

Northern Canada Power Commission Act

be saddled with the expense of uneconomic projects, as they will be if the commission is allowed to have an unfettered sphere of action in investing in projects regardless of the relationship between revenue and cost.

● (2050)

As the bill now reads they could decide on any project they chose and simply calculate the cost of that project and its effect on the rates to be charged, as opposed to the present situation where the commission is obliged to act in a responsible fashion and relate the costs of such projects to the revenue to be generated from them. If my view the latter is a sound principle to follow, and my own amendment would restore it.

The type of provision we have been asked to endorse would open the door wide to saddling consumers of electrical energy in the north, at the whim of the commission, with rates calculated to pay for the project which might be unrealistic or far more costly than they should be. For this reason, and in order to give the elected representatives of the people of the north on the two councils some opportunity of making an input, I put this amendment forward in the hope it will find favour with the government.

Hon. W. G. Dinsdale (Brandon-Souris): Mr. Speaker, I wish to support the amendment put forward by my colleague, the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen), and I do so for two basic reasons. The proposal now in the bill violates two fundamental principles which were put forward in the recommendation which resulted in the legislation we are now considering. That recommendation stated the amendments were being made to provide for changes in financial management. I think we would all agree that in making changes affecting financial management of the power commission the object would necessarily be to improve the situation. The hon. member for Yukon has told us that his further amendment arises from the fact that the proposal in the bill as it stands is a retrograde step which removes some of the safeguards which existed in the unamended act. On this basis alone motion No. 5 should receive enthusiastic support from all quarters of the House.

My second reason for supporting the amendment is that the bill as proposed violates what I believe to be the real purpose of the government in bringing forward amendments to the Northern Canada Power Commission Act. I am sure the minister would agree that when the number of members of the Commission was increased from three to five and provision was made for their expenses, the whole intent was to bring about more effective control on the part of the residents of the two territories over the activities of the Northern Canada Power Commission. However, as has been pointed out during the course of the debate today, this idea of closer control by the residents of the territories is an expression of tokenism rather than of fact.

The bill as it now stands is just another example of tokenism. For example, it states that the commission may investigate a project and advise the minister, or the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories or the Commissioner of the Yukon Territory—and so on. Actually, and the hon. member for Yukon has already made this point, it is a case of the minister advising himself. As has been pointed

[Mr. Nielsen.]

out by several members, the commissioner of the territories is really a creature of the minister of the Crown responsible for administering those two territorial regions. Why do I assert this to be the case?

Over the past 15 years promises have been made to the territories which were supposed to ensure greater local autonomy. The first important gesture in this regard was made in the early 1960's when, for the first time, the commissioner for the Yukon Territory was appointed from within the Yukon population—I refer to Mr. Gordon Cameron who served with distinction for some five years. Mr. Cameron refused reappointment because, as he said, he was just a figurehead of the minister in carrying out his responsibilities. He discovered, after five years in office, that he had no power, that there was really no local autonomy; he took his orders directly from the Ministry of Northern Affairs in Ottawa. I recall the phrase he used at the time of his resignation. He said that the reins directing policy in the Yukon were held at some 5,000 miles distance in Ottawa. And he refused to function any further as a flunkey.

Gordon Cameron, the first from within the territory to hold this responsible position, was succeeded by Jack Smith, who is still the Commissioner of the Yukon Territory. During the intervening years the status of the Commissioner has not changed one iota in terms of his powers. As a former minister of northern affairs I can say this is one of the things we hoped to change, and we looked forward to the granting of local autonomy to both territories as one of the major forward steps in the development of Canada's northern regions by our centenary year, 1967. Very little progress has been made in this regard. The Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, who now has been in office a considerable number of years, is in precisely the same position as the present incumbent in the Yukon Territory. In light of these observations, I would challenge anyone to dispute that that is the situation.

● (2100)

I think the hon. member for Yukon has put forward a very important amendment which would place in the hands of the commissioner in council some control over the activities of the Northern Canada Power Commission. There has been a subtle change in the past few years that would more than justify this change in wording from "Commissioner" to "commissioner in council", because now members of the councils both of the Yukon territory and the Northwest Territories have been given some limited executive responsibility.

It would appear to me that, as a logical concomitant of that change in the status of the members of the territorial councils, the wording proposed by the hon. member for Yukon is a proper designation of the relationship with respect to clause 13. Certainly it would be much closer to realizing the recommendations that caused the government to bring in the amendments we have been considering in the debate today so as to give closer control over the power commission in the territories to the elected representatives of the people of the territories themselves. I hope all hon. members will give their support to this necessary amendment.