

Tory MPs storm out of meeting on energy sharing; Canada left short to aid U.S., says professor

The Edmonton Journal (A6)

The Ottawa Citizen (A3)

The Montreal Gazette (A12)

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OTTAWA - Amid heated charges of a coverup, Tory MPs on Thursday abruptly shut down parliamentary hearings on a controversial plan to further integrate Canada and the U.S.

The firestorm erupted within minutes of testimony by University of Alberta professor Gordon Laxer that Canadians will be left "to freeze in the dark" if the government forges ahead with plans to integrate energy supplies across North America.

He was testifying on behalf of the Alberta-based Parkland Institute about concerns with the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP), a 2005 accord by the U.S., Canada and Mexico to streamline economic and security rules across the continent.

The deal, which calls North American "energy security" a priority, commits Canada to ensuring American energy supplies even though Canada itself -- unlike most industrialized nations -- has no national plan or reserves to protect its own supplies, he argued.

At that point, Tory MP Leon Benoit, chair of the Commons Standing Committee on International Trade which was holding the SPP hearings, ordered Laxer to halt his testimony, saying it was not relevant.

Opposition MPs called for, and won, a vote to overrule Benoit's ruling.

Benoit then threw down his pen, declaring, "This meeting is adjourned," and stormed out, followed by three of the panel's four Conservative members.

The remaining members voted to finish the meeting, with the Liberal vice-chair presiding.

Benoit's actions are virtually unprecedented, observers say; at press time, parliamentary procedure experts still hadn't figured out whether he had the right to adjourn the meeting unilaterally. Benoit did not respond to calls for comment.

It's "reckless and irresponsible" of the government not to discuss protecting Canada's energy supply, says Laxer.

Atlantic Canada and Quebec already have to import 90 per cent of their supply -- 45 per cent of it from potentially unstable sources such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Algeria, Laxer said.

Meanwhile, Canada is exporting 63 per cent of its oil and 56 per cent of its gas production, mostly to the U.S., he says.

"It's shocking the extent to which the Conservative party will go to cover up information about the SPP," says NDP MP Peter Julian, who also sits on the committee.

Other MPs raised concerns about recently revealed plans under the SPP to raise Canadian limits on pesticide residues to match American rules.

Questions were also raised about whether the effort will open the door to bulk water exports.

Representatives from the departments of Industry and International Trade defended the SPP as an effort to protect Canadian jobs in a competitive global market, without sacrificing standards. They denied charges SPP negotiations have been secretive, saying civil-society groups are welcome to offer their input, and referred MPs to the government website.

Robert S. Rodvik
Author/media analyst

"Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became the truth."

George Orwell - 1984