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Inquiry—Debate Continued

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

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THE SENATE

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[*Translation*]

ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Mitchell calling the attention of the Senate to the relationship between the environment and human rights.

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I am pleased to speak today to Senator Mitchell's inquiry on the environment and human rights.

Over the past few years, we have closely monitored many environmental crises. Whether they are natural occurrences or the result of human activity, these environmental crises have a direct impact on the most vulnerable people on our planet. Nonetheless, the study of the repercussions of climate change and the role of human rights is an emerging discipline.

[*English*]

As Senator Mitchell noted, human rights are affected by climate change today. Human rights will continue to be affected unfortunately with greater intensity in the future and with even greater intensity still if we do not act in a way that we should and provide leadership in a way that a country like Canada can provide.

In the time allotted, I am unable to address all the issues around human rights and the environment. However, I will focus on one aspect of the environment that affects everyone: access to clean water.

[*Translation*]

Whether we are rich or poor, we all need water. Unfortunately, it often seems that the poorest regions have the greatest difficulty obtaining potable water. According to the United Nations, more than 2.5 billion people do not have access to basic sanitation, and this causes the deaths of more than 1.5 million people a year.

It is estimated that a child dies every 20 seconds from a disease caused by contaminated water. In other words, during my speech, 45 children will die around the world from a virus or a bacterium, and that could have been prevented if they had had access to clean water.

That is why the WorldWatch Institute estimates that water shortage is the most underestimated global challenge of our time. By 2025, it is estimated that two-thirds of humanity will not have access to water. What is more, the United Nations estimates that by 2030, more than half the population of the major urban centres will cram into slums without a water supply service or a sanitation system.

We Canadians often take our access to water for granted. It is difficult to truly understand what it means to not have access to water.

In order to better understand the situation that one-third of the people in this world find themselves in, here is an example that shows the amount of water used by someone in a poor region, compared to the amount used by us, here in North America.

Someone living in a shantytown might have access to only 30 litres of water for their daily needs. Honourable senators, that is one-fifth of the amount of water needed to fill a North American bathtub.

[*English*]

As Dr. Brian Branfireun, a biology professor at the University of Western Ontario and expert in water resources has noted, "the vast majority of people on this earth elsewhere in the world think about water availability every single day . . . we are spoiled" here in Canada.

• (1500)

[*Translation*]

After all, we live in a country with one of the largest reserves of drinking water in the world. But do we really? According to Maude Barlow, the former senior advisor on water issues for the UN General Assembly, it is true that at least one-fifth of the world's fresh water supply is in Canada.

However, most of this water is in the Great Lakes, which supplies one out of three Canadians and one out of seven Americans. Unfortunately, this water is not entirely renewable.

[*English*]

According to the Great Lakes Information Network, as of September 2010, the lakes were between 3 inches to 11 inches below last year's water level. There seems to have been a constant decrease in the Great Lakes water levels over the past few years. A 2007 article by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA, states that for every inch Lake Superior drops, 529 billion gallons of water are displaced. This figure is alarming given that NOAA estimates that Lake Superior has already lost 12.7 trillion gallons of water.

Statistics Canada recently published a report indicating the following:

The water yield, which is precipitation and the melting snow and ice, declined overall by 8.5 per cent in southern Canada between 1971 and 2004.

Overall, the report estimates that the water yield is in decline by an average of 3.5 cubic kilometres a year. This figure represents the equivalent to the amount of water in Lake St. Clair near Windsor, Ontario.

The same Statistics Canada report on water indicates that renewable water resources have been dropping in Southern

Canada at the annual rate of the equivalent of 1.4 million Olympic-sized swimming pools.

What could explain this continued drop in the water levels of the Great Lakes?

One explanation is that too much water is being pumped out of the lakes for human use. According to a U.S. government report, 26 million people rely on the Great Lakes as their primary source of drinking water.

According to John Sprague, author of *Great Wet North? Canada's Myth of Water Abundance*, even though the Great Lakes represent 20 per cent of the world's fresh water supply, Southern Canada has access to only 2.6 per cent of the world's renewable fresh water supply. Much of the Great Lakes water is not renewable.

The situation is even more alarming in other parts of the country. As noted in a 2005 report by the Standing Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources, "some parts of the Prairies are semi-arid." Many rivers and lakes that supply water to our towns and cities are fed by glaciers that are hundreds of kilometres away.

In my home province of Alberta, the Bow Glacier, which feeds the Bow River, a tributary of the South Saskatchewan River, is melting so rapidly that it is estimated that in 50 years the river might be dry, with only the occasional sporadic flooding. This situation undoubtedly would reduce the water levels of the South Saskatchewan River and affect the water consumption, for example, of the city of Saskatoon.

In fact, the scientific magazine *Nature* notes that in a generation or two, major cities of Canada's Western provinces, such as Calgary, Edmonton and Saskatoon, risk losing the rivers from which they obtain their water supply.

This concern was voiced by reputable scientists, including Dr. David Schindler, who testified before our Energy Committee in 2004:

Alberta is the area of greatest concern because "in addition to being an extremely arid part of the country, it is developing rapidly."

However, access to water is affected not only by the quantity but also by the quality.

