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Tuesday, May 31, 2005

Chair

Mr. John Cannis

Subcommittee on International Trade, Trade Disputes and Investment of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade

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● (1535)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): We have quorum, ladies and gentlemen, so I'll call to order this meeting of the Subcommittee on International Trade, Trade Disputes and Investment of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

With that, I'd like to take the opportunity to introduce our witnesses, who will be discussing chrysotile today. We have with us today as witnesses, from Mouvement ProChrysotile, Monsieur Raynald Paré, president, and Pierre Laroche, technical adviser. Welcome. We have you clearly on video. We look forward to hearing your presentation.

We'll have a 10-minute presentation, gentlemen, from you in French or English, whichever you prefer, and then we'll go into questioning from members on our committee.

Welcome. The floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Paré (President, Mouvement ProChrysotile): Many thanks to the members of the Subcommittee on International Trade, Trade Disputes and Investment. We are very honoured to be received by you. We have a message to send and we are well prepared. We hope our message will be heard.

I'd also like to thank the Bloc québécois for being at the origin of this meeting. I appreciate it enormously.

Now I'd like us to introduce ourselves personally.

My name is Raynald Paré. I'm President of the Quebec Mouvement ProChrysotile, which was founded five years ago. I'm a teacher and have been retired for a few years now, and the voluntary president of the movement because it's a cause that's dear to me.

I'd like to introduce Pierre Laroche.

Mr. Pierre Laroche (Technical Advisor, Mouvement ProChrysotile): I'm an engineer by profession, and I'm here as a delegate of the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de l'Amiante within the Mouvement ProChrysotile.

Mr. Raynald Paré: I'm going to tell you about the movement itself. The Quebec Mouvement ProChrysotile is a coalition of 30 to 40 organizations from two communities: Thetford Mines and Asbestos. Virtually all organizations belong to it: the unions, the Chamber of Commerce, the SADC, MPs, mayors and so on. There's also the director of the hospital, if that can reassure health people. All stakeholders from both communities are part of the movement. There's only one absent party, and that's deliberate. The chrysotile industry as such does not belong to the movement.

Chrysotile is very important for us because it's part of our identity. The Amiante and Asbestos regions were created as a result of chrysotile. That's why we've been defending them so ardently for such a long time, even though we've been considerably weakened. We believe that chrysotile has its place in the world today and even in the world of tomorrow.

We know that chrysotile gets a bad rap and has a poor reputation. It's true that there may have been abuses in the past, but Quebec chrysotile was exported to some 100 countries and was part of 3,000 different manufactured products. As a result, our two communities became very prosperous at the time. That's no longer the case because chrysotile now gets a bad rap.

Fourteen months ago, the movement decided to change its name from Mouvement ProAmiante to Mouvement ProChrysotile. The word “asbestos” is very popular in the region: the MRC is called the MRC de l'Amiante, the Chamber of Commerce is called the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de l'Amiante. Some 50 organizations back home have the word “asbestos” in their names. Fourteen months ago, we decided to identify ourselves with chrysotile because we now know that chrysotile fibre is completely different, something we didn't know at the time. This fibre is different from all asbestos fibres.

However, we don't want to defend all asbestos fibres. We know perfectly well that amphiboles are dangerous. That's why, after some discussion, we made some adjustments in order to correct the situation, and we became the Mouvement ProChrysotile.

Chrysotile is a natural resource, and Canada is still a natural resource-based country. There are natural resources across Canada, but chrysotile is found mainly in Quebec, in Thetford Mines and Asbestos.

Chrysotile is a very complex issue. We're part of it, and we live with it every day. We realize that the biggest problem is one of understanding. That's why we're pleased to be here despite the complex nature of this issue. Health, for example, is a very prominent component.

We hope to address four components of this issue today. Could the members please limit their questions to those four components?

The first component is the economy of our two communities, that is to say chrysotile's impact on Thetford Mines and Asbestos, what it used to be and what it's become. I think that's important.

Then there's the health component. Health is a top priority. Like you, we don't intend to work at destroying ourselves. We believe that chrysotile can be used in a controlled and proper manner. Studies have shown this, and we can discuss it. We can devote a little time to it, and more, if necessary.

