

Widespread Ontario water crisis discredits Tories

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The claims of the Ontario Tories that the lethal contamination of the water supply in the rural town of Walkerton last June was an isolated incident, and their denials that government cuts prepared the tragedy, have collapsed under a virtual avalanche of evidence which has surfaced in recent weeks. From sources within the government itself, most recently from the Commissioner of the Environment, reports have emerged indicating the dereliction of responsibility and cover-up on the part of the Ontario government for its failure in safeguarding drinking water in the province.

Since the contamination was first made public in May, six people have been confirmed to have died and two thousand more made ill from e-coli which was found in the water supply in and around the small town of Walkerton, about two hours northwest of Toronto. At the outset, the Tory government of Premier Mike Harris swept aside suggestions that cutbacks and off-loading of provincial responsibility onto municipal government contributed to the disaster, in fact directing their greatest efforts at minimizing the significance of the tragedy. Only under intense public pressure following the outbreak did the Tory government accede to the demand for a public inquiry and initiate comprehensive testing of the province's water supply.

As evidence mounted that ministry understaffing and underfunding, as well as the removal of safeguards during the rule of the Tories, were decisive in preparing the disaster, the premier responded in the most cowardly and self-serving manner. With Harris variously suggesting that the previous NDP government, individual error, local government and even his own advisors bore responsibility, questions were raised among some of his most stalwart supporters within the ruling class and the right-wing press about his leadership. When, from their own belated investigations, it emerged that Ontario's drinking water was in a calamitous state, and that the government in some measure sought to hide this reality from the public, some top Tory officials came to publicly criticize the government's record, placing a question mark over the entire project of the Harris "Common Sense Revolution."

Details surfacing over the past two weeks indicate that the tragedy which occurred in Walkerton could have happened almost anywhere else in the province. A June 22 report to the Ontario Environment Ministry, marked "privileged and confidential," was leaked late last month by the *Globe and Mail*, forcing the government to make it public. Titled "Adverse Water Incidents Report," it contained a watch list of 120 sites across the province where the water supply was deemed problematic. These include

major urban centers such as Hamilton, Peterborough and Sudbury, which have been identified as having deficient water treatment facilities.

Allegations have surfaced that the withholding of the 57-page report breached the Freedom of Information and Privacy laws. According to Liberal environment critic Jim Bradley, the report shows that "the huge cuts in the ministry's staff have rendered the government unable to respond in a meaningful way to any emergency." Over the past five years the Harris Tories have eliminated more than half of the Environment Ministry staff, over 1,400 people, and cut the budget by 44 percent.

That the report surfaced at all has been attributed to opposition within the top ranks of the Conservative government to the premier's insistence that it not be made public. The pro-Tory *Globe and Mail* recently wrote: "this obduracy is in equal measures stupid, wrong and politically suicidal.... Not only shouldn't this information be secret, it should be as easily accessible as possible. Never again should knowing about a lethal outbreak hinge on the political courage of a local public officer of health."

Confirming the findings of the secret report, results from the government testing program prompted by the Walkerton outbreak show that over half of the water treatment facilities examined so far in the province have reported problems ranging from nonexistent filtration systems to inadequate testing. In addition, of the 350 government owned wells tested through July, which are not part of the public system, 60 percent tested positive for e-coli, parasites and excessive materials. In addition, in mid-July it was revealed that over 48 boil-water advisories were in effect across the province, at least 40 of which still remain.

Perhaps the most damning confirmation of government responsibility in the water crisis is the report published July 27 from the government's own Commissioner of the Environment, Gord Miller, a former Tory candidate, handpicked by Premier Harris for the position early this year. The 12-page report from the government's environmental watchdog, entitled "The Protection of Ontario's Groundwater and Intensive Farming," clearly indicts the Harris government for its role in preparing the catastrophe in Walkerton. Stating that Ontario has "virtually no control" in preventing water contamination from deadly infection such as e-coli, the commissioner questions: "Is the ministry unwilling, incapable or incompetent to perform the task. Or has the Ministry management abdicated its responsibility?"

The early publication of the report, which was not due for

another three weeks, was in direct response to the crisis in Walkerton and represents an about-face for Miller. During the previous week he had come under attack for his uncritical attitude towards the government's handling of water in the province. His report of last week, however, sharply criticizes current practices as conflicting and ineffective, and identifies definite obstacles to the delivery of safe drinking water in Ontario, which were put in place by the Harris government.

