



Why is Canada defending asbestos?

In the face of international backlash, the Tories have openly backed the export of a product linked to lung disease and cancer. It's leaving health experts scratching their heads, and a small Quebec town facing a world of hostility **NEWS, PAGE 13**

WORKPLACE SAFETY

Digging in: The politics of asbestos mining

Harper and Charest governments and local Bloc MP provide political cover for reopening of the Jeffrey Mine

JULIAN SHER ASBESTOS, QUE.
BILL CURRY OTTAWA

Donald Nicholls remembers when the white fibres from the open pit mine that still dominates this town blanketed its streets like snow.

"You could leave tracks from the dust that fell overnight," said Mr. Nicholls who started working in the mine fresh out of high school back in 1950. "It was much, much worse back then."

He's slowly dying of asbestosis, a respiratory disease brought on by inhaling those white particles. But like almost everyone else in town, the 79-year-old supports the reopening of the mine, allowing Canada to ramp up its export of chrysotile asbestos – a variant of the very mineral that is killing him.

Despite mounting international hostility, Canada too has become an unabashed proponent of exporting a product linked to lung disease and cancer. The

Conservative government's decision last week to block an international agreement to restrict the sale of chrysotile incited condemnation around the world and across the country.

The Canadian Cancer Society called it an "unethical decision" that left it "shocked and embarrassed."

So far, none of this appears to faze the Prime Minister. Asked about the backlash, his spokesman, Dimitri Soudas, would not explain Mr. Harper's thinking on the issue. "The government's policy position is clear," he said in an e-mail.

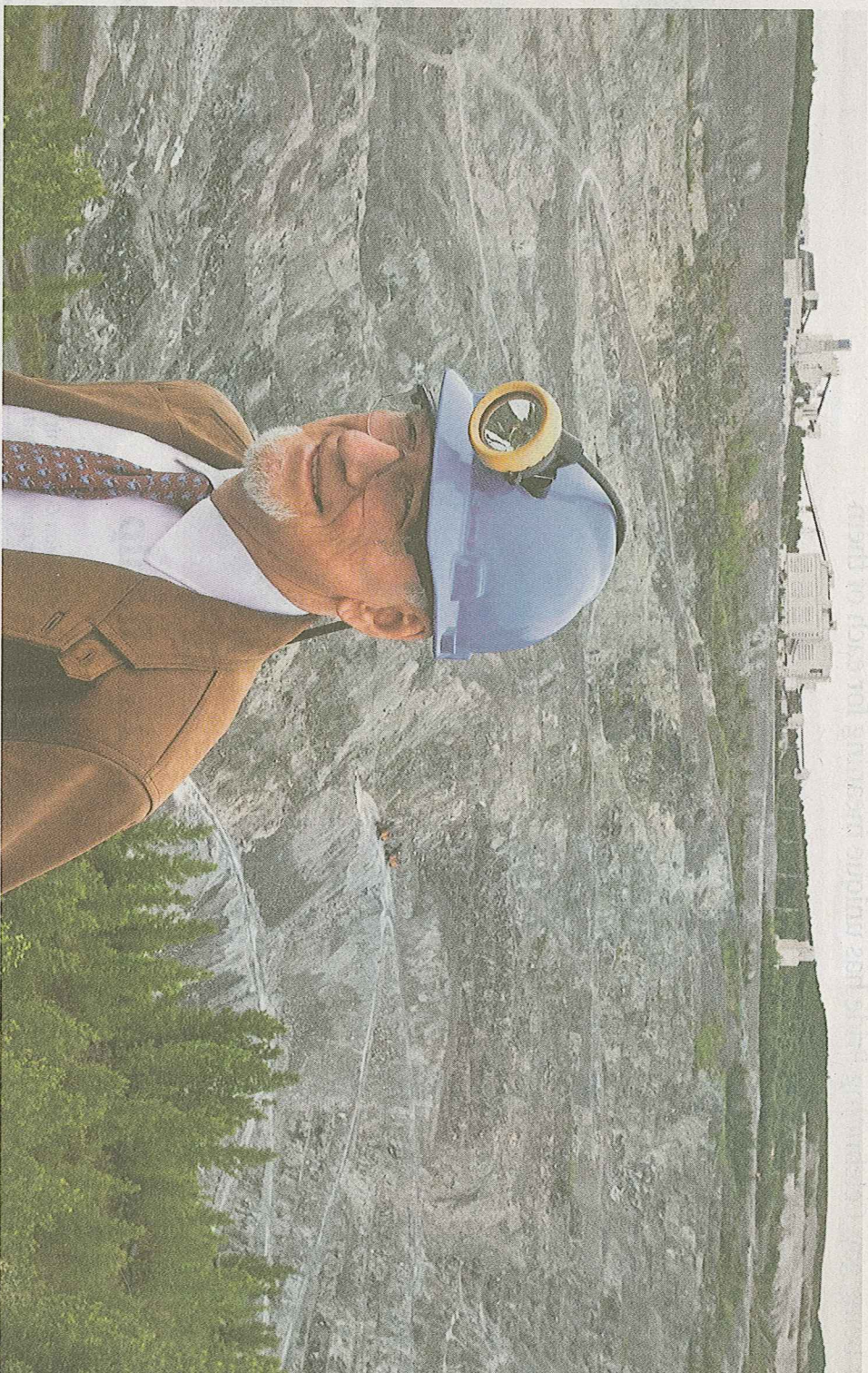
Conservatives and the mine industry insist chrysotile – white asbestos used mainly to reinforce cement – is safe if handled properly, compared to the much more toxic brown asbestos used in insulation.

