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

English Transcript | Volume 24

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

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COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back.

We have a presentation now from Etienne, Chief. Please, you're welcome, Sir, to step forward. If you need an interpreter, fine. If not –

CHIEF RICH: (Inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: – you're good.

Thank you.

CHIEF RICH: Yeah, we'll give Anne a little bit of break.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Good.

CHIEF RICH: Yeah.

Well – who's that person I was talking to this morning? What's his name?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Peter.

CHIEF RICH: Peter, okay.

So, good morning, Commissioners Igloliorte, Qupee and Devine. I'm glad to be here today because I received an invitation

and – but at the beginning of the – this session there, I came here just doing up the opening remarks there, and throughout the week, and it was kind of busy, to be there and there and where – everywhere.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Well, Chief, we realize what kind of life you've got.

CHIEF RICH: Yeah.

But, anyway, this morning when I got here – I had an invitation, like I said. [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

CHIEF RICH: Peter, okay.

Peter, one of your guys, asked me if I could – if I'm willing and taking the – put my thoughts about this sessions and the – about the Inquiry, and I'm more happy to do it. And – because I never have – I'm still in the process, try to – myself, try to speak with the Commissioners about the experience of the CSSD, but I have never gone through that yet. But I'm willing to do it in the future.

But, anyway, like I said, I'm very glad to be here today. And just sitting there by – this morning, about halfway this morning and when I got here, I heard our Elder speak, Tshaukuesh, and then I heard Paul Rich speak about his experience about the system.

It's kind of very emotional and I just can imagine what our people had to go through for all these many decades. And I think, where we are right now, like these are the kind of things that we have to deal with daily basis. It may not be me but there's someone out there, in both communities, Sheshatshiu and Natuashish, what we have been going through for all these years.

I was just thinking – sitting here this morning just listening to those two individuals speak, I'm just thinking that we are – where we are right now is just the beginning of the healing. And I truly believe there has been a lot of pain and hurt throughout this week that came out of our people here in Sheshatshiu, like I said in the beginning, and I think that's the only – that's probably is not even half of the stories that we hear.

I'm more thinking about as well, like, a government institutions that has put our people in a very devastating life, in physically, emotionally and mentally, suffering a lot of pain throughout these years, no wonder why our people has a very hard life for so many decades.

And I'm truly believe, we as Innu, we can cope that pain and the hardships when Innu people stand together as one nation. And I truly believe that one of the powerful medicine that Innu can use is on the land, which is Nutshimit; and the culture and the Innu way of life and surrounded by our people; and healing together where our ancestors came from, in a nomadic lifestyle.

The culture and Innu way of life, like I said, that's the most powerful medicine and healing, too, for the Innu. These are the kind of things that government has taken away from us. I may not see the nomadic life where my grandfather used to live, but I has had heard a lot of stories from him, because I was raised by my grandfather, and I was constantly, every season, he had to take me out in the land. And I missed a lot of English education throughout my life, but I'm happy to say I'm very grateful where I have came from.

I have learned a lot from my grandfather. But after he passing at my age of 19 – my grandfather passed away at age of – when I was at 19 years old, that's when I started beginning the working on the – a non-native skill, which is English. And I had never learned or speak the English language until when I probably about 14 years old. And it was challenging. And I didn't mind, like I said, I'm very grateful that my grandfather has done what he has done to show me where he came from. These are the kind of things that government has been taking away from the Innu.

Most of probably you know – you don't know – out in the bush in the country, in Nutshimit, that's probably one of the best and peaceful places you can live, a very happy place for the Innu.

But when we settled in the community back in early 1950s, that's where all the mentally, physically, sexually abuse came into play in our lives, for all the government institution – institutions has put through the Innu.

I must say, we have learned a lot throughout the years living in the community by the government rules we have to run by in our lives. And now we're turning to, as Innu, hurting one another; that's what we do here in the community. That's a non-Indigenous lifestyle, what we have been going through for the last two or three decades now.

