Ontario premier stonewalls inquiry into Walkerton deaths

Keith Jones, Lee Parsons
20 July 2001

Ontario Premier Mike Harris faced a judicial interrogation June 29 into the role his government's program of budget-cutting, privatization and deregulation played in the e-coli contamination of the water supply in the rural town of Walkerton, a tragedy that claimed seven lives and sent over 2,000 residents to the hospital.

In the 13 months since the disaster, a mass of evidence has emerged showing an incontrovertible link between the Tories' dismantling of Ontario's water-testing system and the events in Walkerton. Even sections of the Tory press have conceded that a "smoking-gun" ties the Harris government to the Walkerton calamity.

Yet at the inquiry, Harris dismissed all suggestions his government bore any blame. Confronted with evidence that he had ignored repeated warnings that his water-management policies were imperiling public safety, Harris either pleaded ignorance of the warnings or dismissed them as ideologically motivated. Exuding indifference to the fate of hundreds of families devastated by the poisoning of their water supply, he mused at one point that "risk" was an inherent feature of life, and retorted at another that hindsight is 20/20.

Asked by Commission Counsel Paul Cavalluzzo whether the privatization of testing of the province's drinking water had not been too hasty—it was implemented in just two months, rather than three years originally proposed by the Ministry of the Environment—Harris replied, "I don't have any evidence of that. I have concerns expressed primarily by those who ... are against the private sector doing these things."

Asked how his government had responded to the Ontario environment commissioner's 1996 annual report, which chastised the Tories for failing to conduct any independent review of the cost of privatization or its impact on drinking-water quality, relying instead "only on promises from private sector labs," Harris feigned ignorance. "I would have to assume'" declared the premier, "that ... [the Environment Ministry] did not believe it was a problem because ... they carried on with the private labs."

Unable to answer the evidence, Harris is seeking to salvage his career and his government's flagging fortunes by appealing for ruling class support on the basis of the Tories' record of attacks on the working class. In the weeks prior to the premier's appearance before the Walkerton inquiry, the Tories announced plans to boost private education, increase corporate involvement in the provision of health care, reduce occupational health and safety protection, and further victimize welfare recipients.

In his inquiry testimony, Harris repeatedly drew attention to his government's record of cuts to public and social services and steep tax reductions for the well-to-do. He boasted that the Tories had brought a "different," private sector "philosophy" to government, and claimed the Tories' public spending and tax cuts had "led to the jobs and tremendous growth in government revenues ..."

While he dared not say so explicitly, the implicit message of Harris's testimony was that the seven fatalities in Walkerton were a reasonable price to pay for Ontario's economic growth in the last half of the 1990s—the "collateral damage," so to speak, of the Tories' drive to make Ontario "internationally competitive."

In truth, the Walkerton disaster was entirely predictable and preventable. It was, moreover, part of a much larger social crisis. The drive of big business and its political representatives to roll back the social conquests of the working class and remove all restraints on capital's drive for profit has caused a dramatic increase in poverty, social inequality and economic insecurity. It has brought basic public services, including health and education, to the brink of collapse, and has been accompanied by a growing assault on democratic freedoms.

Harris is only the second Ontario premier ever called before a judicial body to account for actions taken by his government. Yet the establishment press treated his appearance before the Walkerton inquiry as a one-day wonder that could be dispensed with at the end of the 24-hour news cycle. Even more notable is the media's failure to expose the numerous contradictions in Harris's testimony.

However, neither the Tories' evasions and lies, nor the media's self-censorship, will banish Walkerton from public consciousness. The Walkerton tragedy has profoundly shaken working people's confidence in the program of dismantling public services and unbridled market rule that big business and, to a greater or lesser degree, all the traditional political parties are pursuing.

Far from demonstrating the strength of his government, Harris's refusal to show any contrition reveals the chasm that exists between the ruling elite and the masses of working and middle class people.

The day before his June 29 inquiry appearance, Harris made a show of proclaiming that, as the head of Ontario's Tory government, he was accountable for all its actions. But no sooner was the premier sworn in than he resorted to obfuscation and outright lies.

He asserted that prior to his halving of the Environment Ministry's budget and his privatizing of water testing, he was given no reason to believe these actions might compromise public safety. "I can tell you," said Harris, "at no time was it ever brought to Cabinet's attention, to my attention, that the implementation of these ... plans would cause increased risk to health and safety of any citizen anywhere in the province."

Commission Counsel Cavalluzzo had little difficulty proving this a lie. First he cited a "Confidential Advice to Cabinet" memo that declared, "The risk to human health and environment may increase."

© World Socialist Web Site

Then he referred to an Environment and Energy Ministry Business Plan presented to the Tory caucus. It warned of "increased risk to human health and the environment as a result of decreased compliance and enforcement," and of a "reduced level of front-line service, slower response times to complaints, reduced technical assistance."

