

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, August 14, 1958

The house met at eleven o'clock.

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

Eleventh and twelfth reports of standing committee on miscellaneous private bills.—Mr. McCleave.

Ninth report of the standing committee on railways, canals and telegraph lines.—Mr. Fraser.

ATOMIC ENERGY

STATEMENT ON UN REPORT ON EFFECTS OF RADIATION—SUSPENSION OF TESTS

Hon. J. W. Monteith (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, further to the statement made by the Prime Minister in the house yesterday, I should like to make a few comments on the report of the United Nations scientific committee on the effects of atomic radiation which, as you know, was made public last Sunday. This report is of the greatest concern to me as Minister of National Health and Welfare, dealing as it does with matters of importance to the health of the people of Canada.

A great deal of interest has already been expressed in some of the conclusions of the report, and I should like to read one paragraph in particular of the general conclusions:

The exposure of mankind to ionizing radiation at present arises mainly from natural sources, from medical and industrial procedures, and from environmental contamination due to nuclear explosions. The industrial, research and medical applications expose only part of the population while natural sources and environmental sources expose the whole population. The artificial sources to which man is exposed during his work in industry and in scientific research are of value in science and technology. Their use is controllable, and exposures can be reduced by perfecting protection and safety techniques. All applications of X-rays and radioactive isotopes used in medicine for diagnostic purposes and for radiation therapy are for the benefit of mankind and can be controlled. Radioactive contamination of the environment resulting from explosions of nuclear weapons constitutes a growing increment to world-wide radiation levels. This involves new and largely unknown hazards to present and future populations: these hazards, by their very nature, are beyond the control of the exposed persons. The committee concludes that all steps designed to minimize irradiation of human populations will act to the benefit of human health. Such steps include the avoidance of unnecessary exposure resulting from medical, industrial and other procedures for peaceful uses on the one hand and the cessation of contamination of the environment by explosion of

nuclear weapons on the other. The committee is aware that considerations involving effective control of all these sources of radiation involve national and international decisions which lie outside the scope of its work.

These conclusions were based on scientific information obtained from world-wide sources and Canada, as a member of the 15-nation committee, subscribed to the report as a whole. Technical information available to the government does not lead it to dissent from the above conclusions.

The report observes that present information about radiation levels and effects is inadequate for an accurate evaluation of all hazards. Notwithstanding this great uncertainty it is evident that hazards to health cannot be dismissed. On the other hand, in the determination of government policy concerning the use of radiation sources for various purposes, it is proper that the health hazard should be considered in the light of all other pertinent factors.

The United Nations committee has pointed out that industrial, research and medical uses of radiation are controllable by means of appropriate protection and safety techniques. My department has been active in radiation protection since 1949, when a section that is now known as the radiation protection division was set up. This division provides technical advice on the health and safety aspects of the industrial, research and medical uses of radioisotopes and X-rays. In this regard it works closely with the atomic energy control board and other agencies concerned with this matter.

For a number of years the division has also carried out measurements and studies concerned with the possible effects on health of environmental radiation exposures. Further programs of measurements and biological studies are planned with the aim of providing answers to some of the major gaps in our knowledge concerning the biological effects of radiation.

The importance of scientific research and the collection of information on the effects of radiation have been clearly pointed out by the United Nations scientific committee. With particular reference to this subject the committee, on the basis of scientific experience, "confidently expects that continuing research on an increasing scale will furnish the knowledge urgently needed to master those risks which we know to be associated with