The third component is the position of the Canadian government. The Canadian government has adopted a position on chrysotile. Certain aspects are positive, others negative: we'd like to talk about the Canadian government's good moves and not so good moves on the chrysotile issue in Canada and internationally.

● (1540)

Lastly, we'd also like to address the environmental issue. This is very important; it's a fundamental issue today. We know the planet is threatened. We also believe in the environment. We even think that chrysotile could be an ally in protecting the environment.

That's my initial presentation, Mr. Chairman. We're available to answer questions. Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Merci beaucoup.

We'll go to Monsieur Boulianne, s'il vous plaît.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Boulianne (Mégantic—L'Érable): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First, I'd like to welcome the members of the Mouvement ProChrysotile, its president, Mr. Paré, and his team member, engineer Pierre Laroche. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the people responsible at the Cégep de Thetford Mines, who have made the teleconference system available to the subcommittee.

Mr. Paré, you've given us a snapshot of your movement. We now all know — you referred to it — that the use and exploitation of old-fashioned asbestos, from the amphibole family, is now completely prohibited. It is nothing like today's chrysotile, which can be used safely.

There's a whole history to this, and I believe you're aware of it.

I believe that the safe use of chrysotile has been recognized by the International Labour Organization. We all remember Convention 162 in Geneva. That was the starting point for recognition that it could be used safely.

In addition, in June 2002, the Quebec government adopted a national policy for the safe and increased use of chrysotile. That was the first time a government had unanimously adopted such a policy. It wasn't just talk; it subsequently took action on the issue.

Lastly, there was the Rotterdam Convention in 2004, an extremely important document. Canada had asked that chrysotile not be put on the list of hazardous chemicals, which was granted. All that was done in circumstances confirmed by scientific studies. You referred to that a little earlier, particularly as regards biopersistence.

This is a long preamble, but you're going to see where I'm headed.

Television and news programs often assault us with old studies. They always go back to the 1949 strike. It's true that's important, but now things are different. Very recent studies show that chrysotile can be used safely.

Despite all this information and all these assurances, why is it so hard to get our message through? Why do we still have problems? There are extremely powerful prohibition movements. We have to fight a daily struggle, at all levels, including the political level.

You know certain political parties represented here are not pro asbestos. I believe you have representatives of the NDP with you. Questions are frequently asked in the House of Commons on zonolite, for example. Since it contains asbestos, it's said to be extremely dangerous. So there's a kind of panic.

As for the Conservatives, I believe they're making a major effort. However, at the last conference, there was a proposal that didn't make it to the floor. So all the work has to be started over again.

How is it that, despite all this scientific information, success in this regard has been very mixed?

● (1545)

Mr. Raynald Paré: Thank you, Mr. Boulianne.

Indeed, chrysotile and asbestos were very much in use after World War II, mainly in Europe during the reconstruction. There is information that the Europeans don't know about. They used a lot of asbestos in reconstruction, in boats, infrastructure, buildings. They didn't draw a distinction between chrysotile and amphiboles or between old and new uses.

Among the new uses, those we're making today, chrysotile is encapsulated in matrices like cement, asphalt and things of that kind. That's how chrysotile should be used now. That wasn't done at the time. There were excesses, and today there are scandals. People talk about asbestos removal. People are so emotionally involved that they don't draw a distinction between amphiboles and chrysotile.

Furthermore, you know there have been an enormous number of studies on chrysotile in the past 50 years. There have been tens, even hundreds. If there's one subject that's well documented, it's chrysotile. There have been an endless number of studies, with highly contradictory findings. Obviously, people point to certain studies depending on what camp they're in. But the most recent studies, in particular those in the past three years, 2003, 2004, 2005, have been favourable to us. However, while we're not dismissed in advance, people aren't curious enough to go and look at the studies.

You referred to biopersistence. With your permission, I'm going to take a few minutes to tell you about that study. I don't know whether it's possible to show a chart, Mr. Gamache. It concerns biopersistence, the latency of asbestos in the lungs. It can take 20 to 40 years before it does any damage. The damage is thus very slow in coming. Care must be taken to avoid substituting replacement fibres that have not been studied for asbestos.

