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

English Transcript | Volume 19

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

Tuesday | Sheshatshiu | 17 October 2023

[redacted]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: So, counsel, if you have someone prepared, we're quite ready to –

P. RALPH: Yeah, if you could give us –

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: – continue.

P. RALPH: – if you can – yeah.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: You okay, Anne?

[No audio recorded from 13:35:05 to 13:35:26.]

ELDER TSHAKAPESH: – one. I'm gonna translate myself.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

ELDER TSHAKAPESH: Tshenashkumitin.

Thank you, Judge Igloliorte, Nastash – what's your name again? Mike?

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Mike.

ELDER TSHAKAPESH: Mike, yeah.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken].

I'm not here to talk about Thunderheart. I'm here to talk about the experience with the policy of government. Both level of Liberal government: Newfoundland and also federal government.

Basically, I want to start by referring Gathering Voices. What I'm hearing of in my – that's my grandfather, John Poker. This was produced by the Mushuau Innu, Davis Inlet and also Sheshatshiu, I believe. I'm just gonna refer the Gathering Voices that was done by the Mushuau Innu in Davis Inlet years ago. I wanna read, that was written by Christine Poker, this and I want you to listen very carefully.

My name is Simeon Tshakapesh, I'm from Davis Inlet and now residing here in Sheshatshiu with my wife. She's from Sheshatshiu. I was born across the river, Grenfell, here, but that was demolished. That's where I was born.

When I was 12 years old, both of my parents committed the suicide at the same time. They were both drinking alcohol. And I was raised by this man, John Poker, and I want you to read – listen to this poem wrote – written by Christine Poker during this inquiry of Gathering Voices:

For many generations, his people walked softly and gently on the land; he has done the same.

Through their visions, dreams and singing, his people have been able to lead their own; he has done the same.

His people have cared for Mother Earth, the animals she provided, knew the rituals and ceremonies to give thanks; he has done the same.

His people have spoken wise words, for they knew these words would strengthen their own; he has done the same.

His people have known hardships and they have taught one another to survive; he has done the same.

Because he, with his people, chose a path of pride and dignity, he is a true Innu of our time.

I just want to go back. I'm gonna talk about the impacts on Innu people during the first contact and I'm going to read some information. I'm gonna talk about colonialism, assimilation and confederacy.

Colonialism and Confederation brought dramatic and far-reaching changes to our Innu culture – as Innu people in Labrador – society and lands. When the Christian's missionaries arrive during the 1800s, these missionaries helped marginalize the Innu people religious beliefs, while European traders encouraged the Innu men to trap furs full-time, making them in – dependent on foreign trading posts of the food, supplies. The Labrador Boundary dispute caused further problems as the new Labrador-Quebec border divided Innu territory almost in half in 1927.

Confederacy group – and I wanna question this of all time. Confederacy, it means in a dictionary: A group of people governed – governments, bureaucracy, countries,

organizations, et cetera, to join together for a common purpose.

Of what, of that purpose? Is it assimilation to our people? To colonize them? To degrade them? Is that what's their purpose was for this confederacy?

By 19 – 1863, the RC missionaries in 1800 helped marginalize the Innu religions beliefs.

After Confederation, provincial government within the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, including federal Government of Canada, established the villages of Sheshatshiu, Utshimassit – Davis Inlet – known as Davis Inlet, for the Innu people which largely ended their migratory lifestyle. At the same time, increased industrialization threatening the Innu territory.

In 1969, Upper Churchill Falls hydroelectric project flooded vast stretches of the Innu land, low-level flying – flights training, disrupted the Innu hunting grounds, and the discovery of (inaudible) nickel deposits in Voisey's Bay in 1994 jeopardized more Innu territory, more hunting grounds.

To protect their culture and resources from the outside forces, the Labrador Innu people formed the Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association, known as NMIA, in 1976. As a result of the group of effort, the Canadian government began registering Labrador Innu as a status Indians in 2002, giving them access of federal services and programs available to First Nations as Innu people within Labrador, especially Natuashish and Sheshatshiu.

Although the – post-contact period; and I want to stress that very hard, very nice and clearly. What I'm saying here, I'm gonna put that out in context when I testify in January. Although European nations were using Newfoundland and Labrador as a migratory fishing station by the early 16th century, their presence did not greatly after [read: alter] Innu culture and society until 19th century, when Christian missionaries and fur traders established themselves in Northern Labrador.

