

Opposition leaders blast PM for silence on APEC scandal

BY ALEX BUSTOS

OTTAWA (CUP) — Prime Minister Jean Chretien told Parliament Tuesday he didn't mean to insult students who were pepper sprayed during last November's APEC summit in Vancouver with his infamous comment that pepper is something he puts on his plate.

"I was asked a question about pepper spray," Chretien said. "I did not know what they were talking about. I asked the journalist what he meant — it was a product I had never used. I did not know that it existed. That is why I made the joke and I probably should not have made it. I did not know that there was a pepper spray."

The Prime Minister's mea culpa, however, didn't satisfy New Democratic Party leader Alexa McDonough.

"I didn't hear a sorry at all," she told reporters outside the Commons. "[The Prime Minister] is still

trying to make excuses."

For a second day in a row, opposition parties grilled the government about its role in the APEC security scandal.

On Monday, they accused the federal government of violating the constitutional rights of Canadians at the summit.

"It is clear the Prime Minister and his staff made a decision to sacrifice the democratic rights of Canadians in order to create a comfort zone for a brutal foreign dictator," McDonough said Monday when the House resumed sitting after its summer break.

Documents recently reported in the media suggest the Prime Minister's Office instructed the RCMP to stop protesters from embarrassing then-Indonesian president Suharto at the conference.

One handwritten note by former Privy Council official Patricia Hassard stated the "PM will want to be personally involved"

with security measures at the meeting of 15 Pacific Rim leaders.

When questioned in the House about the note Tuesday by Reform Party leader Preston Manning, Chretien brushed it off.

"Since I have been in politics [for] a long time... I have seen many people in the departments speaking on behalf of their ministers or on behalf of the Prime Minister," without those ministers knowing about it, he said.

But that answer also didn't cut it with McDonough.

"It's an outrageous attempt to hide behind someone else and escape accountability," she said in an interview with Canadian University Press.

In other developments, Solicitor General Andy Scott said the RCMP public complaints commission investigating the actions of officers during APEC has a right to subpoena Chretien.

"The reality is the public

complaints commission can call whomever they want as it is their prerogative," Scott said.

Federal government lawyer Ivan Whitehall had previously stated that, if instructed, he would test the legality of any subpoena calling on Chretien to testify.

The turnaround on the part of Chretien and other government officials to begin addressing the APEC scandal comes a day after opposition parties launched an effort in the House, saying Ottawa had violated the constitutional right of Canadians to protest.

"Canadians were arrested [during APEC] for holding up signs which stated such subversive things as democracy and human rights," Manning said Monday.

"Why did the Prime Minister trample on the political rights of Canadian citizens in order to protect some Asian dictator?" he asked.

Chretien had refused Monday to discuss what is fast becoming one

of the largest scandals Ottawa has ever faced.

His refusal to talk about his role in RCMP actions against student demonstrators was met with harsh words from members of parliament.

Progressive Conservative House leader Peter MacKay warned the scandal is sending a dangerous message to students.

"It sends a harsh message to those engaged in a lawful display of dismay," he said Monday outside the House in an interview with Canadian University Press.

McDonough called Ottawa's involvement in RCMP actions a slap in the face to students and Canadians.

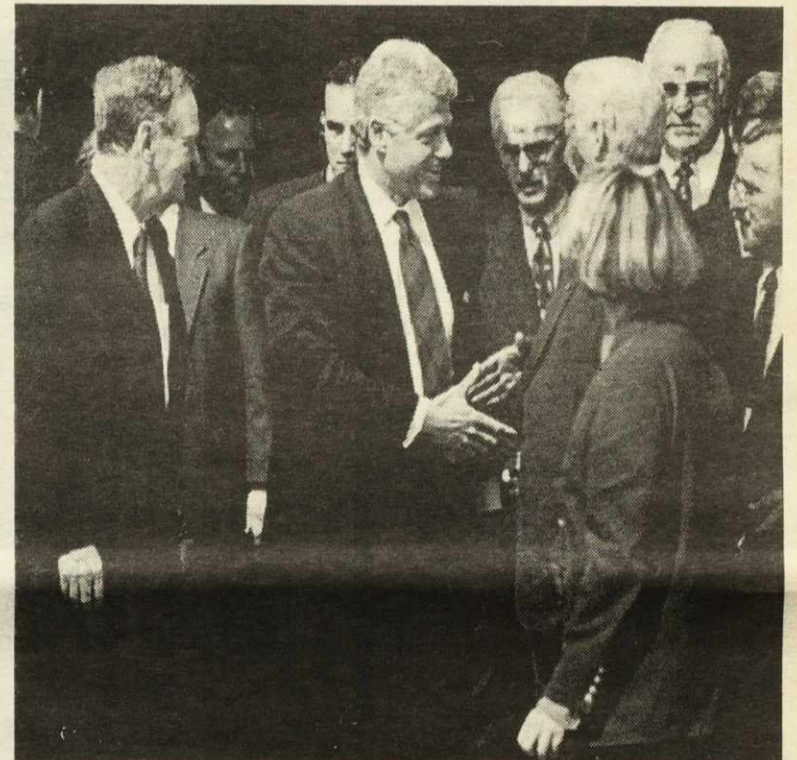
"At a time when students should be applauded [for their role in APEC]... it is a disgrace and a humiliation that the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs [Lloyd Axworthy] are prepared to be a doormat for a brutal dictator," she said.



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"Hey Bill do you know of any good interns?" "No, but I do need some pepper spray."

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