

Pepper spray a civilized method, PM says

BY ALEX BUSTOS

OTTAWA (CUP) — The RCMP used pepper spray at last November's APEC summit in Vancouver because it was a civilized form of crowd control, Prime Minister Jean Chretien told the House of Commons Monday.

He made the comment during a heated exchange during question period as Parliament resumed sitting after a one-week Thanksgiving recess. New Democratic Party MP Svend Robinson asked Chretien about flippant remarks he's made regarding the pepper-spraying of dozens of protesters at the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation

conference.

"The RCMP described pepper spray as stronger than tear gas or mace," Robinson said. "This weekend I was asked by a mother of one of the UBC students pepper sprayed at APEC, 'why does the PM keep joking about her daughter's pain and will he apologize to her and all of the students for his shameful and arrogant insensitivity?'"

Chretien's response took Parliament by surprise.

"Instead of using a baseball bat or something else, today it is necessary to have more civilized methods, and that is why there were

towels at the time to help [students who were pepper sprayed]," said

"Instead of using a baseball bat or something else, today it is necessary to have more civilized methods, and that is why there were towels at the time to help [students who were pepper sprayed]."

Chretien.

The prime minister first joked about pepper spray during a news conference at the meeting of 18 Pacific Rim leaders after students demonstrating against the event

were sprayed. Asked about the incident, Chretien seemed to shrug it off by saying pepper was something he put on his plate.

On Sept. 22, he rose in the House and conceded, "I probably should not have made [the comment]."

Then on Oct. 8, during a Liberal Party fundraiser in Winnipeg, Chretien ribbed about eating "pepper steak."

And this past weekend, during the annual Parliament Hill Press Gallery dinner, Chretien sprayed CBC's *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* star Greg Thomey with breath freshener in a jab at the pepper spray controversy.

Chretien's latest comment

Monday did not amuse the opposition.

His response to questioning about the jokes reveal the prime minister's arrogance, Robinson said outside the House.

"What's next from this prime minister when he actually says that it's better that we pepper spray them than we use baseball bats on students?" asked Robinson.

"This is still a democracy in Canada, this is not some totalitarian state."

However, when asked by a reporter outside the House Tuesday what he should have said instead of baseball bat, Chretien responded: "I don't know. Use water canon? I don't know."

Media misses the point in coverage of APEC

Politicians fight over the issues like children with a brand spankin' new toy

BY ALEX BUSTOS

OTTAWA (CUP) — Last year's APEC summit in Vancouver has turned into something akin to a sparkling new toy introduced into a sandbox full of little kids.

Ottawa's political elite can't resist the temptation to fight for the right to play exclusively with the APEC ball.

And the media is happy to report on all the political drama. Since Parliament resumed sitting on Sept. 21, the media has been awash in a sea of spin and counter-spin.

The government is engaged in a cover-up, the opposition parties insist, as they look straight into the camera lenses of the national media.

Nonsense, reply the Liberals, accusing their critics of suffering from scandal-envy of the U.S. President Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair.

But behind the media circus and mountain of accusations lie the students who were pepper-sprayed, arrested and told to remove their banners while demonstrating at the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation summit last November.

Frustrated with a press more concerned with covering Parliamentary shenanigans than the larger global picture, these original activists are questioning whether the public understands what led to all this in the first place — their cause.

"The corporate media coverage has really ignored and marginalized the issues that made people protest in the first place," says former University of British Columbia linguistic student Jaggi Singh, who was arrested without charge during the conference of 18 Pacific Rim leaders.

To being with, argues Singh, media reports describing the original APEC protest as a student rally against the presence of then-Indonesian President Suharto are overly simplistic.

"We wanted to link what is happening on campuses with society at large," says Singh. "[And show] there is widespread resistance to the globalization of the economy."

Protesters were more concerned with dismantling international capitalism than poo-

hooing a foreign dictator, he says.

Joan Grant-Cummings, president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, shares Singh's criticism of the way the Canadian media has covered the issue.

During last year's conference, Grant-Cummings joined social activists from across Canada in Vancouver for a people's summit geared towards voicing the concerns of those opposed to the APEC summit.