Some countries have conducted biopersistence studies that say this: the longer a foreign fibre or particle is in the respiratory system, the more likely it is to cause damage. That is why Canada, and Quebec in particular, have conducted a study on biopersistence in Europe and the United States based on Canadian chrysotile. Another study was conducted by the Brazilians on Brazilian chrysotile. A third biopersistence study was done by Americans on chrysotile from California. The three studies, which appeared a few months or a year or two ago, all came to the same conclusions.

Laboratory animals were made to breathe in particles, and the time those particles stayed in the respiratory system before being eliminated was observed. We're going to show you a chart entitled Biopersistence of Various Breathable Fibres. Scientists will tell you that one measure that must be considered is when 50% of these small foreign particles have been removed and eliminated. That becomes a standard. The fibres used in this study were chrysotile, refractory ceramic fibre, kevlar, amosite, which is a dangerous form of asbestos, and cellulose.

If you take a close look at the chart, you'll see that chrysotile is removed and eliminated the fastest, in 11 days. It takes 60 days for refractory ceramic fibre, 90 days for kevlar, 466 days for amosite and 1,000 days or more for cellulose. It's amusing to note that, in the case of cellulose, which is a chrysotile replacement fibre, no one talks about this devastating figure. That's why chrysotile must be viewed in a completely fair perspective.

I don't know whether that answers your question, Mr. Boulianne.

● (1550)

Mr. Marc Boulianne: Yes, that's fine. You're confirming for us, based on studies, that chrysotile can be used safely. However, you're often criticized for not taking the necessary measures when exporting chrysotile. You know there are now more countries using chrysotile than banning it. That's now established. We're often criticized for sending this extremely dangerous product to the Third World without warning or preparation. We're taking precautions.

What about chrysotile exports?

Mr. Pierre Laroche: With your permission, Mr. Boulianne, I'll try to briefly answer your question.

First, I want to point out, for your colleagues and those who are not very familiar with chrysotile, that the fibres are not shipped in bulk, but put directly in bags at the plant. I have a sample here. These bags are hermetically sealed. On each of the bags, not on the bag unit as a whole, there's a clear warning about how to use the product safely.

Then, the product must necessarily be shipped safely from the plant where it's manufactured to the customer. The bags are piled mechanically and wrapped in polyethylene with what's called a top, a little cap, precisely to prevent the bags from being damaged. I don't know whether the camera can focus on this, but here I have a brochure that's just been published by the Chrysotile Institute, explaining the entire process used for these fibres between plant and customer.

When the customer uses them, what happens? You must understand that more than 90% of the fibres currently exported in the world are integrated into products made of fibre cement, which at the time was called asbestos cement. Today the product is also called chrysotile cement.

This is a wet process. The bags are put into a liquid environment, that is to say in water. The place where you want to control the introduction of fibres is separated from the place where you open the bags. There's also a ventilation system. In addition, to ensure customers use the product safely, teams of ventilation engineers have surveyed virtually all customers in the world. Delegations have been sent through the Chrysotile Institute to assist those countries and customers in using the product safely. They even help these people design ventilation areas to ensure workers don't breathe in fibres.

There's also another type of bag. These bags are not made of polyethylene, but rather soluble paper. You don't even have to open them: they're put directly into the mix. That way, workers aren't exposed to the fibres at all.

Some claim that chrysotile manufacturers, exporters and producers, be they Canadian, Russian or Brazilian, don't ensure that customers use the product safely. However, that's completely false. In addition, the local, regional and national agencies in those countries monitor the implementation of standards on site. Lastly, there's a memorandum of understanding among producers that this product will not be sold to delinquent customers, that is those who do not comply with standards.

I believe producers currently discharge all responsibilities for ensuring they do not jeopardize the health and physical safety of workers in the various importing countries.

● (1555)

[*English*]

The Chair: We've exceeded our ten minutes.

We generally go ten minutes between questions and answers. But we tend to be very flexible with our time.

Before I go to Madam Jennings, you put a graph on the screen and it wasn't that clear for us to see. There is also a brochure there describing how the product is shipped. If you would be so kind as to submit it to the clerk, I know through his good work we'll make sure each member has an opportunity to look at this material, or other material that might not have been included.

