

*The Address—Mr. Davis*

Mercury as everyone knows, is a heavy metal. It was supposed to sink to the bottom of our rivers and stay there. But minute bacteria went to work on it. They generated a soluble compound known as methyl mercury, a compound which dissolves in water, a compound which is flushed out into lakes and out into the sea.

Mercury in this poisonous form has also been moving up the food chain. It has moved from plants to fish in the Great Lakes and whales in Hudson Bay. It has shown up in even higher concentrations in the flesh of bird life as well. It threatens the life of human beings who eat fish.

Drifting backward and forward across our man made boundary lines, it has created problems which are not only inter-provincial but also international in character. The danger of poisoning to people has called for various interventions on our part here in Ottawa. We have had to close lakes to commercial fishing and make loans to commercial fishermen. We have had to destroy large quantities of fish and we have had to call upon industry to make amends.

As Minister of Fisheries, last spring I called for a meeting with the top executives in the chlor-alkali industry. I asked them to change their ways. I asked them to recycle all of their mercury bearing effluents within the factory fence. This the industry did, and promptly. Ninety per cent of its mercury losses have now been eliminated. Soon the figure will be 99 per cent! That is not bad going when you realize that we first ran into this mercury thing in the fall of 1969, less than a year ago.

Some of you will remember the famous Trail smelter case in the 1920's which involved air. Fumes from the big lead-zinc refinery in southeastern British Columbia drifted over into the State of Idaho. American citizens there sued the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company Limited in Canada. They forced Cominco to strip the sulphur out of these fumes. And stripping out the sulphur led to the creation of a fertilizer industry. It created an industry which has flourished in western Canada ever since.

This is only one example of an industry which has benefited, in the long run, from a pollution abatement program. Ammonium sulfate is now a major by-product of many of our mining operations in Canada. Not only does it make money for those companies but it also encourages things to grow. It gives impetus to a thousand life cycles and it helps to renew our environment in a dozen different ways.

Look at our big pulp and paper industry. This industry alone is responsible for half of the bulk of the pollution which enters our rivers and streams at the present time. Look what it has done under pressure from our Fisheries Act. New kraft mills have installed settling basins and built biological treatment ponds. Half a dozen of them are said to be among the cleanest mills in the world. They are clean enough for salmon and they are clean enough for the tourist industry. This is a big change from half a dozen years ago when pulp and paper, inevitably, meant pollution and pollution meant a loss of business to the motel owners and the fishing lodges in the areas where these mills were located.

[Mr. Davis.]

● (3:10 p.m.)

Again, there have been welcome by-products. Canadian engineering firms have shown us how to design these treatment facilities. They have been so successful that other countries have been asking for their services. Sandwell and Company and H.A. Simmons in Vancouver now have contracts in Sweden and the U.S.S.R. They are helping those countries to clean up their rivers and streams. Think of it! They would never have got this work if we in the Fisheries Department had not insisted that our pulp mills must not kill salmon on the Fraser River and that the waters downstream must be fit for any one of us to use for swimming.

Here again, we have shown that our environmental problems are solvable. We have shown that they can be solved so long as government continues to insist that industry tighten up on its housekeeping, that each plant recycle its effluents within the factory fence, and that anything that leaves its property does not unduly burden the assimilative capacity of the water or the air in its local surroundings.

One thing which hon. members should bear in mind is that we have a special competence at the federal level. We have a special competence here in Ottawa. We have a special competence in federal offices and federal research establishments across the country. This competence—this unique competence—is on the biological front. We have Canada's cadre of biologists, engineers with a background in biology, planners with a sensitivity for living things, fish, wildlife, trees, tundra, parklands and so on.

Proof of what I am saying is to be found, not only in the high regard with which our top fish and wildlife biologists are held the world over, but also in the actions of the provinces themselves. Out in my home province of British Columbia, the minister in charge of pollution, the Hon. Ray Williston, deals directly with our regional fisheries offices asking for advice, our forestry pathologists asking for advice and our wildlife people asking for advice. Our regional experts on the biological front are his experts, and let's keep it this way.

The mercury problem in Ontario demonstrates what I am saying in another way. The Hon. George Kerr and Ontario's Water Resources Commission naturally look to us to be the experts on fish and other aquatic plant life like algae. They have all sorts of engineers, economists and administrators. They have a lot of very competent people and they have already done a lot to protect our environment. But the fact remains; they look to us for advice on the biological side, on the living side, on the renewable resource side. It makes sense and I hope they continue to do this in future.

Clearly smaller provinces do not have this competence. Quebec does not have anything resembling a biological research board; Alberta does not; Manitoba does not. Nor are they likely to. Environmental research on the biological side is an all-embracing matter. It cannot be provincialized. It should not be provincialized because our environment is essentially global. Like life itself it is bigger than all of us.