Beyond that, it's a position the Tories don't want to talk about or explain.

On the face it, the economics of the struggling industry in terms of jobs and exports hardly seems worth the international black eye. Those who see crass politics at play point to the electoral map. The surprise wave that elected 59 NDP MPs in Quebec reduced the Conservative base to a group of five ridings south of the St. Lawrence that includes the asbestos region.

Conservatives campaigned as defenders of Quebec's regional interests. Supporting asbestos fits with that theme. Meanwhile, many in Asbestos, a town of 7,000 people 180 kilometres east of Montreal, feel they are under siege.

"They say we are exporting death, but that is not true," said Bernard Coulombe, the owner of the Jeffrey Mine and a tireless booster of its products. "They



Bernard Coulombe, owner of the Jeffrey Mine, received a \$58-million loan guarantee from the Quebec government. FRANCIS YACHON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

This is a mining town and when we have the ore body left, we should mine it out. We say to the world: We'll do what we have to do and you can scream all you want.

Bernard Coulombe
Owner of the Jeffrey Mine

treat it like it was anthrax. If it was really as dangerous as they say it is, we'd all be lying dead in the streets. Why is the world against us?"

Last month, Mr. Coulombe himself was savagely skewered on Jon Stewart's much-watched *The Daily Show*, called a "douchebag" and told that the word "asbestos" in English means "slow, hacking death."

The World Health Organization and a slew of international scientists have declared that exposure to all forms of asbestos poses too great a risk for workers and the public.

Closer to home, a coalition of Quebec environmental groups last week called for a shutdown of the mines here and in nearby Thetford Mines that are at "the root of an epidemic of deaths around the world."

Instead, the Quebec Liberal government has given Mr. Coulombe a \$58-million loan guarantee to help find new investors.

And on June 24, the federal Conservative government sided with Vietnam, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan at a summit in Switzerland to successfully block the inclusion of asbestos on a United Nations list of hazardous materials.

"We don't want to be on a banned list, that would bring shame for us," said Mr. Coulombe, who started as an engineer in the mine in the 1960s and bought the declining operation in 1991 with hopes of bringing back its glory days of earlier decades.

Much stricter safety controls are in place in the Canadian mines today, but industry opponents say all Canada has done is export its problems – to countries like India where workplace standards for health and safety can be negligible.

Mr. Coulombe said asbestos is like a "family with some bad kids" and that chrysotile is getting an unfair rap from its more dangerous siblings.

Although he conceded in some

countries there may be "mom and pop shops that don't do a good job" handling his products, he denounced his critics as "a gang of Taliban."

Mr. Coulombe's words may sound bombastic, but he knows he has good political cover to protect his mine. Along with the Conservative Harper government, the provincial Liberal representative from the riding and the federal Bloc Quebecois MP are all enthusiastic backers of the Jeffrey Mine.

Since 1984, Ottawa and Quebec have also provided two-thirds of the funding for a Chrysotile Institute which promotes its "safe use throughout the world."

In the rundown town nestled atop the open pit that stretches for more than two square kilometres, there is nothing but enthusiasm for a return of the "white gold" prosperity. The class warfare of the past has been replaced by all-out union support for a mining revival.

"There is real hope this time that this is a turning point," said Joël Côté, the morning radio host whose father and grandfather – both still healthy and hardy, he proudly points out – worked in the mines.

In 10 years, he has never heard a dissenting local voice on his show or in the streets.

"If you find one, call me," he said. "People here have read all the reports and came to the con-

clusion chrysotile can be safe."

Gilles Morin, a popular community physician who worked for the company for 20 years before going into family medicine, agreed. "The rate of exposure to chrysotile fibres today is infinitesimally small," he said. "I'm fed up with being treated like an imbecile or a contract killer because I support asbestos."

Mr. Nicholls, one of his patients, walks slowly around his home, catching his breath as his lungs slowly harden from a disease that will eventually suffocate him.

But he too feels the industry is "not as dangerous as it once was" – though he is genuinely worried about the health of less-protected workers abroad.

Back at his corner office overlooking the massive pit, Mr. Coulombe said by this fall he hopes to expand from the current 25 employees doing basic maintenance to 250 workers operating the open mine and mill. That could double to 500 workers by next year with a reopened underground shaft, returning to the heyday of 200,000 tons in annual exports to countries as far afield as Malaysia, Mexico and Indonesia.

"This is a mining town and when we have the ore body left, we should mine it out," he said. "We say to the world: We'll do what we have to do and you can scream all you want."

LETHAL LEGACY

They called it "white gold" when it was discovered in 1879, and for almost a century asbestos, known for its strength and fire-retardant qualities, brought prosperity to the region.

It also brought conflict. A bitter and violent strike in 1949 in part over unsafe working conditions – supported by young intellectuals like Pierre Trudeau – is widely seen as the birth of the modern Quebec.

But as the cancer-causing risks of asbestos became known, sales plummeted and

lawsuits by workers forced the original mining company, then known as Johns Manville, into bankruptcy. Asbestos is now banned in 50 countries.

Its lethal legacy still hovers over Quebec, as older workers succumb to disease.

Asbestos remains the leading killer of workers in the province – accounting for 277 of the 493 deaths in the past three years, according to the province's Workers Health Safety Board.

Julian Sher