

Oral Questions

● (1440)

Mr. Marchand: Mr. Speaker, I will certainly take the hon. member's question into consideration. However, the Metric Commission has already had considerable consultation with the United States and also, wherever possible, we are letting the American travelling public know of our intention to change from miles to kilometres. It is our view this will not be a deterrent to any American tourists coming to Canada.

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ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS**MERCURY POLLUTION OF LAKES AND RIVERS—REASON FOR FAILURE TO TAKE ACTION EARLIER**

Mr. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Grey-Dufferin-Waterloo): Mr. Speaker, in the absence of the minister of the environment perhaps I could address my question to the acting minister. In reply to a question I put on the order paper, the government disclosed the names of a staggering list of 273 lakes and rivers, including Lakes Erie and Ontario, the St. Lawrence River and Georgian Bay, in which it knows there are fish with abnormally high levels of mercury. May I ask the acting minister why the chlor-alkali mercury emission standard regulation has not yet been produced and why the government permitted mercury poisoning of freshwater in all parts of Canada to become so extensive before taking action?

Mr. Jim Fleming (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Fisheries and the Environment): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member knows, in the reply to his question it was pointed out that a great deal of the mercury registered in these various rivers and lakes was from natural sources as well as industry. I might point out also that on April 20 this year the minister announced that regulations to limit the amount of mercury emitted to the atmosphere from chlor-alkali plants had been published and were to take effect some 60 days later. In addition, although the emission limits come into force on July 1, 1978, as I said, the regulations provide for the immediate start of reporting on control measures, malfunctions or breakdown and emission measurements so that enforcement actions can be focused on the problem areas. Back in 1972 under the Fisheries Act, action was taken to control chlor-alkali emissions into the waterways and I believe that mercury effluents have since been reduced to less than 1 per cent.

Mr. Beatty: Mr. Speaker, I am lucky that the parliamentary secretary brought his music today. In view of the fact that the natural flushing of water systems has been shown to be ineffective— Mr. Speaker, I wonder whether we could have some order from hon. members opposite.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[Mr. Darling.]

POSSIBILITY OF USING HAT CREEK COAL TO REMOVE MERCURY FROM WATER

Mr. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Grey-Dufferin-Waterloo): I can understand their uneasiness. If I had their record I would be noisy, too. In view of the fact that natural flushing of water systems has been shown to be ineffective in significantly reducing mercury levels in northwestern Ontario and that the government appears to be unaware of any effective and cost-efficient ways of purifying waters that have been polluted by mercury, may I ask the parliamentary secretary whether the department of the environment has investigated a process described on the CTV national news a couple of nights ago which employs Hat Creek coal as a purifying agent and has been shown in scientific tests at the University of British Columbia to remove at least 99.5 per cent of mercury from water, and if not why not?

Mr. Jim Fleming (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Fisheries and the Environment): Mr. Speaker, I am sorry I did not have the pleasure of sharing that program with the hon. member several nights ago. In my first answer to him I pointed out that major legislation was passed several years ago which has been extremely effective in preventing additional mercury going into the waterways.

Just a moment ago, Mr. Speaker, the hon. member asked us to be quiet on this side. I am trying to answer his question and wish he would be quiet for a moment. As he well knows, and I believe it was part of the very lengthy and thorough response given to him, mercury has built up as a serious pollution problem in our waterways over many, many years—that is, industrial pollution aside from the natural mercury pollution. I will send the press release of a few months ago to the hon. member to give him some further information about mercury pollution in the air.

An hon. Member: He can't read.

Mr. Beatty: A final supplementary question, Mr. Speaker. With the noise on the other side the hon. parliamentary secretary apparently did not hear my question. Is the department aware of any cost-efficient and effective method of removing mercury from water systems which have already been polluted with mercury? If it is not, why has it not conducted investigations into the use of Hat Creek coal as a purifying agent to remove mercury and other heavy metals from water systems which have been polluted?

Mr. Fleming: Mr. Speaker, I am sorry, I am not an expert on Hat Creek coal. Had the hon. member given me notice I certainly would have had the facts on hand now. I will get the information and send it to him.