

ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY STANDING COMMITTEE

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT THE MIDLAND TOWN HALL, MIDLAND
FRIDAY, 10 AUGUST 2001**

SEVENTH SESSION

Members

Mr McRae (Chairman)
Mr Day (Deputy Chairman)
Mr Bowler
Mr Masters
Mr Murray

DUNDAS, MR GRAEME STUART,
Engineer,
examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Dundas, thank you for agreeing to present your evidence today.

Mr Dundas: Thank you for inviting me.

The CHAIRMAN: The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect the proceedings in the House require. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Dundas: Yes, I have.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you understand the notes attached to it?

Mr Dundas: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet and guidance note regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

Mr Dundas: Yes, I did.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you understand all aspects of that information?

Mr Dundas: I believe I did.

The CHAIRMAN: For the record, can you state the capacity in which you appear before the committee?

Mr Dundas: I am here as a member of the public - one of the great unwashed.

The CHAIRMAN: The committee received your submission on 27 July. Do you propose to make any amendments to that written submission?

Mr Dundas: It would be wise for me to make some small amendments to the submission. I wrote it fairly quickly to submit it in the initial time allotted. I did not spend the same time that other people spent. They have put a lot of effort and research into far more substantial submissions. It is tremendous that they have done that, and I feel quite humble putting in a two-page submission.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you identify those amendments and read them into the submission?

Mr Dundas: I can do that now.

The CHAIRMAN: In the process of doing that, would you then wish that the amended submission be incorporated in the transcript of evidence of this hearing?

Mr Dundas: Yes, I would. I would like to make a slight change to the paragraph that lists a number of points that were not necessarily evident from the public meeting. It may read that way because of the way I have worded it. I want to make a distinction there. I just want to take a new paragraph.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you proposing to insert a new paragraph before the start of those dot points?

Mr Dundas: To take a new paragraph before the opening sentence to that and reword the sentence.

The CHAIRMAN: After the word "panic", do you want to amend your submission by inserting the following words?

Mr Dundas: Yes, I do. I want to say that I feel that the following points should be considered by the inquiry as matters of concern. The first point states -

The waste disposal site had been approved by the then Shire of Swan several years earlier without due care for the environment or health and without due diligence to democratic process.

I need to be careful with the wording so it is not misleading. It is just an area of concern, rather than my making a statement of fact.

Mr MASTERS: Are you saying that you believe there may be problems with the shire in those respects?

Mr Dundas: Yes; I am saying that there may be problems. I elaborate in that paragraph by saying that there may be problems of that nature. That is the essence of what I am getting at.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there anything else you wish to amend?

Mr Dundas: No. Those points go on to say that there were quite a large number of systemic problems that led to the fire, and I feel the inquiry should address those problems. That is why I listed them. That has become apparent in other people's evidence in a lot more detail than in mine.

The CHAIRMAN: To enable us to get to the substance of the evidence that you want to present or the submission that you want to make, are there any other amendments that you want to make to this document now?

Mr Dundas: There is one other small amendment. At the top of page 2, I have listed three organisations and then said "both". I meant "all". I meant that the Department of Minerals and Energy, the Department of Environmental Protection and the Environmental Protection Authority had all been aware.

The CHAIRMAN: Are there any other amendments?

Mr Dundas: No, they are the only amendments I wanted to make.

The CHAIRMAN: I have had the opportunity to read your submission, as have other members. Are there any points that you want to draw our attention to and make as part of your submission today?

Mr Dundas: I want to put on record that there were volunteer firefighters downwind of the chemical fire.

The CHAIRMAN: How did you come to know that?

Mr Dundas: Because my son was one of them.

Mr DAY: Which brigade is he with?

Mr Dundas: He is in the Guildford Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade. I add that the volunteer firefighters have a very fragile relationship with the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of WA. That is why no other volunteer firefighters have appeared other than those who appeared earlier.

The CHAIRMAN: Without identifying your son or any other person, and I understand this is difficult -

Mr Dundas: It is.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you heard people express some concerns about that relationship?

Mr Dundas: Yes. I probably should just say that I have heard that expression. It would be best to speak to some of the volunteer fire brigade people. That would be the way to do it.

The CHAIRMAN: I appreciate your concern.

Mr DAY: When you say that they have a fragile relationship with FESA, are you referring to this fire and its consequences in particular, or are you speaking more generally?

Mr Dundas: Much more generally. The volunteer firefighting brigades provide an excellent service in the community, apart from simply fighting fires; whereas FESA probably sees its worth only in terms of fighting fires, and maybe wonders about that worth.

Mr MASTERS: The second paragraph of your submission says that a number of volunteer firefighters were hospitalised and all but one had been subsequently discharged. Do you mean that one is still in hospital?

Mr Dundas: No. One was discharged later in the day.

The CHAIRMAN: Was that on the Friday?

Mr Dundas: That is what I meant - on the Friday. I understand somebody else was hospitalised a bit later. It was not clear whether that was related to the fire.

The CHAIRMAN: Was it another firefighter?

Mr Dundas: Yes, it was another firefighter. I understand it was a kidney problem, which sounds like it could be related to the fire, but that was not stated.

