INQUIRY RESPECTING THE TREATMENT, EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF INNU IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

English Transcript | Volume 2

Commissioners: Retired Judge James Igloliorte, Dr. Mike Devine and Anastasia Qupee

Tuesday | 14 February 2023

[redacted]

[redacted]

I would now ask Benjamin Brookwell to call the first witness at this Inquiry.

Hmm?

B. BROOKWELL: Thank you –

P. RALPH: Oh there's going to be two witnesses – I'm sorry – two witnesses.

B. BROOKWELL: Good morning, Commissioners.

The first two witnesses who will come to speak are Annie Picard and Germaine Benuen; and they will introduce themselves and proceed with the presentation.

I, like all of you, will be listening today to the presentation. I may have a question at the end but – I may have a question at the end, but I'm here to listen also.

So I'd ask them to please come forward, please.

P. RALPH: I understand that Annie wishes to be sworn and Germaine wishes to be affirmed.

The Bible is right there, Madam Clerk.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

I'll just move this closer.

CLERK (Battcock): Do you swear that the evidence you shall give to this Inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

A. PICARD: I do.

CLERK: Please state your name for the record.

A. PICARD: Annie Picard.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Germaine.

P. RALPH: You're not on.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: She's affirming.

P. RALPH: Yeah.

CLERK: Okay.

Do you solemnly affirm that the evidence you shall give to this Inquiry shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

G. BENUEN: I do.

CLERK: Please state your name for the record.

G. BENUEN: Germaine Benuen.

P. RALPH: And if that wasn't picked up by the recording, it's Annie Picard and Germaine Benuen.

The hand-held mic – I thought it was going to be a hand-held?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

P. RALPH: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: For –

P. RALPH: For the moment do you have any – the clip-on ones?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: I think that Annie has one. You just need one more.

P. RALPH: Okay.

C. URQUHART: Does everyone who needs it, have a headset?

Anyone missing a headset?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

G. BENUEN: Hello. (Inaudible.) Hello. Hello.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: They probably got it turned off.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

G. BENUEN: Hello.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Peter told me he's going to turn it on when he gets back there.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

G. BENUEN: Hello. Kuei.

Good morning everybody. My name is Germaine Benuen. I work with Innu Round Table Secretariat in Sheshatshiu. Innu Round Table Secretariat is representing two communities.

And Innu Round Table is doing prevention work with child – child protection is doing the province. And we also have the health department; we have income support that's being run by the Innu people; and we're also working on the Innu law when the – we're taking over the child protection services.

So I'm just gonna help Annie with the timeline. Annie has been working with us in IRT for a number of years.

And we've been doing this number of times with RCMP, health professionals, government people; and we're gonna be doing that with Memorial University at the end of the month, too. And then we'll be travelling to Halifax to do it with ISC departments in Amherst and Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The other thing I'd like to mention is Mary Jane Edmonds is gonna do a timeline for Natuashish. And Mary Jane is also working with the Innu Round Table Secretariat.

So the other thing I'd like to say, the timeline was worked on by many people. Elders, front-line workers, leaders – and it goes up to 2010. So we'll just talk a little bit after that when we're done with that.

And also that Annie is gonna be working on that with other members in the community – leadership, Elders and other front-line workers.

So when we're presenting this we want to make sure that – we didn't make this up. This is not our own story, or your own personal stories.

And it's people's stories how they remember it, and how stuff were brought into their lives and the impact it has on Innu – Innu way of life and Innu lives – I guess.

So – and also, too, Innu had their own lives. They were resilient before contact. And they had their way of looking after their kids, they have their own laws that they go by, they have their way of life – living off the land, looking after their family, and everybody worked together.

So I'm gonna give Annie – to start off, and I'm gonna jump in now and again and so here's Annie Picard.

A. PICARD: Can you hear me okay?

Testing one, two.

One, Two! There I go.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Perfect.

A. PICARD: Now you can all hear me.

Like Germaine said, I've been doing this for a number of years now. I got started when I was working at the Mary May Healing Centre. We were doing a course called leadership training.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

A. PICARD: (Inaudible.)

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Hmm?

A. PICARD: (Inaudible.)

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

A. PICARD: And it was during that training that we discovered that a lot of people in the room didn't know about their – our history.

So one of the facilitators asked us: Do you – do you guys know about your history? Have you ever looked at it?

And so we wanted to look at our history, so that we can have a better knowledge about why Innu people behave the way they do. Why we do the things that we do.
So during that training, they put up a blank sheet of paper on a wall like this. And we invited – lot of Elders in the community and workers, different workers, and some of our co-workers also.

And then we asked them: Can you tell us about – as far back as you can remember, tell us what you remember about being in the community and in the country. Tell us the history.

And there was some Elders that have since passed away, that were in that room with us. So when they started talking about this story I was up here. These are my drawings. So I just drew everything as they were talking.

And the images that I drew were images to remind me of a particular part of that – that conversation – that discussion.

So I usually start with my own story – my personal story. I grew up – I was – my father is from Sept-Îles, Quebec, and my mother is from here in Sheshatshiu.

When I was young we – we encountered a very violent situation in our family. And I ended up in foster care for a bit. And I think I was away for about – almost two years, I think? So when my – when I got back to my mother she was in no shape to be able to raise me and my brother.

And we were still living in a place where she had no family, no close friends and no supports for herself. So my mother had planned to give me and my brother up. And somehow, my grandfather here from Sheshatshiu felt that something was wrong.

And his – he managed to send message to my mother who was still in Sept-Îles. And then my grandfather said: Whatever you're planning on doing, don't do it. Bring your children here [inaudible] bring them home.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Can you just say that last part in case that noise –

A. PICARD: Whatever you're planning on doing, bring your children home. And when I got here, I was dropped off to my – my grandparent's home. I believe I was five years old.

