

Government Orders

senior deputy ministers of various ministries of the crown who have failed so far to fulfil their environmental duty under the law?

I am not buying it and I do not think the public will either. When Reformers are the ministers, the auditor general report will be regarded and acted on quickly and there will not be any overpaid superstar commissioner.

Mrs. Jean Payne (St. John's West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today in support of Bill C-83. The Liberal Party red book stated that the government would provide national environment and economic agendas. We also said that one of our priorities would be to appoint an environmental auditor general who would report to Parliament directly and would have powers of investigation similar to those of the auditor general. Bill C-83 fulfils this commitment and does even more.

• (1555)

Bill C-83 demonstrates that the government is serious about environmental and sustainable development, that we are willing to change the way government does business, and that government is not afraid to be held publicly accountable for what it does or does not do.

Federal government policies and operations have an impact on the decisions of Canadians, on the economy and on the environment. It is critical therefore that environmental and sustainable development considerations are integrated in government decision making. By getting its house in order the federal government can actively promote the shift to sustainable development throughout Canadian society. This is what Bill C-83 is all about.

The Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development deserves a large share of the credit for the bill. The committee examined the government's red book commitment to establish an environmental equivalent to the auditor general. It recommended the establishment of a commissioner of environment and sustainable development. It provided valuable input at report stage when it made several recommendations to improve the bill.

Bill C-83 explicitly incorporates environmental and sustainable development in the Auditor General Act. It would also give the auditor general the explicit legal mandate to include environmental effects alongside the traditional considerations of economy, effectiveness and efficiency among the considerations he uses to determine the observations he will bring to the attention of the House of Commons.

Bill C-83 will also provide the federal government with leadership in making the shift to sustainable development. The amendments will proactively promote sustainable development across all federal departments.

Under the act ministers will be required to table in the House sustainable development strategies that include their departments' activities and plans of action to further sustainable

development. Departments will also be required to update their strategies every three years and ministers to table updates in the House.

Bill C-83 will authorize the auditor general to forward petitions on environmental matters from the public to the responsible ministers. These ministers must respond within a specified timeframe.

The amendments I have just mentioned are significant in and of themselves but the bill goes much further. It creates a truly independent commissioner of environment and sustainable development. The commissioner will be established within the office of the auditor general. This will strengthen the role of the commissioner, ensuring independence and greatly enhancing the auditing of the government's environmental performance. The office of the auditor general has clout. It is independent from government. It is well respected and has solid expertise that can be put to use at once.

There is another advantage to the innovation. Within the work of the auditor general issues of environment and sustainable development will be integrated directly with economic considerations. This kind of integration is what sustainable development is all about.

To ensure his independence as an effective critic of government the commissioner will be appointed by the auditor general. The commissioner will be the auditor general's right hand person, helping him perform all his duties in so far as they relate to environmental and sustainable development.

The commissioner will monitor and report annually to the House on any aspects of sustainable development, environmental, economic or social, where they merit attention. These issues would include the extent to which departments are implementing their sustainable development action plans as set out in their strategies; the extent to which these action plans are effective and departments are achieving their sustainable development objectives; and the number, subject matter and status of petitions received by ministers.

The annual green report of the commissioner will not be the only report to the House on the government's sustainable development and environmental performance. The auditor general, assisted by the commissioner, may also report on environmental matters in his traditional reports to the House.

• (1600)

These amendments are historic and unprecedented. They will have far reaching implications for the way the federal government does business. They ensure that no matter who the auditor general happens to be, environment and sustainable development will have a high profile in the work of the office. They will provide leadership on sustainable development by proactively promoting and operationalizing sustainable development across federal departments and across economic sectors of the country. They will hold the government fully accountable to the public for its leadership and progress in making the shift to sustainable development.