Mr MASTERS: The committee must determine, as best it can, whether health consequences have arisen from the Bellevue fire. Without identifying your son or any particular firefighter, can you advise us whether any of the hospital tests that were carried out on those people or any of the doctors' observations of those people indicated problems? Your submission says that people were feeling unwell. Was any test work done on those people? Was any advice given by doctors or nursing staff to do this or that or to come back in three months? Can you say anything to amplify that side of the issue?

Mr Dundas: There were some follow-up check-ups. It seemed to me that the tests were fairly limited. I do not know the technicalities of that. My concerns are that the effects of things like polychlorinated biphenyls or dioxins may not show up in these tests anyway, and not for several years. That is why I made the submission; I felt it was important to put on record what has happened.

Mr MASTERS: Did all of the people who were hospitalised go to the one hospital, or did they attend several hospitals?

Mr Dundas: The ones to whom I referred went to Swan District Hospital.

Mr MASTERS: Towards the bottom of the first page, you talk about 600 litres of mercury and then you have a question mark. There seems to be no doubt that mercury was stored on-site. We have received a number of comments along those lines. Where did you hear that volume, because we are hearing different comments about the volume and that it was up to a metric tonne.

Mr Dundas: I heard estimates of 600 or 1 000 litres and I chose to put the more conservative estimate in my submission.

Mr MASTERS: Is that an estimate that you have made?

Mr Dundas: It was one that was stated at the public meeting, but I cannot remember by whom.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you recall whether that information was provided by the Alliance for a Clean Environment or its associates?

Mr Dundas: It may well have been, although ACE may have cited the metric tonne, which was mentioned earlier. Other speakers also spoke about seeing the mercury there and various estimates were raised.

Mr MASTERS: I have just realised that I have raised a fairly interesting point. Mercury is such a heavy liquid that one metric tonne might be a very small volume. Conversely, if it were material

contaminated with mercury, it may be somewhat diluted and there may be a larger volume of lower-grade mercury material. It would be nice to explore this at the appropriate time.

The CHAIRMAN: A metric tonne of mercury and its volume will not have the same relationship as a metric tonne of water and its volume.

Mr Dundas: It was not a conservative estimate, was it? I was thinking that it was the same as that volume of water, but of course it is much heavier.

Mr MASTERS: We are highlighting the fact that we are not sure. If it were contaminated mercury, it would be reasonable to assume that one metric tonne was about a cubic metre or 1 000 litres.

Mr Dundas: Yes, I was thinking in those terms.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you hear the weight given?

Mr Dundas: I might have heard the weight given and then converted it to litres. That might be a good correction.

The CHAIRMAN: We are satisfied that mercury was on the site. However, there is a broad range of views about the precise volume, weight and quality of that substance.

Mr DAY: There is a range of views, but we do not have any firm information at this stage.

Mr Dundas: The presence of mercury raised a particular concern for the wellbeing of my son, because he was fighting a fire directly downwind from the chemical fire. It seemed to me that if mercury got into the fire, the fumes from it probably would have landed right where he was fighting the fire.

Mr DAY: Where was he fighting the fire?

Mr Dundas: He was in the brickyard opposite the wood yard.

The CHAIRMAN: On the western side?

Mr Dundas: On the western side of Midland Road.

Mr DAY: Military Road.

Mr Dundas: It is not down as far as Military Road. The other firefighting unit was at Military Road.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you saying that he was directly adjacent to the site or some distance from the site?

Mr Dundas: He was not directly adjacent to the site. There is quite a large road reserve and car park area near the bridge of the road that -

Mr DAY: That is Military Road.

Mr Dundas: I beg your pardon; it is Military Road. I was confused because a bridge downstream is called Military Road Bridge.

Mr MASTERS: Is that generally to the south west of the fire?

Mr Dundas: It is generally to the south west, but he was only about 200 metres to the south west.

Mr MASTERS: Previous evidence given to us indicates that 30 volunteer firefighters were involved in fighting the scrub fire and other things. Can you estimate for us how many of those 30 volunteer firefighters might have been exposed to the plume from the burning toxic materials? Is there any way that you or your son could give us an estimate of that?

Mr Dundas: My son may be in a position to give you part of an estimate of that. I do not feel that I am.

Mr MASTERS: Would your son put pen to paper and give us an indication of that?

Mr Dundas: I will express my concern again. My son chose not to make a submission because of his tentative relationship -

Mr MASTERS: However, you could make a submission after talking to your son and other people saying that you came to the conclusion - you do not have to tell us how or why - that five or 25 firefighters might have been exposed. That would be relevant and useful information for this committee.

The CHAIRMAN: If you do not feel able to do so, that is fine.

Mr Dundas: I will take it on board with him.

The CHAIRMAN: It is a gentle request, which you are at liberty to follow up or not.

Mr MASTERS: In your submission you talked about the member for Swan agreeing that there should be an independent inquiry into the fire. The member for Swan, Kim Wilkie, is a federal member of Parliament.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you mean the member for Midland?

Mr Dundas: I meant Michelle Roberts.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there anything else that you want to add?

Mr Dundas: No, thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to talk. I feel as though the previous speakers have done an outstanding job compared with my contribution.

Mr MASTERS: No; it has been a valuable contribution.

The CHAIRMAN: Like many others, there are feelings of trepidation and perceived risks. Thank you for your courage and honesty.

[The witness retired]