[*Translation*]

In 2010, major Canadian cities continue to dump waste water into our country's waterways. The City of Montreal, for example, dumps 900 billion litres of waste water annually into the St. Lawrence River. Here in Ottawa, more than 900,000 cubic metres of waste water were dumped into the Ottawa River in the summer of 2006 after an equipment malfunction. The Petrie Island beach, downstream from the source of the spill, was closed to the public for 45 days for health reasons.

The situation is even more worrisome for populations in the far-off regions of our country. Think about the Inuit and First Nations who depend on the lakes and rivers of our country, not only for drinking water, but for fishing and hunting.

According to Ardith Walkem, a lawyer in British Columbia who specializes in Aboriginal law, the Inuit population in the Canadian Arctic is increasingly confronted with problems linked to water pollution. For example, the bioaccumulation of toxins such as DDT and PCBs has been increasingly detected in the water and food consumed by the Inuit population in the far north. The water cycle carries these contaminants from water sources in the south of the country.

Water contamination, ice melts and the loss of permafrost all affect the environment we live in. And these effects are being felt around the world, not just in Canada.

Water is becoming an increasingly precious natural resource. Over the coming decades, the effects of climate change will change our perception of water, especially if, in the worst case scenario, this resource becomes more and more rare or even disappears from some regions.

This is why many researchers and legislators feel that access to clean water is a human right. However, this belief is not shared by all the world's leaders.

[*English*]

This summer, much was written on this issue as the General Assembly of the United Nations considered a resolution declaring access to clean water as a human right.

The resolution came to a vote on July 28, 2010, and was adopted by a vote of 122-0. In what was seen as an historical vote, the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada, along with 38 nations, decided to abstain from the vote that adopted the resolution.

Canada's position, along with that of the other major Western countries that non-officially opposed the resolution, was highly criticized at home and abroad.

Postmedia News reported that Canada's abstention from the vote was due to questions over "sovereignty over natural water supply." However, as another *Postmedia News* article quoted, Canada's sovereignty over its water supply was not threatened by this resolution.

The text of the final resolution is clear as it:

... calls upon States and international organizations to provide financial resources, capacity-building and technology transfer, through international assistance and co-operation, in particular to developing countries, in order to scale up efforts to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all.

It is surprising and disappointing — can I have five more minutes, please?

Hon. Gerald J. Comeau (Deputy Leader of the Government):
Five minutes.

• (1510)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Suzanne Fortin-Duplessis (The Hon. the Acting Speaker):
Is it your pleasure, honourable senators, to grant an additional five minutes?

Some Hon. Senators: Yes.

[English]

Senator Tardif: It is surprising and disappointing that Canada would not accept such a principle, especially because of our country's difficulties in providing clean water to some of its citizens. We all remember the Kashechewan evacuation of 2005, following the discovery of E. coli in the community's water supply. The community located on James Bay was again evacuated in 2006 and 2007 following threats of flooding.

A similar problem was faced by another First Nations community this summer on the same day Canada abstained from the historical UN vote. At the Constance Lake First Nations community, home to more than 900 Cree and Ojibway, a state of emergency was declared when the 30-year-old water purification facility in desperate need of upgrades was declared unable to ensure a safe water supply.

The Constance Lake community joined a list of more than 100 Aboriginal communities across Canada that are under drinking water advisories. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, responsible for water safety on reserves, organized to have clean water trucked to the community, as well as supplying water bottles.

However, as a *Toronto Star* editorial noted, "rather than applying a Band-Aid" to this perennial affair "and proceeding at a snail's pace on the purification plant, Ottawa should have been moving at full speed to fix the problem by paying for upgrades in the treatment facility."

The editorial further argued that the events of Constance Lake and other Aboriginal communities might explain the reason Canada refused to vote on the resolution recognizing access to clean water as a human right. Although not binding, the resolution nonetheless gives a powerful tool to First Nation communities faced with decrepit water treatment plants to request more funding for upgrades from the federal government.

[Translation]

As the International Union for Conservation of Nature points out:

Human rights are formulated in terms of rights of individuals, not in terms of rights and obligations of states

vis-à-vis other states as international law provisions generally do.

Thus, by making water a human right, it could not be taken away from the people. Through a rights-based approach, victims of water pollution . . . are provided with access to remedies.

So, what must we do to ensure access to clean water for all Canadians?

At the national level, the federal government must initiate consultations with the provinces, legal experts, academics and all Canadians in order to develop a plan to recognize water as a legally-binding, international, basic human right that is not merely symbolic, but can produce practical results.

This position is strongly supported by the Liberal water critic, the Honourable Francis Scarpaleggia.

We need a national water strategy. In August, the Council of the Federation endorsed the creation of a water charter with the goal of reducing consumption in Canada and ensuring water quality in rural and remote areas.

It is inconceivable that in the 21st century, there are people in this country who do not have access to clean water to meet their daily needs.

On a global level, it is crucial that the international community mobilize to ensure that the poorest people on the planet have access to clean water.

I would remind honourable senators that the Millennium Development Goals, which Canada committed to, include reducing by half the number of people without access to safe drinking water by 2015.

As for environmental protection, climate change caused by global warming will continue to increasingly affect the driest regions of our planet.

Honourable senators, it is time to take action to ensure that clean water is accessible to everyone who needs it.

(On motion of Senator Comeau, for Senator Andreychuk, debate adjourned.)