

*Quality of Water*

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the subject of safe drinking water, which is a topic that is most important to the Department of National Health and Welfare, and to all concerned Canadians. The initiative of the Hon. Member for Beaches—Woodbine (Mr. Young) in introducing Bill C-224 concerning safe drinking water is most encouraging. As the Hon. Member stated in his introduction, similar private Members' Bills, Bill C-266 and C-276, have been introduced during the past few years.

Canada has as yet no national drinking water standards mandated by or enforceable through legislation. This contrasts with most other developed and even many less developed countries. Under the Canadian Constitution, resources, including water, are considered to be the mandate of the provinces. It follows that the provision of drinking water and the legislation of standards and regulations are the primary responsibility of provincial governments rather than the federal Government, with certain exceptions.

The development of national guidelines for drinking water quality has therefore been undertaken mainly on a collaborative basis between the federal and provincial levels of government with the Department of National Health and Welfare fulfilling a role of health adviser as prescribed under the Department of National Health and Welfare Act.

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Measures designed specifically to protect the public health, such as the drinking water guidelines, are normally undertaken under the auspices of the Conference of Deputy Ministers of Health. A permanent sub-committee on drinking water, comprising representatives from all provinces and territories and from the Department of National Health and Welfare, develops and revises the guidelines on a continuing basis. Officials of the Department provide advice through their position as secretariat to both committees.

I had the privilege of sitting as a member of an elected municipal council for some 17 years. During that period of time I chaired our environmental health services committee, the group that had the responsibility for the provision of clean water to the municipal system. I have to confess that only when reading for this Bill did I

become aware of the federal involvement. We worked with provincial guidelines and provincial people.

The first comprehensive Canadian drinking water guidelines were published by the Department of National Health and Welfare in 1968. They were revised first in 1978 and again in 1987. A fourth revision is in preparation.

The guidelines are not legally enforceable unless promulgated as regulations by the appropriate provincial agency. The guidelines are the primary means of assessing the safety, from a health perspective, of drinking water supplies for lifetime consumption. The guidelines also take into consideration aesthetic parameters such as colour, taste and odour.

However, the guidelines are not enough to ensure that the problems with drinking water arising from our modern society are adequately addressed. Canadians from all provinces have recently become increasingly concerned about the quality of the drinking water which their municipalities deliver. In fact, a survey conducted by a major Canadian magazine found that 44 per cent of all Canadians indicate that they believe tap water will not be drinkable by the year 2001.

Although major epidemics of typhoid and cholera are a matter of history in Canada, we cannot afford to let ourselves become complacent about the presence of pathogens in drinking water. Giardiasis became a serious concern in western Canada, a few years ago, when an outbreak occurred in one of our major resort areas.

There have also been outbreaks of viral diarrhoea and occasional outbreaks of typhoid. These have all been traced back to plant failures, cross-connections or flooding of wells, but still serve to demonstrate the potential public health significance of organisms that may escape sanitary barriers. The current emphasis on chemical contaminants and drinking water, therefore, should not divert our attention from the need to control microbial pathogens in drinking water.

Over the last decade scientists have identified, and the media have reported on, more than 1,000 organic chemicals that have occurred occasionally in drinking water. Fairly frequently a dozen or more chemicals have been detected in a single water supply.