

Trudeau must live up to his pledge to deal with asbestos

[GERALD CAPLAN](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/trudeau-must-live-up-to-his-pledge-to-deal-with-asbestos/article30760882/), Special to The Globe and Mail, July 5, 2016,
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Justin Trudeau is breaking a solemn election pledge and Kathleen Ruff is not letting him get away with it.

Writing in the Ottawa Citizen, Ms. Ruff points out that the PM promised to restore “Canada's badly tarnished image on the international stage” and would “support global policies based on evidence and play a positive role at the United Nations.”

Yet when it comes to asbestos, Ms. Ruff accuses Trudeau of breaking that pledge. On May 10, Mr. Trudeau said his government is “moving forward on a ban” on asbestos, and his office recently told the Globe the government “is reviewing its strategy on asbestos, including a potential ban.” What's to review? And while they're stalling, those exposed even briefly to asbestos fibres could be dying.

Asbestos is the biggest killer of Canadian workers. The Trudeau government, Ms. Ruff tells us, has prohibited use of asbestos in government workplaces and indicated that it will join 55 other countries in banning the lethal substance. “So it is inexplicable that at UN meetings, the Trudeau government's position is that it has not made up its mind whether chrysotile asbestos should be put on the Rotterdam Convention's list of hazardous substances. How can chrysotile asbestos be hazardous for Canadians and not be hazardous for people overseas?”

Unless it quickly lives up to its word, this won't be the last time the government will be embarrassed by Kathleen Ruff. She is among Canada's most indefatigable crusaders, a woman who never hesitates to speak truth to power and won't stop until power actually hears her and acts.

She's been a human rights activist for her entire life, both with the Court Challenges Programme, which funded important court cases that advanced equality, and with the BC Human Rights Commission. She's now senior advisor on human rights to the Rideau Institute, a first-rate non-profit dedicated to peaceful solutions to foreign policy issues.

And she crusades non-stop against the continued legality in Canada of deadly asbestos.

Asbestos threatens ghastly illness and a painful death to all those who come in contact with it, whether as workers or consumers. According to the World Health Organization, the asbestos-related death toll worldwide is estimated at 107,000 annually, including about 2,000 per year

in Canada. In Quebec it's the No. 1 workplace killer: 118 of the 196 work-related deaths in the province in 2015 were officially deemed to be caused by asbestos. Yet Quebec closed the last asbestos mine in Canada in 2012.

These actually may be conservative data since both asbestos-related mesothelioma and asbestosis, both deadly, take decades after exposure to develop. Asbestos is present in homes and buildings across Canada, and the Canadian government still allows the import of asbestos-containing materials. Yet for years governments, business and universities cynically ignored this threat. This quite shocking situation has been Ms. Ruff's consuming passion for the past decade.

Ms. Ruff is one of the few Canadians who understands the Rotterdam Convention, whereby hazardous substances are formally named in the hope countries will then refuse to import, export or use them. It was Ms. Ruff who alerted Canadians in 2011 that the Harper government, alone in the developed world, refused to allow chrysotile asbestos fibres to be added to the Convention.

In that same year, Ms. Ruff received the Canadian Public Health Association's National Public Health Hero Award for her advocacy to end Canada's export of asbestos. Stephen Harper did not.

Since then, Ms. Ruff's great unrelenting cause has been to have the government of Canada ban asbestos use and its export. In a sane world, this would be a no-brainer. The scientific evidence is overwhelming: there's no safe level of contact with asbestos, even if it's disguised as something called chrysotile. Yet in their time, the Harper government and the Jean Charest government in Quebec stood foursquare behind asbestos. Now, thanks in substantial part to Ms. Ruff, Quebec no longer mines and sells this deadly substance to countries like India.

"You may not recognize her name," the Montréal Gazette wrote a month ago, "but Kathleen Ruff will receive a medal of honour in Quebec's National Assembly on Thursday for her decade of work to stop Canada's asbestos trade, work that some argue will save tens of thousands of people from contracting deadly asbestos-related diseases in Canada and abroad."

The article continued: "A longtime human rights activist based in Smithers, B.C., Ruff has toiled for the most part behind the scenes. But without Ruff's dogged determination to rally health experts, victims and politicians to speak out and take action, Quebec might still be mining and selling the deadly fibre to developing countries for decades to come, with the active support and blessing of the federal government."

Saving the lives of "tens of thousands of people" is no mean contribution to a better world. But her work, alas, is not yet finished. Just last week, The Globe and Mail reported on new research showing that exposure to asbestos is still the leading cause of occupational deaths in Canada. Some 150,000 Canadian workers continue to be exposed to asbestos in their workplaces. Yet Canada still allows the export and import of asbestos, while many other

countries, including Britain and Australia, have banned it.

Now the Trudeau government will receive the Ruff treatment it deserves on this file.

Besides an asbestos ban, she's also determined to expose the shameful conflicts of interest that exist, mostly unpublicized, between Canadian universities and the business world. And yes, asbestos is one egregious example. Just last week Ms. Ruff gave a presentation at the Epidemiology Congress of the Americas showing how Quebec's two leading English-language universities - McGill and Concordia - have long colluded with the asbestos industry and will still not acknowledge their own corrupt practices. Sad to say, [Kathleen Ruff](#)'s tireless labors are by no means over.