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NATURAL RESOURCES

**Chalk River Nuclear Laboratories—
Medical Radioisotope Supply—
Comments of Minister**

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, June 9, 2009

THE SENATE

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NATURAL RESOURCES

CHALK RIVER NUCLEAR LABORATORIES— MEDICAL RADIOISOTOPE SUPPLY— COMMENTS OF MINISTER

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, yesterday a new chapter of the government's mismanagement of the isotope shortage crisis was disclosed. It was revealed on a tape, carelessly left behind by the Minister of Natural Resources, that she is more concerned about her reputation than the well-being of Canadians. People's lives are at risk, but the leader's cabinet colleagues are in a turf war over who receives credit for handling the file.

We are confronted with a shortage of medical isotopes that Canadians urgently need. Will the government put the health of Canadians ahead of the political interests of the beleaguered Minister of Natural Resources?

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government and Minister of State (Seniors)): Honourable senators, it is important to put yesterday's news stories into context. This taped conversation apparently took place much earlier this year, indeed in January. For that reason, it is improper to relate the contents of that tape to the events in May, when there was a serious issue regarding medical isotopes.

Rather than titillate ourselves with tapes that journalists hold onto for months, it is important to look at this issue for its seriousness, and that issue is the worldwide supply of medical isotopes.

• (1445)

Minister Raitt has been working around the clock on this serious issue. She has worked very hard toward her goal of securing a medical isotope supply, which, as I mentioned earlier, is an issue not only in Canada but also internationally, one that requires a cooperative global response. That is exactly what Minister Raitt has been doing.

Honourable senators, through the Nuclear Energy Agency, Canada has created and chairs the high level panel of isotope-producing countries to coordinate supply as well as reactor schedules. Last Friday, our government met in Washington with operators of reactors in the United States and officials from the White House to establish sources of supply. The Minister of Health is fully engaged with all provincial and territorial governments and the health care community. The Minister of Natural Resources, Lisa Raitt, announced an isotope expert review panel to provide medium- and long-term responses to this global issue.

Rather than attack this very competent minister —

Senator Mercer: Oh, oh!

Senator LeBreton: Senator Mercer may think that this is a laughing matter but it is not — our government continues to use all available resources.

I wonder if Senator Mercer is interested in the answer regarding what the government is doing or if he is interested only in shouting.

I am simply listing the things that the minister is doing on behalf —

The Hon. the Speaker: Order. I remind honourable senators that this is the Senate chamber.

Senator LeBreton: Thank you, Your Honour.

I wish to assure all honourable senators, all parliamentarians, all Canadians, that our government continues to use all available resources to manage the shortfall and is fully engaged. As we know, this is a worldwide isotope supply issue. In this regard, Australia has asked the Canadian government for training and technical assistance to help bring their reactor on line as quickly as possible. We have facilitated this and Australian experts will be here next week for training. Our government is also willing to deploy officials to Australia to get their reactor up and running more quickly.

The Petten nuclear reactor in the Netherlands has ramped up production by 50 per cent and South Africa has increased supply by nearly 30 per cent. There are some medical facilities in Canada, and also around the world, that use their own facilities to produce some of their supplies of isotopes.

Senator Tardif: Obviously, the isotope crisis was on the mind of Minister Raitt in January. In her own words, she says:

But it's sexy . . . Radioactive leaks. Cancer.

. . . when we win on this, we get all the credit. I'm ready to roll the dice on this. This is an easy one.

I wish to tell the Leader of the Government in the Senate that there is nothing sexy about being denied access to medical tests and to treatments that save lives. When will this government start working together to benefit the health of all Canadians?

Senator LeBreton: Honourable senators, the term used by the minister was in reference to the story itself. It proves that way before this latest shortage, which became known in May because of a power outage and a shutdown at Chalk River, the minister was working on the medical isotope issue from the time she was sworn into cabinet on October 30, 2008.

Lisa Raitt is a hard-working minister who is fully engaged on this file, as are her colleagues. She has been working around the clock, dealing with partners throughout the world.

• (1450)

The goal is to secure a medical isotope supply for Canada, which is so vital in the treatment of cancer, heart disease and other conditions requiring medical isotopes. As has been pointed out by the Minister of Health, the Canadian government and the Minister of Health are working with provincial, territorial and research organizations to provide other methods of treatment to replace the shortage of isotopes.