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Asbestos: Harper government earns world's ire ~MP ELIZABETH MAY

The Quebec asbestos industry has long been a political sacred cow. In 2006, when I became leader of the Green Party, we were the only party to favour ending the export of asbestos. Despite the heroic efforts of NDP MP Pat Martin, until 2008 the NDP did not officially oppose asbestos exports. The federal Liberal governments of Chretien and Martin defended asbestos and taxpayers' dollars flowed to the Chrysotile Institute to promote its 'safe use.'

Over the last five years, there has been a healthy shift. First the NDP, and then the Liberals, shifted their positions to, at least, favour listing asbestos as 'hazardous' under the Rotterdam Convention.

The Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade was signed in 1998 and became globally legally binding in 2004. The Convention does not ban substances. As the name suggests, it sets out the rules for the international trade in certain dangerous substances requiring the importing country receive warnings and give its 'prior informed consent.'

Canada has long been a staunch defender of asbestos. When France banned chrysotile asbestos in 1999, Canada launched a complaint to the World Trade Organization. Up to that point, the WTO, created in 1995, had always found in favour of trade and never in defence of health and safety. The asbestos case was the first exception and Canada lost.

Canada's PR campaign is that the old dangerous asbestos is different from chrysotile asbestos. True, asbestos, used in brake shoes and insulating, was brown and chrysotile asbestos, used primarily to reinforce concrete, is white. What they have in common is that breathing in their fibres causes cancer. No level of exposure is safe.

The World Health Organization has estimated that approximately 100,000 people a year will die due to asbestos exposure. The Canadian Cancer Society has called our government's position 'unethical.'

What made this year's meeting of the Rotterdam Convention particularly galling was Canada's negotiating strategy. Hanging back, we let India and other developing countries do our dirty work. It appeared the deadlock was broken on June 23, when India recanted and agreed to press the small handful of other developing countries, still opposed, to agree to listing. As reported by the respected newsletter, *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*:

'As opponents to listing chrysotile became sparse, the elephant was left with nowhere to hide. Tempers flared as Canada confirmed it would not join any consensus on listing chrysotile. Usual allies questioned why the party (Canada) would allow negotiations to progress even as it knew it could not join the consensus.'

Speaking for the Prime Minister, PMO Communications Director Dimitri Soudas stated, 'All scientific reviews clearly confirm that chrysotile fibres can be used safely under controlled conditions.'

But even Health Canada's own advice is at odds with our public position. A 2006 memo from Health Canada (HC) was obtained by public interest researcher Ken Rubin through Access to Information: 'We cannot say that chrysotile is safe... HC's preferred position would be to list... [HC acknowledges that] the final decision [regarding Canada's position at the Rotterdam Convention] will not be made on the basis of health alone, and other key factors will need to be considered.'

Also released through the same Access to Information Request was this 2008 memo: 'Health Canada's Expert Panel presented a report to Health Canada that confirmed chrysotile asbestos poses a risk to human health. Health

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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada.

Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.

Email: islandtides@islandtides.com.

Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

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Canada's current position is that asbestos is a carcinogen which can cause lung cancer and mesothelioma.'

So, we have lost another two years in which Canada will continue as the fifth largest exporter of chrysotile asbestos without warnings. Nevertheless, I sense we are closer than ever to victory. Despite Stephen Harper's campaign swing in Quebec criticizing the Bloc for not doing enough to boost asbestos, despite the fact his Minister for Industry, Christian Paradis, represents the asbestos mining region of Quebec, Conservative MPs are beginning to voice dissent.

Former MP Chuck Strahl, diagnosed with asbestos-related cancer, called on his former colleagues to change Canada's position. Mark Warawa (MP for Langley) questioned our stance and was promptly removed from his position as Parliamentary Secretary for Environment

(a move he says was unrelated.) Now, Conservative London-area MP Ed Holder has said he will not support asbestos, as has Pat Davidson, Sarnia's Conservative MP. In Question Period, I urged the government to change its position while there was still time in the negotiations. The Government backbenchers looked distinctly unhappy as Paradis read out the same answer (same claim as the PMO) the fifth time in that day's QP.

I see shifting the position on asbestos as a key moment to empower Conservative MPs to break free from the total control exerted by the Prime Minister. It will be the only way that Canada can cease being a knowing exporter of death and human misery.

Visit greenparty.ca/asbestos-apology to post a message to the 'I'm sorry' campaign. ☞

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