

The Legacy Of The Ocean Ranger

*Last summer's hearings of
the Royal Commission on the Ocean Ranger
Marine Disaster revealed much drama,
some disagreement, and a strong
determination that similar accidents
will not happen again.*

by Wayne Campbell

There is a region of the Atlantic Ocean about 170 km southeast of St. John's, Newfoundland, where the presence of humans is no longer felt. Apart from the thinning squadrons of tuna and cod there is no evidence of man, only endless tracts of cold, grey waves rolling to the push of the North Atlantic winds. For human artifact you have to go down through the depths to the ocean floor. There in the submarine gloom, lying on its back with its great caisson legs pointing upward like some huge, stricken beast of the land, is the drilling rig Ocean Ranger.

The rig, the largest semisubmersible platform of its day, disappeared one night three years ago in a winter gale. The problem for the oil industry and government regulators was that the Ocean Ranger was designed to weather such a storm easily.

What went wrong was painstakingly reconstructed in the aftermath, and the first report of the Royal Commission on the Ocean Ranger Marine Disaster, published in mid-August 1984, laid the blame across the breadth of the oil-seeking enterprise. Later in the month, in St.

John's, Newfoundland, the Commission sat again; this time to listen to an invited, international group of experts from industry, government, and the universities hammer out ways of making life safer for the men who go to sea in oil rigs. Not surprisingly, the criticisms in the first report touched many of those attending the three-day meeting at Newfoundland's Memorial University.

But the Commissioners were not there to comb over once more the events that sank the Ranger. Instead, they came to listen to, and learn from, the experts — hoping in the outcome to put a system in place that would prevent such a tragedy from happening again. The Commissioners were looking for information on which to base concrete policy advice to the Governments of Canada and Newfoundland on a new standard of offshore safety. Their ultimate aim was a level of 'acceptable risk' that everyone could live with.

Risk, whether in driving a car or stepping into a bathtub, is present in all human activities, and arriving at a level we deem acceptable is a com-

plex — and often cold-blooded — process, which balances things like economic factors against the value we place on safety. Such a process occurs when a government, understanding that an agent like PCB is statistically linked to human cancer, sets maximum exposure levels for its citizens. It is an actuarial calculation reflecting what consequences we are willing to tolerate from a given cause.

To decide what constitutes acceptable risk on the drilling platforms of the Northwest Atlantic, the Commissioners had to wade through a complex set of discussions, descriptions, and arguments that touched on practically all aspects of offshore drilling. They were told of the sea climate, and how rigs are designed to withstand the worst-case scenario of the "hundred-year storm." They heard how workers could be saved from rolling drill rigs in emergencies, and how people interact with machines and one another in normal times and crises. Finally, they listened to a long, heated discussion on the best means of regulating the industry to ensure that safety procedures are followed. The results of