

Oral Questions

Two of the basic principles which define our national character are that we are not an imperial military power, and that no one should be deprived of the use of their property without due process.

The Government of Canada has a legal and historical obligation to protect the interests of our original Canadian peoples. Platitudes will not stop the sonic booms, the bomb runs at the 30 tactical targets in the area, or the radiation from laser guided bombs. So, I ask the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Mr. Cadieux) to press his colleagues to drop the charges against the 38 Innu, and to declare a moratorium on this invasion of the Innu homeland until the environmental review process is complete, and he has negotiated with the Innu in good faith.

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

SPILLAGE OF TOXIC PRODUCTS INTO SHAWINIGAN RIVER—MINISTER'S KNOWLEDGE OF EVENTS

Right Hon. John N. Turner (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, my question is directed to the Minister of the Environment.

At 4.30 p.m. Tuesday, 7,500 litres of oil contaminated with PCBs poured into the Shawinigan River. At 7.30 p.m. the same day, the Quebec Department of the Environment was informed of the spill. The federal Environment Minister knew nothing about it until 2.15 pm yesterday, shortly before Oral question Period.

When the Environment Minister was informed of the spill, the oil slick had already spread over a distance of 30 kilometres.

On Tuesday night when we had our debate, and when the Minister told the House that oil and toxic waste spills were his number one priorities, the oil slick was spreading in Shawinigan, and he knew nothing about it.

Could the Minister explain the lack of competence he and his Department have shown?

Hon. Lucien Bouchard (Minister of the Environment): Mr. Speaker, I would like to confirm part of the information given just now by the Leader of the Opposition.

I agree that my Department was not notified of the spill when it occurred, and as you know, the Canadian Environmental Protection Act stipulates that a company that is either affected by or causes a spill must immediately notify the federal Environment Department, and this requirement was not met. When we heard about the spill yesterday at noon, it was through the media, and I have therefore asked my officials to look at the possibility of pressing charges against this breach of the provisions of the legislation.

I immediately sent inspectors to the site, however. We have been in touch with the health authorities in Ottawa, and we had legal samples of the river water taken to ascertain whether the water was a health hazard. According to the federal health authorities, it is not. Meanwhile, pumping operations are under way. Last night I spoke to my Quebec counterpart, Mrs. Bacon. We are co-operating closely on this, and the situation is under control.

EMERGENCY MEASURES—GOVERNMENT POSITION

Right Hon. John N. Turner (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, better late than never!

The Minister said the other night that he bases his policy decisions only on concrete facts. Here are some facts:

First, it is the second time in four months that toxic substances have been spilled at that plant. It is also a fact that an internal Environment Canada document named Consolidated Bathurst as one of the most polluting companies in Canada. It is also a fact that the Minister here is responsible for protecting the environment. It is also a fact that he was not aware of a toxic spill although he should have been.

So, what inspection measures—not last-minute, but ongoing—exist to prevent such a catastrophe from happening elsewhere in the country? Why does the Minister not have a mechanism in place to be informed of such a spill as soon as it happens?

• (1420)

Hon. Lucien Bouchard (Minister of the Environment): Mr. Speaker, the law passed by this Parliament last June, on the initiative of the Government led by Mr. Mulroney, allows us to regulate the use of some toxic substances, all priority toxic substances, including the PCBs involved in the Shawinigan spill. I have asked my officials to look into the possibility of legal proceedings in this case, in the light of the inspectors' reports we will obtain.