

National Energy Board Act

That constitutes the basis of this bill. They are two small amendments in size but important in character which do not materially alter the power of the national energy board. They are introduced simply to make the task of the energy board somewhat easier and to protect the interests of those 20 companies which have the privilege of exporting electricity.

When we reach the committee stage I shall be prepared to make an explanation of the third clause if anyone so desires. At this stage I would simply say that this clause does not alter the practice which has prevailed in the past with regard to setting in a date when there is uncertainty as to when a bill will receive royal assent. If anyone desires further information, that may be given when we reach the committee stage.

I simply conclude by asking the house to use its good judgment in this matter, as it will. I have endeavoured to give an explanation of the delay imposed, and I express my regrets that this house is asked to consider this particular bill with a rather urgent deadline facing it. I am quite prepared to accept from hon. gentlemen opposite any suggestions for the future. Hon. gentlemen opposite who have had experience—and some of them have had great experience—in the preparation of legislation for the House of Commons will appreciate some of the difficulties that face those who have that task. They fully understand that unexpected delays may occur when legislation is being processed through the various important stages that must be followed before it is brought to the House of Commons in its finished and printed form. I commend to the house the amendments proposed.

Hon. L. B. Pearson (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, in moving second reading of this bill the minister has characterized it as an important one, though he added that he did not think there was any question of general principle involved in these amendments. We agree with him in the first statement; it is an important bill. We do not agree with him in the second, because we think there is an important question of principle involved in the first of the amendments.

In being asked to consider this bill on second reading this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, we are faced with an extraordinary situation which the minister himself has admitted. It is not necessary to look for any hidden motive to explain our bewilderment at the procedure which has been followed by the government in this matter. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, we are now in one of those

[Mr. Churchill.]

confused and unsatisfactory parliamentary situations into which this government has a genius for getting.

The minister said that some of us on this side of the house have had a good deal of experience with the preparation of parliamentary legislation. That is true, Mr. Speaker; but none of us has ever had any experience of the situation in regard to parliamentary legislation which faces us this afternoon. The procedure being followed is not only confused, it is a striking example of the violation of the rights of this house. It is also an ignoring of the interests of the provinces of this country in a matter which has real interest and perhaps great importance for them, as indeed was recognized in the other place. This afternoon we are witnessing a quite extraordinary procedure. It is an example, I think, of a violation of the rights and the dignity of this house and of the interests of the provinces.

The government knew at the beginning of this session that 20 licences for the export of power would expire on March 31 of this year, that is today, unless legislation were passed by this parliament to extend those permits. As a matter of fact, such legislation was announced in the speech from the throne in the middle of January in the following terms:

An amendment will also be proposed to the National Energy Board Act authorizing the temporary extension of the licences for the export of electricity until the board can conclude its urgent business on export of gas.

Notwithstanding this announcement in the speech from the throne, nothing has been done since that time so far as this house is concerned, and this House of Commons is now asked to approve this important bill today, before six o'clock—no, Mr. Speaker, before 5.45 p.m., as we learned a few moments ago—to approve this bill, if it sees fit, in all its stages or else compel 20 Canadian companies to break the law of this land. This is a strange way to carry on the business of government, Mr. Speaker. The minister who is responsible for this measure must take, as indeed he has taken, full responsibility for it. It is an appalling example of muddle, confusion and inefficiency.

In case the house does not approve this bill in all its stages today the government has, of course, included a clause which the minister mentioned, namely clause 3. Though he said it was an ordinary clause in legislation of this kind it is in our opinion really fantastic. Let me read this clause:

Sections 1 and 2 shall come into force on the day this act is assented to, except that if that day is after the 30th day of March, 1960—