

I would also like to state to Members of the House that the Minister of the Environment (Mr. Bouchard) regrets that he cannot be present at this time, but will be returning shortly to the House from Montreal. As Members may know, the Minister is in Montreal this morning announcing details, in co-operation with the Province of Quebec, of the implementation of the St. Lawrence Action Plan. I think all of us who are aware of the deterioration which has taken place in the quality of the St. Lawrence will welcome this initiative on behalf of the federal and Quebec governments.

As Members of this House also know, this Government and this Minister have given a very strong commitment both in our actions and in the Throne Speech, to the environment in general and in particular in the Throne Speech, to the need to introduce legislation in the House for the environmental assessment of its activities. I can assure the Members of the House that officials at this very moment are preparing the necessary documentation for the introduction of that legislation to the House.

I think that at the outset of a debate of this importance, it is necessary to establish some sort of groundwork or framework in which to judge what is being done, what has been done in the past and what is needed for the future. It is important to the Members of this House and for the public to have a clear awareness of the way in which Government goes about the process of assessment of environmental effects of its activities.

There has been a process of environmental assessment in place since 1974. That initial process, started by the Liberal Government of that day, contained a rather loosely worded cabinet directive which placed a great deal of faith in government's voluntary willingness to do the right thing by the environment. The process at that time did not have a great deal of public credibility. There was not very much progress until the present Speaker of this House, at a time when he had other responsibilities during the Government of 1979-1980, initiated what proved to be time-consuming and complex policy development work including very extensive consultations needed to produce credible legislation in this most important area.

This legislation is absolutely fundamental to having

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environmentally effective Government decision-making. I believe that this Government and all Members of this House would accept the fact that it is exceedingly important that what be done be done properly and effectively. Many of the principles in the existing process are valid if conscientiously applied. Since returning to office in 1984, this Government has over the past five years paid particular attention to ways of improving the process with respect to day to day practice in advancing towards the stage where we are now, the preparation of environmental assessment legislation.

I would like to explain to the House some of the more important aspects of the way in which environmental assessments are done as of now and some of the principles we would propose to incorporate into the new law as soon as it is available.

The Canadian federal approach is based on a judgment that is shared by most of the industrialized world and I believe to a significant degree by the developing world. That judgment is that environmental impact assessment is an essential element in the applying of economic development initiatives. Such assessments will help avoid potentially serious environmental and related social problems which could greatly reduce the value of apparent economic progress. Good environmental assessments result in good development and makes good economic sense.

The federal environmental assessment and review process, which we know as EARP is an administrative process set out by Order in Council applicable to proposed federal Government initiatives or private sector undertakings for which the federal Government has some decision-making responsibility. Their process is a self-assessment procedure in that the government agency with the main decision-making responsibility in each instance undertakes the preliminary screening and, if needed, the more detailed initial assessment of the proposed activity. However, where in the opinion of that agency there is likely to be significant environmental effects, the project must be referred to the Ministry of the Environment for public review by an independent panel appointed by that Minister.