Until then, the Innu families maintained a largely nomadic lifestyle. They spent much of colder months hunting caribou, wolves, ptarmigan, and other game in Quebec-Labrador interior before visiting coastal areas to catch fish, seals and seabirds. Caribou was particularly important. It is not only provide the Innu people with food, clothing and other materials, such as played the central in many spiritual beliefs, as our rituals.

In the old days, our nomadic people depend on this wild meat – wild game, like caribou, wolves and ptarmigan. There was never a grocery store in the beginning of their way of life as nomadic people. They never saw a store – a grocery store to buy pork chops or bacon. They were mainly hunted – hunted these wild game to survive, to sustain their families and feed them.

By 19 – by 1896, Hudson's Bay trading post was established in old Davis Inlet – across from old Davis Inlet. European culture did not really impact Innu society until fur trade – fur traders, like Hudson's Bay Company and Christian missionaries, arrive in Northern Labrador in 19th century.

Increased contact with Roman Catholic missionaries and Europe fur traders during 1800s, the great – greatly altered Innu hunting and religious practices. Traders were able to persuade many Innu to abandon and marginalizing the caribou hunt to traps furs full-time.

In return of the catch, the Innu trappers obtained food, tools, other supplies at trading post. Giving hunt – giving up the hunt and specializing in furs, however, made Innu in – dependent on European goods.

When my grandfather, John Poker, used to share me his stories about our way of life in the old days, he never met with white people – non-Aboriginal people – never met with the social workers, never met with the police, never met with the store managers, lawyers, in the memorial time.

They had their laws; they had their religion; they had their spirituality, their beliefs, their values, their ceremonies, their rituals. When somebody got sick, they had a sweat lodge. They didn't have a hospitals. They were independent nomadic people; my ancestors, my grandfather.

And life changed, he said, when they met the priest, store managers and the rangers. Life changed rapidly. They were forced to settle in the settlement of old Davis Inlet first. Eventually, they were transported to Nutak but walked back home. Some didn't make it back.

When Europeans contact with our people, the disease was introduced to them. A lot of our people died with measles, Spanish flu. And my grandfather, John Poker, said: When somebody's sick, they usually take them to the medicine man and put him in a sweat lodge.

He said: Today, you go to hospital if you get sick; you get a bloodwork. In the old days, he said, the bloodwork was blood bleeding. That's how their – they heal people when they're sick. And I have a picture here that – what they performed when somebody is sick and – [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken].

There was a picture here. I was gonna show it to you guys about –

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yes, see if you can find it.

ELDER TSHAKAPESH: Yeah, it's here somewhere. There was an Elder was performing to bleed the blood when a person was sick.

My grandfather said: When somebody sick, this is how they heal people. They made a hole in their vein in the foot and they drain a blood – a lot of blood, and he said you could see the white stuff coming out from that person, a lot of white stuff, and that is a disease that – a virus that a person carried.

And after the – when they bleed the blood from that person – a person who's ill, when all the blood – white stuff is coming out and that means he's healed. And my grandfather said: Today, you have to go to see the doctor and get a blood test to get the results.

And that was a way of life as Innu people, and today, a lot of history change. A lot of people history change today. Who we are as Innu people, and who our ancestors were, they were pride – proud people, independent people.

I don't know how many people ever got in trouble with the law themselves, but when somebody's have an altercation or dispute, they usually move away from the camp and left that person abandoned until he's cooled down. That was a way of life dealing with justice – the Innu justice.

But today, when government – Newfoundland government entered Confederation 1949, we were introduced to policies, to follow their policies. What about us as Innu people? They didn't even consult our Elders. You know why? None of our Elders would have understood anyway. None of the public, we didn't speak English at all, nor education. As Mr. Einstein probably had more education than them. But they had education: the Innu education, their survival.

Today, the Innu people of Labrador, Natuashish and Davis, are the victims today of a colonization and assimilation – today. It is pretty evident today.

In the old days, was there any correctional centres? Was there any sexual assaults? Was there any child apprehension in the old days? I don't really think so.

Today, we entered – agreed with their policies, today, and their laws and their justice. What about us as Innu people? Do we have Innu lawyers today? I don't think so. Probably one but he passed away. Do we have university people degree? Yes, very – a few people.

I don't know why I am sitting here talking in English. I am Innu. I'm supposed to be talking Innu and that's the big change, how

we've been assimilated. Look at the clothes I'm wearing today; look at the microphone. In order my people to communicate one another in years ago, they had a shaking tent.

