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The Hill Times, August 29th,
2005
LEGISLATIVE PROCESS
By Bea Vongdouangchanh

Support for asbestos makes Canada an 'international pariah'

Tory MP Chuck Strahl's stunning announcement that he has cancer should be a wakeup call for the government to support a global ban on asbestos, says NDP's Pat Martin.

Canada is an "international pariah" when it comes to supporting and dumping asbestos around the world, said NDP MP Pat Martin, who's calling for a global ban on the production, sale and use of asbestos, adding that the recent announcement of House Deputy Speaker and Conservative MP Chuck Strahl that he's battling a form of cancer most likely caused by asbestos exposure should be a wake up call for the government to start moving on the issue.

"Chuck's situation illustrates that this terrible, toxic substance is all around us and the government has its head in the sand for the sake of a few jobs in Quebec," said Mr. Martin (Winnipeg Centre, Man.). "They refuse to acknowledge that there's no safe level of exposure. It reaffirms my commitment that asbestos in all its forms should be banned."

Mr. Martin told *The Hill Times* that one of the main reasons he



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became an MP is "to fight for the global ban of asbestos." As a young man, he had worked in an asbestos mine in the Yukon from 1974-1975 and said he was lied to about asbestos hazards. "For the tragedy of asbestos to strike so close to us all on Parliament Hill, it strengthens my resolve that this is Canada's greatest shame and is crying out to be addressed."

Mr. Strahl (Chilliwack-Fraser Canyon, B.C.) announced last week in a column in the Chilliwack *Times*, a local paper in his riding, that he is suffering from lung cancer likely caused by exposure to asbestos when he worked as a logger years ago.

Mr. Strahl said he plans to continue his MP and deputy Speaker duties. "This column is about me (always a difficult subject), and it is about my cancer," he wrote. "I don't see any other way around this. I'm a kind of private guy in many ways, and I like to be pretty stoic about problems I face day to day. But my job is so public and expectations so obvious that it can't really be a secret. And perhaps it wouldn't be fair to be secret anyway, because there are so many people who need to know and want to help out in ways small and large."

Just after the House broke for the summer, Mr. Strahl, 48, said he started to feel ill. Then his lung collapsed. "I thought it was just the flu or perhaps pneumonia, and I was too busy and too stubborn to rush into the doctor's office," he wrote.

After two weeks of tests and surgery and another collapsed lung, "Pathologists had determined that the lining (the pleura) had developed cancer, likely because of an exposure to asbestos when I was a young man. My logging days included a time when we used open, asbestos brakes on the yarder and while my exposure wasn't that lengthy, it was intense. Typically, 20-25 years later, the asbestos works its ugly magic. Unfortunately, I'm right on time.

"A column like this could have the word 'unfortunately' sprinkled throughout, and it is the perfect word for the situation. Unfortunately, I was exposed to asbestos. Unfortunately, my body couldn't handle it. Unfortunately, it targets the lungs. Unfortunately, there is no cure, only treatment. Unfortunately, like all cancer, the disease has an awful, debilitating effect on your family and friends, all of whom want to help, can't believe it is happening, and just wish they could do something to make the world 'right' again.

"I'm none too thrilled with it all either. The treatment will be determined in the next few days, and I'll have to start that soon. It won't be any fun, but it has to be done and I'll just get at it when they're ready. I'm hoping to be able to keep working while this happens. I'll be in there sluggin' for now, and much of what comes up will be simply business as usual."

Conservative House Leader Jay Hill told *The Hill Times* last week that he was "struggling a lot" with the news of Mr. Strahl's cancer.

"He's my closest personal friend," said Mr. Hill (Prince George-Peace River, B.C.). "The friendship that we've developed over the last decade as Parliamentarians has morphed into a very close personal relationship. It goes unsaid that myself and our entire caucus give our utmost support and encouragement during this difficult time. He's loved by all and respected by MPs. The respect they have for him as Deputy Speaker is reflective of the respect they have for him as an individual."

Mr. Martin said he was shocked when he heard the news. "We wish Chuck the best. He's such a healthy and vibrant man and if anyone can beat it, it's him."

He told *The Hill Times* that he is also worried about his own health and regularly goes for bronchoscopies which show there is scarring around his lungs but there is no sign of cancer.

Earlier this year, Mr. Martin was in Washington, D.C. for the first World Asbestos Awareness Day with a U.S. lobby group. "It was on April 1, April Fool's day, unfortunately, which is an irony because we've all been fooled by asbestos for so long," he said, adding that the government refuses to acknowledge that there is no safe level of exposure to asbestos.

Health Canada's website states that "asbestos poses health risks only when fibres are present in the air that people breathe. If asbestos fibres are enclosed or tightly bound in a product, for example in asbestos siding or asbestos floor tiles, there are no significant health risks.