"People in Canada have not talked about APEC, what it means," says Grant-Cummings. "That is why we assembled in Vancouver last year. [Unfortunately], a lot of [the people's summit] wasn't even covered in most of our newspapers

nation-wide, and as a result a year later we are playing catch up with students and social justice groups."

Grant-Cummings says it's "bitter-sweet" the press is now so eager to cover the police crackdown at APEC a year after the fact.

For example, editorial pages across the country are currently condemning Chretien for his infamous joke that pepper is something he puts on his plate.

What these same scribes usually fail to mention, however, is that this comment — made during the closing news conference at APEC — was received by the press corps with roars of laughter.

The media's about-face doesn't surprise Jonathan Oppenheim, a post-graduate

physics student at the University of British Columbia and one of the original protest organizers.

Ever since reporters picked up the APEC ball, Oppenheim has become a media darling with his polite and thoughtful manner — a relationship that doesn't sit well in the stomach of this veteran social activist.

"The mainstream press likes to focus on certain people, and the image that gets shown is fairly false," says Oppenheim. "[For example], the CBC will interview me about globalization, and then they take one small quote about Suharto, so they essentially are reconstructing the conversation."

According to New Democratic Party MP Bill Blaikie,

this selective filtering underscores the power of the media.

"I think the press has not paid attention to the underlying issues [of the

APEC scandal], because they thrive on sensationalism and this has become a sensation," says Blaikie. "For me it's a textbook case of the way the media drives the political agenda."

Still, Blaikie hasn't refused to run with the hoard of reporters that gather in the House of Commons lobby to interview MPs about their takes on the latest APEC scandal developments.

Even principled MPs know the political sandbox called Parliament Hill is, well, a media playground.

Scuffle raises concerns about pepper spray

Others wonder if homeless people and their dogs are being put at risk

BY MARY VALLIS

VICTORIA (CUP) — A recent scuffle between a group of homeless people and their dogs and local law enforcers has heightened concerns about the use of pepper spray by authorities.

Municipal bylaw enforcers used pepper spray earlier this month during a scuffle with about 20 homeless people and their dogs over the impoundment of one of the dogs in Victoria's Centennial Square.

The incident began when two enforcement officers found about five dogs to be in violation of city bylaws, says Miles Drew, chief bylaw enforcement officer of the Capital Regional District.

When an officer moved in to impound one of the dogs, a man attacked a police officer from behind, Drew says. One of the officers then drew his pepper spray as he was "swarmed" by the group, spraying them slightly in self-defense.

"There was no pepper used on a dog, and there was no pepper used to distract the owner while we took the dog," said Drew. "[But the officers] used reasonable force to protect themselves."

In the end, one dog was impounded.

But the Society for the

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals says the dog may in fact have been pepper sprayed.

"The dog was obviously agitated, and it suffered from some [of the] effects from being pepper sprayed," said Lynn West, executive director of the society.

Mike Yeager, a media relations officer with the Victoria Police, says pepper spray can travel through the air quickly and can affect animals and people that weren't directly targeted.

Charges were being pursued in connection with the Oct. 6 incident, he added.

The scuffle has raised concerns about whether the enforcement officers are targeting the homeless and whether they should be carrying pepper spray at all.

Drew says the bylaw enforcement officers carry pepper spray to defend themselves against potentially harmful animals.

But others wonder if homeless people and their dogs are the ones being put at risk.

West says that in the past year, she knows of four dogs that were impounded from the downtown core — all of which belonged to homeless people.

She added the bylaw enforcement tactics used by the force are new.

"Our society has provided a

control service to 10 municipalities for over 20 years, and they've never had a need for pepper spray," West said.

After the recent incident, Victoria Mayor Bob Cross spoke in favor of making downtown a "dog-free zone," but denied allegations the plan targets the homeless.

"Everyone has the right to use public space without feeling intimidated or obstructed," he said.

Sandra Fleck, a street outreach worker, says Cross is on a campaign to flush the homeless out of the downtown core.

Cross' dog ban suggestion follows a long list of new bylaws, including one that gives officers the right to ticket anyone "sitting, kneeling or lying" on the street.

Fleck says she will pursue charges against the officers through the B.C. Civil Liberties Association.

Why would anyone read a paper other than the Gazette Reggie?

Gosh, I can't imagine why, Wilbur. I can't imagine why.

