

Mr. Dennis Bevington MP Western Arctic: Bill C-47

November 26, 2012

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise on this particular bill. It is a bill that is very important to the people of the north. As a northern representative, I look forward to dealing with our northern regulatory issues in good fashion, in a fashion that can promote development but can also protect our environment.

Northerners have lived through all of that. There is no question that in the Northwest Territories we understand the nature of the mining industry. As I mentioned to the minister earlier, it is an up-and-down industry. Mines are created. There is huge capital investment in the mines. Afterwards there is an ongoing process with operations and maintenance of those facilities. That creates an up-and-down nature in the gross domestic product of our very small territory. Our territory has 45,000 people in it. Adding in a very large capital investment causes the GDP to rise. We are accustomed to that. We have lived through these boom-and-bust cycles with the mining industry over and over again.

It is very important that we understand the mining industry. It is very important that we know what mine plans do to our economy. It is very important to understand how much mining will benefit the north and where that line can be drawn. When the minister talks about 8,000 jobs in the mining industry going to northerners, he is not really being accurate. It is pretty hard to fill the existing mining jobs in the Northwest Territories with northerners. We run about 50%, and we are topped up. We are topped up in the mines that we have already.

We do have some room to add on mining jobs in the Northwest Territories. However, when we talk about 8,000 jobs, we are talking about increasing our population by a very large extent if we want to fill those with northerners. When the population of the Northwest Territories is increased, enormous pressure is put on the government because the cost of living and the cost of providing facilities in the north is so high.

We view mining very carefully. It is important for our economy. We live with the results of mining. When it comes to the environment, throughout the Northwest Territories we live with the results of mining. We live with the results of bad decisions, decisions improperly made or made too quickly. Those decisions have led us to projects such as the Giant Mine, the worst environmental nightmare in Canada. The only solution for the 270,000 tonnes of arsenic underground is to perpetually freeze it in place so that future generations can deal with it.

The government is on the hook for billions of dollars for the Giant Mine over the foreseeable future. What we see there is what happens when environmental assessment does not work right. What we see with other projects is the same thing. We can look at the Pine Point Mine and the result of that. There is no money left for reclamation. The site was left abandoned. The investment in the community was abandoned.

These are things that we live with in the Northwest Territories. We understand mining very well. We understand its relationship to the environment. Probably more so, the Yukon has the same understanding. Nunavut is just moving into an understanding of mining and how it will work out in its vast territory. I am glad to see that the Nunavut land claims agreement is moving forward, considering that it has been in preparation for almost two decades. We can perhaps understand the frustration of those people who live in Nunavut, in getting their legislation in place and in understanding how that is going to work.

That is one of the reasons why I would love to see the bill split. Nunavut could move forward very quickly. There would be minor amendments, which we understand people are interested in making. That would open an opportunity for Nunavut's people to have a better hold on their regulatory process, a process that, as I pointed out earlier in my question to the minister, is focused on land use planning.

Land use planning is the key element. It is certainly very important. However, we have seen little progress in the Northwest Territories on approving land use plans, which have been worked on for a dozen years. Whether in the Sahtu, Gwich'in or Inuvialuit areas, land use plans need to be developed. In the unsettled claim area of the Deh Cho in the Northwest Territories, an interim land use plan was proposed to deal with the issues. That has not found success with the federal government.

We want to see the bill move forward as quickly as possible. It is a start in the right direction for Nunavut. However, let us hope that when it is put in place the land use plans come very quickly. These land use plans are not written in stone. They are amendable over a certain period of time so that people can adjust them accordingly, so that they work for people in a good fashion. That is exactly what should happen with them. Let us go ahead with Nunavut and get that through.

With regard to the Northwest Territories and the surface rights board, it is a much more difficult issue in some ways. Unlike Nunavut and the Yukon, we have unsettled areas where there has not been an agreement to have a surface rights board. That is not in place yet. That has not been negotiated between the traditional landowners, the first nations of the Deh Cho or the Akaitcho, which is quite a large area of the Northwest Territories. Therefore, what we would be doing with the act is putting in place legislation that has not gone through the process that it has for the Tlicho, the Sahtu and the Gwich'in, where this was negotiated and agreed to by both parties. What we have is a situation where it is going to be put in place, regardless.

Within the bill there is a clause that says the minister must review the act upon the creation of any new land agreement with any party in the Northwest Territories. However, is that review sufficient for the people of the Northwest Territories, for the Deh Cho and Akaitcho people, who are still negotiating their land claims? Is it sufficient that this would simply be subject to a review? Without qualifications to a review, without understanding what a review could accomplish for those two groups, that question needs to be further outlined in committee. It needs to be answered for a very important part of the Northwest Territories. There are things that have to be done there.