Ignoring his testimony of only minutes before, Harris acknowledged that the Tories had known there were risks in downsizing the Environment Ministry. But Harris claimed he and his ministers had thought the risks could be "managed."

Where, asked Cavalluzzo, were the documents outlining how the government intended to manage the risks? "Can you point to a single document today that persuaded you, then, that the increased risk to public health could be managed?" In replying, Harris contradicted himself once again: "No ... I can't point to that. By the same token, I can't recall at any time being told by the Ministry of the Environment or senior officials that there would be any increase in risk."

After Cavalluzzo showed that the government tried to "manage" the adverse political fallout from its cuts by omitting all references to increased risk in the public version of the Ministry of Environment Business Plan, Harris declared, "there's risk in everything, there's risk in walking across the street ..."

In the course of his interrogation of Harris, Cavalluzzo indicated that the inquiry had identified four possible causal links between the actions of the Tory provincial government and the failure of authorities to warn the populace of Walkerton in a timely fashion that the town's water supply had been contaminated. They were: failure to establish a clear Notification Protocol stipulating that private water testing labs must inform the local Public Health officer in the event they find evidence of water contamination; failure to back up such a Notification Protocol with a binding law; lack of mandatory accreditation of private water testing labs; the haste with which the government privatized water testing.

Asked in turn about each of these, Harris claimed he was aware of no evidence linking them to the Walkerton tragedy. It is, however, a matter of public record that the non-accredited private lab that discovered e-coli in Walkerton Public Utility test samples failed to inform the health officer. As a result, days passed before the residents were issued an alert and instructed to boil their water.

As for the repeated warnings about the Tories' water management policies in the years preceding the Walkerton tragedy—Cavalluzzo spoke of "document after document" and "four red-flags"—Harris shunted the responsibility onto subordinates, while suggesting the Tories had no reason to accept the validity of these warnings since they were made by government bureaucrats interested in preserving their jobs and budgets, or by persons ideologically opposed to privatization.

Harris became his most testy when Cavalluzzo, citing testimony from previous witnesses, suggested that it was the Tories who had placed their ideological agenda before the public welfare.

The Commission counsel charged that the Harris government had failed either to insist that private water testing labs be accredited, or that they be legally obligated to inform public health authorities if they detected water contamination, because of the Tories' "distaste for regulation."

Specifically, Cavalluzzo pointed to the role played by Harris's Red Tape Commission in implementing the Tories' "new regulatory culture." A high-powered Tory task force, the Red Tape Commission was established shortly after Harris came to power in 1995 with the express mandate of working with big business to curtail government regulation of the economy and environment.

Do you not think, asked the Commission counsel, that "MOE [Ministry of Environment] officials would be disinclined to bring forward a new regulation because of all the hurdles created by the Red Tape Commission?"

To which Harris replied, "They absolutely should not have been." He then claimed that the commission's purpose was to ensure that government regulations were so framed as to meet their objectives—a fanciful description of a body whose express purpose was to gut regulations on business.

At one point Harris described Walkerton as a "wake-up call"—a characterization that is both offensive, in that it trivializes the deaths of seven people, and self-serving, in that it obscures the Tories' refusal to heed the many warnings prior to the disaster. Harris then refused to concede that new water-testing regulations introduced by his government in August 2000 were implemented in response to Walkerton. "I wouldn't presume," he said, "any of the actions ... were taken because we believed had they been taken before, Walkerton wouldn't have happened."

Harris and the Tory cabinet are—at the very least—guilty of criminal negligence. In pursuit of a right-wing agenda that aims to remove all tethers on capital's exploitation of working people and the environment, they willfully ignored repeated warnings from government officials and pressed ahead with the downsizing of the Environment Ministry and the dismantling of the province's water-testing system .

However, working people would be making a mistake if they looked to the official inquiry to call Harris and his government to account. The inquiry's powers are entirely advisory and its purview has been defined by the Tory government itself.

Already the inquiry has signaled that it will not question the Tory program of privatizing public services as such, but only the manner in which the privatization of water-testing was carried out.

The trade unions have said virtually nothing about Walkerton. They long ago abandoned any struggle, even in the limited form of public protest, against the Harris government.

The social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) has been active on the Walkerton file largely to obscure its own complicity. As Harris has been quick to point out, the 1990-95 NDP government of Bob Rae helped prepare the Tories' privatization of water-testing, by allowing municipalities to use private labs and spinning off the Clean Water Agency from the Environment Ministry.

More fundamentally, it was the NDP that prepared the way for the coming to power of the Harris Tories by initiating wholesale cuts in social services and imposing anti-union laws. Rae, in jettisoning the NDP's traditional reformist program, unabashedly declared his allegiance to the capitalist market.

Holding Harris and the Tories responsible for their socially criminal policies is inseparably bound up with the establishment of a genuinely independent political party of the working class. Such a party can be built only on the basis of a socialist program, which takes as its starting point the needs of working people, not private profit.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site