

Pollution of Chedabucto Bay

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The Leader of the Opposition should be given the opportunity to make his statement in reply to the minister's statement.

Mr. Stanfield: The usual method of the Minister of Transport is to try to pour oil on troubled waters. Obviously that will not work in this case. I agree, naturally, that the people who work on the spot deserve a great deal of credit. But I am concerned about one note which seemed to come through in the minister's statement. There seemed to be an attitude pretty close to complacency with regard to the extent of the damage which has already occurred. One would almost believe from his statement that very little serious damage has been done to date. This is not the case, of course, and as far as the fishery is concerned the statement of the minister that little damage has been done is of doubtful value.

The question of damages is something which the minister and the government as a whole should consider. In addition to the matters touched upon by the minister, the difficult position of those who are suffering damages ought to be considered. What recourse will they have? We are concerned here about many relatively modest Nova Scotians who are not in the same position as large corporations when it comes to seeking legal advice. The government has an obligation to be helpful in connection with the assessment of damages and seeing that these people obtain recourse.

The minister said there was to be an independent inquiry. I do not know exactly what he meant by that; I wish he would spell it out more precisely. It is of the utmost importance that a public inquiry be held—not just an inquiry within the department or under the Canada Shipping Act but a fully independent and fully public inquiry.

It seems clear that neither the government nor the Department of Transport were ready to deal with this tragedy. I agree, of course, that it is not possible to prevent every occurrence of this sort, but it has become evident that the government and the department had no regulations in effect designed to lessen the chance of such an occurrence. It is also evident that the department had no plan ready to be put into operation. Members on this side of the House called out to ask the minister why the vessel was not destroyed when there was a chance to destroy it.

Mr. Jamieson: They asked: "Why didn't you burn it?"

Mr. Stanfield: All right, "Why didn't you burn it?" I simply enlarged the question by using the term "destroy". This question has not been answered and it ought to be answered in the course of a public inquiry.

This was a great tragedy, but far worse will occur in future unless the government learns a lesson, unless we all learn a lesson, from what has taken place. The minister is well aware that in the very area with which we are concerned now the depth of water is such that the port lends itself to the use of the largest oil tankers which have been conceived. The tanker which went aground is very small in comparison with the tankers which may be using these waters before very long. It is essential that the department take effective measures designed to prevent occurrences of this kind, and place themselves in readiness to take prompt action.

All this, of course, has an obvious bearing on the north. It has an obvious bearing on the Arctic waters. It has an obvious bearing on the conditions under which the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources grants leases for drilling in the north. It also has an important bearing on the use of our territorial waters and the waters off our east and west coast.

An hon. Member: Heavy water!

Mr. Stanfield: The heavy water is not as heavy as the oil around the minister. Of course it is obvious there ought to be the fullest possible international co-operation. I can see it would be desirable to develop an international research team in connection with this kind of thing as well as an international team to devise the best methods of cleaning up after such occurrences. But the point to be emphasized is that the responsibility in the territorial waters is the responsibility of the government of Canada; it is not an international responsibility, although one would, of course, seek all the international help one could get.

So we want an assurance from the minister that there is to be a public inquiry by an independent body. We can hope that such an inquiry will not only throw further light on what happened here but will help us to prevent this kind of thing happening again. In addition, it might place the government in a better position to deal with such an occurrence if, unfortunately, it were to happen.