

National Energy Board Act

Mr. Symes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you for pointing out to the hon. member for Calgary Centre (Mr. Andre) that the western conference bears little relationship to this bill, though I think my argument does.

I was trying to point out that the National Energy Board has been unduly influenced by oil companies in this country, and moving it to Calgary would only heighten this problem and work against a beneficial policy for Canada.

If I may pursue this line of reasoning, I feel that to move it to Calgary would only increase the problems and pressures that face the National Energy Board. Already that board has capitulated to the pressures of the oil companies in selling our Canadian resources at prices beneficial to foreign oil companies rather than to the Canadian consumer.

In 1970 the National Energy Board told West Coast Transmission, for example, to serve a United States market at ridiculously low prices in order that the Pacific northwest would not be faced with an energy shortage. Again in 1971 the National Energy Board was forced to admit that too much gas was exported, and that year we had approached a shortage of 1.1 trillion cubic feet. In other words, the National Energy Board gets much of its information from oil executive and the oil industry in Calgary and has constantly over-estimated the supply of energy resources in this country.

In my opinion, the National Energy Board has had too much independent authority. It is not responsible to this House of Commons. It has a history of not acting in the best interests of the Canadian consumer and it has undoubtedly been influenced by the petroleum industry, 83 per cent of which we should remember is foreign-owned, 65 per cent of that being U.S.-owned. I think it would make much more sense to move it to oblivion, restructure the whole board and make it responsible to this House of Commons and the Canadian people.

Mr. John M. Reid (Kenora-Rainy River): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-25 proposes two questions to the House of Commons. The first is, what is the appropriate place for the National Energy Board to be located; secondly, in a more general and perhaps more philosophical sense, to what extent and in what way should the federal government move to decentralize not only its departmental functions but also its regulatory functions? I think the hon. member for Sault Ste. Marie (Mr. Symes) made a significant point in a somewhat humorous way when he suggested that to move the energy board to Calgary would be like putting a virgin in an army barracks.

An hon. Member: Send the Wheat Board to Newfoundland.

Mr. Reid: The problem that we face is really twofold. I do not know whether hon. members have had an opportunity to look at the green paper entitled "Members of Parliament and Conflict of Interest" tabled by the President of the Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen), but it does have a rather interesting comment concerning what is conflict of interest, which is, of course, the point the hon. member for Sault Ste. Marie raised in his offhand comment.

[The Acting Speaker (Mr. Boulanger).]

The President of the Privy Council indicates in his paper that he proposes to bring forth a further paper dealing with conflict of interest and senior civil servants. More to the point, there is a comment on the first page I should like to quote for the edification of hon. members. It states:

This definition raises a number of questions. The decision to limit the discussion to pecuniary interests is made on practical grounds considering the difficulties that would be involved in determining other rewards, psychological ones for example, which might motivate an individual's action.

I have always argued that those people in government service who are most open to potential conflict of interest and temptation are not members of parliament or cabinet ministers, but indeed are members in regulatory positions, senior civil servants.

The reason for that is quite obvious. The House of Commons, members of parliament and cabinet ministers have enthusiastically taken away their powers of patronage and powers to engage in this kind of conflict of interest situation. That power has been passed on to senior civil servants and regulatory boards.

What would be the situation if we were to move our regulatory bodies from Ottawa into the very centres of the industries which have a tremendous amount of influence on the way in which they take regulatory decisions? It is my opinion that any regulatory board ought to be located as far away from the physical operation of that industry or corporation as it possibly could be in order to ensure that the minimum of temptation is placed before those people.

I think one of the fundamental problems or dilemmas we have been faced with in respect of our regulatory bodies, not only the National Energy Board but the Canadian Transport Commission and the CRTC, is the fact that by definition they get so deeply involved in the industry they are trying to regulate that they have a tendency to lose sight of what we in this place might call the totality of public interest. This is not something that happens deliberately. This is something I believe is understood by the members of the regulatory bodies, not only by the commissioners themselves but also by their staffs. None the less, this is a danger.

We in this House of Commons provide perhaps the most spectacular example of the way in which we try to deal with the singular, the unique and the particular as it affects our ridings, at the expense of consideration of national policy or what might be termed national unity.

In this House of Commons we do not talk as representatives from particular ridings about national issues. If we are backbenchers on this side or on the opposition side we talk about riding concerns, regional concerns, provincial concerns and then perhaps national concerns. The blinkers on us blind us to the national impact of policies. I think any decision in respect of the decentralization of our regulatory bodies has to be considered very carefully because of this particular danger.

The second point I want to raise is the matter of geography. Let us be quite honest, this is a country which is influenced by its geography, and governments, civil servants, regulatory bodies, corporations or any kind of government services are obviously going to be located, in a place where somebody, somewhere, is going to have to