

The Year of Ban Asbestos Canada

Kyla Sentes

Ban Asbestos Canada (BAC), Canada

Abstract

2003 saw the creation of a new national organization dedicated to banning the production, use, and export of asbestos: Ban Asbestos Canada (BAC). While this represented a significant achievement for Canadian victims and activists, the road ahead is long. The political economy of asbestos in Canada is complex and the pro-asbestos lobby has entrenched itself at both the federal and provincial levels. As such, the strategies for BAC must address myriad issues in order to be effective: the regionalization of the asbestos industry in Canada; Quebec nationalism; divisions within the labour movement; disparities between provincial compensation systems; and the coordination of actions. However, despite these obstacles, response from the public at large has been overwhelmingly positive and momentum is high to achieve a global ban on asbestos.

The last year has seen numerous important events for Canadian victims and their loved ones. BAC was created nearly this time last year, and is becoming a name on the scene. You know you've made it when the Globe & Mail cites you as "a group calling themselves Ban Asbestos Canada."¹ The website has had many visitors and emails from both victims and those concerned about the general welfare of the Canadian population. The extensive network created at the conference last September has meant that each person emailing has been able to be pointed in the right direction for whatever their concern: be it personal illness, concern about building safety, or removal issues. In addition, a ribbon campaign and a petition to the House of Commons have been started and supported by the Sierra Club.

But as an umbrella organization, BAC supports all those involved in the fight to ban asbestos. Day of Mourning events across the country helped raise awareness about the current asbestos situation, and the response from those at these events has been

¹ Anonymous. 2004. "Ottawa on Trail of Asbestos in Indian homes: Building records combed in a bid to trace dangerous substance in reserve dwellings." *The Globe & Mail*. April 2.

overwhelming. They spawned several news articles in Edmonton, Vancouver, Ottawa, and Montreal.

An incredibly important inroad was made with the creation of AVAQ. Through the dedication and tenacity of Roch Lanthier, AVAQ has firmly established itself on the Quebec and Canadian scene as a force to be reckoned with. Quebec is key to any effective mobilization in Canada. It is absolutely crucial that Quebec workers be shown the effects asbestos use has on their communities and on their health. They must understand that the Quebec government is playing Russian roulette with their lives. AVAQ's work is forcing people to pay attention and the pro-asbestos lobby is getting scared – they should be.

The commitment of people like Tim Devlin is linking asbestos victims across the country. One would have hoped that the myriad events worldwide promoting the banning of asbestos would have some effect on our government. However, the greatest problem we as activists face is creating effective knowledge about the problem. Faced with all of these challenges, the issue becomes how the victims and their families can act in a meaningful way. One thing that has become clear to me through my involvement with the movement over the last few years is that action is the best way to funnel anger and grief on numerous levels. Knowing there are so many others who have felt the same loss, who go through the same anger on a daily basis, having people you can share your feelings with is an incredible emotional help. Further, knowing that there are so many dedicated people who have become involved without having had that personal loss is inspirational. One cannot underestimate the power of knowing that there are others who share your cause.

As such, there are ongoing efforts to create a nation-wide support system. Across the country we need to ensure that those who are in need have access to a variety of services: information and assistance in getting compensation; emotional support for victims and their families; medical information and the names of doctors who have a thorough knowledge of asbestos diseases. Workers' health clinics are crucial in these efforts and several provincial federations of labour and trade unions have expressed support for these ideas.

And of course, policy needs to be a target.

The last federal election in Canada saw some substantial changes to governance, both positive and negative. On the positive end, we saw our representation by the New Democratic Party increase. The NDP has been extremely supportive of our cause as well evidenced by their participation in the 2003 Ottawa Conference. Provincially, numerous caucuses have expressed their support. More significantly, however, we are now faced with a minority government. The Liberal party of Canada failed to get the number of seats to warrant a majority win. The results of this are several. First, the party has no

mandate to rule, which means that significant legislative changes are dependent on the support of other parties. While this has the potential for aiding our cause, it has significant potential for harming it also. The opportunity for the New Democratic Party to bring forward asbestos issues is significant in this political environment.

Recently, the Canadian House of Commons faced a potential toppling, as they were not garnering adequate support for the throne speech. However, support from the Bloc Quebecois prevented this from happening. The ramifications of this are immediately clear. The Liberal party will likely face making many concessions to either the Bloc or Conservative Party if it is to avoid a vote of non-confidence, which would force a new federal election. Asbestos needs to be made into a core issue. We must have asbestos placed on the policy agenda in a minority environment.

