

Yellowknife - Arsenic in the Environment

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1. The NWT Government and the Mayor of Yellowknife were, before the results of the survey were made known on May 27, given copies of the attached document. This document describes the methodology of the hair analysis and lists each individuals result with the names of the individuals deleted in the interest of confidentiality of individuals.
2. The question of Mr. Firth about mercury levels in hair in Yellowknife, prompted by a small separate survey done for National Indian Brotherhood, is attached along with Miss Campbell's answer in the "late show" June 5, 1975.

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for tonight I had the opportunity to read it briefly. I agree with the hon. member that it is a complex document and requires a great deal of work before the government will be able to make a decision.

I can say that the document will be referred to the Cabinet imminently, probably by the end of the month of June, at which time the Cabinet will consider it and make a judgment as to what position it will take.

The hon. member for Grenville-Carleton gave a précis, as much as one can give a précis of the document in respect of government activities. It basically argues that the official languages act of Quebec is unconstitutional on a number of grounds in those areas where it is alleged to violate the British North America Act and a number of statutes of the Government of Canada.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): What is the date you said for referral to the Cabinet?

Mr. Reid: It ought to be before the Cabinet by the end of June. Presumably at that time discussions will take place and the Cabinet will come to a conclusion in the ordinary way.

On an issue of this nature I do not think we can look forward to an easy answer, because the issues in this particular reference are complex, delicate, and have to do with the over-all position of legislative powers in our system. For example, I can think of a number of premiers who would be very upset if the government were to use its powers of disallowance—

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Morin): Order, please.

HEALTH—REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION NOT TO TEST FOR MERCURY POISONING AMONG NATIVES

Mr. Wally Firth (Northwest Territories): Madam Speaker, I have asked for this time to clarify for myself and for many other people who are involved just exactly what the position of the government is in relation to the question of arsenic and mercury pollution in Yellowknife.

Several times in press releases and in speeches the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde) has indicated that the survey results released last week by his department represented only a part of the testing program. He said, as reported at page 6379 of *Hansard*, that "more thorough studies have been launched, particularly on established cases showing what appears to be a high arsenic rate."

The only source the government has of finding high arsenic rates is its own study, and frankly I find that study suspect. The difficulty lies with the sample on which that study is based. I believe 700 people volunteered for the survey. Roughly speaking, less than 20 per cent of the samples were from mine and mill workers, and only 8 per cent were from native people. By my calculation that means only 28 per cent of the samples were from people most directly connected with arsenic.

• (2210)

It is the workers, for obvious reasons, and the native people who are most directly connected with arsenic

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because many of them have been using Back Bay in Yellowknife as their source of drinking water, and Back Bay is polluted with arsenic and mercury. The point I am trying to make, Madam Speaker, is that if the minister is going to base his next round of tests on his first study, then he is going to miss a lot of people who potentially have high readings of arsenic in their bodies.

Let me illustrate this with an example. You have heard mention of a study commissioned by the Indian Brotherhood. The testing for this survey was conducted by the University of Toronto. Their sample is suspect because it only contained 18 individuals. However, they did find two children with mercury readings. One had a reading of 180, the other of 90.

The minister's study also found some examples of mercury, but they were very low. Let me quote from a department press release dated May 27:

Since the presently accepted maximum safety level for mercury is 60 parts per million it is not considered necessary to do any follow-up studies on the mercury levels at this time.

One of the two children I mentioned had a reading three times what the minister's department calls the maximum safety level. Because his first survey was not relevant to the matter at hand, his department missed this one example. And because they missed the one example, they are not going to test for mercury.

My worry is for the other ten year olds and their families whom the minister's survey did not find, and I think that the life and health of these people are worth any effort the minister might have made to design and carry out a survey that will give a more accurate picture of the situation in Yellowknife. Armed with relevant data, he should then proceed with further studies.

The second point I would like the minister to take to heart concerns the attitude of some of his staff, and the staff of other departments, when they are dealing with the public in these matters.

As I remember it, last January when the CBC made public the allegedly secret document which revealed the levels of arsenic present in the environment of Yellowknife, a great number of attacks and counter-attacks were made about whether the document was indeed secret. The upshot of the whole thing was the announcement of the survey that came out last week, and what appeared to be a pledge that every pertinent fact on the subject of arsenic would be made available to the public.

I have a memo, dated February 6—a time when the commotion had died down somewhat. It is from Mr. H. Veldhuizen of the air pollution control section of the Environmental Protection Service. It went to Mr. C. A. Lewis of the EPS in Yellowknife. Copies went to Dr. R. D. P. Eaton in Edmonton, who is an employee of the Department of National Health and Welfare.

It deals with the recommendation of a body in the United States charged with evaluating standards for health in working environments. It seems that this body now recommends that the industrial hygiene standards for in-plant environmental conditions be lowered from 500 micrograms per cubic metre to 4 micrograms per cubic metre. Mr. Veldhuizen explains this change to Mr. Lewis in some detail. Then he says:

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It would be advisable not to release this information to the public as it may cause undue concern at this time.

