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**Maternal and Infant Health Initiative
at G8 Conference**

Questions by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, April 27, 2010

THE SENATE

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MATERNAL AND INFANT HEALTH INITIATIVE AT G8 CONFERENCE

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. Over the past two decades, Canada's position on maternal health, including safe and legal access to abortion, was well respected nationally and internationally. American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated on her last visit to Canada that, "We cannot have maternal health without reproductive health, which includes contraception, family planning and access to legal, safe abortions."

Can the Leader of the Government in the Senate tell us why her government refuses to fund abortion services in poor countries and goes against the policies of other G8 countries?

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, at the G8 leaders' summit, Canada will champion an initiative to promote maternal and child health. This includes training and support for frontline health workers; better nutrition, treatment and prevention of diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhea and malaria; screening and treatment for sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS; proper medication; family planning; immunization; clean water; and sanitation.

Senator Tardif: Honourable senators, comprehensive family planning includes not only education and contraception, but also safe and legal abortion services. The World Health Organization states that a woman dies every eight minutes somewhere in a developing country due to complications arising from unsafe abortions.

Illegal and botched abortions performed by butchers put at risk women's health, their lives and the lives of their families. When legal and safe abortion services could save millions of women and children in developing countries every year, why does the government refuse to fund services that could save and improve the health and lives of these women and their children?

Senator LeBreton: Within the scope of the G8 initiative, countries will be able to identify their own priorities. Canada's contribution to maternal and child health may involve various interventions, including family planning, which includes the use of

contraception. The details remain to be determined. However, Canada's contribution does not include abortion, unlike what the United States may decide.

I point out to the honourable senator that this issue was submitted to the House of Commons by her own party. The Liberal Party was divided on this issue and the motion was defeated. This government is working to better the lives of women and children in the interests of their good health; it is not engaged in a cultural war.

I will read a few quotes into the record. Paul Szabo said that Mr. Ignatieff's efforts to use something as important as maternal health as a political tool was "opportunistic."

Sharon Marshall, Senior Adviser for World Vision, said in an email to the media on Monday:

World Vision is outraged that the abortion debate is being raised in order to distract from the real issue on the table . . . 8.8 million children dying every year from causes that we could easily prevent with interventions that cost pennies. The fact that the abortion debate has been re-opened in parliament and media means that the voices for those children are being over shouted.

Teresa Chiesa of Care Canada said in the *Edmonton Sun* on February 22, 2010:

I would hate to see it become a political fight. It has the potential to destroy it all if it becomes politicized.

Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization, said:

WHO policy on abortion, and similarly controversial issues, has always respected the national context, which includes cultural and religious dimensions as well as national legislation that embodies these dimensions. Decisions about abortion services are entirely within the jurisdiction of authorities in each individual country. . . .

The upcoming G8-summit, hosted by Canada, will, among other things, provide an opportunity to seek international consensus on ways to improve maternal health.