

**Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Region of Northern Ontario Act**  
Private Members' Business

February 16th, 2011

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Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak tonight to this important bill, Bill C-309, put forward by my colleague from Nipissing—Timiskaming. This is an important piece of legislation brought forward by an important and fine Member of Parliament. I had the pleasure of being elected to this House in 2004, and since that time I have pretty much sat beside the member for Nipissing—Timiskaming. I have seen how hard he works, how seriously he takes his duties and how connected he is to his community on a whole range of issues.

The bill tonight speaks to that commitment to the community of northern Ontario. The importance of regional economic development agencies in general must never be underestimated. Canada is such a vast country, diverse both in terms of culture, ethnography, geography and in every other way.

From region to region, Canada is different and from one province to the next, and even within provinces. In the province I come from, Nova Scotia we have Cape Breton, the Annapolis Valley, the French Shore in Southwestern Nova Scotia and we have Halifax-Dartmouth. The legislation should reflect those differences across Canada but even within regions.

I want to speak from my own experience with our regional development agency, ACOA, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, and its value to Atlantic Canadians. I believe the member for Nipissing—Timiskaming would acknowledge that ACOA is a pretty good model. The bill we are talking about today in some ways can trace its origins to the work that has been done by ACOA.

ACOA has done so much good work. One of the key things is it has recognized that Atlantic Canadians are smart and innovative people who have ideas they want develop and market. One of the things that was missing is that Atlantic Canada is not a haven of venture capital.

The Liberal governments looked at ACOA and asked why not use this as a way to spur innovation and research so that Atlantic Canada can grow not only now, but for generations to come?" The Atlantic innovation fund was set up. I want to acknowledge Senator Moore. He is still in the Senate and is one of the people who came up with this idea, the rising tides document that came out around 2000 and led to the introduction of the Atlantic innovation fund.

These permanent development agencies with stable core funding really help regions to develop economic potential that is unique to their geography and their demographics. Hundreds of millions of dollars of economic activity is at risk of not being used, in other words, of going untapped.

Bill C-309 would establish a permanent and annually funded regional economic agency in northern Ontario as an essential step to building a more secure and stable economy in the region.

The member pointed out that there does not now exist a federal government program that aims to contribute to economic development in northern Ontario. FedNor falls under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Industry and is essentially now used as a tool, quite often for punishing and bribing of the parties concerned. It is a program, not an agency. It is constantly

under threat of having its budget easily cut or eliminated altogether. That is not the way to encourage regional economic development.

Under previous Liberal governments there was never any threat to funding, so perhaps it was not as important in those days. The member acknowledged in his speech that it was not as necessary 10 years ago as it is today because of the threats, the whims, the enemies list of the government. Anything that is left to the whim of a ministerial decision, as we have seen with the minister responsible for CIDA what can happen when a minister gets piqued at something. It is gone pretty quickly.

As my colleague pointed out, the Liberal government at that time actually increased FedNor's core funding to \$52 million. The fact is since the Conservatives took office, FedNor's budget has been slashed by close to \$7 million a year. This bill is designed to ensure that FedNor will not be subjected to further cuts.

Some people asked why did the Liberals not do it? My colleague answered that question. It was not necessary then; perhaps it might have been useful. If we had anticipated that the Conservatives might be coming in, perhaps we would have done that to protect northern Ontario.

In short, the bill seeks to promote economic development, economic diversification and job creation in communities throughout northern Ontario. As an agency, as opposed to a simple program, FedNor would demand greater accountability and will be required to report to Parliament on a regular basis.

Right now, each of its counterparts as a regional development agency has an act of Parliament establishing it as a separate entity. This legislation would mean that the federal government requires the consent of Parliament to change or alter the powers and mandate of FedNor. That sort of stability is absolutely essential for any initiative that aims at regional economic development.

Economic planners and communities need to be able to plan, knowing full well that they can count on an agency, staffed and mandated to be a regular partner with the region's players. To make FedNor into an agency through an act of Parliament is not only good for the region; it is good for accountability and transparency. As a separate agency under the FAA, FedNor would be required to file detailed financial performance reports for tabling in Parliament.

To conclude, let me say that this bill is not about bureaucracy, it is about accountability. It is not about politics, it is about good policy. It is not about cost, it is about benefit. It is about northern Ontario. I congratulate the member. I urge all members to support it and for the government to provide a royal recommendation.