

Proceedings on Adjournment Motion

Later, I asked the minister what steps had been taken by his department to prevent this serious situation from recurring. In Your Honour's wisdom or otherwise, my question was ruled out of order. This matter has been brought before the house by myself, as member for St. John's West, and by others on this side. It is extremely serious because, in effect, it has destroyed the means of livelihood of a large segment of the population of Canada's tenth province in the area of Placentia Bay.

The Minister of Fisheries has made several announcements on the subject. His most recent was made last Friday in reply to a question which I put to him. He stated then he had been informed by his scientists, his officials, that the cause of the pollution had been determined—that it was effluent from the Long Harbour Electric Reduction plant. To be fair to the minister, let me say I realize that under existing legislation he can only go so far. He is restricted in the action he can take to prevent this sort of thing from happening. I realize that under present legislation he can take punitive measures but very few preventive measures.

● (10:20 p.m.)

I contend that this problem has been in the forefront, as it were, in that particular area of Newfoundland, and indeed in this house, since the end of 1968, and certainly since the beginning of the present year. I also submit that the Department of Fisheries failed to take the necessary action to find the cause of this pollution, which as I have already said has resulted in the destruction of the way of life of a large number of people.

I believe it was only in the latter part of April, perhaps the first week of May, that a really concerted effort, at least in my opinion, was made by the department to find the cause of this problem and thus eventually close the plant. The bay to which I refer, Placentia Bay, was closed to fishermen in the latter part of April, I believe, and as a result close to 500 fishermen were prevented from earning a living.

Again, I do not wish to be too critical of the minister. I have great respect for him and I admire some of the steps he has taken to improve the lot of the fishermen in eastern Canada. But in view of the fact that this problem did come to the fore in the latter part of December, or certainly in January, why did it take so long for corrective measures to be taken?

Had this problem been pinpointed when it first became apparent in December or January, I am sure that a large part of the pollution could have been prevented and the plant closed. In all fairness, I do not think there was really any doubt in the minds of anybody connected with the fisheries in that area—I suspect the Minister of Fisheries had strong suspicions even at that time—that this Long Harbour phosphorous plant was the cause of the pollution.

I am compelled to debate this issue tonight in view of the action that has been taken in recent days in Newfoundland. A few weeks ago the Minister of Fisheries announced a program of assistance for those fishermen affected by this problem. Again, I realize that under existing legislation the minister was restricted as to what he could do and how far he could go in the matter of offering compensation. However, the government announced that it would make loans available to fishermen whose livelihood had been cut off by this problem.

These loans were made, and I believe the first cheques were delivered either on Monday or on Friday of last week. The amounts forwarded by the federal government were an insult to the fishermen affected. I have proof that in many instances people who received these cheques would have received more money had they gone on welfare; but being a very proud people with a great reluctance to accept welfare—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Béchard): Order, please.

Hon. Jack Davis (Minister of Fisheries): Mr. Speaker, two matters were raised by the hon. member. First the delay, as he called it, on the part of the federal Department of Fisheries in recognizing the cause of pollution in Long Harbour. The hon. member says there was no doubt as to the cause of the pollution there in the months up to April. We had a team of scientists in Long Harbour monitoring the effluent from the plant and sampling the waters of the bay as early as January. They worked continuously, and these excellent people enjoy a high reputation.

Divers did not discover dead fish on the bottom until April. The cause was thought to be spill which was reported and acknowledged by the company in December. Most people thought this was a once and only spill, and would not occur again. Something occurred in April which was more extensive.