

Routine Proceedings

[English]

What we are putting in place are practical and effective rules that everyone can understand from the start. We are getting rid of a system where clarity and sometimes lack of clarity have resulted in many court actions.

We are going to have a straightforward, streamlined approach. Small scale routine matters will be dealt with through a simple screening process. Big projects or environmentally sensitive projects will undergo a comprehensive study.

[Translation]

The new regime introduces the concept of mediation to see if environmental issues surrounding a project can be resolved to everyone's satisfaction by consensus.

[English]

For the first time we are introducing the concept of mediation, in the hopes that some environmental differences might be resolved by the parties without the necessity of long and arduous procedures.

[Translation]

These first three steps—screening, comprehensive study and mediation—will eliminate the headaches and the waste and the bureaucracy that have resulted in so much time being wasted on minor or easily resolved issues.

[English]

That means that a project will reach the stage of review by an independent public panel if there are difficult environmental issues that cannot be resolved by any other means.

When the environmental impact is important enough to be subject to an independent public review, the new rules allow for the public to be fully involved and the new rules mean a more rigorous assessment of the projects. For all projects we want everything out in the open and we want to ensure that the public interest is paramount.

[Translation]

With one of the new amendments, when a review panel makes recommendations, no individual cabinet minister will have the power to accept, reject or change those recommendations. Only the government as a whole will have that authority.

[English]

The Canadian Environmental Assessment Act recognizes the importance of federal-provincial co-operation and promotes harmonization of regimes. I am working closely with the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment and with ministers in each and every province. Indeed over the course of the last few days I have been in touch with every provincial environment minister to assure him or her that it is our intention to work collaboratively. We need to continue a co-operative

approach, a common sense approach to environmental assessment.

[Translation]

The government believes that the actions I am announcing are fair and forceful. To be absolutely certain, we shall have a one-year monitoring program. We want to make sure that the new law and the new policies do not place an unnecessary burden on industry. We also want to guarantee that no projects with significant environmental impact slip through the cracks.

• (1020)

[English]

The new rules recognize the unique and historic responsibilities of aboriginal people for the stewardship of their traditional lands. Today's actions give Canada what we believe is one of the world's best environmental assessment systems. The whole point is to make the best informed decisions and to make environmental thinking a fundamental part of the planning of any project.

The aim is to prevent environmental damage rather than clean up after the fact.

[Translation]

Sound environmental thinking is essential to international competitiveness and, even more so, it is central to the legacy we leave our children.

What we must do now is try to strengthen the environmental assessment of projects under federal jurisdiction. What we need to do next is find ways to improve how we assess all new policies and programs of the federal government. We must, and we will, clean up our own act. In the months ahead, we shall be announcing further policies for the ongoing greening of government.

[English]

It has been seven long years since the Leader of the Opposition first conceived of the idea of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act. My hope is that future actions to create a healthier environment can come much more quickly.

We need to do everything we can as members of Parliament and as Canadians to honour our environmental heritage and to honour our responsibility to future generations. I believe that today's announcement is a step in that direction.

[Translation]

Mrs. Monique Guay (Laurentides): Mr. Speaker, today the Minister of the Environment and Deputy Prime Minister has announced a decision by her department that affects all those concerned with projects that have an environmental impact. This announcement is consistent with the centralizing approach that drives the federal government and indeed sustains it.