

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

English Transcript Volume 43

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

Tuesday 5 November 2024

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Good morning, everybody. Welcome back this morning, for those who have returned. We're going to start now and –

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Our first speaker will be Elizabeth Penashue.

ELDER PENASHUE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA (providing English translation): When I speak today, I want to make it short as I can because of the translator. I don't think I am alone of what I am feeling. Every woman – Innu woman – mother, grandmother, feels it. We miss the way we used to live out on the land. Sometimes I want to cry but I hold my tears because I don't want to cry in front of my grandkids. I find it hard. When I am alone that's what I feel.

It is hard of what is happening to us today, because the Innu used to live a healthy lifestyle when they are in the country on the land. We used to be strong, healthy. Today we are no longer there. I, myself, only blame the government, the priests that destroyed our lives.

I, myself, I am not a leader, but I know I can fight back, and I am not well enough to do that. But we have our leaders to do that for us. I know other Elders will say and tell them of our hopes and what we want to be done from them.

I think I am not alone when I think about what needs to be done. We are not being

heard. I always say: Let's stand up and do what is right.

All the things that you see and hear about our communities, we have been unable to work together, to fight together, but in the past, we did not care of any monies to be given to us. I remember late Elder Sebastien Penunsi used to say – did not say: Am I going to get paid to go to these meetings? He showed up; Elders showed up to their meetings to talk about what needed to be done for our communities. He never went to the meetings to get paid, but he said what he needed to say to be heard as an Elder.

I remember in the past that whenever we had our community meetings, they went well because they were our knowledge keepers. They left us with what they thought that we should work together for our future generations to come. Maybe those generations will think: What would have our Elders thought? We should work together for the betterment of our communities. I always mention this whenever I am on the local radio station, when I talk there.

All of us have felt what is happening in our communities. Sometimes I think we should be listened to because we are Elders; they should listen to us. And I don't want to sound like as if I am the leader, but there are those I know don't listen, and I think they should listen to us Elders in our communities when they hear us talking.

Many things are not working for us in our communities, like the Social Services, the RCMP, even in our leadership regarding our land. Where are we now with our land? We haven't heard anything about our land, and I am disappointed. I want to know what is happening. Maybe the government thinks we don't know, and that worries us. This is what I am thinking, what is happening to us.

So this is what I think: We Innu should stand together and do something and show our strength to do what needs to be done for our people. I thought of what had happened before; there was a lot of support from other people. They showed their support. They show their support to the governments of what they did to us, before. This is regarding the NATO and the low-level flying. There was a lot of support from other peoples.

Today the government, I know, is just sitting back, never heard of us Innu. And I will stress this: Innu still love the way of life of being in Nutshimit, being free, being with their families. And I want to stress that out to the government, to let them know we are still here, and we will be here, and don't just go sitting back.

I know there is support from other people for us Innu, but it is us, the Innu, that need to show to the government that we can stand up for ourselves to fight for our rights, and that's what I want to see, as an Elder myself.

This Inquiry I have heard Innu cry, shedding tears, telling their stories. And those stories, I know, truly come from their hearts. Their cries are real of what had happened to them, to the women, the men, even the young people. I heard them. I heard their stories and their cries. And this is what the government has done to our people.

I know everything in our community is hard for everyone – the Innu living in these communities, every mother, grandmother, even great-great-grandmothers. I am not trying to cry when I say this: How many more young Innu will commit suicide because of drugs, alcohol? Mothers in our communities are the ones who feel this sadness within our communities that we live here today.

I know I'm not the only one – an elderly woman saying this, feeling this way. It hurts me when I think of my children, my grandchildren. I am afraid to tell my children to tell their kids, to help their kids. I am afraid they will not listen to me. What if something happens to my grandchildren? What if he/she commits suicide or gets run over by a vehicle?

I think what if we could have done something after it had happened to them. I

have heard them say, they are old enough to know. But myself, I think we still need to support them, to help them in our own ways, and this is how I feel.

