

OCTOBER 18, 2011: A BLOODY ANNIVERSARY

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We are here today to mark the 20th anniversary of the overturn of the United States Asbestos Ban and Phase-out Rule. It is fitting that we do so in Ottawa, the capital of the country which attacked the legislation intended to protect Americans from deadly exposures to asbestos. It was, after all, as a result of a lawsuit backed by the Federal Government of Canada, the Province of Quebec, Canadian asbestos stakeholders and others, that the ban was quashed. As a consequence of the legal and political actions mounted by Canadian interests, a further 300,000 tonnes of asbestos, most sourced from Canada, were used in the U.S. and vast amounts of asbestos products were incorporated into the national infrastructure. The continuing lack of an asbestos ban in the United States has been ruthlessly exploited by industry lobbyists to promote global sales of asbestos.

The Canadian assault on the U.S. ban was masterminded by politicians and civil servants in Ottawa and Quebec. They sought to remain invisible and, to a large extent, succeeded. Their Machiavellian strategy was spelt out in 1986 by Alek Ignatow from the Ministry of Energy, Mines, and Resources: "Clearly, the industry must be seen as leading on this issue," he wrote. So, while industry fronted the attack, financial support and political assistance from Quebec and Ottawa underpinned the incursion of Canada's asbestos foot soldiers into U.S. territory. Documents released by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) name those involved in the Canadian plot to overthrow the U.S. ban.

Canadians Implicated in Attack on U.S. Ban

Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney lobbied President Reagan over the EPA's plans to ban asbestos at a meeting in the mid-1980s. The PM was kept apprised of developments regarding the ban proposals as were members of the Privy Council.

Quebec Premier Jean-Robert Bourassa raised Quebec's concerns about the controversial ban with U.S. trade officials at a meeting in Washington in 1986.

Canadian Ambassadors to the U.S. Allan Gotlieb and **D. H. Burney** meet with the EPA Administrator in September 1986 and April 1989 respectively.

Over the years, EPA officials grew used to seeing the Canadian Ambassador's letterhead on correspondence and memoranda attacking the EPA's ban proposals. On January 10, 1989, in a 17-page "note," the Canadian Ambassador rehashed his Government's arguments in support of the policy of "controlled use of asbestos." "Asbestos is," the Ambassador wrote "an extremely versatile mineral which

produces useful, cost-effective materials essential for providing potable water, sanitation, and affordable shelter in developing countries.”

Other politicians whose names are in the EPA files include Canadian Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources Marcel Masse, Quebec’s Minister of Mines Raymond Savoie and Roch Frechette, Mayor of the Quebec town of Asbestos.

Personnel at Canadian ministries and departments with involvement in the plot to overturn the ban included staff at the:

- Ministry of Energy, Mines, and Resources
- Ministry of Environment
- Ministry of Consumer and Corporate Affairs
- Ministry of Regional Economic Expansion
- Department of Health and Welfare
- Department of External Affairs
- Canadian International Development Agency

Reflections

Of course, it is not possible to say what might or might not have happened had Canadians stayed on their side of the border when it came to deciding on how the U.S. Government could best protect the lives of American citizens. It is conceivable that without the involvement, support and influence of Canadian asbestos interests, the attack on the EPA’s Asbestos Ban and Phase-out Rule might well have failed. Should that have been so, then several things could have transpired. The U.S. would, by now, have benefited from twenty years of using asbestos-free products; a generation of workers would have escaped hazardous exposures to asbestos-containing products. Other governments, following the U.S. example, might also have passed legislation prohibiting asbestos use. The asbestos-free world which so many of us have campaigned for could have become a reality.

Concluding Thoughts

The financial greed and political expediency which motivated the onslaught on the EPA ban is alive and well in Canada. Canada’s behaviour at the meeting of the Rotterdam Convention in June 2011 is an example of this as are the increasingly outrageous statements being made by Baljit Chadha, a businessman hoping to extract a \$58 million loan guarantee from the Quebec Government for a new asbestos mining project. Today, the 20th anniversary of the overturn of the U.S. ban is the perfect time to say: “Enough is enough.” In memory of those whose lives have already been sacrificed in the name of asbestos, let Canada finally do the right thing – shut down this corrupting and corrupt industry, cut loose the pariahs who are growing fat on asbestos blood money and assist

communities in the mining regions to diversify their economies. An asbestos-free future is possible; it is what each one of us deserves.¹

¹ The full paper and documentation from the EPA can be accessed at: <http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-a-bloody-anniversary-2011.php>