

INDIAN AFFAIRS

MERCURY POLLUTION IN WABIGOON AND ENGLISH RIVERS— CLAIMS SETTLEMENT—STATEMENT OF MINISTER OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

Hon. David Crombie (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to advise the House that an agreement has been reached to settle finally the mercury pollution claims of the Grassy Narrows and Islington Bands in northern Ontario. I am sure that all Members will be as delighted as I am that today, 15 years after the discovery of the mercury pollution in the Wabigoon and English Rivers, this Government, the Province of Ontario, Great Lakes Forest Products Limited, Reed Incorporated and the two Indian communities can all say that we have achieved a settlement that is fair and honourable.

Sixteen million six hundred and sixty-seven thousand dollars will be provided in compensation to the two bands. Of this amount, Canada will provide \$2.75 million, Ontario will contribute \$1.66 million, \$6 million will come from Great Lakes Forest Products Limited and \$5.75 million from Reed.

This money will be transferred to the bands, to be used for purposes of social and economic reconstruction. Two million dollars of the total will be paid into a special fund to compensate individuals with health problems attributable to mercury poisoning. This fund will be administered by a board appointed by Canada, Ontario and the two bands.

Many individuals, representing all the parties, have played an important part in hammering out this agreement. However, let me pay special tribute to my own representative, the Hon. Justice Emmett Hall. When I appointed him to act as my special representative in this matter, negotiations were at an impasse. Justice Hall shouldered an immense burden and acted with complete conviction to work out an agreement acceptable to all parties. I say this, not to detract from the role of the other negotiators, but to indicate my own personal profound gratitude to Emmett Hall, who, at the age of 87, has now yet another accomplishment to add to his distinguished career.

Finally, I want to say to the Indian people in those communities that we know the hardship and despair that they have experienced during the past 15 years. I and many Canadians have felt shame that situations like these could develop in our midst. We do not forget those 15 years, but we do celebrate a new beginning, a new future for these, our first citizens.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Keith Penner (Cochrane-Superior): Mr. Speaker, it was in the period from 1963 to 1970 that approximately 10 tons of mercury were dumped into the Wabigoon-English-Winnipeg river system from a chlor-alkalai plant, part of a paper-mill complex at Dryden, Ontario.

This mercury was absorbed into the biota of the river system, rendering fish in the river system unfit for human consumption. The Indian people at Whitedog and Grassy

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Narrows who had worked as fishermen and tourist outfitters lost their jobs.

Grassy Narrows, an Ojibway Indian village, had to be relocated. A traditional community was transformed into one which was programmed to self-destruct.

Joblessness and pollution led to horrendous economic and social disintegration and health problems. The communities of Grassy Narrows and Whitedog became pathological places with alcohol and drug induced violence, child abuse and a large number of children who were taken into care by the Children's Aid Society.

It is essential to note that the horror and death were not the tragic norms before the river was poisoned. It happened after.

As far back as 1977, the Grassy Narrows and Islington Bands initiated legal action seeking \$25 million in damages. The settlement which has been announced today will probably be accepted and I certainly want to commend the Minister and his special negotiator for the work they have done. Of course, it has yet to be ratified by the band members of Grassy Narrows and Islington, but I think all Members and the Minister himself will agree that this money can never replace all that has been lost.

Is \$16 million really fair compensation to a people who have been deprived of their livelihoods, their pride, their self-determination and their self-sufficiency? The compensation package will certainly help to alleviate much of the pain, but can it restore the loss of hope? That remains to be seen.

Mr. John Parry (Kenora-Rainy River): Mr. Speaker, I and I am sure all Members of the House and the vast majority of Canadians join the Minister in welcoming the settlement which he has announced today. Yet the overwhelming sentiment with which I am left is one of amazement that an injustice of such proportions and such devastating effect was allowed to persist for such a period of time.

The fact that it took 15 years to reach a settlement with the bands for the injuries done to their people, of whom scarcely a family or person was left untouched, is something which will remain as a stain on Canada's record both in environmental and human terms. I am saddened to see today that these bands are not clear of further threats from the environment. They are not clear from the threat of possible PCB pollution from the possible siting of a PCB storage dump near to the water course that brought them the original tribulation of mercury pollution.

I am glad to see the Minister of the Environment (Mr. McMillan), in a speech only last week, recognized that corporate polluters will continue to try to get away with activity in Canada that would not be permitted in other jurisdictions.

The nature of the injustice done to the people of the Islington and Grassy Narrows communities was cataclysmic. It was poisoning that led to a complete disintegration of the social fabric of those communities. This has been well documented in a couple of books which many Members of the House will have read. The relocation, the social fragmentation