I'll now go to Madam Jennings.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Thank you very much for being here today. I'm not as familiar with chrysotile as you. One of my former colleagues, Gérard Binet, did a lot of work on this issue in the Liberal caucus. I'd like to thank you because it was through him that I obtained what little information and understanding I have.

As I understand it, today you want to see what the government could do to fight the myths that still exist around the world regarding the allegedly harmful effects of chrysotile. You'd also like to see what the government could do here, in Canada, to encourage and help the industry return to its position in international exports. I read that we had slightly lost our former position in international exports.

Since you work in the field and belong to this major movement with all the experts and so on, I'd like you to make recommendations that we can then, if we agree, submit to the government in a report. I believe that would be the best solution because I think my colleagues have done their homework. Even though we aren't experts as you are, we have a sound understanding of the subject. We would like you to give us your recommendations.

Thank you.

Mr. Raynald Paré: Thank you, Ms. Jennings.

Indeed, we had the pleasure of working with Mr. Binet when he was an MP. We were regularly with him, particularly at the time of the Rotterdam Convention. That was a major battle for us. The task for the Canadian government was to oppose the inclusion of chrysotile in the Rotterdam Convention, since the International Labour Organization's Convention 162 had previously been adopted by 145 countries and regulated chrysotile in the work place.

Before continuing, I'd like to sidetrack briefly. We're not major experts. We're not the ones doing the studies. We know about chrysotile because we are around it on a daily basis. I'll soon be 64 years old, and my entire family...

● (1600)

Hon. Marlene Jennings: You look young.

Mr. Raynald Paré: You're very kind.

My entire family, my uncles and the others, have worked in the chrysotile industry their entire lives. Some have died, others are still alive and they're nearly 80 years old. When I as a student, I worked in the chrysotile industry. I know because I lived with it on a daily basis. I live in a community where I'm surrounded by chrysotile. In that sense, I can say that I know it.

I think we can rely on studies. They're very important and sometimes provide food for thought in making good decisions. I'd nevertheless say that direct observation may be the best way to gauge a product like chrysotile.

That's why, when the CBC did a program on chrysotile in February, the entire community was shocked because it didn't represent the actual situation. The people probably did an honest job from their point of view, but it didn't represent the actual situation. That's why we think it's a good idea to go there in order to get to know chrysotile.

We can definitely make some recommendations. With your permission, we could even provide them in writing.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Definitely.

Mr. Raynald Paré: When the Canadian government adopted the position not to include chrysotile in the Rotterdam Convention, it was a courageous and very much appreciated gesture. We knew there were colossal international trade issues and that the Canadian government was under enormous pressure because it was one of the few western countries to oppose inclusion. We were aware of that. We're able to appreciate the value of that gesture back home. I tip my hat. We're very pleased. We told the people back home, and they know it.

However, I'm surprised to see the psychosis about chrysotile in Ottawa. It's a psychosis. From time to time, I look at the *Hill Times*. I don't believe you have control over that paper.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: No, not any more than the *Journal de Montréal*, *La Presse* or the *Gazette*.

Mr. Raynald Paré: I understand.

It shocks us a bit to see that things are being said in the capital of Canada that are not consistent with the actual situation. It shocks us to hear that measures are being taken for the most minor jobs in the West Block. A whole procedure is adopted simply to remove a frame. This projects a very bad image and fuels a psychosis. We hear...

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Paré. My office is in the West Block. It's been there since June 2, 1997, when I was elected for the first time. I'm on the fourth floor, and I very much understand what you're saying. I have a three-person team working with me in my offices. I've checked, and no one has complained about their health or the slightest problem, nor have I. When I go to the women's washroom and see a poster saying not to disturb, to phone, and so on, I find that ridiculous. It's precisely what you're saying. They're scaring people and promoting the myths about a substance that most Canadians don't understand because we haven't done our awareness and public education work.

That was just an aside. I turn the floor back over to you.

Mr. Raynald Paré: Thank you, Ms. Jennings. I congratulate you; I think you're a courageous woman. If there is a somewhat general psychosis over there and you still have your offices in the same building, bravo!

I don't know what you can do to combat this psychosis in the public service. One of the requests we could make might be for the government to work against the psychosis that's spreading in Ottawa and that we have a lot of trouble understanding back home, in Thetford Mines and Asbestos. It seems to me we're still part of Canada. It seems to me we have MPs from back home who come here. We don't understand how behaviour here in Ottawa can be so different from ours. That's the first thing.

