

## OPINION

# Canada should call for a complete ban on export of asbestos right now

But no political party with significant Quebec representation in Parliament has the guts to call for a ban on asbestos exports.



BY MURRAY DOBBIN

VANCOUVER, B.C.—There is an intense battle going on in Canada and internationally over the continuing export of Canadian asbestos to developing countries. But most Canadians remain largely unaware of the battle and the high stakes involved. Included amongst those Canadians, apparently, was Michael Ignatieff. Speaking in Victoria, B.C., Ignatieff was asked whether he supported ending the export of asbestos. Admitting that he might be getting into trouble for his answer, the Liberal leader was nonetheless unequivocal in his common sense answer: “Our export of this dangerous product overseas has got to stop.”

But just two days later, after being briefed about the role that this deadly substance plays in the politics of Quebec, Ignatieff recanted—and denied ever having said the fateful words. The leader of the opposition declared: “What I said... is that we have an obligation, it’s an international convention, to warn countries to which we export this product, so that they know that there are risks for public health. That is all I said. That’s my position.”

In the political gulf between these two quotes lies the long and sordid story of Canada’s role in continuing to export what is far and away the most deadly workplace substance in human history. In British Columbia alone 300 people will die from workplace exposure to asbestos this year. Still, this madness continues simply because no political party with significant Quebec representation in Parliament has had the guts to call for a ban on exports.

Indeed, neither Liberal nor Conservative federal governments have even been willing to place chrysotile asbestos on the list of the Rotterdam Convention on hazardous chemicals. The convention requires importing countries to provide “prior informed consent” which would give them the right to be informed about, and to refuse, extremely hazardous chemicals and pesticides.

The Harper government’s determination to prevent the listing, against the recommendations of the convention’s

own expert committee, has effectively destroyed the convention which operates on a consensus basis.

This killer industry is itself dying. There are only 550 miners left—one-tenth of the peak numbers—and they have had their wages cut; they work only part of the year. In 2007, one of the two remaining asbestos mining companies, LAB Chrysotile Inc., filed for bankruptcy protection. In fact, both would have disappeared long ago were it not for Canada’s status in defending the industry. In return for its influential international voice, other exporters, producing at much lower cost, permit Canada to keep its market share.

But when you have both corporate Quebec and Quebec labour gunning for any dissenter, it is not surprising to see politicians run for cover. Clément Godbout, the president of the Chrysotile Institute (named after chrysotile asbestos, the only form of asbestos that is produced and sold around the world) is a former president of the Quebec Federation of Labour—the second QFL president to hold the position.

Ninety-five percent of Canada’s exports go to Third World countries which have woefully inadequate regulations and even worse enforcement. Thousands of workers are affected and once asbestos disappears into concrete (its principal end point) and is cut, crumbles or is demolished, the deadly stuff is released into the air.

Amongst the long list of health organizations calling for the banning of chrysotile asbestos are The World Health Organization, the International Labour Organization, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Canadian Cancer Society, and the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. The evaluation by the International Agency for Research on Cancer—the most respected cancer investigative organization in the world—states that all forms of asbestos, including chrysotile asbestos, cause cancer. The science is irrefutable.

But this does not stop the Chrysotile Institute (CI). The CI admits that chrysotile asbestos is carcinogenic but says it is much less so than other forms and it can be handled safely. But it also quotes favourably a self-proclaimed expert with no scientific credentials who claims that chrysotile asbestos is not carcinogenic, stating that it “disappears” when it is mixed with cement and consequently becomes harmless—a claim universally ridiculed by scientists in the field.

*The Canadian Medical Association Journal* editorial of Oct. 21, 2008 accused the Canadian government of “contributing to asbestos-related illnesses and deaths in the developing world.” Ignatieff could do three things to correct this appalling situation, if he becomes Prime Minister: withdraw the quarter million dollar grant Ottawa gives annually to the CI; aim to save the Rotterdam Convention by formalizing, as Liberal Party policy, his recent commitment to list asbestos as a dangerous substance; and lastly, to achieve true hero status, call for a complete ban on the export of asbestos and for transition funding and training for the workers displaced.

Murray Dobbin writes from Powell River, B.C.

news@hilltimes.com  
The Hill Times