They had a shaking tent. That was our spirituality. That was a communication for other camps. They can even communicate people from Quebec through the shaking tent. Today, we have a devices: cell phones. Like, I have one here. That's how I communicate with people today. I don't go in shaking tent anymore. That, which was condemned by the missionaries.

And life has change as Innu people. They destroy us, who we are; they destroy our parents; they destroy our grandparents. Everything was taken off the table, 'cause they know the two level of government will be advancing at the table, and I am very disappointed. I am very disappointed for that.

I wish I was born years ago – many, many years ago and able to communicate in English and have an education. Things will – might have been different. Or any other Elders who had education, things might have been very different. I don't know.

I don't wanna change anybody's minds, the way our lives has been changed with these policies. The alcohol was introduced to our people and, today, we are abusing alcohol. We don't know how to control our drinks. I am an alcoholic. I am. But I am recovering alcoholic.

Years ago, my grandfather never talks about alcohol. Rarely I hear people say homebrew. As soon as Hudson's Bay Company post was refurbish in old Davis Inlet and that was – yeast was introduced and they started making homebrew, and the disruption and dysfunction started happen, and the violence happen.

So, the damage, it is pretty evident today and these are the facts. This is not a hearsay, the voice you're hearing. The voice you're hearing is of my ancestors and my grandfather's stories, not my stories. I'm just the messenger, but I'm glad I'm here today to tell you the story what they have done to our people.

I know – I notice, not a whole lot of Elders here. That's why I kept continue on it – on my – in the English because most of peoples do speak English.

So when you destroy somebody's way of life and you're trying to tell them how to live in their homes – you put them in a small shacks and you make them pay a price.

And when my – when our Elders was – were practising their spirituality, and the drum – I see the drum over there, as you can see the tent – the children were listening. That was another communication, how to feed the families through the drum. And I know you guys not gonna believe this. I'm not talking crazy. It's a fact. That was a way of life.

My wife here, Ruby, her great-grandfather was a shaman: name was Sam Rich. The power came from my great-grandfather Atika, and he was a powerful shaman, passed on to Chief Joe Rich, on to Sam Rich and others. The knowledge, the power, was given to them to go on.

And when they practise their beliefs and their values and their ceremonies, their rituals, the priest told them: You're worshiping the devil. And gave a cross to our people, the Elders. Look at the Elder in the middle over in that black and white picture; there is a big cross there. They gave those crosses to the people to get away from their culture and their way of – and their culture was evil. You just can't do that to the people. You just can't do that.

And who's gonna be accountable? If I break the law today, I know for fact I will be wearing – I'll be handcuffed, wearing shackles. If I did something wrong to a child or anybody else, I will be arrested and read my rights, too. And when white people – non-Aboriginal people, like social workers, when they commit a crime – like, I reported incidents after incidents with the police, lodging complaints against them, the

wrongs that they do. The file always come back concluded: insufficient evidence.

But when you are investigate as an Innu person, there won't be no questions asked. The information will be right in your face, handed down to you, and that's a fact. But when you tell people like that: they're worshiping the devil. How do we expect an Innu person to embrace his culture, his language, his values, beliefs, his spirituality, to honour that, when he was told he's worshiping the devil, his culture, he's practising the devil's work?

And who is more devil, here, taking the kids? The province is probably the devil, and Canada, of government probably are the devils.

And thank you, that's all I wanted to say. I'll be back in January. Me and my wife are gonna be attending therapeutic treatment and I'll be dealing with my – our – we're gonna be dealing with our son, Thunderheart's case. It's gonna be hard; it's gonna be tough, but it needs to be told.

And thank you. Tshenashkumitin.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you, Sir.

We're grateful for your attendance – for you and Ruby to be here with your counsel. What you have told us, we confirm what you are saying is the history of Canada and the history of Indigenous people.

In particular, what you tell us about the Innu experience is something that is now becoming more widely known, and also because you are confirming it with your knowledge of your Elders, your parents and grandparents. We're grateful for that. You're passionate, you're informed and you're eloquent in your statement.

So, all of this, we continue to look forward to your participation as time goes by.

Nastash?

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Tshenashkumitin, Simeon, Ruby and Bill.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yes, I just also wanna say thank you for your words and for your speech here today – your talk, your truth.

I guess, there's many things that you said that really struck with me, but the one thing I'll give back to you is that you just gave to us, and that is: You just can't do that to people.

And that pretty well sums it up, what you said: You just can't do that to people.

So, thank you.

ELDER TSHAKAPESH: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

Let's have a 10-minute break (inaudible).

Recess