And my grandparents took me on the land. And I don't remember much about growing up here in the community – but I remember a lot about being on the land.

And one of the things that I really enjoyed about being with my grandparents is storytelling. My grandparents used to take turns every night telling me our legends, our stories, the Innu stories.

And I was a very curious kid, I guess. I would ask a lot of questions during storytime. One of the things I asked my grandmother is: Grandma, where do we

come from? Where'd our Innu people come from?

And this is the story that she told me. A long time ago the whole world was covered in water. This was known as the great flood. There were some animals that survived that were together in a big canoe.

One day, Kuekuatsheu the wolverine said to the animals: If I had some earth, I could create land for us all. Amishkᵘ the beaver said: I can dive to the bottom of the water and fetch some earth. And he dove down as far as he could, but surfaced again and was not successful in getting some earth.

Then Nitshikᵘ, the otter, said – dove down to the water and said: I'll get the – some earth, and he, too, was not successful.

And then the proud Muakᵘ, the loon, spoke up and said: Well I can certainly dive down, because everybody knows I can stay down the longest.

Now when he was down there, he was gone for a very long time, and the animals thought he was gonna be successful. And then when he surfaced, they found out that he wasn't able to get some earth either.

And then the animals were very discouraged and feeling hopeless, when the smallest of the animals, the muskrat, said: I can try. And the muskrat, Utshashkᵘ, went down and he was gone for a very long time. Longer than what the – the loon had been gone.

And then after a while, the animals on the canoe got worried that he had been gone too long. And then after a while, they noticed that the muskrat, the Utshashkᵘ, was floating on the surface of the water.

And when they brought him into the canoe, they found him that he had drowned. And when the animals noticed that in his hand he held a piece of the earth.

And Kuekuatsheu said: We will honour our brother. And he took – he took the earth in his hand and he started blowing on it and blowing on it, and it started getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

And then after a while, it got too big that he couldn't hold it. And then he asked: I need a place to lay this earth on.

And then the turtle, Missinakᵘ, said: I can carry that for you. So Kuekuatsheu put it on his back and it kept growing bigger and bigger.

And that's where they say we all live. On the back of Missinakᵘ, which is known as North America.

And here I have a drawing of what – that is. So that's the story my grandmother told me when I was a young girl.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Annie, can I ask you a question?

Would you be willing to tell us your grandparent's names and what year – you were five years old?

A. PICARD: I was five years old, yeah.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: What year – what's (inaudible)?

A. PICARD: I'm going to say 1981.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

A. PICARD: My grandmother's name is Annie Michel and my grandfather's name is Philip Michel.

Hmm?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Talk into that one.

A. PICARD: Talk into that one?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Yeah. That one's good.

A. PICARD: Is this okay?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: No, see I was saying you can take that one off if you (inaudible).

P. RALPH: Annie – um – whenever you want a break just let us know.

A. PICARD: Yeah. I'm going to take this one off I think. They say it's noisy.

I don't know how to turn it off. Okay.

So this is where I start my timeline was with that story. Because I think it's important for the Innu people to know our own stories, to know our own beginnings and what the Innu people believe.

And here in the 1800s – we started this timeline in the 1800s – but according to the stories that I've heard and according to our legends it goes all the way back as – we've been here for a very, very long time.

And in that room when we were talking to the people, they talked about how the Innu people have their own beliefs, they have their own laws, they had their own truths, they had their own values, they had their own system.

To the Innu people, the most important thing was the land. Because the land was something that took care of us, and we got everything we needed from the land. And they respected every part of the land.

Up here I put a cross. It doesn't represent Christianity, it just – to remind me of the Innu people's own belief – spirituality. They had their own way of doing things and they believed, like I said, in spiritual – spirituality. They believed in their own deity.

So they lived on the land. They – they were nomadic people. There's – they had their own ceremonies, they – we believed in Makushan. And they believed in Mishtapeu. And they believed in the dreams and the songs of the Innu. [redacted] And they lived in homes that are, like, teepee structure.

And they said: Innu people back then worked together. They helped each other and they shared with – whatever they had. Everyone in the family had a purpose.

[redacted]

They ate good food – healthy foods. They were active and strong. And they got their medicines also from the land and from the animals.

The Innu language was not a written language so everything we know today was passed down to us by – orally, people telling each other. And a lot of our history was passed down orally too.

They made everything they needed like the snowshoes, the spears, the weapons. And when they talked about – 'cause we talked about the Innu person – as a person, for quite some time. What was the Innu person like back then?

And they said: the Innu back then were a lot a stronger than they – what they are today. They could travel long distance. They – they carried great loads. And they helped each other.

And when we were talking about the Innu person back then, one of the people in that room said: It sounds like you're talking about Superman. So that's why I drew "Super Human Being"; so that I can remember what the Innu person was like back then.

They – there were no known sicknesses or anything of that sort. And uh … so this was before contact. So it was around in the 1930s, there was not a whole lot of contact

with non-Innu. But there was a few encounters.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Would you be able to explain [redacted] Makushan [redacted]?

A. PICARD: [redacted]?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yes please.

A. PICARD: Makushan is – is a feast ceremony that is – take – that takes place after a big hunt is successful. And – it brings our community together.

G. BENUEN: The thing that you have to remember, Makushan is also a sacred feast among the Innu people within our region – like Natuashish, Sheshatshiu and also the Quebec north shore – the Innu people.

So it's a sacred, sacred feast to celebrate the kill or to celebrate the animal master, I guess, if you could call that.

A. PICARD: (Inaudible.)

G. BENUEN: Huh?

A. PICARD: Mishtapeu.

G. BENUEN: I guess when you think about the word Mishtapeu, it's a great spirit. I would explain it like that, 'cause back in the day there was no religion.

'Cause right now if I was to put it in that context, a lot of people are – believe in the Catholic Church, the other denominations – so if you're talking about Mishtapeu that was the religion that the Innu had – to put it in a context.

Did I answer the question?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yes. Thank you.

[redacted]

B. BROOKWELL: Annie and Germaine, would this be a – an okay time to have a short break? I know –

A. PICARD: I'm on a roll!

B. BROOKWELL: There's lots of – there's lots of people listening and lots of translation.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

B. BROOKWELL: Yeah.

P. RALPH: Okay. We'll take ten minutes.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Great job.

Recess

P. RALPH: Okay. If we can get back in our seats again, we're gonna start.

Okay, Ms. Steele.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible) Commissioner.

A. PICARD: Oh, sorry.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Germaine, you got to keep her – keep her together.

G. BENUEN: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Right?

G. BENUEN: (Inaudible.)

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: There's always one.

G. BENUEN: (Inaudible.)

There's always one.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Sometimes, yeah.

B. BROOKWELL: So if we go to five minutes 'til 12 –

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yeah.

B. BROOKWELL: – like, you just let me know when we're close to the time for the next break. Is that okay?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: It is, yup.

B. BROOKWELL: It's 11 – it's 11 now or so.

You don't have to do that. No, no, no you don't have to do that. No, just that one.

(Inaudible.)

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Perfect.

A. PICARD: Okay.

[redacted]

A. PICARD: Yeah, so I just wanted to mention that to you.

So around 1930s, as I mentioned before, there was still not a whole lot of contact with the non-Innu. But there were some stories where they would meet non-Innu in the

country. And for this sake I'm just going to call them akaneshau.

So they talked about the – in the – well, in the country, they would meet akaneshau and – but it didn't really affect their everyday lives at that point. So the Innu people were still – were still practicing a lot of their tradition and their culture – and everywhere they needed to go, they had to walk or go on canoe – and they got their food from the land and from the animals. Everything was really healthy.

And they didn't come together like, in great big groups, but every summer they would come together – what they would – it's like a summer gathering or something – there's a number of places around Quebec and Labrador where they would go.

There were favourite spots in Labrador that they would gather. And, of course, there was no border to tell them where Quebec and Labrador was so it was all just – to them, just Innu land. And they knew the land like they knew the back of their hands.

And that's something that I learned a couple of years ago, when I was on a walk with the Natuashish women. When you're on the land every day, it just – you memorize everything around you. And you memorize landmarks. Even after a few years, you can't forget those landmarks.

Like, even to this day I still remember the mountaintops. So I know how and I understand a little bit of how that knowing of the land was like. Because I went on that expedition walk with the Innu women.

So they also talked about running into a doctor. This is what it – that was representing, he used to go around on a dogsled. And somewhere else – they said somewhere else in the – in the world there was World War I and II, but for the Innu people they didn't – it didn't affect them, it didn't change anything for them. The only thing that they – they knew about was seeing an occasional plane over.

And for other places in the world – I guess – is when there was a – a need – I guess – for fur pelts. So this is where the Innu people would have encountered more of the akaneshau, 'cause there was a need for more furs, especially the beaver.

So it started changing a little bit of the daily lives of the – whatever they did, because now they're not following the animals as they normally would; now they're doing a bit more trapping.

And around 19 – between 1949-1960 – is when they said they had an – encounter more with the church, the Catholic Church.

So the priest would come to the – the Innu people in the summertime. He didn't stay all year around but he would come maybe two weeks out of the summer, here and there. And this is also a time where he's introducing the religion and it's starting to impact more of the lives of the Innu.

So in the summertime when they would gather, they would – the Innu people would come together. They would have their – their weddings and their baptisms. And they also talked about before that. That there were – the Innu people had an arranged marriage kind of culture.

And they said that it was your parents that made the arrangements and they always looked at how people were able to continue, like, the lineage, I guess, of their family. That's how they based their – their decisions.

So they looked at how well a man was able to hunt – how hard they worked – and I guess they also looked at their family – how that family was doing.

And for the women they also looked at, pretty much like, how well the – the woman's family was doing. How they were

growing up and how they were – how hard of a worker they were. And this was done so – to ensure that families were gonna be strong.

So in the – in the 19 – early 1950s, I guess, and '60s there were – when the priests started to live among the Innu more full time – they said that they had a – at first, the Innu people, when they used to come gather here on – they didn't stay on this part of the river; they stayed on the other side.

And they talked about that we have Innu burial sites in North West River. And when we asked the Elders: How did you guys end up on this side of the river? And they said: I guess they didn't want us on that side of the river because the land was better for growing stuff.

And there were some complaints made about them, I guess, about them being – living on that side, and they wanted them to go somewhere else. 'Cause they were building a – a town there.

So they said: What happened is that there were – there was a meeting that happened without their knowledge with the priest and some of the akaneshau, I guess, on that side. And it was decided that – by this time they're now getting into the – the Catholic Church – so they said we'll build a church on the other side of the river and they will go there.

And like they planned, the next time the Innu people came around there was a church on the other side of the – on this side of the – the river and this is where they got off and this is where they started staying more.

And so when the priest was more involved in the lives of the Innu, he was starting to change a lot of things about the way that the Innu people were living. So the – there was an outlaw, I guess, on a lot of the – the ceremonies. They weren't allowed to practise their ceremonies and their feasts and practise a lot of the – the stuff that they were – had been used to doing.

They were told that what they believed in or what they knew and understood was evil. It was from the Devil. And then they're told they need to live a certain way. They're made promises; they're going to get houses – and they're also told that – at this time, that they – they shouldn't leave the community. That they should stay here.

And so it was also around this time when they were trading with the Hudson Bay – they said that it's probably around that time when alcohol was introduced to the Innu, too. And it was – they were taught how to make alcohol also. And they said that when a Innu person is intoxicated, they can be taken advantage of when it comes to trading and stuff like that.

So at – at this time, too, when they were – some of them that did stay behind, started being on welfare – I guess – or what you would call now? And then when they were also trading, they had – this is where they would have traded for things like rifles and like cast-iron pots and stuff like that.

And this is also where they would have changed their – their homes from fur hides to canvas tents. They said that the canvas tent was easier to get and – and quicker to set up.

So they – around this time is also when the priest is also – started teaching children. And some people said that he's – he was teaching them from – at first from his own home, and then later on from – I think they built a – some kind of like a – a building to teach the children.

So a child, when they were going to school, would be in school from kindergarten to Grade 9. And if anybody wanted to finish Grade 12 they would have to leave the community. Be sent somewhere else.

So between 1960 to 1970 – in the – in Labrador – I guess – they – there was some work that was happening that the Innu people were not – were not told about. There was a – Churchill Falls project, mining, fisheries – and the forestry.

And around this time also there would have been some people that would go into the country by plane. As I mentioned before, people used to walk to the country before.

And there was also, around this time, where there was an outbreak of tuberculosis. And there are some people that – that got sick that had to be sent out to Newfoundland. And they also mentioned that this was probably around the time, too, when they built a hospital in Goose Bay.

Hmm. And they also talked about where there was no bridge before, between North West River and Sheshatshiu, there was a cable car.

And when they talked about the priest, they talked about what he was like. And they – we stayed on the subject for a very long time because a lot of people had a lot of bad memories about that priest. And here in the drawing, as you can see, I drew a priest with a stick in his hand. They talked about him walking around in the community with a stick, and people were really afraid of him. He – people said, to the Innu people they – he was almost like a – a god. That's how they looked at him. They – they were afraid to – to drink – like – openly.

He would also – if a child was not in school, he would go into the homes of the Innu people and he would take that child and bring them back to school. There's stories about how he would beat the child if they missed school.

And also he – there was one child that they talked – what they talked about, when she missed school. The priest came into their house and not only did he beat her, but he also beat the parent that was in the building – that was in the home. And when the young people, the – the younger people, when they were out walking around, they always kept an eye out for the priest – 'cause he used to terrorize people.

And he ruled the lives of the Innu people.

There was a lady that talked about when she was in the hospital after she had given birth to her first-born – she said that there were three other Innu women in that room with me who also had given birth. So the priest would come visit them. They were young women and not married.

So the priest would ask each of them: What are your plans? What are your plans for this child? So they had to make a decision right there. What they were planning to do. And the woman said: When the priest came to talk to me, he asked me what – what my plans were. And she told him: I don't know, I have to talk to the father of the baby.

So later on that day, when the father of the baby came to visit her, she told him about that visit from the priest. And she told him: The priest wants to know what our plans are. And his response was: I guess we're getting married. And they were a young couple – and she said: I was able to keep my son because I decided to get married.

The two of the other women that were in that room had to give up their children – give their children away. Two of them had their children adopted outside the community to an akaneshau family. And one of the other women gave the – gave her son away to a family in the community that had no children – were unable to have children.

So their choices was taken away. And their lives were changed.

B. BROOKWELL: Okay, Commissioners is it time for another break?

G. BENUEN: I just want to make a comment. Also at this point here, there was an introduction – like Annie mentioned, about the social assistance program from the government. Income support, as we know it today. And there was also a – a family allowance was introduced to the Innu at that point, too, which is child tax credit.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

G. BENUEN: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

And the other thing is when those assistance programs from the government were introduced, the Innu people were told that if you don't – if you don't send your kids to the school, this assistance program is gonna be cut off, because at that time, they were depending on it. They weren't going to the country anymore for food and all that stuff and the – the Catholic Church was ruling their lives.

And I think at that time, too, the – 1949, that's when the – Newfoundland would join into Canada – Canadian government – and so at this point all the – the Innu people – and when the – the breakout of tuberculosis there were – Innu people were sent out to the hospitals on the Island.

And some of them never came back. They – I guess they died in the hospital and they were buried on the Island.

And I know one family, probably ten years ago, they found their great-grandmother, I think, that was buried in St. Anthony area – around that area – and they found the – the burial site and they have done their headstone and all that and they go there – that's their ritual for – every summer the family goes up and do their thing there.

And that's not just one person. There were a few that were taken out because they had TB and some of them were out like 18 months to three years.

So I just want to comment on that and as we started off there, and here – and all this outside contact has happened to Innu and it's starting to look chaotic on the picture as you – if you look at it.

And also that's when Annie mentioned about Churchill Falls project. There was a flood of a lot of land and that's where the Innu people used to have their hunting grounds, camping grounds, burial sites, they used to leave their cache of – supplies – of tools.

So they have no – I guess – there was no consultations for the Innu people when the Churchill project was being worked on. And they also have knowledge that this happened, because when they went back after it was flooded, everything was gone.

I just want to make, also – when I say the burial grounds, there's a lot of dikes and stuff if you drive around there, and – the riverbanks.

Several years ago – I think it was Daniel Ashini who was a leader of our community and who was also instrumental person on our land rights negotiations with the governments – went up with a couple of people just to look around there. And they did find a – a skull that the burial ground – like – I guess, with the water and stuff and it – there's a picture somewhere and – so you can see how – so damaging the flooding was.

Okay. That's just my spiel.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Okay.

A. PICARD: So with the priest now in the lives of the Innu people, a lot of – a lot of things had to change for the Innu people.

One of the things that changed was their practises or their ceremonies and stuff like that. It all had to go underground. They mentioned that there was some people that

would practise only when they were in the country, Nutshimit.

And they also mentioned that there were some families that couldn't – that couldn't stay in Sheshatshiu because they – they were not listening to the priest, I guess. And some people talked about living in – like, in around Goose Bay – like outside of Goose Bay and around those areas. And so they had to find work there too.

And it was through this new system when the Innu people had to have a chief, I guess. Before that they didn't have the system of chief and council. And their system would have been, wherever they go and other parts of – like, if they went to the north or to the south – whoever was most knowledgeable in those areas would have been the person that they looked to for leadership.

And – so when they went into the country, they didn't go as a big group. There would have been like, maybe, two or three families together. Sometimes an older family would take along a younger couple. And this was also done that they could better support that young family.

So when we asked them, then how did we end up having chief and council, and so they said: It was in the summertime at the – at the church, there was a meeting and at the end of that meeting or some – the priest was there and some akaneshau were there. At the end of that meeting the priest came out and pointed to an Elder – there were – as the Innu people were waiting outside the church – pointed to an Elder and said: You're the chief.

So there was no election system or anything like that. The first, I guess, election that they would have had would have been an Elder that –passed away now – his name was Ponus Nuke. During an election.

And they also talked about when they – in 1967 they said, is when they built the – the school here. And it was called the Peenamin McKenzie School. And – so there's – at this time there's a lot of – a lot more Innu people that are starting to stay around in the community. And they – they didn't go to the country as much.

And also around 19 – between 1970 and '80s, they talked about the roles of the Innu people. And they said the roles of the Innu people changed a lot. They said that the Innu – the Innu person for – the man, I guess, would have been – he knew what his role was when he was out in the – in the country. He didn't need to be taught or didn't need to be told what to do.

And they said these roles just came on naturally as you were growing up. And also the – the woman had his – her own roles too. The way that the structure of the family was also changed – they said that back then it was – it was the woman of the household that was more in a – a leadership role.

She had to – she had the decision-making in – within the household. And the man was the one that made the decisions outside the household. And they said that the children were the women's children. And so they said that that – that also, with the contact and with the religion and stuff, it really changed.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

P. RALPH: Is that a good place to stop, Annie?

G. BENUEN: Yeah.

But I'll – I just need to make one comment.

I guess – I forgot to mention, in 1949, when Newfoundland joined Canada, there was no mention of an Aboriginal people in the province.

And – I guess – whoever the Premier – I'm not going to say any names – said there

was no Aboriginal people in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

So just a quick – in 2002, we had a status – I guess Indian status cards – where we had to join the *Indian Act*. Before that we were just another municipality. We didn't get the funding that the – all other First Nations get across Canada.

So just briefly on that then I'll –

P. RALPH: Thank you, Germaine and Annie.

So we'll continue with the timeline this afternoon. What time do you want to come back, Commissioners?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: 1 o'clock?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yeah.

P. RALPH: Annie and Germaine, 1:15?

G. BENUEN: Yup.

A. PICARD: Yup.

P. RALPH: So resume at 1:15.

Yeah. (Inaudible.)

Recess

CLERK: Good afternoon.

All rise.

This Commission of Inquiry is now open – now in session.

P. RALPH: We'll ask Germaine and Annie to come back up and continue the presentation.

Thank you.

A. PICARD: Testing.

I'm trying to remember where I left off.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: That was Germaine.

G. BENUEN: That was me.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

A. PICARD: Yeah. Over here.

Okay.

So the other thing that I – the group talked about was the first time they saw somebody – an Innu person own a vehicle, and that was Penote. And they thought it was important to note that because it showed how the lives of the Innu people were changing.

And they also talked about how it was around the late – the early '70s – I guess – when the – the bridge from Happy Valley and North West River was built. And between the '70s and '80s is also when the last Innu family came from the country, Nutshimit, and walked by foot.

And they also mentioned that in – around that time, also, was around when we first had a – the first alcohol casualty, and it was by suicide. And before that, suicide was unheard of amongst the Innu people.

So they talked about how some students – some young people went away for high school – to finish high school, and this was what they talked about when they talked about residential schools.

The other thing that they also mentioned is, there was still quite a – I guess they – the – the – the children, the Innu children, were not learning as much as – the English language and the – like – the non-Innu way as they should be by then.

So they said there – there was a plan that they know that happened that the Innu children had to be separated from their parents in order to better assimilate the young – the children. So children were – were being taken away by CYFS.

And living in the community for the Innu people was a cultural shock for them, because so many things were changing. Their lives were changing, and they were encountering things that was not even heard of amongst the Innu people in how another person is – is treating another person.

So when they talked about what life was like living in the community, the best that they can describe it was – they said: It was like living in prison for us.

So this – what this – two things represent a jail cell and shackles. And they said that it wasn't a happy place, to be living in the community.

And they said that being in the community, and with all the abuse that was happening and the things that they were now facing, it made life for them really hard, so they were struggling and – to adjust and to cope with many things.

And it was in the late '70s and early '80s when a lot of the stories started coming out about what had really been happening around this time in – back when they – the priest was – first got into the community, into the lives of the Innu.

And this is the first time the stories of sexual abuse started coming out. And it really outraged the Innu people – when they found out that the person that they considered a god had been doing this to their children.

And this is around this time when – from the anger and from – from – it motivated them to try to change things for the Innu people – to turn things around for themselves.

And so the – this is when they set up the NMIA; the Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association and a lot of the people that had gone for higher education were some of the people that set up this NMIA.

So the first leaders are motivated now to fight the system – fight back the system and to empower the Innu people.

The other thing that they talked about was, not only was there sexual abuse it was also – most of the people in the community were – were drinking. There's now drugs involved and families are separated – their families are broken, their family connections are broken and there's a lot of loneliness being – living in the community.

And the other thing that they talked about is, the living situations in the community. When the houses that they were promised were really poor – constructed really poorly. These houses were not meant for the kind of winters we have here in Labrador. When they built those houses, some of those houses included toilets and sinks, bathrooms; but there was no plumbing, and there was no running water.

So in the wintertime you had to find water. There was a pumphouse. Some people also went to – there was an old building down by the beach road that also had a – a pump where they can get water. But a lot of times in the wintertime those pumps would also break and – when it would get too cold, so some people would get water from these two ponds we see back here and they were not really fit for drinking.

So they also talked about when – when things started changing for the Innu people. They also worked really hard to get their power back, to show that they still had power.

And a lot – a lot of people might remember the protest that took place on the base – that was probably the biggest turning point for the Innu people. This is when they

realized together, as a group of people, they have a powerful voice. So between the ’80s and ’90s is – there’s a lot of changes that are taking place for the Innu of Labrador.

And they also talked about the – the protests that took place on Mealy Mountain caribou herd. There was a ban for the – for the caribou herd.

And with the NMIA we were able to set up some different things in the community. Some people in our community started bringing – slowly started bringing back the – the ceremonies. And there was a group home that was set up for – for – that were taking in babies.

So there’s a lot of change that was taking – that was happening around that time. There was also the first Innu man that was an RCMP – that worked with the RCMP. But with – even with that, there was still children that were being removed from home, and families that were still being separated.

They also talked about when – when women were, I guess, red-flagged if they were pregnant or something, and then CYFS would get involved in – at the hospital during – while they were giving birth.

And the other things that they mentioned was the first time we had a radio station, which – which made it easier to be able to talk to and share communication on a bigger scale with the community. So that was a good thing, they thought.

Yup. Next.

And also it was around this time that we had our first Innu person that was living with diabetes. So diabetes was not even something that affected the Innu before.

G. BENUEN: We’re gonna take a break in 15 minutes, I guess, to give the interpreters a break because it’s a hard work.

So I’m gonna just go back a little bit on this end, ’cause I know Annie talked about that stuff. And I just wanna say also that the – I guess – the departments that came through around 1960s – like there was a church, there was a health system, there was a justice system, there was a store and school. But we’re here today talking about the child protection system and our problems that we have been dealing with. So I’m gonna have a little focus on that for a little bit and I could –

Oh yeah.

I think we need – just to – I guess, to focus on the child protection system, because that’s why we’re here today. It’s been a long time coming.

I guess back in the day when – under the *Indian Act*, there was a plan, that we’re gonna force this systems on the Aboriginal people across Canada – or the continent – that we’re gonna do this until there’s no Indian left in the country. That’s when the introduction of residential schools were coming in. That’s when the child protection system came into the Innu lives and –

B. BROOKWELL: Um, Germaine, just that I think we need to slow a little bit for the translators, sorry.

G. BENUEN: And Innu people are family-oriented people; their children are important. And, I guess the government recognized that. And they started taking the Innu children away from their parents to assimilate them into the white culture. I don’t know if it’s the right term for that.

And I know in – they call it Sixties Scoop – that’s when they start taking the – the children – Innu children out of the communities. And there were several people with children that were taken away from their families, from their community. And there were also young – I guess – young adults were taken away – or maybe

youth – were taken away to go into the residential school – to go to school.

And those young adults came back into our communities after several years and they couldn't speak their language, they couldn't communicate with their parents and they couldn't communicate with their peers in the community. So – 'cause they lost their language, and their parents didn't speak English.

And the Sixties Scoop, there were several children that were taken out – out of their families from the hospitals or …

And eventually in the last 20 to 25 years, they came back to our communities and they – they didn't know the language, they didn't know the Innu way of life and they couldn't fit in, into the – how the Innu were living at the time when they came back to the communities. And they tried to stay in the communities, get to know their families. But they couldn't do it – they had to leave the community again.

I have a cousin – my first cousin, who was taken away from the hospital when he was about two years old. And his mom didn't even know he was taken away. As far as she knew she was at the – he was at the hospital. So when he – when she went to see her son, he was gone.

So they didn't have any contact with him again until he was in his 20s. He was accidentally found, I could say, because his cousin was an RCMP officer on the Island.

So this RCMP officer went to this dwelling that he was called. And the lady at – I guess the adoptive mom – because he was adopted after a few years in foster care. That's – the lady's – when he saw the police officer, he said: Oh my God, you look like my son. And so he saw the picture, and he sent it to the family here and they said yes, that's our brother.

So the – the young gentleman was living in Toronto at the time. He had moved on from the Island. And so they were reunited and he came back to visit a few times. And he decided to move to Sheshatshiu. And he stayed in Sheshatshiu, but he didn't speak Innu, his mom didn't speak English, and he had a lot of questions and he couldn't get any questions because he couldn't communicate with his mom.

So he came back trying to fit in, and he – he had a hard time, he was frustrated, he didn't understand the way people lived and then he started drinking. And he drank – he was here for about seven or eight years – and he died because of alcoholism. Because he didn't – he couldn't fit in, in the community.

And – so I'm going to stop there. So think about that story and there's – that's not the only story. There's so many stories like that.

So we'll take a little break.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Okay. Thank you.

Recess

C. URQUHART: All right, folks, we're going to get started again.

Just checking with the interpreters, are you guys good to go?

Thanks, Gerry.

Anne?

Excellent, thank you.

So firstly we just wanted to remind everyone that this conversation, we know, can be triggering. And so we have healing support workers here in the blue vests. And they're here to help provide emotional support to anyone who may need it. They are also helping to – helping people to sign up if they want to share their own stories and experiences with the Commissioners.

The Commissioners will be back here in Sheshatshiu to hear from Innu March 20 to 24, and in Natuashish April 17 to 21.

So if you are interested in that, or want more information about that process, please speak to the healing services workers.

This afternoon we're going to finish with Annie and Germaine's presentation of the timeline, and we will hear from Elder – from one Sheshatshiu Elder and we'll have another Elder speak tomorrow.

All right, I will pass it back to Annie and Germaine.

G. BENUEN: Testing.

A. PICARD: Okay.

So in – between 1990 and 2000, is when the NMIA – over here – changed their name to Innu Nation. So now they're – they're – they're doing a lot more work in the community. And as more changes are taking place in the community, there's also more organizations that are being set up. And it was around that time when – when they set up the women's shelter, the new group home, the Charles J. treatment centre.

And they also set up the mobile treatment program, so people that wanted to go to treatment were able to go to treatment on the land. And they also had a sentencing circle in the early '90s. And they also – we also had the youth centre – the old youth centre, CYN.

So as the Innu people recognize and progress in our community, we also had a lot of things taking place in our community. There – we had a lot – a lot of people that were still struggling personally in their lives, and struggling with drugs and alcohol, and still struggling with a lot of the – the abuse that they've encountered over years.

And between 1995 and 2010, we had a rash of suicides. We had a lot of people that committed suicide – a lot of young people that we lost during that time. In my own family, I lost two brothers to suicide. One of them was 16 years old when he took his own life, and he had a one-month-old baby – a six-month-old baby, sorry – at the time. And my youngest brother was only 14 when he took his own life, and that was due to family breakup, because of the drinking in the family.

So a lot of our leaders and our community members started asking for more help, and there was an emergency community meeting that took place. And it was during that community meeting that we found out that we had 29 drug dealers living in our community. And this was just information that people in the community just gave to the leaders.

And one of the outcomes of that – that time, I guess, was – there were a group of people in the community that went for training with – and took the Nechi training. And Nechi is a counselling – alcohol counselling training. There were a few people from Natuashish that took that training and a few people in Sheshatshiu that also took the training. And then there was also another group of people that took the same training in 2010.

And I was one of those people that took that training in 2010. And my youngest brother had just died four months before that. So I credit that training for my sanity during that time.

And around 1995 and 2000 is also when we had our new clinic – the Mani Ashini Clinic, that's down here by – by the bridge. And also with the changes that was taking place, one of the things that the Innu people did was they – they kicked the priest out of the community.

We had, also, more people going into the country by plane. And in 2000 and – 2002, I believe, is when Sheshatshiu became a – a

reserve. So we were able to get our status cards.

And it was between 2000 and 2010 we also lost a lot of those early key people that worked really hard for the Innu people. And some of those people are Rose Gregoire, Mary Mae Osmond, Apenam Pone, Daniel Ashini, Penote Michel, Enoch, and Greg Penashue.

So for the Innu, that was a big loss.

G. BENUEN: When you think about the stuff that went on in our lives – in the Innu lives – and when the leadership started to fight back, we did get the funding from the federal government and the province but we did get – you – it was like – you spend this money the way we want you to spend it, or you don't get it back. So we had to do that and there were some services and programs that we needed it; but we couldn't spend the money that we got from the government.

And – like – we didn't get – get the – the support that we needed from the government, 'cause you need resources when you're trying to deal with the social issues. And so when the Voisey's Bay came on stream, there was an Impact Benefit Agreements, and a lot of that funding source that came from the land was used to develop the programs to deal with the social issues in our community. And – and it's not only the – the government is saying: Okay, you Innu people, now we're going to recognize you.

We had to fight for it. Our leaders had to fight for it. They travelled across the world to United Nations to make a complaint – I guess – against the government. And when you look at the resources – the resource developments in our land is – they see none. The Churchill Falls project, we didn't get anything from it.

There was also – as you guys probably know about it – there was low-level flying training within our land. That – Annie mentioned that's when the Innu started to stand up for themselves and that's when they do the protests, the lobby and getting support from other organizations and our – other Aboriginal groups across Canada.

And also the Voisey's Bay project, we had to protest to get – I guess – what we want from it, too, 'cause it was developed on our land – there was also a protest for that.

And also that we didn't get the – under IRT – I'm only going to do the IRT part 'cause I can't speak for other organizations – we didn't get the prevention funding until 2016, I think, and it wasn't much. We had to hire social workers and a community – a couple of community workers to start the prevention program under IRT.

And in 2019, I think, there was legislation on the province that came on under Innu or Indigenous Representatives program. And at the time the – the legislation was placed, we didn't get any money for it, so we had to transfer those two prevention workers into that roles.

We did put in proposals and we were negotiating a funding with ISC – I think – regarding the Indigenous Representatives program. I don't know if any of the people know what that means.

I'm just going to briefly say what Indigenous Representative has been in place across Canada, I guess – and it wasn't in the province. And once the province passed legislation –

And when – we have five in Sheshatshiu and we have four in Natuashish that has held that position. And that would be the first contact if there's any referrals to child protection cases. And they would need to contact that person if they have a referral from the community or another source that there is a child of concern. So that's just a shortened brief of that Indigenous Representatives.

And when I say we didn't have the funding under prevention, the Child and Youth Family Services child protection system within the province received unlimited funding from the federal government to run their program. So in the last few years we have gotten some funding under prevention.

And two years ago Innu Nation put in a complaint of discrimination into a Human Rights Tribunal and we had to do – I had to do an affidavit to say that we were discriminated – the Innu children were discriminated against, because of where they are – I guess – 'cause the First Nations across Canada was getting this funding.

So after we put in the – the complaint, we – they up our funding and, just, maybe a couple of weeks ago, we got another letter saying that they will give us what we asked for – maybe a little bit more.

So we got that funding because we fought for it. We put in our claim, into a Human Rights Tribunal, and – and the Innu, that's how they got what they need, it's: Fight for it.

So under – with our program under prevention services, we also did have a protocol signed with the province. There was agreement MOU before that, but that wasn't working, that wasn't being followed. And we have come a long way 'cause before this protocols, or before this Innu representative program, Innu had no say in what happened to the kids when they were apprehended by the province. And now we do have a protocol with the province that – that we had signed, and the rules that are going forward with it.

And the province, they have been good; they could be better. They have worked with us. The front-line social workers call us when there's a referral for apprehension, or a child of concern.

And our prevention workers – and some of them are here in the blue vest – they do try everything to keep the child in the family, or in the community, before they – 'cause there's a section, it's like – I don't – like a safety plan, which the child is not in care. So all those are being looked at first, before we – before the child is taken away. And there are times that we're – we can't prevent that.

So we – we do have a process and we have the Innu representative, we have our staff who are – who have a degree in social work, and we also have prevention workers that we try to – try to keep the children in the communities or with families if all possible.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

G. BENUEN: And I'm not saying that it's not still happening – that the kids can – like the CYFS is still doing the work, I guess, like everybody else. 'Cause all day I have been communicating with a couple of people; CSSD shows up at the house, and – so it's – it's still happening.

And also I want to mention, too, that we've been working on the Innu Law with child and family services, within our organization at IRT. Innu Nation gave us this task, to be a technical support on this Innu Law, and we have done work for the last couple of years, since 2021.

And that – that work is still ongoing and we were – also from Innu Nation, we were given a green light to do consultations within the communities and get Innu stories.

So that work is still ongoing and it's probably gonna be going for the next few years before we can clue it up. 'Cause we gotta – we gotta design it for Innu and Innu children, and the Innu people have to lead this project.

So that's an exciting project that we took on. 'Cause once that project is done, the CYFS – it's no longer going to be here, under the

province. Innu are going to run their own child and family services department.

So we – just to clue up, it's been a struggle. Like, this happened many, many, many years, and in the last few years we have been able to work with the province and work with the federal government. It's – it's better than it – what it was, but it could be better, and it's gonna be better – that'd be hopeful.

So that's – that's the end of my presentation.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Oh.

Thank you so very much for that enlightening presentation. With the concurrence of my fellow Commissioners, we would ask you to stand for a dedication.

So, I'll ask for a moment of silence as the Commissioners are dedicating this morning's session to the children of Gregory and Agathe in Natuashish, and to the siblings of Annie here, Gilles Gregoire and Tobias Nuna. Please bow your heads.

Thank you.

In the same way, we dedicate this afternoon's sessions to Gilles and Tobias.

Thank you.

P. RALPH: You guys, that was fantastic. Thank you very much.

We're going to take about a ten-minute break. We need to get an interpreter set up outside here, and then we'll start with the next witness. Is that – is that fine, Ben?

B. BROOKWELL: Um.

P. RALPH: Do you want to start now or do you want to start later –

B. BROOKWELL: Well I –

P. RALPH: – tomorrow morning?

B. BROOKWELL: – I just had a few short follow-up questions just for some clarification, and then – I promise we won't be long. Just for Germaine and Annie to help us out.

So could you remind us what IRT stands for?

G. BENUEN: Innu Round Table Secretariat.

B. BROOKWELL: And what is IRT?

G. BENUEN: IRT is – we coordinate discussions between federal government and provincial government with Innu leadership. We also have like, a devolution of program – income support program that we had taken over since 2016, I think. And that's where we're moving with the – family – child and family services too, is devolution of programs.

B. BROOKWELL: And you mentioned the Innu Law; what is the Innu Law going the cover?

G. BENUEN: The Innu Law is going to cover the Child, Youth and Family Services – like child protection and prevention. Right now the province is doing protection and Innu Round Table is doing prevention which I don't understand; this – two and two should go together.

B. BROOKWELL: We're okay on translation?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: She was (inaudible).

B. BROOKWELL: Okay.

And the last question, there are some photos around the room; could you tell us about them, so people may see at the break?

A. PICARD: So a lot of the photos around the room are – there's some photos that depict during the protest of the – the NATO protest. And there's also photos that I received from Memorial University, of people – like, I have a photograph of my great-grandmother here, too. So these are really old photographs of the Innu people.

And I just found out, actually, this morning, there's a photograph here of my grandmother's brother when he was just a child. So I didn't know that.

B. BROOKWELL: Thank you very much.

G. BENUEN: Just a little comment. I guess the old photos are the way the Innu used to be. And those are, I guess, the first contact when non-Innu people came into our communities. I want to say a little story about that – that's my grandfather, just over there.

Somebody told me this morning, when they first saw a non-Innu person, they came on the boat. There was a legend called Aiasheu and the – it's – and Aiasheu was left on the island, and he came on the boat. So when they saw all the people in the boat they call them Aiasheu, because of the legend, and they were non-Innu people.

So they weren't sure of each other. There was the strange people on the boat, there was Innu people camping on the shores of the lake. So that little guy there – he was maybe eight or nine there – he was sent to meet with these people – go check them out. So he went on, got on the boat, checked everything out, couldn't communicate with them, he was just looking around on the boat. So they came on the shore – so he brought them all over and said: They're okay. We're okay. We can't speak to each other, so that's how it is.

So that was – that was the story that I find out this morning.

P. RALPH: Great. Thanks again.

Now the three parties here have the opportunity to cross-examine, I believe, the Province of Newfoundland, Canada, and the Commissioner's Counsel. I don't believe anyone intends to cross-examine, is that correct?

And the parties that need to seek leave, I understand that no one is seeking leave to cross-examine, is that correct?

So, Ben, do you want to – to start the witness – the testimony this afternoon?

B. BROOKWELL: I think it'd be good for us to take a break so we can set-up for translation in the room.

P. RALPH: Okay.

B. BROOKWELL: And that'll take a few minutes.

P. RALPH: Yes. Great.

Thank you.

Recess