

Water Pollution

Mr. Tobin: Or are we having the convoluted kind of argument which led to a series of insinuations? I am afraid that my opinion of the gentleman who has left the Chamber as soon as I stood in my place to answer his questions now leans toward the latter argument, that indeed his remarks were nothing more than an attempt to score political points. I am sorry to have to disappoint him.

Let me then state categorically, and as clearly as I can, that the Amax decision was reached by means of the normal regulatory process and after a very careful review of the data which indicated that the method proposed for disposing of the tailings into the inlet would not jeopardize the fisheries resource. The suggestion that some political pressure was brought to bear to influence the decision is completely without foundation. The decision was reached purely and simply on the basis of the scientific facts which were on hand at that time.

The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans has stated on more than one occasion that he was quite satisfied that a sound decision had been reached and that there was no valid reason to delay the start-up of production at the Amax mine, with its accompanying employment and economic benefits for British Columbia and Canada as a whole.

It would be useful, I believe, if I were to re-emphasize the factors which were taken into account in approving the Alice Arm tailings deposit regulations. This was not a decision that was taken flippantly or in great haste, but one that was made only after a detailed technical examination of data on various tailings disposal alternatives available to us carried out by staff of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Department of the Environment.

By way of an example of the thoroughness with which this task was carried out, I might mention that more than 40 technical reports on the biology and oceanography of Alice Arm were reviewed to assess the immediate and long-term risks associated with maintenance of a conventional on-land tailings impoundment, as compared with the existing underwater disposal system. Following this extensive study, the conclusion drawn was that a properly designed marine tailings disposal system would not adversely affect the fisheries resource and, on balance, would be preferable in this particular case to a containment pond on land.

The minister, in making his decision, based his approval of the tailings deposit regulations on the following factors. The first factor was the conclusion that Pacific salmon and other important fishery resources would not be adversely affected. The second was that tailings deposited from the mine would not extend outside of Alice Arm. The third was that the tailings would keep to the bottom of Alice Arm at a minimum depth of 100 metres. The fourth factor was that the alternative method of tailings storage, that is, on-land impoundment, would represent a threat in perpetuity to salmon resources entering Alice Arm. This conclusion was arrived at in view of the high rainfall and the steep topography of the area, which meant, in effect, that the permanent stability of an on-land storage basin could not be assured. I feel this is a very important point and one which has been frequently overlooked

by those critical of the underwater disposal system. I note a point made by an hon. member from the Conservative Party who spoke a few moments ago.

Having satisfied himself as to the technical aspects of this disposal system, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans (Mr. LeBlanc) has freely admitted that there still remained a nagging thought that perhaps the experts might have miscalculated or slipped up somewhere along the line. It was for that reason that he was not unsympathetic, nor unresponsive, to the concerns expressed by the Nishga Tribal Council on behalf of the native people who live in the vicinity of Alice Arm that some damage might be caused to the fishery resource as a result of the mining operation.

Because of this, and to make doubly sure that we were doing the right thing, the minister asked for the establishment of a review panel of independent and highly respected scientists to go over all the data and reports on which the decision was based and to publicly report their findings. He opted for a scientific review panel, rather than a public inquiry which was advocated by the Nishga Indians, because the evidence on which the panel would have to base its findings was almost exclusively scientific or, at best, very technical. However, it was made very clear to the Nishgas, and to any other groups or individuals interested in the issue, that the panel would be prepared to meet with them and hear their views or evidence, and that all reports of the panel would be readily available to the public.

The minister, and most others involved in this matter, were disappointed that the Nishgas, for reasons best known to themselves, decided to boycott the review panel. In view of the concerns they had raised and their repeated demands for a public inquiry, it was somewhat difficult to understand their position. However, that was their decision, and a decision we can only choose to respect.

● (1740)

At the same time, it is somewhat ironic that the conclusions of the review panel are now being questioned by the Nishgas and others because of the lack of any Nishga participation in the public hearing although they themselves had every opportunity, and in fact were invited, to participate but chose not to do so.

In the recruitment of members of the review panel, considerable care was taken to ensure that competent and independent scientists were appointed. Its chairman was Dr. J. E. McInerney, who is chairman of the department of biology at the University of Victoria and a specialist in the physiology and behaviour of fish. The other two members were Dr. R. W. Burling, professor of oceanography at the department of oceanography, University of British Columbia, and Dr. W. K. Oldham, a member of the faculty of civil engineering at the University of B.C.

I should say, as I mention these three highly prestigious and respected scientists, all from the University of British Columbia, that I think the hon. member for Skeena almost called their competence into doubt today. I am somewhat