

Adjournment Debate

world economic recovery and can look forward to a sustained period of strong, non-inflationary growth.

WESTRAY COAL MINE

Mr. Francis G. LeBlanc (Cape Breton Highlands—Canso): Mr. Speaker, I reluctantly return to a question I asked on May 20 regarding the May 9 disaster at the Westray mine, a disaster which killed 26 men.

Six of these men: Myles Daniel Gillis, Peter Francis Vickers, Roy Edward Feltmate, John P. Halloran, Benny J. Benoit and Angus Joseph MacNeil were from my riding. They and their families deserve answers. Indeed the families of these men have been pressing for months for an adequate investigation into the circumstances leading to this tragedy.

Last May I asked the government why it ignored reports about the risk of spontaneous combustion in the Westray mine and went ahead to guarantee an \$85 million loan to that project. Since then the Westray loan has been called in by the Bank of Nova Scotia. Because of its guarantee, the federal government is now liable for anywhere between \$75 million and \$80 million.

The Minister of State for Small Businesses and Tourism replied to my question by saying that the federal government had ensured, through constant monitoring by independent mining consultants, that safety regulations were being followed, yet Bank of Nova Scotia officials have denied this.

The minister of state claimed as well that investments like this would continue to be made despite the tragedies. "These things happen", he said. How the Westray accident occurred will be the subject of the provincial inquiry he assured us. Yet both the federal and Nova Scotia governments have been stalling for months saying that everything would come out in the inquiry.

The province dragged its heels while Westray officials have done everything possible to put roadblocks in the path of this investigation. As we all learned last week, the inquiry is effectively dead. Nova Scotia Supreme Court Justice Constance Glube struck down the inquiry because its terms of reference stepped into the area of criminal jurisdiction, prejudicing, she found, the criminal proceedings being undertaken against Westray officials.

What now? How do these questions get answered? On June 9, the Liberal Party called for a federal parliamen-

tary committee of inquiry to examine all aspects of the federal role in the Westray coal project.

That call was repeated on Friday of last week by my colleague, the hon. member for Cape Breton—East Richmond. As my colleague so rightly pointed out, nothing in Justice Glube's decision prevents the federal government from holding its own inquiry. Indeed that inquiry is now more important than ever.

A federal inquiry would examine why the economic and safety advice of civil servants was overruled. It would clarify the federal politics involved in getting the loan guarantee approved.

It would examine just what cabinet knew about the safety concerns prior to authorizing this \$85 million guarantee. It would determine why, in the face of well-known considerations of safety concerning this project, this government would put \$85 million of taxpayers' money at risk.

These are important questions. They are questions that any government, serious about safety in the work place and about the responsible use of public funds, ought to be deeply committed to having answered.

The time has come for this tired government to finally gather the courage to look within itself and permit a thorough examination of its role in the May 9 Westray tragedy. I hope the parliamentary secretary opposite is now rising to announce just that.

Mr. Ross Belsher (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member from Cape Breton Highlands—Canso for his continued interest in this subject.

The hon. member knows that the federal government does not have jurisdiction in the area of occupational health and safety. This is the responsibility of the provincial government. However, the initial environment assessment, the Acres report, did point out the key health and safety concerns associated with coal mines and the methods that the company was putting in place to overcome these concerns. All concerns, including those associated with health and safety, were deemed to be correctable with known technology. Furthermore, the CANMET review spoke briefly of mine ventilation and spontaneous combustion risk and concluded that in spite of these technical uncertainties, the proposal had no