With your permission, and time permitting, I have a second request to make, Madam. You know as well as I do that national industries are encouraged by Canadian consumers and often by Canadian governments. We see that the Canadian government supports us. The Rotterdam Convention is proof of that. I often come back to that point. I figure that, if the Canadian government supported us in the case of the Rotterdam Convention, it has to do the same thing in international forums. I imagine the Canadian government defends chrysotile because it's being consistent with its own principles.

However, what I hear is that, if the Canadian government is in favour of chrysotile, why doesn't it use it? You know that Canada is virtually the only one of the chrysotile-producing countries whose chrysotile the government does not use. You know that chrysotile can really be used to great advantage for everyone, in an environmentally friendly way, with long-lasting products. That would give chrysotile communities a boost and, at the same time, would send out a very serious message. The government would be moving beyond words and taking action.

For the moment, those are two requests I would make to the government, Ms. Jennings.

● (1605)

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Mr. Paré, I must tell you that I find your two recommendations eminently reasonable. I would be entirely prepared for this committee to adopt those two recommendations as its own in the report it submits to the government.

Mr. Raynald Paré: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jennings.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Ted Menzies.

Mr. Ted Menzies (Macleod, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Paré.

I represent a riding in southern Alberta, and in my part of the country this product is not quite as popular as beef, for example. So forgive me for not having the depth of understanding you and some of the other members here have.

Can you give us an idea of how many jobs this would mean? What is the value of this industry today, and can you give us a bit of insight into its potential?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Laroche: With your permission, Mr. Menzies, I'll answer your question by providing a brief retrospective on the way the regions lived here thanks, at least in part, to chrysotile mining.

Around the 1970s, that is to say when the industry in the Thetford Mines and Asbestos regions was at its peak, there were more than 6,000 direct jobs in the chrysotile sector. Following the problems the industry went through, we're now talking about approximately 1,000 workers, again in the two communities.

However, those communities have diversified their economies. For example, light industry has developed nicely.

Here's another chart showing that, in 1971, the L'Amiante region, the primary sector, that is to say the agricultural sector — that you're quite familiar with, Mr. Menzies — the forestry sector and the mining sector, represented 33.4% of the economy, that is to say of jobs. In 2001, the figure had fallen to 12.3%.

At the same time, the secondary sector, that is to say the manufacturing sector, rose from 18% in 1971 to nearly 29% this year.

It's also important to note that, in the 1970s, the production and export volume of chrysotile fibre was 1.5 million tonnes at its peak. We're not talking about combined production in the order of 170,000 tonnes. Those figures show that the number of jobs has declined, as has production capacity.

However, in the Thetford Mines region — a parallel could be drawn with the Asbestos region — the current impact on payrolls, that is to say wages earned by workers, exceeds $25 million. As for supply purchases — from $16 to $18 million approximately — and taxes paid to school boards and other municipalities, the impact is in the area of $1 million. The industry as such is still very important, and it's the biggest employer both here and in Asbestos, if you exclude the education and hospital sectors. The mining industry is the biggest private employer in our two communities.

Lastly, one of the longer-term solutions we foresee that would have an impact on the local economy is the processing of these resources and residues, because several hundreds of millions of tonnes of processing residues have accumulated in both regions over the years. We're talking about 700 to 800 million tonnes, and we know those residues contain enormous amounts of metals such as magnesium and nickel. These residue mountains can eventually be used to produce metallic magnesium, as we're already trying to do at the Magnola plant in Asbestos, to extract other magnesium components or simply nickel components. So, over the long term, there is great potential for secondary resources that could be derived from those residues.

I don't know whether that's a good answer to your question, Mr. Menzies.

● (1610)

[*English*]

Mr. Ted Menzies: That certainly helps. Thank you.

You say the residual of magnesium is a fairly valuable product. Is it valuable enough to pay for the extraction fees from this residue?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Laroche: If international market prices are high enough, yes. However, costs are nevertheless higher than those of producers like China, for example, which is a very low-cost producer. However, as we speak, the price of metallic magnesium is very high. So, if someone wanted to go into business right now, that could be promising.