This is what we learned. Being throughout all the pain and the hurt ever since we've been settled in the community, now this is what we learned, how to hurt each other. And now we have to deal with this every day on a daily basis.

On top of it, probably the most painful of the other institutions have been put through – to the Innu. And like I said, the Innu culture and the Innu way of life, for the last two generations, probably, our culture has slowly died because of the government institutions. The government have put a lot of funding towards us for our young people, our young children, to then attend these schools: residential schools, day schools.

I was just thinking, where has government have put through the Innu, has been taking away a lot of knowledge and our language and our culture. If the government could put the funding to do that, my question is: Why can't government put the funding towards to the Innu, in order to get that back? Because we have our young people now that aren't knowing what the Innu way of life is, Innu culture is, especially some of those young people has been taken away ever since they were born, and now they're adults and they don't even know their own identity as Innu.

If the government could put a lot of funding towards to do that – and I think maybe that's something that government should pay back because nowadays, this generation, we need funding in order to do things in life now, everyone does. Where we are right now, everyone is getting paid, they're not sitting there for free. That's what I'm saying when I talk about funding.

It is a very frustrating just sitting there, just half morning listening to those two individuals speak about the experiences about the system. I was just saying to myself sitting there and listening to them, wonder why no – I wonder why our people are like where we are right now. We're constantly fighting. We're constantly hurting each other, emotionally, mentally. Like I said, this is what we learn.

Because I have never heard the Elders or even any Innu person, if they could talk and speak about the stories what they've heard from their grandparents, you never heard them telling the story of how the people hurt each other. Mostly, they're constantly helping each other, anywhere they can.

I remember my late grandmother told me that on my mother's side there was about 16 of them. And I remember my grandmother told me there was a lot of women, Innu women, out there helping her raising her own children. And they weren't getting paid, because that's the Innu way of life, helping each other.

These are the kind of things that government has been taking. We may speak our language still, but we have lost a lot. And I think these are the kind of things that, in my mind right now, it is a very frustrating to listen to our own people has to go through in this system. It is very sad to see and, like I said, it's probably the beginning of the healing, but we still got long ways to go because healing journey, it's probably a long road ahead. Because some of those young people – and some of them are already gone – these are the kind of things, you'll not get it back.

Like it is a very emotional. I was just thinking that – listening to this two individuals – I only heard two individuals; imagine for the last sessions you guys had, like hearing how much hurtful and painful stories they have to share. And me, as an Innu person, I'm just thinking that hey, we're forgetting those people has been hurt for so many years and now we're hurting each other. Like I said, this is what we learned.

I think where we are right now, it's the beginning and the – as we go along, there could be a lot of – the outcome – I hope, really hope, a positive outcome about this Inquiry. And I believe this is probably one of the first Innu – first child welfare inquiry happening in Canada, which is – there's still a lot of Indigenous people out in the West and across the country, they have been going through – like you hear, unmarked graves – more than 10,000 unmarked graves there. But you just – this is the stories in the big and the small community, about 3,000 Innu people in Labrador, you're hearing the stories. Imagine what's out there in across the country.

Well, that's my thought, Commissioners, and like I said, I'm glad to be there today and just to share my thoughts and I had my own personal experience about the system, that probably in the future that I will share, but I'm gonna translate what I have said in my language.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Good.

CHIEF RICH: Thanks, yeah.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

Tshenashkumitin. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

Just said thank you to Chief Etienne for sharing his thoughts of how he thinks that life has changed for the Innu and what his hopes are. And also talking about land and how that is medicine for Innu people. And I think that's very important and I look forward to when he comes back again and speaks more about his own experience with CSSD.

So, again, thank you. Tshenashkumitin.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yes, Etienne, I know that you have other matters to deal with so I'll just be brief and say thank you so much, and please come back.

CHIEF RICH: Thank you.

P. RALPH: So, yeah, we're going (inaudible) invite someone else to speak.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: We don't have everybody?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Is there a list?

P. RALPH: I don't – I'm not sure –

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

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