

# Canada blocks UN from declaring asbestos a “hazardous” substance

Jake Silver  
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Canada’s Conservative government has prevented asbestos—a notorious carcinogen responsible for tens of thousands of deaths each year—from being listed as a hazardous substance under the United Nations’ Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade.

Canada had hoped other countries would take the lead in blocking greater regulation of asbestos exports at last month’s conference of the signatories to the Rotterdam Convention, thus enabling it to avoid public odium.

Even as the conference delegates were assembling in Geneva, Canadian officials, including Environment Minister Peter Kent, either denied Canada would vote against listing chrysotile asbestos as a hazardous material or claimed that the matter was of so little concern to the government that they did not know what its policy was.

But to the Conservative government’s chagrin, Canada soon found itself alone in opposing inclusion of asbestos in the list of hazardous substances stipulated in Annex III of the Rotterdam Convention. India, a major asbestos importer, dropped its longstanding opposition and several other countries involved in either the production or import of asbestos indicated that they were preparing to follow suit.

Because the Rotterdam Convention functions by consensus, Canada, even if the lone dissenter, could nonetheless thwart the push for greater regulation of chrysotile asbestos.

Ultimately, the Ukraine, Vietnam, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—poor countries hardly known for their concern for the environment or occupational health and safety—joined Canada in opposing chrysotile asbestos’ inclusion in Annex III.

Had it been listed, the export and import of chrysotile

asbestos would not have been banned. Exporters would merely have been legally compelled to warn importers of the health risks.

Both major asbestos exporters such as Canada and importers like India fear that listing asbestos under Annex III will result in new limits on how and where it is used, driving up building costs and causing importers to look for alternate fire-resistant materials.

The whole process has revealed the Harper government’s callous indifference to human welfare and the right wing character of its anti-regulatory economic agenda.

This is the third time Canada has blocked the listing of asbestos under Annex III of the Rotterdam Convention. Canada has also previously vetoed moves to change the ratification process so that substances can be added to the Consent List if three-quarters of the countries that are signatories to the Convention agree.

The Canadian government has provided over \$20 million to the Chrysotile Institute in recent years. Headed by Clement Godbout, the former Quebec Director of the United Steelworkers union, the Chrysotile Institute is a Montreal-based lobby group that promotes the sale and use of chrysotile asbestos in the developing world.

In the run up to the 2008 Rotterdam Convention conference in Rome, at which Canada was able to use asbestos importing countries, such as Vietnam and India, as its proxies in defeating asbestos’ inclusion under Annex III, the *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)* issued a scathing attack on the Harper government. Calling it “an avid asbestos cheerleader,” the *CMAJ* criticized the Conservative government for its shameful “political manipulation of science,” including suppressing a report from an expert panel, commissioned by Health Canada, into the risks

associated with chrysotile use. According to the *CMAJ*, one of the world's most-respected medical journals, Canada has taken part in a "death-dealing charade" by arguing that chrysotile can be safely used in the developing world.

Canada is the world's fourth largest producer of chrysotile asbestos, with only Russia, China and Kazakhstan producing more, and is second only to Russia in annual exports of the carcinogenic substance. The UN World Health Organization reports that cancers caused by the inhalation or ingestion of asbestos fibers kill approximately 90,000-100,000 people per year.

In Canada and other advanced capitalist countries use of chrysotile asbestos has been effectively banned. Nearly all of Canada's asbestos production is for export to poor Asian countries where health and safety regulations do not exist or are not enforced.

Several newspaper reports noted that Canadian government is currently spending millions to remove asbestos from the Parliament Buildings, other public facilities, and ordinary Canadians' homes. Yet it is doing everything in its power to prevent Canadian asbestos companies from having to put warning labels on their products.

During the recent federal election campaign, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a point of stopping in Quebec's Eastern Townships, where Canada's asbestos industry is centered. When challenged on his government's stand on asbestos exports, Harper said it would be unfair to deny Canadian companies access to markets in which there is a demand for their product and in which its sale is permitted. "This government," declared Harper, "will not put Canadian industry in a position where it is discriminated against." Earlier he told an election rally in Asbestos, Quebec, "The only party that defends the chrysotile industry is our party, the Conservative Party."

The Harper government's unabashed promotion of the asbestos industry and transparent and callous indifference to the health of asbestos miners in Canada and building workers and others in impoverished countries has been criticized by sections of the corporate media. Several editorial writers and columnists criticized the government for damaging Canada's "good name" on the world stage. Their concern is that Harper's stance has shined light on the

predatory interests that determine Canada's foreign policy. Habitually, Ottawa and Canada's ruling elite seek to camouflage these economic and geo-strategic interests with profuse professions of altruism and humanitarianism.

In arguing that the government's defence of the asbestos industry is not in the "national interest," many of Harper's press critics adopt a crude dollars and cents approach akin to that of the prime minister. They note that Canada's asbestos industry has shriveled in recent decades. In Quebec, where it is based, asbestos production only generates \$90 million per year, equal to about 0.1 percent of the province's economy.

Few, if any, of the editorials criticizing Canada's stand at the Geneva conference drew the obvious connection between the government's vigorous opposition to labeling asbestos "hazardous" and its pledge to make deregulation a government priority. In the name of eliminating "red tape" and reducing the regulatory "burden" on business, the Conservatives are seeking to increase corporate profitability at the expense of the environment and the safety and well-being of workers in Canada and around the world.



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