

## **FLINT—AMERICA’S WALKERTON?**

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My travels have taken me deep into the American Midwest. The media is obsessed with the upcoming Iowa and New Hampshire primaries, and the strange campaign that candidates are conducting. But cutting through the election hype in recent days has been the emerging story of the Flint, Michigan water disaster.

The short story is this—in April 2014 Flint switched its primary water source from Detroit and started getting it from the Flint River. It was a cost-cutting measure for this nearly-bankrupt city of about 100,000 residents. It is somewhat murky right now which officials of which government agencies made that determination.

What is very clear is that immediately residents began to complain of bad water. Smell, taste, colour. If you have seen any TV pictures of residents holding up grimy bottles of yellow, rust-coloured liquids, yes, that was coming out of their water taps. It is ghastly to watch.

It has taken nearly two years for this issue to force its way onto the national consciousness, which in itself is shameful.

The wind generated from the finger-pointing and arm-waving of terrified bureaucrats and elected officials is enough to power a turbine.

The bucking and weaving of governments at all levels is nauseating to watch. There is ample blame at every level of government and agency to fill a book—and one assumes there will be a public enquiry called at some point.

The human toll is immense, and will be for decades to come. Children forced to drink water contaminated by lead are likely to have health problems for much of their lives. People have been sickened by not having access to clean, potable water—surely a basic human right, certainly a basic human necessity.

Money is suddenly pouring in, but it just isn't enough. It will take hundreds of millions of dollars to redo the aging, rusting water system in Flint. Some estimates are \$1.5 billion.

It is important for you to understand that Flint is a desperate, some say dying, city. Population has dropped since the manufacturing sector declined years ago. The city is without a grocery store. The per capita income is about \$15,000. And, wait for it, the poverty rate is 41%.

This industrial wasteland may be without much future unless there is an immense effort, investment and commitment, but the people there don't deserve the shameful treatment by their elected officials and government agencies and commissions. Incompetence piled upon indifference.

Your hair shouldn't fall out when you drink tap water. You shouldn't get sick and nauseous from the local water. Your kids shouldn't have health problems.

Flint is now again getting its water from Detroit. But the fall-out is just beginning. For months nobody listened to the local residents. The inevitable trail of emails is going to point more fingers at many elected and appointed officials. The Michigan head of the Environmental Protection Agency has resigned in the rubble of the disaster; she won't be the last. An EPA review is finally going to happen.

Just as the Walkerton water disaster changed forever the way municipalities and governments in Canada handled their water systems, the Flint situation may be a wake-up call to US cities, states and their federal government.

It also points again to the failing infrastructure problems that plague our towns and cities, and how we continue to fall behind. We really need to face that reality and understand the investments that are long overdue.

Nobody wanted, expected or deserved a Walkerton--or a Flint.