

Canada: Listeriosis epidemic continues—Liberal and Tory policies culpable

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The number of deaths linked to the listeriosis outbreak that originated at the Maple Leaf Foods meatpacking plant in Toronto has now risen to 20. Six other listeria deaths are still under investigation.

The latest deaths were announced during the final days of the Canadian federal election campaign under conditions where the Harper government is under increasing attack from the opposition parties, in particular the Liberals. But just as in so many other cases, in dismantling Canada's food inspection system the Conservatives have only continued Liberal policies. It has now come to light that the design of the new inspection system that the Harper Conservatives implemented was developed under the prior Liberal government of Paul Martin.

The listeria outbreak occurred a few months after the Harper government began to introduce new relaxed inspection rules. In August, Maple Leaf Foods issued a recall of virtually all the products produced at their Toronto plant after the deadly listeriosis outbreak was made public. The contamination led to the largest food recall in Canadian history.

The Harper government changed the way inspections were to be carried out by axing rules requiring meat-processing plants to alert the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) when tests show the presence of listeria. Under the new rules, inspectors only had to review test results twice a month, leaving it up to the companies to police themselves and flag positive tests or trends.

A recent investigative report by the *Toronto Star* and the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corp.) has revealed that the CFIA, months before the outbreak, dropped the requirement that food producers report positive bacteria tests to government experts. The investigation also found two-thirds of meat samples taken from Toronto-

area nursing homes and hospitals in mid-August for testing were contaminated with the bacteria. This has significant ramifications considering the elderly form a high-risk group for infection. Other groups most at risk in listeriosis outbreaks include people with weaker immune systems, children and pregnant women.

Toronto's associate medical officer of health, Dr. Vinita Dubey, said the test results illustrate the extent of the contamination. "I'd never seen anything like this," said Dr. Dubey. "Usually in our food investigations, we'll send a number of samples for testing and most will be negative. The fact that so many came back positive shows how contaminated the source was."

Professor Rick Holley, a microbiologist at the University of Manitoba, claimed, "There shouldn't be any positives." "The reality," added Holley, "is if you did a survey in the market, you might find one or two at most out of this sample that are positive. ... And it is a particularly virulent strain of listeria. It's one of the bad ones."

The meat samples that tested positive for listeria had best-before dates ranging from early August to early October. Holley suggested that the meat from the Toronto plant was being contaminated over a period of nearly two months!

It has now come to light and been confirmed by the CFIA that the new federal food inspection rules were developed when the Liberals were in power in 2005. The design of pilot tests for the Compliance Verification System that commenced in April of this year began in August 2005, according to Brian Evans, the agency's executive vice-president. "The basic tenets didn't change. It was a matter of fine tuning," said Evans. The first pilot tests commenced in June 2006, five months after Prime Minister Stephen Harper's

Conservatives defeated Paul Martin.

During this time, the agency operated under the office of former Liberal agriculture minister Andy Mitchell, who was defeated in the 2006 federal election. Ujjal Dosanjh, the former NDP premier of British Columbia cum Liberal minister for health in the Paul Martin government, was in charge of the food safety policy at that time. Dosanjh is currently seeking reelection in Vancouver and now serves as the Liberal health critic.

Liberal Wayne Easter, who currently acts as opposition agriculture critic, served as parliamentary secretary to the minister of agriculture when the new Compliance Verification System was developed. He has since stated that he was not involved in the development of the pilots to test the feasibility of the new system, but was aware of the developing initiative.

In one revealing admission Easter stated, "There was pressure from industry to go forward with pilot programs. Then it's up to the government to decide whether or not you're going to go down that road or not." However, Easter then passed the blame for his culpable inaction onto the Conservatives. "There should have been a major rethink. 'Is this the avenue we should go down?' And that didn't happen."

Despite their own role in the food inspection crisis, the Liberals have been cynically attacking the Conservatives during the election campaign, charging that the failures in the inspection system were due to the "government's ideological preference for deregulation." The Liberals have issued no less than nine press releases attacking the Conservatives on food-inspection since the federal election campaign began.

The Maple Leaf plant was allowed to reopen nearly one month ago after intensive sanitation, however no product has been allowed to go to market. Recently, four new positive tests for listeriosis have been confirmed in samples of meat from the plant. The company has sought to reassure the public that this is a standard finding following such intensive testing. "While this plant has undergone intensive sanitation, we will never, ever eliminate it," said Michael McCain, president of Maple Leaf Foods. McCain hails from the McCain family dynasty in New Brunswick-one of Canada's richest families.

A leading food microbiologist with expertise in inspection systems, Professor Rick Holley has stated that proper risk management cannot be done until the

food-borne surveillance system is vastly improved. He noted, for instance, that standard pro-activities such as the documentation of the listeria strains found in the current outbreak were not even catalogued in a central database. "I don't see any real groundswell of support within government to address the [contamination] issue appropriately," he said. "We're going to just sit here and knee-jerk react to outbreak after outbreak unless some serious consideration is given to investing dollars in improving the food safety system in Canada."

The gutting of the inspection system is part of the ongoing deregulation of industry and program of budget cutting that has been pursued for the past two decades by all governments, federal and provincial. Both the SARS and Walkerton contaminated water tragedies, like the current listeria epidemic, were the outcome of these socially regressive policies. The fact that the new food inspection system was designed by the Liberal government and then enacted by the Harper Conservatives should come as no surprise. Both parties are instruments of big business who pursue policies that put the interests of private profit before human need.



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