



Minister under fire for nuclear plans

Jun. 20, 2006. 07:17 PM

CANADIAN PRESS

Ontario Environment Minister Laurel Broten came under fire from several fronts Tuesday as she struggled to defend the Liberal government's quiet efforts to exempt its new, long-term energy plan from an environmental assessment.

Opposition critics accused Broten of using "deceptive" double-speak in defending the decision to pass a regulation last week that exempts the energy plan from environmental assessments.

The government passed the regulation to show its support for the law, Broten said in an often baffling exchange with reporters that left critics shaking their heads.

"In order to confirm and make it clear that the province was not going to change the law, that we were not going to expand what should be included in an environmental assessment, we chose a step of including — by way of designation — to exclude," she said.

"In this case, somewhat unusual to do . . . we are confirming the law. FYI, we are not changing the law."

New Democrat environmental critic Peter Tabuns called Broten's explanations "Orwellian," noting that the regulation would only be necessary if the government was trying to hide something.

"If you want to be deceptive, then it was absolutely necessary to bring forward this regulation to exclude it from the act," said Tabuns.

"If you want to be open and have public scrutiny, if you want to act in a way that is not unprecedented, then you don't follow this route that they have followed."

Tabuns said Broten's defence of the regulation wasn't credible, and said he believes the government's energy plan — which includes an expansion of the province's nuclear facilities — should be subject to a full environmental assessment.

At the same time, Greenpeace, The World Wildlife Fund, the Pembina Institute and the Canadian Environmental Law Association issued a joint release Tuesday calling on the province to repeal the new regulation.

"What are they trying to hide?" asked Greenpeace spokesman Shawn-Patrick Stensil in a release. "A good plan could withstand scrutiny. The government is having to break its own rules in order to avoid key environmental tests."

Broten and Energy Minister Dwight Duncan both countered by saying the two new nuclear plants called for in the energy plan would be subjected to federal environmental assessments.

But Ontario Environment Commissioner Gord Miller said the Liberal government escaped public scrutiny by exempting its nuclear plans from a provincial assessment.

Duncan said Tuesday that the environmental watchdog is wrong, and insisted there was no need for the entire energy plan to be subjected to an environmental assessment.

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"I don't agree with the environmental commissioner," said Duncan. "Our very clear opinion is that the (entire energy plan) is not subject to that (assessment). We've simply given greater clarity to it."

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