In addition, the metals market is a cyclical market, which means that prices vary over time. So you have to make sure, when you start up a project, that operating costs are low enough to face the cyclical metals market.

[*English*]

Mr. Ted Menzies: I have one more question, if I can. I'm going to go back to some earlier comments about public perception. I think we know what a huge hill you have to climb over to get around the public perception.

What steps have you taken to inform the public—I don't know if I want to use the word “educate”—of exactly what you have told us here today? How have you mounted that challenge?

● (1615)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Laroche: You've clearly understood that the challenge is quite a big one. As we speak, the main agent is the Chrysotile Institute in Montreal. The Institute provides information around the world. It produces brochures — I showed you an example earlier — and organizes conferences around the world to inform users, together with producers. The Chrysotile Institute is an association of union organizations directly involved in Quebec, chrysotile producers and the two orders of government, federal and provincial. Those are the main players within the Institute.

As for the local movement here, since our resources are very limited, we mainly participate through media invitations. We are even organized in such a way that the media can invite us to spread information to as many people as possible. Of course, when you give us an opportunity such as this one today, it's excellent. It enables us to sensitize not only people in Quebec, but also our friends in Alberta and the other Canadian provinces and territories. It's extremely important that the message not be conveyed solely in Quebec or outside Canada, but also across Canada. I don't believe our friends, our fellow Canadians from the other provinces are ery familiar with chrysotile. I know that, when they are informed, they may become alarmist, negative and biased.

I could go back to Mr. Menzies' question. Would the government or your political party — I'm also addressing your colleagues from the other parties — be interested in us organizing activities on Parliament Hill to inform all Canadian MPs? If we could do that, with the people from the Chrysotile Institute, that would be a very good thing since you too must be called upon by your electors to address the hypothetical risks associated with the use of asbestos in general and chrysotile in particular.

For example, I've brought some products that are commonly manufactured and used around the world. Here we have a type of fibre cement in which the fibres are encapsulated in a cement matrix. The risks associated with this product are therefore virtually nil. Once installed, the appropriate precautions are taken and that's it.

We also have a sample of chrysotile asphalt taken from a road that was paved with this material. The paving material as such contains 1.3% fibre, which makes it possible to add liquid asphalt, which comes from Alberta. That allows for a more watertight road that better resists water infiltration and is longer lasting. Adding these fibres doubles the life expectancy of road surfaces. This is a major advantage, given the climate we have in Canada.

We now have a roofing tile that was produced in the Asian countries. This tile is distinctly more durable than the roofing materials currently found in our homes. The product as such can be installed in the same way as builders install materials today. The fibres are bound up in the cement matrix. The risk is therefore virtually nil.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We've gone about two and a half minutes over. You see how interested we are in the topic, gentlemen?

With that, we'll go to Mr. Julian.

● (1620)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for being here today, Mr. Paré and Mr. Laroche. We of course find this very interesting. I think your suggestion about coming to Parliament Hill to give members a little more information is very valid because it's definitely important to get more information.

I'd like to go back to the issue of economic impact. Earlier you referred to the fact that employment in the primary sector in the Asbestos region fell from approximately 33% in 1971 to 12% in 2001.

So, considering the number of jobs that were lost in that sector, is it fair to say that the Asbestos region lost jobs in all sectors during that period, that there were, on the whole, fewer jobs in 2001 than in 1971?

Mr. Pierre Laroche: As we speak, there are necessarily fewer jobs. The loss of those jobs in the primary sector was partly offset by jobs in the secondary sector and tertiary sector, the services sector.

It should also be said that the population in the Thetford Mines and Asbestos regions is aging. Young people have gone to the big cities such as Montreal, Sherbrooke and Quebec City for their education. In many cases, they don't return to the region. They find jobs in the big cities and stay there.

Mr. Peter Julian: That's unfortunate because it's an extraordinarily beautiful region. I spent a few weeks there. The people are friendly and hardworking. It's beautiful there.

Mr. Pierre Laroche: Thank you very much. We appreciate your comments.

That's in fact what's happened over the past 20 years. Business people have worked very hard to establish new businesses. I don't want to go into details, but there's one business that manufactures kitchen counters made of synthetic granite, a kind of quartz mixed with resin. They also manufacture synthetic olivine from chrysotile residue, for sandblasting. There are also plastics. The plastics industry is very well developed. There are also mechanical shops. We have two steel and cast iron plants in the region. A number of small businesses have developed.