In the briefing, it was indicated that the municipalities have not been engaged on this issue. There was a feeling from the department that they did not have a role here. That is not correct because we have existing mines that are located within municipal boundaries, so there are some surface rights that extend into municipal areas.

Therefore, access is important to municipalities. As landowners they have to be part of it. They do have a role here. Consultation has not taken place with them, so we will have to do that at committee as well, in order to understand how municipalities feel about and understand the legislation, which could affect their role.

There are private landowners as well, although not many in the Northwest Territories, that may have some interest in the legislation. Hopefully, we can accomplish this in a fulsome committee examination. We could do the work of government for them at committee. I think that is fair enough.

The minister says this is all about economic development, that the government in effect is passing environmental legislation all about economic development. Is there not something wrong with that statement? Should we not be passing environmental legislation to protect the environment, to ensure for future generations that projects are conducted in a good fashion that yields a good result, and that when companies leave their disturbances are taken care of? That is just what needs to be done.

Good development also ties in with the needs of the people of the region. In the three territories, we have a problem, because we are not provinces. We cannot go to developers and tell them that we want a road in an area as well, that we will work with them to create the infrastructure because it will benefit our people later on. No, under the NWT Act, any new road has to be approved by the federal government; it is a federal government responsibility.

How do we see it playing out in the Northwest Territories? With the diamond mines, which are a great economic development opportunity for the Northwest Territories and for Canada, we have seen very little public infrastructure developed.

Now that fuel prices have gone through the roof, companies are saying that they cannot make a go of it in the future with these prices. However, if we had done it in an orderly, planned fashion, we would have put in hydro-electric power in the Slave province area where the three diamond mines exist right now. That did not happen. The federal government was in charge of that environmental assessment. It chose not to even examine hydro-electric power at the time in 1998, and now today the economy of those mines is suffering. The economy of the Northwest Territories has missed an opportunity to develop more infrastructure and more resources.

Therefore, resource development is a very important tool for human development as well. We miss the connection when we do not have a good say over development. When we do not take a long and careful look at how development would work, we miss the opportunity that could actually enhance and build our territories, which could also perhaps someday become provinces.

These are not areas that are simply set aside for resource development. That attitude should not prevail. The attitude should be one in which the north is for northern people and that they should be served first by development, so that development works to enhance the lives of every single northerner. That is what we look at when we talk about development.

We can look at the past and see that there was one great example of a properly developed resource, although the company did not do a very good job after it finished. That was the Pine Point Mine. The company developed a hydro-electric system and a road and railway, and all of those legacy items remain today as part of the infrastructure and economy of the Northwest Territories.

We want to see that kind of development continue, but we do not want to see big holes in the ground filled with water that have an environmental impact. We have some real goals with environmental assessment, and they are not predicated on slamming things through the system but on careful planning. That is how we make success for the north. We do not make success simply by throwing the doors open, getting through the process as quickly as possible, getting the shovels in the ground as quickly as possible without planning carefully what we are doing.

I do not see that attitude from the government at all. I do not see that planning attitude implicit in what it is doing, and the federal government still holds all the cards when it comes to northern development.

We need to take the part of the legislation dealing with the proposed NWT Surface Rights Board and give it close examination in committee. That is where we want to go. We will find out there what people really think and how to make this work for us. That is our goal.

We had hoped that the bill could be split so that the territories could be dealt with as separate entities. We are not all the same. I do not agree with the minister's attitude that the three territories should be dealt with as one unit; we are not one unit. Nunavut has one common government and one land claim. It has a system it has designed for itself. The Yukon has a completely different system of party politics, which has been established over many years. In the Northwest Territories, we are different. We have six major claims areas that are going to have self-government and a large say in the resources and the development of those particular regions. We do not want that changed.

If the members were to talk to people in the Northwest Territories, they would see that they are not talking about giving up their unique identity. They are not talking about getting in line with the other two territories and marching to the same drum as good little soldiers for the federal government's plans. No, we have our own way of dealing with ourselves, just as Alberta has its own way and puts up with the representation it has. We have our own way. I have been elected three times by the people of the Northwest Territories on a strong environmental platform. I did not get elected simply on resource

development; I got elected because people knew I would stand here and speak up for the values that we hold in the Northwest Territories. That is what I am going to do every day I am here. I do not care what Albertans say, I do not care what Ontarians say: I am here for the people of the Northwest Territories.

We look forward to the bill coming to committee, but it needs a fulsome discussion there. If the Conservative government thinks this is simply a slam dunk, it can forget about it.

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