

*Government Orders*

A public hearing process, where Canadians can speak out on major initiatives being proposed so that in the end the best decision is made, is a critical component of the process that we have not seen recently with the VIA Rail decision. There have been no public fora, no hearings held on whether or not a certain line should be abandoned or a certain service should be curtailed or eliminated in part. We are hearing from across the country an outcry that the government has really erred in judgment on VIA because of its lack of serious input that experts and others could have provided through a public hearing process.

The main thrust of this bill before us is to make the export of electricity from Canada easier, to streamline the process. In itself that is obviously not bad. No one is in favour of unnecessary regulation, duplication of effort, red tape and frustration. No one wants to trip up exporters with unnecessary complications just for the sake of it.

However, we are all aware that the United States importers of electricity have complained about our means of protecting our national interest. I suppose we could say that is just too bloody bad. This is our national interest and if the Americans do not like our public hearing process and find it burdensome and inconvenient, well, that is too bad. It is our electricity, it is our future we are concerned with, it is our country we are concerned with, it is the people of Canada we are concerned with, and if the Americans do not like our so-called cumbersome process, I say that is too bad. We are not in the business of providing easy access by Americans to our natural resources, although this bill, unfortunately, does just that.

I and my colleagues in the New Democratic Party remain totally unconvinced that the current process needs to be changed. Perhaps more important, I am concerned that the changes proposed in this bill would undermine what protection the existing legislation provides for the Canadian public in the future. I am deeply concerned that this bill would mean that consumers in the United States would enjoy substantial benefit at our expense.

• (1340)

What are the main changes proposed in this bill that concern us? The most important change is that the National Energy Board will routinely grant export per-

mits in most cases. As opposed to calling for a natural public hearing as part of any process, the National Energy Board can grant an export permit without necessarily calling a public hearing. They want to expand the maximum duration of export licences from 25 years to 30 years. I think it is important that most export applications now will not require a public hearing because of what will be the usual routine granting of permits. There is no compelling reason for making public hearings less frequent, especially given the importance of electricity to our national energy future. That is one of the assumptions built in.

The National Energy Board public hearings address issues of national importance. I believe that when a company wants to export electricity it is not necessarily thinking in the national interest. I suspect and would submit it is seldom thinking in the national interest, it is thinking in the interest of its shareholders which is, of course, the business they are in. In some cases a certain province might be applying for an export application. It too might not necessarily be making judgments in the national interest but in the interest of the province.

We believe it is important that the national interest be taken into any consideration of exporting electricity to the United States. I would submit that a closed process seldom serves the public well. We always have to wonder why things are not being done in the open, why we would not have a public hearing, even if it is a streamlined public hearing. I think it is fair to say that it does serve the public interest well to be doing the business of the public in the open.

As my hon. friend from Victoria made so amply clear in his presentation, this bill would politicize the decisions regarding whether to simply grant a permit or to hold public hearings to consider an export proposal. We have seen too many decisions made not in the public interest but in the political interest of the government in office.

By the legislation, the final decision on whether a public hearing is held or not is made by cabinet, not the National Energy Board. This means that the decision under this system is much more likely to be made on narrow political grounds. I do not have to remind us of the F-18 decision on which every single expert who made his or her views known said that this particular proposal should go to western Canada; every single witness, every expert, and the government did exactly the opposite.