Miller points to the historical roots of the prevailing disarray in water management going back to when the Tories took power in 1995. He states that despite calls from the Environment Commissioner in each of the last four years for a water protection strategy, which won commitments from government Ministries to meet such a need, no action was ever taken. He points out that such a plan has gained greater urgency in view of significant changes over the recent period in how farming is done in Ontario, which have placed greater stress on the water system.

The dramatic growth in large intensive farming, which has been actively encouraged by the government, is identified as a particular issue for environmental risk. Previous practices of spreading liquid manure had been tolerable because smaller operations had relatively less manure to spread on greater acreage. The vast quantities of animal waste being produced by large-scale farms do not have correspondingly large areas of farmland and, as a result, the risk of contamination of ground water is dramatically increased. Animal waste has been identified as a likely source of e-coli contamination to ground water and Ontario now has over 3.4 million hogs which produce as much raw sewage as the province's 10 million people.

The Ministry of Agriculture, which is responsible for both promoting farming investment in the province and for manure handling, is clearly indicted in the report for being in a conflict of interest. In response to concerns raised early in the crisis, Agriculture Minister Ernie Hardeman was quoted as saying, "I think it is important that one does not regulate our agriculture business out of business." Miller underscored in his report that there are no mechanisms in place to even assess how manure affects drinking water or the ecosystem as a whole, and said that compounding the problem is the fact that manure management is strictly voluntary and virtually unregulated.

After nearly two months of preparation, the public inquiry called to investigate the causes of the e-coli deaths last week began with interviews of those affected by the outbreak. At the same time investigations are being carried out by the Ontario Provincial Police and by the Ministry of the Environment. On the same day that the inquiry began its hearings, the coroner's office issued its report following the investigation of 21 deaths suspected to have been caused by water contamination. In it, six deaths were confirmed to have been caused by e-coli poisoning in the drinking water and a seventh was left undecided due to lack of evidence.

Press reports have given detailed accounts of personal suffering as well as enormous financial hardship, which continue to plague the people of Walkerton. Justice Dennis O'Connor, who is heading the probe, visited Walkerton last week to hold interviews with those affected. At a town hall meeting O'Connor cautioned, however, "We are not here to find out the cause—that will come

later." Formal hearings for the inquiry are not expected to begin until October.

In response to the perception that their elected officials would not represent their interests, a group of Walkerton residents formed a committee called the Concerned Walkerton Citizens which will likely participate in the inquiry with formal status. The group, which in the first month numbered just over 20, has grown to over 500 people, an indication of the growing decline of confidence in their political leaders. Residents were told at a meeting last week that the boil-water advisory is not likely to be lifted until October.

The compensation package promised by Attorney General Jim Flaherty is expected to run into the millions, but funds have been slow in materializing. To date the province is said to have contributed less than \$400,000 to the relief of the town and, to the dismay of the Citizens committee, private donations have been solicited to fill the void.

The investigations into water mismanagement in the province have thrown light on other disastrous policies of the Tory government. Recent studies have shown that Ontario has become a virtual toxic waste dump since the Tories took office, eviscerating environmental laws and protections. The government's own figures indicate that toxic waste imports into the province increased a staggering 138 percent between 1994 and 1998, the last year for which figures are available. Industrial waste produced by Ontario businesses has over the same period increased nearly 42 percent.

Both the opposition Liberals and the NDP have sought to position themselves at the head of the wave of public outcry provoked by the alarming state of water management in the province. This, despite overwhelming evidence that the record of both parties shows them to be complicit in the decay of social infrastructure not only in Ontario, but across the country. The NDP government of Manitoba is in fact facing its own crisis since dangerous levels of e-coli and coliform were recently found in at least four communities across that province.

For its part, the trade union movement organized under the Ontario Federation of Labour, has been virtually silent during what is clearly the greatest crisis the Tory government has faced since the Ontario teachers strike in 1997. Despite their demonization of Mike Harris as the singular enemy of the labor movement, they have allowed the most striking proof of the real impact of the Tory program to pass without comment.

The reactionary social remedies that give market forces dominion in public policy has had, for the Tories, unforeseen and for the victims, tragic consequences. This bitter experience has conditioned the reversal of Tory media pundits in their adulation of the government, an indication of divisions arising within the political right over the ill effects of their free market policies which can no longer be seen as restricted to their stated political targets, the disenfranchised and the poor.



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