

*Government Orders*

We on this side proposed an amendment that would have changed this section 37 so that the final decision-making responsibility would have been given to cabinet as a whole. A collective responsibility would be better than leaving the responsibility to the proposing minister who has a mandate to do that, including the Prime Minister, of course. We tried, of course, and we did not succeed. We did so because we felt that by giving the collective responsibility for the decision to cabinet and the Prime Minister, the purposes as spelled out in clause 4 would not be compromised but would be carried out in a good way.

• (1630)

Another point of disagreement has to do with the role of the Environmental Assessment Agency. This is a very important area of disagreement. The proposed federal environmental assessment and review office, which we had in the past, is now being turned into the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, which will promote uniformity and harmony, conduct research, environmental assessment consistent with the act, and ensure opportunity for public consultation.

We in the Liberal Party support a different approach for this agency. We want and are committed to an independent agency that has a legislative mandate not only to administer but to enforce the federal environmental assessment process. This agency would report directly to cabinet in the same way that the National Research Board does, or the CRTC, the Canadian Radio and Television Commission.

The proponents would prepare the initial environmental assessment of the proposal and submit the report to the agency for a review. After being satisfied with the scope and content of the assessment report and so on, the agency would have the authority to approve the initiative or refer it to mediation or a panel for public hearings or deny the approval.

I will spare you, Madam Speaker, the various steps that we have envisioned for this agency because of time limitation. It seems to us that this agency should have the same status and the same powers as is given to the National Energy Board and the CRTC so that it can fulfil its mandate fully. When necessary, when cabinet approval is required, the agency would review the proposal, express its opinion to cabinet which then has of course

the final and ultimate responsibility to approve or reject the proposal or, if it wishes, to constitute an independent panel to hold public hearings. Should the cabinet in the end approve the proposal, the opinion of the agency or the panel would be made public with the announcement of the cabinet and the public would know. The whole process would be out there in the open with the ultimate responsibility, of course, on the political masters who are the elected representatives and who should be responsible in the end.

That would be the Liberal alternative.

Finally, on the point of disagreement, we on the Liberal side believe very strongly in the creation of a commissioner for the environment, or a federal ombudsman if you like, modelled on the very successful New Zealand experience. This commissioner would be given the power to review the implementation of the environmental assessment process, report directly to Parliament, and therefore through Parliament to the public, to Canadians. It would have powers of investigation similar to those that are invested in the Auditor General, or expand the mandate of the Auditor General to include this kind of responsibility. You can see that here there is a convergence of responsibilities which would well serve the public interest, I submit to you.

Moving on, I would then try to pull together some of these thoughts by saying that we all know, at least in theory, although not in practice, that the integration of the environment into the economic decision-making process is of enormous importance. The failure of having done so this far has created the mess that we now face. I will not elaborate on the various aspects: acid rain, toxic contamination, ozone depletion and climate change.

We want to protect future generations from the staggering cost of clean-up of pollution in comparison to the relatively modest cost of examining and changing proposals a priori to ensure the prevention of environmental harm. In order to do that, we have to apply a comprehensive and effective environmental assessment. We cannot escape it.

In that sense Bill C-13 begins to realize that necessity and makes a small step in that direction. This has to be done at an early stage.

There is enormous evidence through various polls that Canadians expect a sound and good process, one that will