

Government Orders

House and that is being put forth today for passage at second reading.

The first of those differences is the fact that the process we now have, the process put in place in 1984, is merely a set of guidelines that were put into place by Order in Council. What we have before us now is an actual bill, a piece of legislation that has much more in the way of teeth and much more in the way of permanency in law than an Order in Council. An Order in Council can be revoked at the snap of a finger, as you know Mr. Speaker. However here we have an act which would have to come before this Parliament again for amendment or change in any way.

At the present time under those 1984 rules and regulations that were put in place we have decisions that can be made in respect of having environmental assessments which lie strictly within the control and the jurisdiction of a minister of the particular department that is involved and is putting forward that particular public work or that particular development.

That is changed under this piece of legislation. In fact it is now the Minister of the Environment who will have the say, not the line minister, and therefore the question of the potential conflict of interest which was there when the line minister had the decision-making process as opposed to an entirely different minister will not be there. It is the exclusive responsibility of the Minister of the Environment to protect the environment. That is an enormous change. It is making sure that we do have a minister responsible exclusively for the environment who is now in charge of this whole process.

It is not something which can be decided just by the minister who wants to put forth the policy. It is not something which could just be decided by me any more. For instance, I might want to develop this piece of land. I think it is a good idea. I think it will be of great benefit to Canadians to have some more affordable housing on this land; but at the same time this bill would remove that decision-making process from me and put the environmental assessment aspect in the hands of the Minister of the Environment. That is a real advance on the process in place at the moment.

In addition, the rules and regulations of the 1984 guidelines are currently the ones that we have in place. They certainly are not clear and they are certainly

voluntary. The ones set out in this bill are going to be explicit requirements through regulations. They are not going to be voluntary any more and they are not going to be unclear.

As well it is important to remember that at the present time there is no system or process in place for an ongoing evaluation or reporting on the environmental aspects of any of these undertakings by the government, whether it be a housing development or whatever. Under the bill which we are debating today, the bill which hopefully will be in place with the help and co-operation of all members of the House on both sides, we are going to have a regular ongoing process of examination and reporting.

Under the current rules, regulations, and guidelines that are before us there is nothing in the way of mandatory requirements for environmental assessments, but under the bill before us now there will be a list of projects that will require mandatory assessments.

I have just touched on a very few of the major changes that will be brought about as a result of this bill, but as you can see, Mr. Speaker, there is a very major change, a very major improvement. The bill will strengthen the process immeasurably. It will produce a process in which you and I and all Canadians can have confidence that our environment will be taken into account and dealt with properly by the Government of Canada when it undertakes one of its many, many projects for the good of Canadians, whether it be housing or anything else.

Mrs. Marlene Catterall (Ottawa West): Mr. Speaker, I am afraid that what we have just heard from the hon. member opposite is an example of what is wrong with the government's thinking on this issue, and what is wrong with the government's understanding of its own bill and what it is trying to perpetrate.

• (1850)

The minister has said that the current guideline orders are voluntary, not mandatory. I think he must be saying that in the absence of having read either of the three court decisions in the last year concerning the Oldman River dam or the Rafferty—Alameda dam, because he would know that the courts have said very clearly that it is not voluntary, that it is not discretionary, that it is required.