

Canada: Ontario government bends to pressure for a public inquiry into e-coli deaths

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Ontario's Tory government has announced a judicial inquiry will be held into the contamination of the water supply in the rural town of Walkerton and the resulting deaths of at least seven people. But the Tories are resisting pressure that the inquiry investigate the province's water management system. They continue to insist that the Walkerton tragedy had nothing to do with their cuts to the Environment Ministry's budget and workforce or with the privatization of water-testing.

Likewise, the Tories have dismissed suggestions that the off-loading of provincial government responsibilities onto municipalities could have impacted on Walkerton's ability to maintain its water system, or that largely unregulated industrial livestock production might have resulted in fecal matter getting into Walkerton's water supply.

A 1995 Health Canada report found that there was a link between cattle density and e-coli infections. But Ontario Agriculture Minister Ernie Hardeman told reporters Wednesday there is no evidence the province's burgeoning industrial livestock industry could constitute a threat to public health. "I think it is important that one does not regulate our agriculture business out of business," he declared.

Seven Walkerton residents, including a two-year-old child, are known to have died from kidney failure or other complications caused by infection from O157: H7, a deadly strain of the e-coli bacteria. The Coroner's Office is also investigating the deaths of four elderly people that occurred before it was known, or at least publicly revealed, that Walkerton's water supply was contaminated. Initially believed to have been natural, the deaths are now thought to have been caused by e-coli. More than 20 Walkerton residents, many of them children, remain hospitalized.

That the Walkerton tragedy has shaken public

confidence in the Tories' program of privatization and deregulation, and placed a question mark over the political future of Premier Mike Harris, is openly conceded even in the pro-Tory press. Noting that the Tories received strong support from the south-western Ontario farm belt in the 1995 and 1999 elections, one *Globe and Mail* columnist wrote, "Walkerton has happened in the Tories' own backyard.... If [these people] lose confidence in the legacy of the Common Sense Revolution, then the Revolution is lost."

The public outcry makes it all the more important for the government to limit the scope of the judicial inquiry to the immediate cause of the contamination in Walkerton and why the municipal Public Utilities Commission (PUC) failed to promptly alert the public of the e-coli outbreak.

The Tories' attempt to remove their actions from scrutiny are being challenged by a new ad-hoc association of Walkerton residents. The Walkerton tragedy stemmed from "a complete systemic breakdown" at all levels of government, charges Bruce Davidson, co-signee of a letter demanding a broad-ranging inquiry into Ontario's entire water system. "We don't want this to be about Walkerton, this freak, in the whole piece. This could be your town—that's the sense we have."

The opposition Liberals and New Democratic Party (NDP) have sought to make political capital by associating themselves with the public outcry. They have demanded a role in fixing the judicial inquiry's terms of reference, so as to ensure it will consider the impact of the Tory cuts to the Environment Ministry. But they have been rebuffed by Ontario Attorney-General Jim Flaherty, who insists he alone will determine the scope and composition of the inquiry. "I'm the chief law officer of the Crown," he declared

Thursday. "It's my job as Attorney-General to draft terms of reference."

For several days last week, Flaherty and Premier Harris rejected calls for a judicial inquiry, but then in an abrupt reversal and with an obvious lack of preparation announced Wednesday that one will be set up.

The three more limited investigations that are already under way have to date revealed little. A criminal investigation is believed to be focusing on the actions of Walkerton (PUC) head Stan Koebel who waited at least five days before revealing the town's water system was contaminated and allegedly assured local health authorities the drinking water was safe even when he had test results showing otherwise.

On Friday, a team of technical experts told a press conference they have yet to discover the source of the e-coli, but have found that three municipal wells had entry points for contaminants. They say it will be at least six to eight weeks before Walkerton residents can resume drawing their drinking water from the municipal system.

Meanwhile, the local medical officer, Dr. Murray McQuigge, who played a key role in containing the Walkerton tragedy, has been placed under police protection after receiving several threatening phone calls. Dr. McQuigge ordered his own water tests after a large number of Walkerton's 4,000 residents fell ill; then, when they showed contamination, instructed Walkerton residents not to drink the water. McQuigge has suggested that both the PUC and the Tory government share blame for the tragedy and has criticized the lack of monitoring of farm waste management.

Contrary to the initial claims of Premier Harris, evidence continues to mount that the rules governing the regulation of the province's drinking water are both confused and far from uniform. While some of the problems predate the current Tory government, the Tories' closure of four provincial water testing facilities, privatization of all water testing, and a more than 40 percent cut in the Minister of Environment's personnel clearly created disarray both at the Ministry and at local water authorities. A survey done by the *National Post*, whose editorial pages have been mounting a furious defence of privatization, found that many water system managers are unclear about the

rules and some "weren't even sure whether they were legally obliged to test water and report contamination to health officials".

Many of the managers also told the *Post* that since 1996 visits by provincial inspectors have been few and far between. "I haven't seen an inspector around here for three years," said John Schmidt, who runs the water system for towns in Wellington North. "Cutbacks have had a lot to do with it."

Since the breakdown of the Walkerton water system, numerous other municipalities, particularly in Ontario's south-western farming region, have conceded that they have experienced problems in recent years. Government inspection reports show that 46 of 145 water systems had at least one contamination problem in the past two years. Residents in Durham, 30 kilometers east of Walkerton, woke Thursday to a boil-water warning from health officials.

Escherichia coli O157: H7, the bacteria responsible for the deaths in Walkerton, is a deadly strain of coliform which, according to a recent report in the medical journal *Lancet*, "has evolved from a clinical novelty to a global public-health concern". Unknown until 1982, it has grown into one of the most dangerous pathogens in the world.

Often called the "hamburger disease," it is usually spread through contaminated meat. According to the Canadian Pediatric Society, Canada has one of the highest reported rates of e-coli infection in the world. Nearly 81,000 people in North America are infected with the bacteria each year, resulting in about 70 deaths, mostly among young children and the elderly.



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