

Conservatives' pro-industry approach compromises food safety, Dion says

By Bill Curry & Brodie Fenlon

Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion accused Conservative cabinet ministers yesterday of taking the same pro-industry approach to food safety that he says was ultimately responsible for the tainted-water deaths under their watch in Walkerton, Ont.

With the Maple Leaf Foods Inc. Toronto meat-processing plant closed in a nationwide outbreak of listeria infection, Mr. Dion accused the government of wanting to walk away from the “core” responsibility of food inspection in favour of privatization. He named former Ontario Progressive Conservative ministers Jim Flaherty, John Baird and Tony Clement as key supporters of privatization.

“It's unacceptable,” Mr. Dion told reporters during a stop in Toronto. “These are the same people – Mr. Flaherty, Mr. Baird, Mr. Clement – who are responsible [for] what happened in Walkerton, who privatized [Ontario's] propane inspection, and they want to do something equivalent about food inspections, which is at the core of what the government should do.

“This very conservative government does not understand what is at the core of the responsibility of a government in a society.”

Mr. Dion's comments were based on a cabinet document leaked earlier this year that has become the focus of hearings by the Commons agriculture committee.

The document outlines a plan to save money at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency by shifting CFIA meat inspectors to an oversight role and “allowing industry to implement food safety control programs.”

The document also says the announcement of the policy was delayed “owing to significant communications risks.”

Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz said federal officials are working around the clock to trace the source of the listeriosis outbreak, which is caused by the *Listeria monocytogenes* bacterium.

“Let me state on behalf of the government that our thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends of those that are affected,” he said at a news conference outside Agriculture Canada headquarters in Ottawa. “And of course, I'd like to reiterate that our highest priority continues to be making sure that Canadian families' food supply is safe.”

In response to criticism over the government's proposed inspection changes, Mr. Ritz noted that the CFIA has hired 200 new inspectors since the Conservatives took office.

“There are no cuts at this particular point,” he said. “I’ll let Mr. Dion draw the conclusions he wants. It was a discussion document. Certain portions of that were brought forward in the budget and put into play, but the vast majority was up for discussion and has not been implemented.”

Mr. Ritz said the proposal is aimed at moving CFIA inspectors to activities where they would be more effective.

“As opposed to having our inspectors standing line by line, they’ll have a more oversight role within the plant itself,” he said. “We’re trying to build a better mousetrap here.”

CFIA chief veterinarian Brian Evans said new test results expected tomorrow should confirm whether the current illnesses can be traced to the Maple Leaf Foods plant.

New Democratic Party agriculture critic Alex Atamanenko called the outbreak tragic and said he will strongly oppose plans to give industry a greater role in food inspection.

“We need to have as much control over the safety of the food as possible and by even thinking that we’re going to give that inspection over to the industry, or part of it, I think is very wrong at this time,” he said.

University of Regina business professor Sylvain Charlebois said the proposed changes would make food safer, but the government needs to do a better job at selling them to the public.

Prof. Charlebois said so little food is actually being inspected at the moment that having the private sector do more will increase safety.

“The fact of the matter is, only 2 per cent of everything we eat is being monitored right now,” he said. “This new policy that is being put forward is a step in the right direction.”

Mike McBane, a food safety advocate with the Canada Health Coalition, is far more concerned. He said the cabinet document contradicts the government's high-profile pledges to protect consumers. “It flies in the face of all of their stated claims in terms of consumer protection.”

He also criticized the government for firing the public servant who brought the issue to light by taking it to his union.

“I just think that's quite ironic for a government that came in promising transparency and accountability.”