



OPEN GOVERNMENT

Canada should stop soft-pedaling asbestos

Why does Canada still want to be the lead country marketing asbestos?

By KEN RUBIN

Just before Parliament returned, a little-noticed workshop entitled "Canadian Asbestos: A Global Concern," as well as a protest took place on the Hill. It was all about Canada's safety record and long-time complicity in promoting asbestos in Canada and Third World countries.

Even Parliament Hill is not without asbestos. For years, officials have been slowly removing it from the Parliament Buildings and over the years employees have registered health and safety complaints.

The recent workshop dealt squarely with Canada having a policy of aggressively leading and not removing itself from pushing asbestos use and sales abroad. Workshop participants were drawn from asbestos victims, families, unions, environmental and international groups.

Some 95 per cent of Canada's asbestos is exported, in part because its use here is much more restricted for safety and environmental reasons.

Documents that I've obtained primarily from Natural Resources over the last decade under the Access to Information Act, illustrate just how extraordinary the extent to which Canada went to lobby foreign governments not to ban Canadian chrysotile asbestos as unsafe. The Prime Minister even intervened unsuccessfully when Chile was about to ban asbestos products.

Canada also tried to have France's asbestos ban decision reversed by mounting an unsuccessful WTO challenge and claimed that the "controlled use" of asbestos rendered it safe if only Third World recipients used it "responsibly." Canada also argued that the scientific evidence and links between asbestos and lethal diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma were "inconclusive."

Canada's main method at coordinating a country-by-country counter-asbestos ban attack was to heavily fund an international asbestos industry group, the Asbestos Institute, based out of Montreal, Que.

Records show that Canada, along with Que-

bec, since 1984 have provided almost \$60-million to the Asbestos Institute. The institute, working in close association with Canadian embassies abroad, Natural Resources and even Health Canada personnel, have held numerous overseas "training" seminars, and have applied pressure to other countries' leaders and health authorities.

Records show that Canadian government funds were used to bring foreign journalists to Canada on junkets and to hire scientific help to present and to bolster the "safe use" of asbestos line. Critics were stonewalled or ignored by the Asbestos Institute.

Despite dozens of calls earlier this year, the Asbestos Institute directors refused to discuss my questions about their affiliated groups around the world and declined to provide a breakdown for their uses of public monies. Only after persistent calls, was I able to get both federal and Quebec Natural Resources departments to release parts of some of the Asbestos Institute reports on their activities that they were required to provide to their government funders.

Some of the most moving parts of the three-day workshop on the Hill, meanwhile, which brought together speakers from places like India, Peru, Japan, South Africa, Italy, the United States and Great Britain, were the personal presentations of surviving kin of family members who believe their relatives died of asbestos-related diseases. One woman described her husband's dignified struggle to live after working just one summer handling asbestos products. The workshop heard of many other cases of asbestos-handling and work in Canada and abroad, leading to death where there was inadequate compensation and little government support.

The irony is that now the Canadian asbestos industry is itself dying. There is only one active mine in Quebec left. But this has not prevented the Canadian government from aggressively supporting the Asbestos Institute. Natural Resources Minister Herb Dhaliwal signed a \$500,000 agree-

ment for 2002-04 with the institute to hold more training "awareness" workshops in Latin America, Africa and Asia and to target yet other foreign governments like Brazil and Vietnam which were considering bans and tough restrictions on the use of asbestos.

Records show that the Canadian government has even recently issued a Public Works and Government Services directive that companies bidding on federal procurement contracts should not discriminate and should consider using asbestos products in federal building construction. No other product has received such a semi-official federal endorsement. The pressure to do this came from the Asbestos Institute, much of whose funding comes from Ottawa, and from MPs whose ridings were in the Quebec asbestos mining region, including Liberal MP Gerard Binet's.

The asbestos workshop on the Hill brought things full circle with participants forming a Ban Asbestos Canada group whose goal is to end Canada's leading international role in soft-pedaling asbestos products and to cut out funding for the Asbestos Institute. The group wants greater public awareness and better treatment for the families devastated by losses.

After a summer of public health emergencies, with SARS, West Nile, and Mad Cow concerns, it's hardly reassuring to see that Canada still wants to be the lead country marketing such a lethal commodity as asbestos.

Parliament is only back for a short time. It doesn't seem too inclined to deal with public health emergencies on these many fronts, including this one which was so powerfully raised on their own turf.

But sometimes it takes those most affected and a few protesters to remind officials and MPs that by their indifference, blind faith and support for such lobbying and funding practices, is dead wrong.

Ken Rubin writes from time to time on public health and safety issues for The Hill Times.

The Hill Times



Photograph by Ada Wright, The Hill Times
IN SUPPORT: MINISTER DHALIHAL SIGNED A \$500,000 2002-2004 AGREEMENT WITH THE INSTITUTE TO HOLD MORE TRAINING 'AWARENESS' WORKSHOPS IN LATIN AMERICA, AFRICA AND ASIA.