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Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

Energy Efficiency Act

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, before I begin to speak to Bill S-3, I want to say how pleased I am I see many hon. members wearing carnations. Some members, perhaps, did not have a chance to get one before question period when they were being offered, but many are wearing them in recognition of the launch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society's Carnation Campaign. Last year I took part in the MS bike tour in Nova Scotia and hope to do so again this summer. I know many members will be supporting the MS Society and other charities, of course, in their ridings and across the country.

The natural resources committee dealt with Bill S-3, the amendments to the Energy Efficiency Act, for the third time last week. I say the third time because this bill, or one very similar, has been before Parliament twice before. Hopefully this time the government has it right because effective regulation of energy-consuming products is an important tool in our efforts to combat climate change. Canadians have known this for a long time and it is encouraging to see that the Conservative government might be starting to realize this too.

Bill S-3 deals with seven basic amendments, all of which were discussed in committee during clause by clause. That is the clause-by-clause analysis when each clause of the bill is considered, amendments are considered and the clauses are amended or passed.

One important change that the bill provides would allow government to regulate classes of products rather than individual products. This would include products defined by similar characteristics. That will be helpful, as we see more and more energy-consuming products coming on the market every day.

The problem in the past has been that when new products appeared that did not really fit into a description in the act, they could not be regulated effectively. Therefore, by having categories, it makes it much simpler because it is awfully hard to say what the next product will

be. When we consider the phenomenal rate of change in technology in my lifetime and in the lifetime of many members here, we can certainly understand that we can expect and anticipate lots more interesting, exciting new technologies and developments, but it is important that we have the ability to regulate new products that come along.

Other amendments in the bill deal with issues like the potential stockpiling of non-compliant products, labelling and a requirement to report to Parliament every four years on the stringency of the act.

When people consider buying a refrigerator, a freezer or a stove, for example, they can see the label on the product that tells them about the kinds of energy use that product involves. I assume that when people buy a fridge, they think of those things. Modern fridges use far less energy and electricity than they did 20 years or so ago. Hence, people do look at those things. That labelling information is very important to consumers, but having standardized labelling is part of what this is about.

The basic premise of the bill is to broaden the scope of the government's ability to regulate energy-using consumer products, including products that affect or control energy consumption.

Bill S-3 is actually building on a 1992 act which established the regulations the first time to eliminate the big energy wasters, to promote energy efficiency in general and bring in labelling requirements, the kind I talked about a moment ago.

Bill S-3 significantly broadens the government's ability to improve energy efficiency, something that the Liberal Party supports. I congratulate the government on bringing this bill forward for the third time. I hope this time we can get it through, pass it on to the Senate shortly and it can finish with it before too long. As the senators consider it, as they should, and their duty is to have consideration of the bill, then we hope they will pass it and have it go to royal assent.

One aspect of Bill S-3 that I think is very important is the regulation of products that operate on standby mode. My hon. colleague, the parliamentary secretary, was talking a bit about that. We all have these kinds of products in our homes. Those are any products that we see some little light on, whether it is our DVD player, clock radio, microwave, some kind of games or whatever, those things that stay plugged in and have a little light flashing or the time showing on them, they are using energy all the time.

This bill would require companies manufacturing and selling those products to ensure they meet more stringent requirements in bringing down the kilowatt hours that they are using up with those items.

We all need to be more educated about energy consumption from products operating in standby mode. Hopefully, to some small extent, the fact that we are discussing this today will have a bit of that effect. This bill should be helpful in that regard.

I know the department, as the Department of Natural Resources has been doing for years, does make efforts to educate the public on that. I would encourage the department to do more of that. I was encouraged when departmental officials indicated that some amendments, like the reporting aspects of this legislation, were in response to comments that the opposition made in previous attempts to amend this act. It is sound, but a bit unusual for the government to listen to Parliament and committees in this fashion. However, it is a salutary incident and I congratulate the government on that.

I note that the roots of Bill S-3 are found in the original so-called clean air act that the former environment minister introduced in 2006. Parts of that legislation focused on the government's plan at the time to regulate large final emitters of greenhouse gases. It also involved the regulation of fuel consumption by automobiles, among other things.

After the House and committee made wholesale amendments to the climate change provisions of Bill C-30, the so-called clean air act, and actually made it a clean air act, the government, unfortunately, chose not to bring the bill back to the House for further debate. And the Conservatives wonder why they were labelled "climate change deniers".

Instead of bringing back the clean air bill in its entirety, the government decided instead to carve off the Energy Efficiency Act provisions and introduce them in a separate bill in the Senate. We are dealing with that now. The measures in this bill are fine as they are but we need to see more from the government in terms of dealing with climate change effectively.

While the government wasted several years in the process, the results in this case in relation to these items we use in our homes, will be more effective regulation of items like washers, dryers and fridges, through standards, labelling and education.

However, as many of my colleagues who have spoken on this bill at second reading pointed out, there are some concerns. Many Canadians are concerned because they know they cannot trust the Conservative government when it comes to bringing forth regulations to ensure the impact of the amendments outlined in Bill S-3 will be felt. We have seen in its other actions that it cannot be trusted to take action on climate change. We have seen no regulations. After three years of promising them, there are no regulations on greenhouse gases.

There are also concerns about the Conservative government's complete failure to understand that energy efficiency is a fundamental issue for not just the environment but also for our economy.

When this bill was debated in the other place, the Senate, my colleague from Alberta, Senator Grant Mitchell, raised many important questions about this bill. In fact, while the government leader in the Senate introduced the bill, it was Senator Mitchell who was the driving force behind these ideas and this bill, and has been for some time now. He was right when he noted that perhaps one of the biggest questions was the lack of trust that Canadians have that this neo-Conservative government will do anything it promises.

I said that Senator Mitchell was the force in the Senate working on this. However, many Canadians interested in this issue have also been working on this issue and I am sure they will be pleased to see some progress. I have heard from many Canadians who say that they simply do not trust the government to implement this or any other significant environmental policy. I find that troublesome and troubling.

While the Liberal Party supports a broadening of the government's ability to regulate products that use energy, it does not disguise the fact that these changes are in isolation and that they create a false impression that the Conservatives are doing something on the climate change file. Well, they are not doing much, other than waiting for the United States to tell them what their environmental policies will be.

We used to hear the Conservatives say that they would have a made in Canada plan for climate change. We are still waiting for that plan. We are still waiting for regulations. We have seen no actual action. Moreover, not only are the Conservatives not talking about a made in Canada plan any more, now they are waiting for a made in U.S.A. plan. It is quite a change for the government, but the net effect is nothing.

This is another reason why Canadians do not trust the Prime Minister or the government on environmental matters, climate change, any more than they can trust it to properly manage our country's finances or our economy.

We saw that last year times when the government and the country were in deficit, even before the recession began. We saw that in the first two months of the fiscal year and we saw it again in August.

The government claimed in November that everything would be fine, that the budget would be balanced. Then we saw money allocated in the budget for infrastructure which was not being spent.

The Conservatives were talking about stimulating the economy. They were telling us how urgent it was to pass the budget, yet the money, under their proposal, could not be spent until April 1. They were not getting things moving even before that. How concerned were they about where the economy was going? That is discouraging, but it is another matter.

It is true Bill S-3 would lead to more energy efficient products on the Canadian market. Hopefully this time the bill will make it all the way into law.