

Canada's Historic And Continuing Shameful Asbestos Role

A summary by Kathleen Ruff

For much of the 20th century, Canada was the biggest exporter of asbestos in the world. Even though indisputable scientific evidence showed that all forms of asbestos were deadly, the government of Canada continued to promote its mining, use and export.

By the 1980s, the industrialized countries where Canada had shipped asbestos for decades, were facing epidemics of asbestos-related deaths. Global sales of asbestos plummeted from over 4 million tons a year to 2 million tons. Instead of respecting the scientific evidence and public health, the Canadian government launched an aggressive campaign to create new asbestos markets in the developing world. Jointly with the asbestos companies, the government created and funded a pseudo-scientific institute, the Asbestos Institute (later re-named the Chrysotile Institute), which spent millions of dollars marketing asbestos to developing countries and disseminating misinformation that asbestos can be safely used.

When France banned asbestos in the 1997, Canada launched a trade complaint at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and sought to remove the right of countries to ban asbestos, arguing that this constituted an illegal restriction on international trade. In one of the rare cases where the WTO put protection of health ahead of industry interests, the WTO Panel rejected Canada's case.

Chrysotile asbestos represents 95% of all asbestos sold in the past century. Today, it represents 100% of the global asbestos trade. Canada has played the leading role in preventing the listing of chrysotile asbestos as a hazardous substance under the UN Rotterdam Convention, thus allowing it to be sold without any warnings of its hazards.

By 2011, the last two Canadian asbestos mines, located in Asbestos and Thetford Mines, Quebec, had closed down due to catastrophic financial

and environmental problems. The Premier of Quebec, Jean Charest, supported by the Canadian government, gave a \$52 million government loan to re-launch the Quebec asbestos industry and export asbestos to developing countries for decades to come. In September 2012, the Parti Québécois (PQ) became the government of Quebec and cancelled the loan, a decision that was strongly criticised by the Canadian government.

At the 2013 Rotterdam Convention Conference, Canada continued to refuse to support the listing of chrysotile asbestos but did not bother to oppose the listing, saying that since the Quebec government had closed down the asbestos industry, there was no point in Canada opposing the listing.

An epidemic of asbestos-related diseases continues to occur across Canada, but the Canadian government refuses to acknowledge it or to take action to protect Canadians from asbestos harm or to assist asbestos victims. Canada has not banned asbestos and allows the import of asbestos-containing products, such as car brakes, into Canada. The Canadian government is the only government in the Western world that continues to deny the overwhelming scientific evidence and continues to claim that chrysotile asbestos can be safely used.

Kathleen Ruff is the author of [Exporting Harm: how Canada markets asbestos to the developing world](#); and Founder of [RightOnCanada.ca](#). She is a former director of the BC Human Rights Commission, and received the Canadian Public Health Association's National Public Health Hero Award in 2011 for her advocacy to end Canada's export of asbestos.