

In Canada, economic and historical forces have combined to create a chemical valley along the St. Clair River and it includes Dow Chemical Canada Limited. We know that a key to the current problem is a spill of perchloroethylene by Dow between August 13 and August 16, 1985. Moreover, for many years, Dow disposed of chemical waste by placing them in abandoned salt caverns that lie below the riverbed. Other companies injected their wastes into the shallower Detroit Formation. I should stress that the companies' waste disposal methods were consistent with what was understood at the time to be safe.

● (1520)

Dow has been vacuuming the St. Clair River since concern first focused on the tarry material and is continuing to do so to this day. An area approximately 30 metres square is being cleaned. It has been divided into a grid comprising 66 squares and, as of noon today, 52 of them, or 80 per cent in all, have been cleaned. The material being vacuumed is being stored in a holding pond on Dow's property.

My Department's scientific team posits that three possible factors have contributed to pollution problems in the St. Clair River. First, over the years there have been spills from Dow and from other companies. Second, there is continuous discharge from the property of various companies directly into the river itself. Third, there is a continuous leakage, not from direct sources, that is to say from the companies themselves directly into the river, but from past underground waste disposal practices.

In my few remaining remarks I will address the third theory, a theory which has received wide attention. It holds that industrial wastes injected into the salt caverns at a depth of 600 metres have seeped through crevices up into the river bed. That particular doomsday scenario, my experts tell me, is an extremely unlikely possibility. They are, therefore, concentrating their efforts elsewhere. The question of seepage from the Detroit Formation has not been answered, either positively or negatively, to date. There is no absolute certainty yet, but there is increasing evidence that the dominant cause of the problem is Dow's recent spill, combined with a degree of continuing seepage from various sources, plus past environmental accidents.

I can assure Members of the House, in conclusion, that my Department is taking strong measures to counter pollution of the kind that has concerned us in the St. Clair River. However, the steps now being formulated for action in 1986 will go far beyond the one situation, the St. Clair River, however serious.

First, my Department is drawing up plans to control chemicals from the cradle to the grave and even before, using birth control on some new chemicals, if you will. This action will take the form of tough screening to ensure that only safe compounds and safe uses are permitted.

Second, the Department has already begun a thorough review of all existing environmental legislation, in particular the Environmental Contaminants Act, with an eye to overhauling and strengthening the entire range of laws and regulations.

Statements by Ministers

This process will be completed in co-operation with the other federal and provincial Departments which share jurisdiction for pollution control.

Third, in connection with the aforementioned review, we are laying the groundwork for a major rationalization of environmental law within federal jurisdiction.

Finally, there is a need to be concerned, not only with pollutants, but also with the resources they damage. In that regard my Department is drawing up plans for a Canada-wide water policy, a need which was clearly enunciated in the recently released Pearce Report.

Despite these bold measures, no Government, no company, no individual can be complacent about the events which have occurred in the St. Clair River. However, I think that these events have been highly instructive for all Canadians concerned about environmental protection. The St. Clair is an index of the degree to which we have become a chemical society. What is more, the state of the river is an indictment of our society for its carelessness and shortsightedness. If we are committed to a new era of chemical care and control—and I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that the Government is unequivocally committed to that era and to bringing it about—the country must do an awful lot more than it has done to cope with what I have called the chemical society. If we take the actions required, the St. Clair River will be seen in future years to have been a turning point—yes, a watershed, quite literally—in the country's history.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Chas. L. Caccia (Davenport): Mr. Speaker, certainly it is not very helpful to receive a copy of the Minister's statement five minutes after he has started reading his text. It shows vacillation, it shows indecision until the last minute, and perhaps it shows a sloppy and disorganized office which cannot come up with a text in time for the Opposition to see it, even at the beginning of the Minister's statement. That process leaves very much to be desired, and my Leader has already made an intervention to that effect. It does not seem to be an isolated case. It seems to be an alarming and increasing pattern on the part of the so-called Progressive Conservative Government.

However, what disturbs me in the approach of the Minister is the fact that he made a high-sounding declaration about a chemical society and the St. Clair River perhaps being a turning point in the treatment of the situation in those waters. He did not address the broader and basic questions which flow from the cuts which he and his Government allowed in the research of toxic chemicals at a time when we badly need them. I am referring to the badly needed scientific knowledge, as corroborated two weeks ago by the Royal Society of Canada in its study, about the effect of toxic chemicals on human health and the cancellation of the centre which was announced in November, 1984 by the Conservative Government.

In addition to that, I refer to the cancellation of the \$2.5 million which the Department of the Environment usually and regularly sought from the Treasury Board every year before