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ENVIRONMENT

Access to Safe Drinking Water
and Sanitation

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Tuesday, June 5, 2012

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ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING WATER AND SANITATION

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, my question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

In mid-June, world leaders, along with thousands of participants from governments, the private sector, NGOs and other groups, will come together at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in order to shape how we can reduce poverty, advance social equity and ensure environmental protection.

With preparations for the conference under way, and after years of opposition, the Minister of the Environment has finally taken a long-awaited position in support of recognizing water as a basic, fundamental human right. While this policy shift is certainly welcome — in light of recent figures showing that 2.5 billion people do not have access to basic sanitation, causing more than 1.5 million deaths per year, and given the UN resolution declaring access to clean water as a human right — many observers still have strong reservations. They fear that these words will not necessarily be followed by action.

Will the government align itself with the international community and respect its legal obligations by formally recognizing water as a basic human right?

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): I thank the honourable senator for the question. I will go back to the original conference in Rio: Our government has consistently had a record that is second to none when it comes to the environment and protecting the environment, including water.

I will not at this point in time seek to speak to the minister with regard to all of the policy areas that the minister will advance on behalf of Canada at the upcoming conference. I will take the question as notice and seek to receive from the minister a statement of intent.

As should be the case, the actions of the government will be as a result of the deliberations in which the minister participates in Rio, on behalf of the Government of Canada.

Senator Tardif: Am I to understand, then, that the Leader of the Government in the Senate is not willing or able to confirm at this point the minister's statement that Canada will recognize the right to safe drinking water and to basic sanitation? Is that correct?

Senator LeBreton: That is not correct, honourable senators. I just offered to provide for Senator Tardif a detailed statement of Minister Kent's position on behalf of the government as he prepares to represent the country at the summit in Rio. It will include Canada's position on water and sanitation.

Senator Tardif: I would certainly hope that our government will be moving forward on this. Canada is being criticized because our country has not been supportive of the right to water. Many nations are publicly condemning Canada's stance, and that was done on World Water Day. Therefore, I would hope that we will be moving forward on this.

Senator LeBreton: I thank the honourable senator for her comments. Conservative governments are very used to various people in this field criticizing the government. I remember that, when I was part of the Mulroney government, hardly a day went by that Mr. Mulroney and the government were not being roundly criticized for the various policy positions taken on the environment. After the fact, when Mr. Mulroney was no longer in office, he was honoured as the greenest prime minister this country has ever had.