As we speak, Mr. Julian, there are approximately 21,000 jobs in all sectors combined in the RCM — the regional county municipality. All we hope is that this number can increase, regardless of sector.

That's why I mentioned to your colleague Mr. Menzies earlier that it would be a good idea to develop residues. It would be a good idea to process them, but there's also the tourism component, which wasn't mentioned. The Chambre de commerce et d'industrie is also interested in all the sectors. The mining sector is very important, but the tourism sector too, as well as processing.

Oleochemistry, the recovery of vegetable fats, etc., is also a promising sector for the future. That should happen within five to 10 years. Consequently, we're quite optimistic about the future of our region.

In Asbestos, people have also made some very good changes. Greenhouse tomato production is developing well.

That's why I see our two regions progressing, and I'm not a pessimist by nature, on the contrary. However, we want to make a request to your government. With regard to the chrysotile industry, I'm fundamentally convinced that we have to inform your colleagues in the House of Commons very clearly and make Canadian citizens aware of the extraordinary, less energy consuming and longer-lasting products that I showed your colleague earlier and that we can market. It's clear in my mind, that, in order to engage in sustainable development, we need materials that last as long as possible, materials that won't wind up in dumps after a few years, but that last five and even 100 years. The fibre cement products we showed you are examples of very long-lasting products. That's why I believe that the people in your political party, and those of the other parties around you, and everyone in general, have a responsibility to examine objectively, scientifically, all the potential of this natural resource.

Of course, you'll say I'm speaking in my own interest, but I believe we can form solid coalitions between Canada's various parties. Whether it's Western Canada, Ontario or the Maritimes, it's possible to pool our resources and become an example for the rest of the world in the responsible and highly productive use of natural resources, including chrysotile. I believe there's potential here for the rest of Canada in terms of economic and social impact.

● (1625)

Mr. Peter Julian: I agree with you, Mr. Laroche, particularly if we don't forget British Columbia. That's my province, and it's very important.

I have two questions to ask you. I want to go a little faster because I only have a few minutes left. I have one question that concerns the past and another that concerns the future.

The question that concerns the past is about the job losses in the Amiante region between 1971 and 2001. I imagine that had a fairly disastrous effect on small businesses, that merchants were affected by those job losses. In your view, were government transition programs sufficient, given the extent of the job losses during that period in the Amiante region?

As for the future, how can all these chrysotile promotion issues and environmental protection issues be reconciled in the coming years?

Mr. Raynald Paré: Sometimes we feel that the government programs designed to assist businesses and regions in making a transition don't operate very well. We criticize the Government of Quebec, but I don't want to emphasize that too much. In Quebec, approximately 200 communities live from a single industry or a single business. When the business is threatened, the entire community is threatened. Thetford Mines and Asbestos are examples of that. Our conversion is a tough one. Despite all the statistics earlier, young people are still leaving and unemployment is high. The region is doing relatively well as a result of the pride of its people. There's a lot of emphasis on buying locally and helping each other. These are values we have back home. People are very proud; there's a community and a sense of belonging. That's very much present, and it helps us a great deal.

The government has programs that are administered through the SADCs. There's one back home and it's doing an excellent job. The Economic Development Agency of Canada is also doing an excellent job. However, our region was living off a single industry in which the workers were mostly unionized; the entrepreneurial spirit wasn't very developed. That's not a criticism, quite on the contrary, since I believe in the union movement. In our region, you see few people willing to take the lead in pressing the issues. That's why there are now programs at the cegep and in the high schools, and various projects to develop entrepreneurship. You see that at the CLD and the SADC. This is a change in mentality that's happening slowly, but surely. In the meantime, the community is definitely suffering, but we're nevertheless not unhappy. We're sticking to chrysotile.

To answer your second question, concerning environmental protection — a fundamental value and issue these days — we claim to believe that chrysotile can be environmentally friendly. Earlier, my colleague told you about various products that last a very long time when chrysotile is incorporated in them. I'd like to go back to one example in particular, asphalt. The Government of Quebec has started using more asphalt made with chrysotile, and should do so increasingly in the years to come.

