

*Government Orders*

I believe that Canadians, including Quebecers, want to set aside this sort of unproductive debate. Everyone agrees that environmental concerns transcend political referendum disputes and so-called centralizing federalism. For this reason, I am going to avoid talking about this sort of thing and keep to the subject of Bill C-83.

In 1987, I had the honour of being a member of the Canadian delegation to the United Nations when Prime Minister Brundtland submitted her famous report on the environment and the economy, known today as the Brundtland report. She was followed at the podium by the president of the Maldives, Mr. Abdul Gayoom, who remains the president today.

The Maldives are an archipelago of some 100 islands south of India in the Indian Ocean. Describing his country in the words of the great Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl as jewels on a cushion of blue—the Indian Ocean—he said that his country and its magnificent islands were not hit by storms and adverse weather conditions until the 1980s. They were inundated by enormous waves in 1984 and 1985 and then again in 1986 and 1987—for the first time in their history. These waves became increasingly violent, bringing about distress, destruction and casualties. Everybody there was asking the representatives of industrialized countries: “Do we, innocent people of the Maldives, have to pay the price for the destruction you caused, for the harm you did to the environment, for the greenhouse effect, for all the environmental problems for which we are totally blameless and for the consequences of your actions?”

• (1325)

I submit this is a fundamental problem and that, as a rich country with unparalleled natural resources, we must set an example for the world, especially for the developing countries which have to endure the consequences of the actions taken by industrialized countries. We must show the world that sustainable development is more than just words.

[English]

We have to start practising what we preach on the international scene. Sustainable development must never be just a catchword. It must never be that kind of convenient buzz word that makes us escape from the realities of having to integrate economy and environment in a realistic and true fashion.

If the federal government does not practise sustainable development in all its day to day doings in its act of governing the country then how can it expect its citizens to do the same? How can it expect municipalities and provincial governments to practise sustainable development if it does not show the example itself?

This is why in 1993 in the red book the Liberal Party of Canada devoted a total chapter on sustainable development. One of the key parts of that chapter was to install a commissioner of the environment. In the red book the idea was such that it be linked to the office of the auditor general of the environment.

I am very pleased this is becoming a reality with Bill C-83. We will become the second country in the world to install a commissioner of environment and sustainable development after the leading example of New Zealand several years ago.

This new office will have significant powers. Beyond the significant powers of the office, the very existence of the office of a commissioner of environment and sustainable development sends a powerful signal not only within the government itself but beyond the government into the reaches of Canadian society. They now know there will be somebody there, a monitor, an ombudsman, who will devote his or her duties to the environment and sustainable development in making sure the government itself practises what it preaches.

[Translation]

The Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development held hearings for several months on that topic. Our colleague from Davenport really deserves to be congratulated for his sensible and really inspiring leadership. In fact, our committee had recommended that an independent commissioner of the environment and sustainable development be designated, a position similar to that of the Commissioner of Official Languages, but the government went with the suggestion made by the official opposition, to set up a commissioner of the environment and sustainable development within the office of the auditor general.

Despite the fact that the government did not choose the option recommended by the committee, I think—even though I was a member of the committee—that it is a major step forward. Today, with Bill C-83, we are creating this position of commissioner, which becomes irreversible. With the appointment of the commissioner, two years from now each government department will be required by law to table in the House a sustainable development strategy.

• (1330)

These strategies will have to be updated every three years and the revised strategies will also have to be tabled before Parliament. So, Parliament will be accountable to the Canadian people for all these sustainable development strategies in the future.

[English]

It is a tremendous departure for the Canadian public that in the future every ministry of government will have not only to produce a strategy of sustainable development but also be responsible to the commissioner for its being monitored, its