

Government Orders

federal government to acknowledge that that jurisdiction may be theirs in the context of clause 5.

We then get into the process itself, the power of the ministers to exclude projects from environmental assessment and review. Clause 6(1)(a) states:

in the opinion of the responsible authority the project is described in an exclusion list;

If that is the case, then it is exempt from environmental assessment and review.

The responsible authority is very broadly defined and can include, in the case of a department or ministry of state, the member of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada presiding over that department or ministry. In other words, any minister deciding that a project is on an exclusion list can prevent environmental assessment and review from occurring. As a minimum, that should only be the power of the Minister of the Environment.

The Minister of the Environment should have responsibility to account to the House of Commons for the welfare of our environment, as a whole. The Minister of Public Works should not be able, under clause 6, to decide that a project is exempt from assessment and review. Only the Minister of the Environment should be able to do that, if any minister is able to do it. If a minister is able to do that, and if it is the Minister of the Environment, then that decision should be reviewable. There should be an appeal. It should be possible for the people of Canada to take the Minister of the Environment to court and say: "You should not be exempting this. The implications for our environment are too great." That provision, as far as I can see, is simply not in this bill.

It strikes me in so many ways that this bill, although well meaning and although its time has come, is an inadequate response in the context of many events occurring in Canada, such as the Rafferty-Alameda situation and the Oldman Dam. We are seeing the guidelines being enforced by the courts first and the federal government being dragged along somewhat reluctantly. Now is the time to have a clear, legislated statement of what it is that we think should be the standard for the world, not only for Canada, in protecting the environment.

As I sit down, Mr. Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the great assistance of my co-op student, Tom Yurkiw, who worked so hard in preparing notes for this.

Mr. Willie Littlechild (Wetaskiwin): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to participate today in the debate, at second reading stage, on Bill C-78, the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act.

The time for speeches at this second reading stage is limited and because my native heritage is very important to me. I would like to focus my remarks on those aspects of the bill that hold special meaning for the aboriginal people of Canada. However, let me also be quick to add that this issue of environment is very important to the whole of my constituency.

• (1550)

Hon. members opposite have been very quick to find fault with the fact that Bill C-78 is a planning and consensus-building process based on the principle of self-assessment. It seems that they would prefer that every environmental assessment lead to a court enforceable edict by some all knowing and all powerful authority who would ensure that the best interests of the environment are defended against the inherent evils of development. Personally, I find this suggestion to be both naive and dangerous. It is also quite contrary to the very principles of sustainable development.

Long before the arrival of Europeans on this continent, native communities were both self-governing and self-sustaining. First Nations lived in harmony with nature and were as one with the land, with their ancestors, with their children and their children's children. There was no room in native society for practices that could deplete the natural resources and damage the environments on which future generations would depend. In fact, politicians, academics, and so-called environmentalists who proclaim the virtues of sustainable development, but who fail utterly in their attempts to define such development in practical terms, would do well to reflect upon the lessons learned and the way of life practised by untold generations of native peoples in North America. They have always been, and are still, concerned with management between development and conservation.