We've observed that, when asphalt contains 1.3% to 1.7% chrysotile, it becomes more absorbent and fewer cracks occur. In northern countries, cracks break up the asphalt because water seeps in and breaks the asphalt when it turns to ice. We've noted that, when chrysotile is added, asphalt lasts nearly twice as long and costs only 15 percent more. In terms of environmental protection, this is one example.

The same is true of fibre cements. We're sometimes criticized for exporting chrysotile to emerging countries and accused of taking advantage of the ignorance of those countries. That's not why we do it. Fibre cements require a relatively simple and accessible technique. That's why those countries import a lot of chrysotile. They bring in chrysotile from virtually everywhere and build water supply infrastructures that improve their quality of life. I wouldn't be surprised, when the whole thing comes full circle, if Canada went back to using more pipes made of an amalgam of chrysotile and cement, chrysotile cement, as was done about 30 years ago. Chrysotile is so condemned that it's become a politically incorrect product and is rejected.

● (1630)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Everybody got about 12 minutes, as I noticed from my timekeeper here.

I do want to give some time for a very brief question to Mr. Bellavance, who's a visiting member on our committee. If you would, please, ask a very brief question.

And we need a brief response, because we have to go into the second phase of our committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate you allowing me a few minutes. I'll be brief.

Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Paré and Mr. Laroche. It's always very interesting and very important for our regions. Obviously, my colleague Mr. Boulianne and I are very much aware of the issue, but it's important that everybody be aware in the House of Commons and across Canada.

There have been alarming reports, on Radio-Canada's *Enjeux* program, for example, showing that you still have — and we do too — a lot of work to do to defend the safe and responsible use of chrysotile.

I have a question for you about the Rotterdam Convention. We know that chrysotile was excluded from it. That's excellent news, but we have information to the effect that Chili and the European Union may be questioning that. I don't know whether you heard about that.

I'd like it to be proven that the replacement products manufactured in Chili and the European Union are as dangerous as, or more dangerous than, chrysotile as regards biopersistence. You showed us a very clear table earlier. So I'd like to know whether there are other studies showing that replacement products are more dangerous than chrysotile. That would be a very good defensive weapon for us.

Mr. Raynald Paré: To my knowledge, Mr. Bellavance, there are no studies that have been done in as thorough a manner as those on chrysotile.

Earlier I referred to cellulose replacement fibres in the biopersistence study. To my knowledge, those are the only studies. You're right: if there were studies and we could draw comparisons, I think we would be at a distinct advantage. We very much hope there are. We encourage the Government of Quebec to conduct studies on replacement fibres.

You referred to the Rotterdam Convention. We're still a bit careful because victories are never certain. We know some countries are very unhappy that the Government of Canada did not include chrysotile in the Rotterdam Convention. We also know they'll be coming back with a new strategy. They want to create a second class of less dangerous products, like chrysotile, that could be added to a future convention.

We're obviously opposed to that because chrysotile is already highly regulated under Convention 162 on asbestos signed in Geneva in 1986.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, we have to go into the second phase.

Mr. Paré, there were three documents you showed us. I would ask you to submit them to the clerk, please. I noticed members are interested in seeing those graphs and those data, and I'd like to see them myself.

Thank you for your in-depth presentation and solid recommendations. As my colleague Mr. Julian said, information on the Hill certainly would be a wonderful idea. Maybe one day—who knows? —we could organize, with your cooperation, an information centre on the Hill so all other members could be made aware of the complete picture and be able to intelligently interact.

Thank you for a good presentation.

We'll adjourn—

● (1635)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Paré: Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for inviting us. I very much appreciated this information session. I think we're developing a closer relationship.

We're available to go to Ottawa to provide samples. We're also interested in sending you all the documentation you request. You referred to three documents: please be assured that we will send them to you.

I'd like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and every one of the members of the subcommittee. À la prochaine.

[*English*]

The Chair: I have one last tip: don't hesitate to send information to the 308 members of Parliament. That's democracy here in Canada. If you want to inform us on an ongoing basis about the issue, feel free to do so.

Thank you.

Colleagues, I'll suspend for just a moment. I'm sorry, Marc, but we have to go into the next session.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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