I would like to ask the minister to justify that kind of attitude in a person hired with public money to protect the public.

Miss Coline Campbell (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Health and Welfare): Madam Speaker, in response to the question of the hon. member for Northwest Territories (Mr. Firth) put to the minister this afternoon on the National Indian Brotherhood survey, I would like to say the following.

During the survey on arsenic levels in hair samples of residents of the Yellowknife area which was carried out in February of 1975 by the department, tests for mercury were also done on 20 per cent of the hair samples. These tests were done because a study carried out by researchers of the University of Iowa some time ago had indicated the possibility of mercury contamination also occurring as a result of the processing of gold ore at Yellowknife. The study of arsenic levels provided an opportunity to obtain up to date information on the possibility of a mercury problem, since the presence of mercury in human hair is a good indication of whether, and to what extent, it is present in the body.

All the hair samples tested for mercury revealed levels of less than 10 parts per million (ppm) with one exception, which was 25 ppm. Since the presently accepted maximum safety level for mercury is 60 ppm, it was concluded that further follow up studies on mercury levels were not necessary at that time. This conclusion was the one made known in the press release of May 27, 1975.

Since that time officials of the National Indian Brotherhood have contacted officials of the department to inform them of the results of a survey carried out for the NIB on arsenic and mercury levels in some hair samples of residents of two native communities very near Yellowknife. As reported to the department, this survey was of 18 hair samples, but levels of mercury were reported on only two of the samples. Both of these samples are reported to have revealed significantly elevated levels of mercury.

When told of these results, the department immediately requested the National Indian Brotherhood to provide it with a full report on the survey because it wished to follow up with further tests on any individuals found by the NIB to have significant arsenic or mercury hair levels. We have not yet received the report from NIB, and are therefore not yet able to draw any conclusions about the two mercury levels reported, or on the methodology used in the tests.

In the meantime, however, the results reported by NIB have already been reported to the northern health services with the instructions that they are to contact the individuals concerned and ask them to have clinical examinations during phase II of the Yellowknife survey which will start on June 9.

Whether still further tests or surveys should be conducted at this time in connection with mercury is something which will be assessed when the department has had an opportunity to study the full report of the NIB survey and these clinical examinations have been done. The fact remains that the much larger survey carried out by the

[Mr. Firth.]

department did not reveal any mercury levels of significance, and the two high levels reported from the NIB survey must be examined in that light.

Despite this fact, I want to assure the hon. member and the House that in addition to the immediate steps I have described, the department will follow up with whatever further work we find to be necessary to monitor the health of the residents in the area and to enable us to take measures to protect it.

FINANCE—EXCISE TAX ON PRIVATE AIRCRAFT AND PLEASURE BOATS—REQUEST FOR REPORT ON EFFECTIVENESS IN LIMITING CONSUMPTION OF PETROLEUM PRODUCTS

Mr. John A. Fraser (Vancouver South): Madam Speaker, in *Hansard* for May 30 at page 6280 is recorded the question I asked of the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner), as follows:

With respect to the 10 per cent excise tax on privately owned aircraft and motor driven pleasure boats, which was part of the November budget, will the minister now advise as to what degree this tax has limited oil consumption in Canada?

The Minister of Finance replied:

—I will have to consult with my colleague, the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources, but I would hope it had some result.

On January 9 I wrote to the Minister of Finance, and I quote from that letter:

Regarding the 10% tax on non-commercial aircraft and pleasure boats I am forced to ask whether anyone really believes this is the way to cut down on the consumption of oil. Surely this move is unnecessary and, for that matter, not based on any real programme for energy conservation. Ration gas, tax gas, or let the price rise, if you really want to cut down on consumption, but why try and pretend that this tax is going to help to maintain Canadian self-sufficiency in energy?

On February 19 the Minister of Finance replied, and wrote the following:

The special excise taxes on energy-consuming vehicles constitute one of several programs the government has introduced to deal with the critical question of conserving Canada's energy resources.

In the following paragraph it is stated that:

... the government is aware that the impact of the new taxes on industries directly affected will result in some short-term dislocations in those industries. However, it must be emphasized that disruptions in industries directly related to the consumption of petroleum products will inevitably occur, and the government must take action now to encourage such industries and consumers to adjust their production and consumption in the direction of more conservative energy-consuming products if even greater dislocations are to be avoided.

I want to say quite frankly that if that is the result of this tax, then of course the public must have some sympathy with it, but I wish to record tonight my own severe doubts that that tax has had any effect on the consumption of oil in Canada.

I want to quote from some letters which I have received, as a member of parliament, from people operating in the marine industry in my own province. I quote from a letter dated May 12, 1975, from Leo Edwards Sons, Ltd. as follows:

• (2220)

The imposition of the tax has resulted in decreased sales, lay-offs and has contributed to inflation rather than otherwise.