"When inhaled in significant quantities, asbestos fibres can cause asbestosis (a scarring of the lungs which makes breathing difficult), mesothelioma (a rare cancer of the lining of the chest or abdominal cavity) and lung cancer. The link between exposure to asbestos and other types of cancers is less clear."

The federal government is currently keeping a close eye on the West Block building on Parliament Hill where asbestos is present in many forms due to major renovations conducted in the 1960s when it was legal to fireproof buildings with the material. Using asbestos as insulation was banned in Ontario in 1973.

According to a recent report by engineering firm Golder Associates Ltd., MPs and staffers toiling inside the building are at risk of asbestos exposure.

"The fact that asbestos fireproofing is observed to have fallen off (which creates a disturbance), and the measured effect of activity in the asbestos contaminated areas leads us to state that there is no guarantee that the occupants have not been exposed to some levels of asbestos fibres," says the report.

In the last session of Parliament, Mr. Martin raised the issue of an asbestos-laden home insulation product called vermiculite whose commercial name is Zonelite.

"Hundreds of thousands of homes have been made dangerous and even devalued by virtue of Zonolite contamination," Mr. Martin said during Question Period in February. "This happened because of a federal government program that promoted and even subsidized the installation of this Zonolite. Within months of learning that UFFI foam was irritating, a program existed to remove that hazard from people's homes. Canadians are looking to their government for help in removing Zonolite. What will the government do to help homeowners get this carcinogen out of their walls when the government helped put it in?"

In response, Labour and Housing Minister Joe Fontana said, "I do not buy the premise of the question at all. I am sure the member would want to be more clear with Canadians. Yes, any time they are undertaking renovations we would encourage them, obviously, to talk to professionals so that they can get the right information. We have been told, and it is on Health Canada's website as well as [the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's website], which advised all the stakeholders and so on, that if left undisturbed it does not pose a health risk. Yes, we need to inform Canadians on the health and safety of their homes but I am sure the member would not want to alarm Canadians."

Mr. Martin said that Canada is the largest and one of the only asbestos producers left in the world, and where "it would be irresponsible to continue using it in Canada," it's still exported to many countries in the developing world. "We spend millions subsidizing the industry and promoting it in the third world," Mr. Martin said. "It's our greatest shame for dumping asbestos in the third world and we're international pariahs for it."

In 1999, Canada appealed to the World Trade Organization to stop France from banning asbestos imports and lost. "The WTO found that all levels of asbestos posed some cancer risk, that safer substitute products were available and that there was no such thing as 'controlled use,'" wrote Barry Castleman, an environmental consultant, in the *Washington Post* last year.

"We really are the international bad guys," Mr. Martin said, adding that the European Union's 23 countries banned asbestos as of Jan.

1, 2005.

"We've chosen not to use it, but it's still legal here and a whole generation is at risk. It should have never been taken out of the ground and now with wreckless abandonment we've scattered it across the country and continue to dump it around the world. That's why I'm calling for a global ban. We have an obligation to do anything and everything to get rid of it."

One solution, Mr. Martin said, is to shut down the mines and give the 800 or so workers early pensions because the asbestos industry is a "dying business" in Quebec. However, Mr. Martin said, "The government is acting cowardly to shut down the death mines and pension [the employees] off."

Mr. Martin said that once Parliament resumes, he will organize a gathering on the Hill with home owners from across Canada who have Zonelite in their houses to demand action.

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The Hill Times

Asbestos in West Block

In its December 2004 final report to Public Works, engineering firm Golder Associates Ltd. concluded that mesothelioma, a rare form of cancer which affects the protective membrane covering most of the body's internal organs, was considered to be the most likely illness to arise from the current potential asbestos exposure patterns in West Block. Public Works says it has been conducting daily air monitoring and that the results have consistently been within acceptable levels. It also doesn't plan to vacate West Block until the fall of 2006.

Golder's final report stated: "In light of the risk analysis and based on the balance of the information and data (observational and other), we conclude that an important health risk exists for occupants of West Block. Studies show that some individuals with only brief exposures have developed mesothelioma. It is therefore unreasonable to prolong the occupants' risk of exposure to this situation or to introduce new tenants to the building under this condition. The best strategy for ending potential occupant exposure is to vacate the building's occupants as soon as reasonably achievable. A four to six month timeframe for the relocation of the occupants was recommended in July 2004 to being immediately and end in December 2004. The four to six month timeline was selected because it communicates a sense of urgency without panic... Although the December 2004 target date has lapsed, Golder maintains its recommendation that an action plan for ending occupancy should be developed with a timeline beginning immediately."

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