

THE WALKERTON INQUIRY

The Honourable Dennis R. O'Connor, Commissioner

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COMMISSIONER'S STATEMENT

Delivered June 6, 2001 in the Inquiry hearing room in Walkerton

We are approaching the conclusion of the Inquiry's hearings relating to the events in Walkerton.

During the course of Part IB, the government policy section, we have heard from dozens of witnesses, including some from the most senior levels of the civil service. Earlier, we announced that we will be calling two former Ministers of the Environment, Brenda Elliott and Norm Sterling. They will give evidence during the week of June 25.

We are now satisfied that, in order to ensure that the work of this Inquiry is thorough and complete, it is important that we also call Premier Harris. Given that it is the Premier who is to be called, I think it is appropriate to briefly set out the reasons for our decision.

As the terms of reference make clear, the government policy section of my mandate is extremely broad. It is to look at the effect, if any, of government policies, practices and procedures on the events in Walkerton. There are many such policies which must be looked at in order to fulfill this part of the mandate. To date, we have heard a good deal of evidence during Part IB about several policies implemented through different Ministries.

Walkerton

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There are, however, some policies and some decisions, which could be found to have a connection to Walkerton, that were not made within the Ministries or indeed even by the Ministers.

Here I refer to decisions such as the significant budget reductions in 1996 and 1997, and the program of regulatory reform, implemented around the same time. These decisions were made at the very highest level of the Government, by the Cabinet, and apparently originated within the Central Agencies and the Premier's Office.

The Premier, as the leader of the Government and the Chair of the Cabinet, is the person in the best position to answer questions about policies of this nature. For that reason, we believe it is important that the Premier testify.

That said, there are three points I want to make clear. First, the questioning of the Premier will be limited to those policies that may have some connection to the events in Walkerton. This will not be a wide-ranging examination of government policy in general. It will be focused.

Second, it is important that people keep the decision to call the Premier in proper perspective. There is a danger that some may exaggerate the significance of his testimony or even the reason he is being called.

It should be kept in mind that this is an inquiry, not a proceeding alleging wrongdoing of any sort. The Premier is being called so that he can be asked about specific policies and decisions, and their possible impacts on Walkerton, and for no other reason.

Finally, I want to make clear that the fact the Premier is being called does not mean I have concluded that the policies about which he will be questioned in fact caused or contributed to what happened in Walkerton. My conclusions will be set out in my report. It is important, however, to hear the evidence of the Premier to better enable me to reach these conclusions.

Yesterday, we informed Government counsel of our decision. We are awaiting a response as to when the Premier will be available. We have requested that he attend during the weeks of June 25 or July 2, the final weeks of the scheduled hearings, but we are of course prepared to accommodate his schedule.