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Update from Winnipeg Expert Panel Hearings

WINNIPEG, MB- From August 22 to August 24, 2017, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was on Treaty One Territory and the homeland of the Métis Nation, for the first National Expert Panel Hearings on Indigenous Law and Decolonizing Perspectives. Chief Commissioner Marion Buller, and Commissioners Qajaq Robinson, Michèle Audette, and Brian Eyolfson met with the community in a place that has been an important meeting site for many Indigenous nations historically- The Forks.

“We came to Winnipeg to learn about decolonizing perspectives and how all the different phases of the National Inquiry can be informed by Indigenous laws. It was also an occasion to get to know some Manitoba families and survivors on a more personal level”, said Chief Commissioner Buller, “not only were all of the panels invaluable to us as Commissioners, it was also an opportunity to educate all Canadians about the existing laws of the Anishinaabe, Mi’kmaq, and Inuit.”

Another important purpose of the Expert Panel Hearings was to learn about Indigenous legal principles and models that would likely prevent violence against Indigenous women, girls, transgender and two spirit people and reduce their vulnerability to experiencing violence. The speakers spoke of the value of revitalizing these laws in contemporary society.

Here are some highlights from some of the Expert Panelists who all gave recommendations to help us understand the root causes of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and LGBTQ2S people:

Dr Val Napoleon and Dr Hadley Friedland offered presentations about the need to shift beliefs and undo false assumptions that Indigenous laws no longer exist. They shared that Indigenous laws are practical tools to help solve problems when they arise and these laws still continue to be part of communities today.

Tuma Young shared with the Commissioners the concepts behind “two-eyed seeing,” which is how to work and think in a space between Canadian and Mi’kmaq law. He expressed that this concept can be practiced by all Canadians. Professor Young explained that Mi’kmaq law is practiced through songs, ceremonies, language, dances, and storytelling. He emphasized the role of collective responsibility in Mi’kmaq law and how this principle when implemented is more effective in preventing abuse and violence than is the Canadian criminal justice system which focuses on individual responsibility.

Dawnis Kennedy explained that Anishinaabe law is a deep wellspring from which the National Inquiry could draw, and that the key to having respectful relationships is to understand Anishinaabe law and philosophy. “The standing ovation for Dawnis Kennedy was a powerful moment about how profound her words were for all of us,” said Commissioner Brian Eyolfson.



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Sandra Omik and Elder Kumuk shared concepts behind Inuit law and experiences by video conference from Iqaluit, Nunavut. They spoke about the deep relationship between the environment, Inuit laws and social structures. The two presenters also stressed that Inuit communities are distinct from each other so we will need to hear from Inuit in all regions in which they reside.

“This was an experience that I have long waited to see in the Canadian legal landscape. The fact that an entire testimony was done in the Inuktitut language for the first time in a national public proceeding informs us just how important this work is to including decolonizing perspectives,” said Commissioner Qajaq Robinson.

On the final day, at the request of the community, the Commissioners changed the scheduling to start the day’s gathering with a safe space for families and survivors to share their stories and recommendations. The guidance for the talking circle came from the Grandmothers that have been a part of the Expert Panel Hearings all week. The Grandmothers posed 3 questions: what key messages did the families and survivors hear in Winnipeg; what was learned over the past 2 days; and what recommendations do they have to move the National Inquiry forward in a good way.

“It is important for us moving forward to include families and survivors every step of the way. This was one of the most important lessons we learned this week during the expert panel hearings,” said Commissioner Michèle Audette.

A video archive of the Winnipeg Expert Panel Hearings will be available online until 90 days from the beginning of the hearings. You can access the archive by following this link: <https://webcasts.welcome2theshow.com/mmiwg-ffada-ARCHIVE>

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