I find it hard when my grandkids come to visit and yet I can't tell them anything. One time, this is what I wanted to tell my grandchild: How come your siblings never come; it's only you who comes to visit? I told him: I wish your late grandfather was still alive. He used to drive around, and I bet he would have been there for yous.

I told him I would have asked him to drive around to look for you and your siblings in this community and take you home. Take you to my home to be safe. This is what I told to one of my grandsons. Sometimes I want to ask to be driven around this community, but I am afraid of being put down or not allowed to do what I want to do for my grandkids too. I'm afraid I will get the answer No.

After I talked to my grandson, I asked him that he should pray for his grandfather to ask for his help with his addictions. I like the fact that he listen, and I hope he shared this with his siblings.

I think in our communities everyone knows what it's like being a grandmother. The worrying of our grandchildren, of them breaking laws, fighting other people, going to jail, ending up in courts. And sometimes the courts will give them opportunities to help and start taking responsibilities for their actions. And I say this: I still love my grandson, and I still pray for him, pray that he starts doing something for himself. And that's what I think.

When I speak, when other Innu speak, that is our truth. We always tell the truth when we talk from our hearts. I cry when I am alone because I feel alone. There are only two of my siblings that are still alive today, and sometimes I wish I could talk to them. There are so much stories to be told and to be heard, and I know that, as a mother, as a grandmother, as a great-grandmother.

I want to thank you all for listening to me. I hope we work together and show our strength.

I want to mention that I miss Jim Igloliorte; I remember him when he was young. I will always remember that when they started this Inquiry, that I looked back in his younger days, in our younger days, that he used to be at the Hudson's Bay Company store in North West River. That's how I remember him. He never – he did not like when the young people were fighting. He wasn't like that. I remember he was a good, young Inuit.

I hope to live to see the outcomes of this Inquiry.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you, Elizabeth, for your words this morning. Always words of wisdom that I've come to appreciate coming from you. And certainly in this morning you were able to talk about the history and where the problems came from with the government and the priests and how it's been problematic for so long.

And that there are many issues for the Innu – and you mentioned the land claims and what's happening with that. And certainly the strength that the Innu have shown; and particularly I think, the big thing that you mentioned was NATO back, I believe, in the '80s and how the Innu really showed their strength and determination at that time.

And also to talk about your family and your concerns about your grandson. The way that I heard I it and what I'm gonna say now resonates with me, because I can appreciate it as a grandparent: where you want to be supportive and helpful, but don't want to be seen as interfering. Sometimes you feel like you want to say something, but don't know if you can say it. It's not an easy place to be sometimes; I really appreciate that.

And thank you for your kind words at the end and I certainly hope that – I'm hopeful that this Inquiry will begin to respond to

many of the issues that are in the community and to really get on a path of healing. So thank you.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I was just saying to Elizabeth that I thank her for her contribution, and it just came to my mind when she was speaking about the future and how it's important for children to hear the stories. One of the things we're doing as an Inquiry is that we wanna be able to give those stories back to the people that have come forward and shared their stories with us. Because a lot of it has happened where people would tell their stories and they'd never hear what has happened.

And so to honour the people and their experiences, that's one of the things we're working on, is so that they can have those recordings and to be able to share it with their children, their grandchildren or in the future as well, too, to keep those for the future youth. So that's one of the things that my Aunt Elizabeth reminded me of when she was speaking. So thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: I just also wanted to mention that I had said earlier Edward was here, but Edward is not. But in Edward's place is Nanshi. Am I pronouncing your name correctly?

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Yes.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yes? Okay, thank you.

So I guess we'll take a break now for – where somebody's due at 11, so what time do we have?

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: They're here.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yeah, so 10 minutes or so.

Thank you.

Recess

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, everybody, just wanna let you know that there is no public session now until 1:30, so we will be convening again back at 1:30. We have a private session but no public session right now so you can do as you wish.

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