The dissemination of knowledge is crucial. Members of the pro-chrysotile lobby have called us uninformed and ignorant. While this simply is not the case, we must use their information against them, despite the fact that the government is making that more difficult. Derek Shackelford puts out a weekly culling of asbestos news that has been an invaluable resource for us all.

Information on asbestos exports is now being held from the public. According to Louise Perron, the senior policy advisor for Minerals and Mines Sector of Natural Resources Canada, a Canadian citizen does not have access to data regarding the export of asbestos due to Statistics Canada regulations.² Under these regulations, any industry wherein there are fewer than three reporting companies cannot have their data published as it may provide an unfair advantage to given companies. However, the last time there were more than two producers was 1994. Yet export data were available up until 2002.

Ms. Perron informed me that it must simply have been an oversight that asbestos data were released, since these guidelines have been in place for many years.³ I found this particularly strange given that Ms. Perron herself authored myriads of these reports and clearly must have been aware of the regulations and their applicability for asbestos. Yet suddenly, after 8 years of ignoring the guidelines, protecting this statistical information has become of the utmost importance – you can draw your own conclusions here.

Further interactions with members of the federal government have produced similarly confounding results. While current Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan was minister of health, I wrote to her discussing the various concerns BAC had about health and safety both at home and abroad. Ms. McLellan's response was that asbestos issues were not

² Statistics Canada. Accessed September 2004. "Disclosure Control." <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/12-539-XIE/steps/disclosure.htm>

³ Perron, Louise. 2004. Personal Communication. September 30.

relevant to Health Canada and that she would forward my letter to International Trade. Since when is asbestos *not* relevant to the health of Canadians?

The Canadian government recently created the new Public Health Agency of Canada, and our first-ever Chief Public Health Officer (CPHO). While Dr. David Butler-Jones was appointed primarily to deal with SARS concerns, his mandate is to ensure the health and safety of Canadians through a strengthened public health system.⁴ A branch of this agency is the Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control – this organization must be a focus for us.⁵

We must continue to expose the hypocrisy of the Canadian position. We speak of human rights, the importance of upholding the values of institutions like the United Nations, and then we turn around and reject the inclusion of chrysotile in the Rotterdam Convention.

We must also point the spotlight on the Asbestos Institute, recently renamed the Chrysotile Institute in an effort to dissociate itself from “bad” asbestos, and its relationship with the Canadian government. The fact that the Asbestos Institute continues to receive funding from our tax dollars must be made clear. It flies under the radar and must be exposed for what it is. Nearly a million dollars will be given to the institute over the next few years. The Canadian government continues to talk about needing to find sources for funding our health care system, here’s a little bit that might serve it well. The asbestos institute tells us, in their lovely pamphlet discussing what is wrong with anti-asbestos activists that:

Canadians are fully informed of the role played by Canada in defending and promoting the safe use of chrysotile as part of its policy on using minerals and metals. Not only do Canadians applaud the government's efforts to export the expertise developed since chrysotile was first mined, but representatives from all political parties, including the NDP leadership, came to reiterate their faith and support for the policy on the safe use of chrysotile.⁶

Perhaps then, they can explain the reaction I have had from every single person I have encountered since the creation of BAC. During the various conferences and table sittings we continually hear: “but I thought we had already banned asbestos?” Academics, intellectuals, activists, students, workers – all expressed shock to learn of Canada’s practices. In addition, numerous people have come forward telling stories of family members who are dying or have died of asbestos-related illnesses, but had no idea that compensation was available or that we were transferring these tragedies to the developing world.

⁴ Government of Canada. 2004. “Government of Canada Appoints First Chief Public Health Officer to Head Public Health Agency of Canada.” September 24.

⁵ http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ccdpc-cpcmc/index_e.html

⁶ The Chrysotile Institute. 2003. “What is the logic being applied by anti-asbestos activists?” Pamphlet.

They attack us for being profit motivated, saying we're working for the substitutes industry. Raynald Paré from the Mouvement PROchrysotile has called into question our financial motivations and sources.⁷ Their funding sources are clearly stated on their website: they are all corporate. We are far from corporately funded – most of us have put our personal savings into running this movement. But we must be happy that they are so worried about our effectiveness that they question whether we have some huge corporation backing us. Clearly we are having an effect.

But we must continue to put a human face on this tragedy. Thus those who speak from personal experience of loss must ensure that their voices are heard. What profit lies behind mourning the needless death of a loved one? Are those who demand a stop to these deadly practices motivated by anything other than compassion? These are powerful stories, and they must be heard.

⁷ Gagné, Lynne. 2004. “La mascarade des “anti-amine” a assez duré!” –Raynald Paré.” Les nouvelles régionales. *Courrier Frontenac*. September 17.