

Canada: Evidence links Tories to Walkerton deaths

Lee Parsons
30 June 2001

The second phase of the public inquiry into water contamination in the central Ontario town of Walkerton has brought to light clear evidence of the provincial Tory government's culpability. In May-June 2000, the e-coli contamination of Walkerton's water supply killed at least seven people and caused over half the town to fall ill. Many Walkerton residents remain sick and some have likely been left with life-long disabilities.

From the outset critics have alleged that the Tories should have recognized that their gutting of health and environmental budgets would endanger public safety. But it is only in recent weeks that proof has emerged that the Tories were repeatedly warned by high-level government civil servants of the potentially tragic consequences of their program of spending cuts, deregulation and privatization of water-testing, and downloading of public responsibilities onto municipal governments—warnings the Tories chose to brazenly brush aside.

These revelations have profoundly shaken what public confidence remains in the government of Mike Harris and, moreover, objectively condemn the Tories' claims that the capitalist market is the best mechanism for providing basic services and social infrastructure.

In response to calls from the *National Post* and the most rapacious sections of big business, the Tories have tried to regain the initiative by announcing a new stage in their "Common Sense Revolution," including plans to promote private schools, increase private sector involvement in the provision of health care, punish welfare recipients and gut workplace health and safety. But there are real doubts in the ruling class as to whether the Tories retain the legitimacy and credibility to continue to impose a radical right-wing agenda in the face of massive working class opposition.

In an editorial this week, the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of the Bay Street financial houses, said that given the evidence that the Tories ignored "urgent warnings from some of (Ontario's) most senior and respected public servants ... it is for Mr. Harris to explain" why he should not "bear a portion of the responsibility" for the Walkerton deaths.

The *Globe's* John Ibbitson, a right-wing ideologue, has been even blunter, declaring that the warnings of Dr. Richard

Schabas, then Ontario's Chief Medical Officer, constitute "a smoking gun" that conclusively establish the "causal links" between the government's actions and "the regulatory failure that led to Walkerton:" "The most senior people in the Ministry of Health ... used everything short of skywriting to warn the Environment Ministry of the danger. ... The Tories were warned. They ignored the warnings. And we got Walkerton."

In 1997, Dr. Schabas sent a memo to his boss, the Health Minister, expressing alarm over the Tories' plan to turn water-quality tests over to private laboratories with no requirement that findings of contamination be reported to the local health office, as had been the practice previously. Schabas's memo and a call to amend the new regulations were sent by Tory Health Minister Jim Wilson to Environment Minister Norm Sterling. But Sterling ignored the warning, shunting the paper-trail off to a technical committee. At that time Sterling was working hand-in-glove with the Red Tape Commission that the Tories had established to massively reduce government regulations.

In testimony at the public inquiry into the Walkerton disaster, Dr. Schabas testified this week that the Tory government ignored direct appeals for stricter guidelines on numerous occasions. "This was a government that I think really held public institutions in contempt, and was contemptuous of people who worked in public institutions," he said.

Schabas described how he was excluded from a 1997 Cabinet meeting at which he had been delegated by Wilson to oppose the government's plan to offload all funding for public health boards onto the municipalities. (Traditionally the province had footed at least 75 percent of the bill.) On arriving at the meeting, Schabas was asked by one of Harris's aides to leave. "The Premier doesn't want you here for this discussion," the aide told him. Schabas testified he then turned to the Premier to see if he indeed was being ordered to leave. "The Premier looked at me ... and then he turned away. As far as I was concerned, the Premier was turning his back on public health." Schabas was so outraged by the Tories' attitude to public services he resigned in 1998.

Brenda Elliott, who was Environment Minister in 1996 when the Tories slashed the Ministry budget almost in half and privatized water testing, also testified before the inquiry this

week. Elliott, who is now the Intergovernmental Affairs Minister, claimed that she was for the most part unaware of at least ten documents written by officials from her department warning that the deep cuts being carried out in her Ministry posed real dangers to the environment and to public health. One of these, which was directed to senior cabinet officials including Premier Harris, stated that “the risk to human health and the environment may increase as a result of improper or illegal actions which are neither detected, nor controlled.”

When asked to explain why the government had chosen to privatize water-testing over a two-month period rather than two to three years recommended by Ministry officials, Elliot was at a loss to provide any explanation. “I can’t recall specifically why that would have occurred.”

Former Environment Minister Norm Sterling made a number of admissions this week that reveal the government’s indifference to public safety. In his testimony to the inquiry, Sterling confessed that he had in fact never read the warning letter sent to him by his colleague Health Minister Wilson, that he had not read Ontario’s new drinking water guidelines and that he was not even aware that they were only voluntary and not enforceable by law. He insisted, nevertheless, that he had been assured by unnamed senior bureaucrats that privatization and the halving of the Ministry’s staff posed no danger to public safety.

Much of the recent testimony has revealed the extent to which the Red Tape Commission, an agency established with the more or less overt aim of ensuring that the province’s regulations would be rewritten in line with the requirements of big business, worked to block attempts to preserve key environmental and health regulations.

Only in the face of a public outcry did the Tories last summer establish the Walkerton inquiry. Its terms of reference pointedly preclude laying blame for the disaster, let alone the drawing of an objective balance sheet of the Tory agenda of privatization, deregulation and the dismantling of public and social services. Royal Commissions are a device routinely used by governments in Canada to dodge difficulties. The current inquiry is no different and in fact is expected to take up to two years to deliver its recommendations.

Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that the Tories have been less than forthcoming in providing documents to the Commission. Earlier this month, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police carried out what was later revealed to have been the second search of Premier Harris’s office this year on behalf of the Walkerton inquiry.

As he has done from the outset, Harris continues to deny that he or his government had any responsibility for the Walkerton crisis, saying that Cabinet was never given any reason to believe that its actions might endanger public safety.

Other senior Tories have taken a similar tone. Brenda Elliot was particularly evasive when asked who should be held responsible in the event that government actions were found to

have contributed to the deaths in Walkerton. First she suggested the cabinet should share responsibility, than she said all members of the legislature should be held to account, even those who did not vote for the Tory program of massive public spending cuts and lower taxes for the well-to-do.

In response to public demand for better protection of the province’s water supply, new legislation has been drafted by Agriculture Minister Brian Coburn to regulate the use of manure by industrial farms. While both opposition parties have supported the government’s belated action on this front, they have pointed to a lack of committed funding to ensure the new regulations are enforced.

In arriving at the graver political conclusions from the bitter experience of Walkerton, a number of questions arise. Why did the Harris government not make public all information relating to the impact of their policies on water safety last summer, when it became clear that government actions had a bearing on the events in Walkerton? What sort of justice can we expect even if the public inquiry were to chastise this government? What are the limits to the human sacrifice the Tories are willing to extract in advancing their free market agenda?

It is undeniable that the Walkerton crisis represents the greatest indictment yet of the Tory program to divest government of social responsibility and hand it over to profit interests. Nevertheless, the Tories remain in office and in recent months have been able to intensify their drive to privatization in areas such as health care and education.

Notwithstanding their indignant charges against the Tories over Walkerton, neither the social-democratic NDP nor the Ontario Federation of Labour have acted to bring down this government. The question is objectively raised how, in light of overwhelming evidence of the immense dangers and unpopularity of the Tory a program, they have been able to stay their course and in fact deepen their attacks? The answer to that question must lead to a trenchant assessment of what passes for the leadership of the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact