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

English Transcript | Volume 18

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

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COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Good afternoon, everyone.

We're going to start our proceedings. We understand that the fan has to stay on so we will all try to speak into our microphones.

Thank you for welcoming us back to your community.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you, Penote, for being here to start it off with a prayer in a few minutes. I also want to recognize the Chief. I want to recognize one of the very important figures who pressed so hard for this Inquiry as well: Simeon.

The Chief was just attending another very important event where the community accepted the search and rescue craft named *Atuan Penashue*, the boat, and we're so pleased that the community is making this kind of progress.

[Dialogue between Commissioner Qupee and Interpreter Nuna in Sheshatshiu-aimun.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: What was the name?

[Dialogue between Commissioner Qupee and Interpreter Nuna in Sheshatshiu-aimun.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yeah, the name of the boat?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Isaiah.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: The building –

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: – the building is Isaiah.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Isaiah.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Right.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: The building, but the boat's –

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Isaiah. The boat –

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: The boat is Atuan.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: We want – sorry.

We want to welcome Janet Michel, all of the community members here as well. Thank you for being here.

We'll ask a Elder to give us a prayer to open our session.

ELDER ANTUAN: First of all, I want to say a few words for the people that – who never did come home to their own community, like, residential schools. I'd like to wish them a prayer for them, to remember what happened to them 'cause we have heard that now and then that they found bodies just where they were – where they went at the schools and some of them never did come home.

And I – I'd like to thank, especially myself, I went through the same situation when I was a young boy. I was eight years old when I left my community, this Sheshatshiu, and I didn't come home until I was about 10 or 11 years old and I lost my language. That's the same thing I'm gonna repeat again: I lost language, I lost my culture, I even lost the relationship to the people.

I couldn't understand the Innu language when I came back in the community. And I thought myself: I have to learn my language back, in my community. And I did learn it, the language.

But I never got it, everything, what I'm entitled – supposed to get it, in my lifetime. And the reason why I want to remember is for those people who never came home in their community because I did come home, myself, in my community, to tell the people

what I was doing in St. John's and what happened to me. And whatever, like – whatever the people who sent me in St. John's were doing, they did wrong to me. They did wrong because I lost my language.

What I said before, I lost my language, my culture and my identity. I didn't know who I am. I was a different person when I came back here in Sheshatshiu. I only can speak English, and the other people who were there in my community couldn't understand me. The only people who understand me was the teachers who taught the students in the community, and the priest who was serving – our parish priest in our community.

And it's very difficult for me to relate it to the people who didn't come home, who were in a residential school. But I'm proud to hear them, they didn't know where they came from. I hope they know where they came from because I know, where I came out from my community. And to say a prayer for each of them, I'd like for you people to remember for those, especially the students who never came back home in their community.

I want to start off with the sign of the cross.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I just want to add another section there. I remember how hard for me to tell my people what I went through, because none of them did not quite understand how I went through in a – in my life. And I also think I'll remember those people who didn't come home. They were the ones who were supposed to tell the people in their community to know what their situation was when they went to the school other in – other communities. Like, when you say residential schools – residential school.

Our school was the Mount Cashel. That was located in St. John's. Mount Cashel was the – organized by the Irish Brothers, I was told. That's the story that I was told. And the Brothers who were teaching didn't do the right way, according – 'cause I was only eight when I heard one of the Brothers said to the – another Brother, because I was a different person from that – from a different community. And this what turns me real bad on myself because I didn't know who I am, first of all, because I didn't know who I am.

So today, as I remember those years, it's very sad. To have my scar in my – inside my heart, the way I was told to go to school because you're gonna learn English. You're gonna learn all the matters of the white society. I did learn lots of it, because I'll – I did – when I say I lose my language, I losed my culture, I losed everything – just about everything that I had when I went in there.

So it reminds me of those students who did go to residential school, who never came back to their communities. It reminds me, very hard and I can't express my sincere to them, what the feelings they had when they went in there and the differences of education that's doing to them. And especially for those people who came back into their communities, like myself. I came back to my community to tell a story, what happened to us when we went through the school, to the white society.

And I also – the mind changes everything when we were there in that – in school in St. John's. Everything changes – everything. They didn't care what changes came about. And today, today as I stand here, I still never got apology from government saying that I'm sorry what have you – what – whatever happened to you. You went St. John's and we apologize to you.

You're the first part – that was two, three weeks ago, I think, when they apologized the first people who were – that was in Cartwright they apologized to people. They weren't the real people. They were only part of it.

Like, with – as we, Innu people, are human being and the Inuit – the Inuit, which they used to call them Eskimos. They didn't do apology to them and ourselves. They only apologized to the Métis people, which is totally wrong to our government to say apology to the other people, not the people who were here before them, like us and the

Inuit. They were there before the white people came here in our community, in our land.

And this is why we are saying we are the part of this land and I'm appreciate to say those things in here, especially when you people are trying to help us the way we – you people want to walk with us. And we certainly have – I'm happy to reach the – this – the word – the wording from today and on whatever the – whatever intents you to say to the people here in Sheshatshiu, and I'm very thankful for all of you people.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Is it on? Okay.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Good afternoon, my name is Anastasia Qupee.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yes, my name is Mike Devine.

First of all, we have healing services workers here from Social Health and IRT to provide you with support as we go through the sessions today and throughout this week and next week.

And I wanted to identify the workers that are here today. So if you'd just acknowledge – stand up or wave when I call your name so that people know who you are, please. So we have: Edward Nuna; Tiffany Nuna; Rebecca Rich; Louise Bradley is our consultant, and she's moving around the room; and, of course, Elizabeth Sheppard.

We also want to let you know that we have food. It's down here to my left. And there's coffee and snacks to provide you for some nourishment for the body.

Also, we have a tent outside, as we have in previous sessions, and so if you – anytime you want a break, you want to go out there, it's – I think it's still a work in progress or almost finished. It may be finished by now, so you can just check that.

Also, whether you're here to speak today or just to listen, hearing somebody or speaking may – you know, may trigger something in you about past occurrences, yourself. So we want you to take a moment just now – take a moment right now to think about how you will care for yourself afterwards.

So speaking or listening today may take a toll upon you. So we ask everyone to please reach out to support, whether it's the people I've identified here who are in this room, those who may be on the land or family and friends. So anybody that you can find for supports.

We want to acknowledge that it takes great strength to reach out for help for support and to be vulnerable. It's a true sign of strength that you can do that. So, please, take care of yourself and take care of each other.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Tshenashkumitin, Mike, and also Anastasia, for those words.

We welcome Chief Etienne. He will be speaking to us in just a moment to start our afternoon, and then Janet Michel will speak, followed by Frederick Pinette.

I think it's important for all of you to understand that the entire Inquiry team is always so happy to come to your community, and that is because you are so welcoming to all of us.

We already have a list of maybe 10 or 12 people who are already signed up to speak this week. And when you come in, all you have to do is meet our administrative team and Paula will put your name on the list when you want to speak with us. We'll welcome you either in this public session or if you want us to hear your – what you have to say in private, we'll be doing that as well.

And, of course, if you know that someone can't make it or they're ill but they wish to speak to the Commission, we will go to your home and hear you as well.

We've already – as Commissioners, we have already reviewed many of the testimonies given up to this point and we are very pleased with what we have learned from your truth. Your experience in life, your understanding of Innu life that we have to learn about, is very important for us to hear.

Along with the Innu Round Table, the Innu Nation, the governments, we are committed to making sure that Innu gain control of child protection and child welfare. With the many lawyers who are working for the families, the lawyers working for the Commission, the people who speak with us, we want to be an Inquiry that gives real results and is not simply a report that will not be followed up on.

So you, the Innu, all these other people, are guiding us in the recommendations that we will eventually make.

Caitlin, our lawyer, will speak with you in a moment but, first, we're going to hear from Chief.

CHIEF E. RICH: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

No, I just want to say that I had a call – I called Helen Gabriel this morning, the woman who lost her husband last night, and in the respect because that's what we do this kind of circumstances that happen in our community. Because – I, myself, as a leader in the community, because I have to hear to the family members because of this hearing – this Inquiry will be happening for the next four days. And I'm glad to say that I gave her a call there this morning and then asked her what her opinion, what her thoughts of this process that's going to be happening in our community.

Well, she said, if that's kind of very important work and she understands it and she see how important it is and she said: I'm not trying to stop anything. I said – and she was just telling me, encourage me that to move forward with this hearing because she knows how important it is because it's been quite some time, and a long time, that we have been talking about this Inquiry when it comes to the Social Services – Child, Youth and Family Services.

But in the beginning, I was just saying that back in 2017, when I entered the leadership in Innu Nation, and it already happened the year prior to that to our previous leaders. That calling out to the government that – just have the – to have this child welfare Inquiry and it's been a long process.

And then the leadership have their – finish their term and then we took over, and then we start from there. And, at same time there, the hardest part of the dealing at that time that – with the federal government and – mostly federal government, because we asked them to be involved and sit on this table in this Inquiry because it's very important to hear out the Innu, what they had been going through with the Social Services work.

And they're just only going to provide our – an information for us, and I said: It's very important for you to sit on the table because you're the main government that's sending the funding source to the provincial in order to these institutions up and running and I think it's – that's how important it is.

And it took a long process and then – but where we are right now, it took us a lot of years and I think it's very important and the – and it's very important for the – our community in Sheshatshiu and Natuashish to hear out the people. Because these are the – this is not the only thing because there's a lot of stuff that's been happening for the last 50 or 60 years with the Innu since they've been located in the community in Sheshatshiu and in Davis Inlet, at that time.

But that's the only thing I would need to say and I'm gladly – I had a conversation with Helen Gabriel this morning and seeing that how important this work, that need to move forward, and she's very supportive of this.

And I'm just gonna say that the – and I think it's very important work that this process need to move forward.

Thank you. Tshenashkumitin.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you very much, Chief Etienne.

I can report that as a person who lives in St. John's, many people are aware that this Inquiry is happening. People who I have never met have come up and said to me: The work that the Inquiry is doing with the governments, with the Innu Round Table, with the Innu Nation is important and we have to complete it.

So, what you're saying is also acknowledged by the province and people in the province, as well.

Caitlin, please – oh, I'm sorry.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

C. URQUHART: Thank you, Anne.

I wish, like Chief Rich said, I could translate for myself. But sadly I can't, so I'm very grateful that you're here and would echo the comments of the Commissioners and thank everyone for being here today. I'm just going to provide a few housekeeping remarks.

So the Commissioners will be here listening to community members today until Thursday. Generally from 9:30 in the morning to 4:30 in the afternoon, with a lunch break approximately from 11:45 to 1.

We're very excited that, on Thursday evening, Dawna Marie Lee is going to be hosting an open art studio session open to all community members.

Each day, we hope to hear from approximately four people: we have two people scheduled in the morning and two scheduled in the afternoon, and so we've asked folks to try to keep their statements around an hour to allow as many people as possible to – an opportunity to speak.

If we have time after the scheduled speakers, anyone in the room who would like to speak will be provided a chance to do so. And if you'd like to speak and haven't already signed up, you can speak to Nathan Penashue, our community liaison here in Sheshatshiu, or speak to Paula Battcock, who is seated at the red table in the back.

These sessions are being recorded and are public; however, the recordings and the names of speakers will only be shared or made public if the speaker chooses to have them shared.

Commissioner Igloliorte already mentioned that if anyone doesn't feel comfortable in this setting, we can also meet – provide private meetings or go to people's houses to meet, if that would make them more comfortable.

And if anyone has any questions, my name is Caitlin. Nathan's around – Paula, Louise, grab any one of the Inquiry team and we're more than happy to try to answer your questions.

Thank you. So this afternoon we're going to first hear from Janet Michel and then Frederick Pinette. So I'm going to now welcome Janet Michel to this seat.

ELDER J. MICHEL: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA (providing English translation): My name is Janet Michel. I come here to tell my story.

It is not long ago that I lost my brother. We used to talk about what will we bring in this Inquiry. There were three of us. Me and my younger sister used to be in a dormitory when we were taken away from our parents. I often wondered why, why did that happen?

There were white people who were working in the dormitory and I remember my sister was always abused, beaten, and I always wanted to defend her. I defended my sister.

I remember so well that there were male workers at the dormitory. They grabbed me and threw me in a room. I was told that I will be in that room for one week but I fought back. That white male who threw me in that room opened the door, he sexually abused me.

I – it was always on my mind that I will tell my mother. I would ask: When will I go home? And it was always said to me – the answer was no.

I also wanted to find out about my younger sister who was in another building. I was not allowed. I also was told no.

I often thought about if I go home, who do I tell? How do I tell my story to my parents? I was in a dormitory for three years and I thought: Once I go home, I will go to the hospital for an exam.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

ELDER J. MICHEL: Lawyer.

INTERPRETER NUNA: I was talking to a lawyer and told everything that had happened to me.

Ever since my husband passed, I also often wonder what had happened to him because he went to a residential school, himself. And I also think about the others today. The others that will come forward and tell their own stories in their own way. I think about that, too.

Today, I think about my husband, how we would go to Nutshimit, the country. I would – we would spend time together and how we would do our own healing when we would be there.

I have 16 grandchildren and I have four great-grandchildren and I raised them. I think that is mainly the reason why I am still here. There has been a lot that has been going on with drugs and on – and alcohol but I still sit here today. I really love my grandchildren and they are in school.

I thank the Commissioners, Nastash and Igloliorte, for being here, for helping supporting us. I thank those behind me, the one who sits beside me, my daughter, and the support worker behind my back, I also thank them.

And I'd like to thank everybody else for coming. That is all I need to say.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you very much. We might have some questions.

I'm going to ask Mike – Commissioner Mike Devine, if he has any questions.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Just one question.

But, first of all, I wanted to say thank you for sharing this difficult information that I know it was for you to say. That I believe what you have said and I am so very sorry that this has happened to you.

I also wanted to say how strong you've shown to be in the raising of so many children in your family and in your community.

So my just one question for – so that I can understand, is where was the dormitory?

ELDER J. MICHEL: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: North West River.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I just wanna say that I thank Janet for coming forward and being able to share her story. And I invite her again to come and to keep talking and it's nice to see she's got a lot of support, as well.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Tshenashkumitin, Janet.

Please, if you can remember, tell us how old you were and how old your sister was when you went to the dorm.

ELDER J. MICHEL: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

[Dialogue between Elder J. Michel and Interpreter Nuna in Sheshatshiu-aimun.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: Yeah, she was 14 and her brother was 13 and her younger sibling was 12.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Can you tell us some of the work that your husband, Penote Ben, did for the Innu? The things that you can remember about that.

ELDER J. MICHEL: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: He started working with, the past naming for Innu Nation was Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association, that's where he started working for the Innu.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Tell us about the things that he did.

ELDER J. MICHEL: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: He used to travel with the Elders, the knowledge keepers.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Do you recall the time when he was involved with low-level flying in all those protests?

ELDER J. MICHEL: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: Yes.

ELDER J. MICHEL: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: He went to jail for it. Also, the authorities used to go after him when he went on a caribou hunt.

ELDER J. MICHEL: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: She said that her husband used to travel around the world to tell other countries about the Innu and what our beliefs were with our land. When he came back, that's when he left a note at our house telling me that they will be incarcerated because of what had happened to low-level flying in Goose Bay at the air – runway. People ran in and he was one of them.

When I learned my husband was jailed, I told this to my uncle: What will I do? What will – who will help me with our kids? And then my husband called me and I just said to him: I support you on this. I support what you are doing.

I thank you for – that I'm trying to answer the best I could. And as I'm sitting here, I'm a bit tired 'cause where I am ill.

Thank you, she said.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you so much.

We appreciate your memory. We all recognize, like so many other Innu people, how you and your husband have contributed to the well-being of Innu people and we're very grateful for both of you.

It's a good time for a break and we'll be back in 15 minutes and Frederick Pinette will be speaking.

Recess

