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STATEMENT BY THE HONOURABLE MARC LALONDE
ON ARSENIC POLLUTION IN YELLOWKNIFE

Mr. Speaker: I should like to expand on the statements which I made on January 24, 1977 in response to the questions from the honourable member for the Northwest Territories. During the past two years, the study of the potential danger to health produced by arsenic pollution in Yellowknife has been intensified by officers of the Medical Services Branch of the Department of National Health and Welfare, and by a Committee set up by the Government of the Northwest Territories.

The Medical Services Branch study carried out in 1975 involved seven hundred residents of Yellowknife, one hundred and fifty-five of these being industrial workers. Since arsenic is a cumulative poison, the study made every effort to ensure that long-term residents and mine workers were tested. Because the issue is one of critical concern to other people living in Yellowknife, examination was also offered to any members of the public who wished to be tested. The results of hair samples taken from the industrial workers were very similar to those found in the small sample of twenty industrial workers publicised by the National Indian Brotherhood last week.

However, the Medical Services Branch study of 1975 went further: detailed clinical and laboratory examinations were performed on those individuals found to have

elevated hair arsenic levels. Of these, only five were found to have indications of slightly elevated levels of body arsenic shown by tests on urine samples. Even these slightly elevated arsenic levels were well below toxic levels. The results of this survey were published as news releases on May 27, 1975 and on October 3, 1975.

The Government of the Northwest Territories set up a Yellowknife Environmental Study Committee to carry out broader environmental studies of the potential problem. Two individuals, Mr. J. Grainge of the Department of National Health and Welfare and Mr. D. Gemmell of the Department of Environment were asked to review available environmental material, perform further studies and report to the Y.E.S. Committee. Mr. Grainge and Mr. Gemmell were unable to agree on the interpretation of the data and therefore, provided separate reports to the Chairman of the Y.E.S. Committee in August 1976. Both reports were made public in the late Summer last year and widely commented upon in Alberta and in the North. It was stressed at the time that these were both working documents intended for review by the Y.E.S. Committee. It is the Gemmell Report which the National Indian Brotherhood has recently referred to as the Y.E.S. Report. However, the true Y.E.S. Report, that is the report of the Y.E.S. Committee, which consists of a consolidation of all available data has only just been completed. It is expected that it will be released in the very near future. I have not yet seen a copy of it.

The recent statements by the National Indian Brotherhood together with the United Steel Workers of America and Dr. Jervis of the University of Toronto have caused considerable concern to the residents of Yellowknife even though the report is based on a limited screening of a small group of individuals.

It is my firm intention, Mr. Speaker, to ensure that the true facts of the situation are known. It is for this reason and to ensure that a truly impartial review is performed, that I have asked the Canadian Public Health Association, an independent non-governmental professional association, to choose three independent experts and to oversee the conduct of a review of all the available material to which I have just referred and any other data which may be requested. The Federal Government will have no hand whatsoever in the selection of the three experts nor in supervision of the study. I am sure that the total independence of this group of experts will be evident to all reasonable people and that they will therefore be acceptable to concerned groups such as the National Indian Brotherhood and the union representing the workers of the Giant Yellowknife Mines, as well as to the people of Yellowknife who are, I am sure, as determined as I am to

have all of these scientific data as clearly interpreted as can be by the independent experts selected by the CPHA. I reiterate that all findings will be made public.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I should like to stress that to my knowledge there has been no cover-up of data by my officials or other officials. As I indicated in the House earlier, we have been told about a departmental memorandum issued by a Department of Environment employee, with a suggestion to this effect; but here again, it is simply the opinion of a junior civil servant which does not represent government policy. The paper concerned has been submitted to Government of the Northwest Territories, and it is available.

All information has been released either as news releases or as working reports by the Y.E.S. Committee, as I indicated earlier. The final report of the Y.E.S. Committee, a Territorial Government Committee, has only just been completed and will, I anticipate, be released in the near future by the Territorial Government. I am sure it will be examined, along with other documents, by the group of experts.

January 26, 1977.