

PROCEEDINGS ON ADJOURNMENT MOTION

[English]

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Ray Funk (Prince Albert—Churchill River): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege for me to be able to raise again the question about the spill of radioactive waste at Wollaston Lake which occurred last November 7, 1989, almost a year ago.

• (1800)

One of the reasons I have to keep raising this question is that the story first broke on November 9, which was a very significant day in world history. It was the day the Berlin Wall came down, and of course the media cared about little else. Therefore this story never became as prominent as it otherwise would have.

What in fact happened was that two million litres of contaminated radioactive mine waste was spilled into Wollaston Lake. The spill that went unreported for 15 hours. It would likely never have become known to the public if the chief of the Hatchet Lake Band on Wollaston Lake had not flown over the area. Being a former miner himself, he recognized what was happening and phoned us. Certainly the environmental authorities had been notified by that time, but the community had not been notified. This whole series of events left the people of Wollaston Lake very much wondering what was happening to their environment.

I had an opportunity to visit the site shortly thereafter with the MLA for the area, Keith Goulet, and with officials from the town and from the band. What we saw there was really appalling. One would not run a farm dugout system or a farm sewer system—and that is what I know better as a farmer—in the same way as this very sensitive disposal system was being run. What really caught my attention was an automated warning system which was to back up visual inspection every hour, and 11 inspections were missed. That system had been disconnected since 1985, for about four years. The Atomic Energy Control Board had been inspecting this system

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that whole time and had never discovered the disconnection.

The chief issued a call for a public inquiry. He wanted to know what was the role of the regulators in the area. In other words, who regulates the regulators? Is the Atomic Energy Control Board doing a proper job of looking after things? Shortly after we saw headlines such as “Staff levels too low to prevent spills, AECB” on November 24. That is the kind of question that arose.

The chief also wanted to know what the role was of aboriginal people in resource development. These things are happening all around them on their traditional lands, affecting their environment in a permanent way. They have very little economic opportunity and no jobs. Right now there is no one from Wollaston working in Rabbit Lake 18 miles across the lake.

What is the role of the local community in the protection of its environment? After all, they have lived there for so long and will live there long after. They know an awful lot more about the natural environment than some well meaning researcher who comes there from time to time to take a sample.

There was a lot of support for this inquiry, all the way from the United Steelworkers of Canada to church groups, Greenpeace, health professional organizations and many others. Petitions are still coming in.

I asked my initial question on February 19 about how the inquiry was coming and received no real reply. Finally on September 6, the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources replied to Chief Ed Benoanie of the Hatchet Lake Band. He essentially said not to worry, that there were a few fiddles and diddles that they would make to improve things, and then a good system would be perfect.

Perhaps I could just quote from the minister's letter. He said:

Cameco acknowledged responsibility for the spill, pleading guilty to charges laid under the Atomic Energy Control Act and paying the maximum fine of \$10,000.

A maximum fine of \$10,000 is a pitiful joke. Everybody knows what a \$10,000 fine for virtually unlimited degradation of the environment means to a huge industry like this one in this day and age. In fact it was for two charges at \$5,000 each, twice that for smoking on Parliament Hill.