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Chair

Mrs. Stella Ambler

Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women

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• (1815)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC)): Welcome back to everyone, especially to Ms. Audette.

Hello, Michèle. I don't know where the camera is, but I'm waving at you. Welcome.

Ms. Michèle Audette (President, Native Women's Association of Canada): I see you.

The Chair: Welcome once again to our expert witness, the Native Women's Association of Canada. We thank you for being here.

You are calling in to us from Sept-Îles, I believe, today.

Ms. Michèle Audette: Exactly. I'm calling from my first nation community, Uashat Mak Mani-Utenam.

The Chair: That's fantastic. Welcome. We're here at La Promenade Building, and we are anxious to hear from you. As you know from your conversation with the clerk, we have combined the front-line assistance and preventing violence against aboriginal women sections. So we're anxious to hear from you today.

Please feel free to take as much time as you like, as we did the first time. If we have time for questions, we'll do that. If you'd like to take the entire time until 7 p.m., that's okay with the committee as well.

Maybe you could tell us who your helpers are today.

Ms. Michèle Audette: My helpers are my twins. They'll be well prepared to take over NWAC pretty soon. They're following me everywhere.

Thank you very much. I only see you, Madam Ambler, but I want to say hello to everybody. I am sure everybody is there; I hope so.

The Chair: We're very happy to have you here. Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Michèle Audette: Thank you.

[English]

So I guess I shall start, *madame la députée*?

The Chair: Absolutely, yes.

Ms. Michèle Audette: I have to say that I am really proud and happy to be in my own territory, the Innu territory, which is Uashat Mak Mani-Utenam.

Another nice thing to say is that the band office is giving me this space so that I can speak to you. It's coming from my heart, and also coming from the grassroots community, from where things are

happening every day, which I witness, or I listen to women and they help me.

Of course, I have to say that I know that not long ago this committee was dissolved. Knowing that when a committee is dissolved we do not have to bring it back—that is my understanding—this time I see that you did bring back this special committee on violence against indigenous women.

But I have huge concerns. I had concerns before; our board members had concerns; our expertise at the office had concerns; women and families we met already had concerns about many aspects of this committee.

Instead of repeating and repeating what has been said over the years, the same thing, I would like to start this presentation with a question. Many recommendations, many statistics, much homework, many documents, position papers, etc., were given when the committee was put in place. Much testimony, from families, government people, etc., was presented to you with some probable solutions. I would like to hear from you: is all the work that was done when the committee was active something that stays alive or that will be fully, 100% accurate?

We never ended and put it back. I want to hear about that before I give my testimony.

The Chair: Certainly. I don't mind answering that.

The motion in the House, Michèle, was to bring back the committee, including all of the testimony thus far. So it's as if there was no break, essentially, in the committee. All of the routine motions are the same and all of the testimony is back in for the analysts to use, for us to use, and as part of the public record.

So rest assured, while the committee had to shut down due to prorogation, just like every other parliamentary committee, this one was brought back, essentially, as if it was the next day, with no changes. So, please, rest assured that there's no change there.

Yes, all the documents, reports, briefing notes, submissions—all of that is part of what we have to work with.

Does anyone else have anything to add to that?

Please go ahead.

Ms. Michèle Audette: Okay, I'm glad to hear that. It's important that it's official and everybody is witnessing. I'm glad that it was also discussed, that it's going to stay there and it's going to be used for recommendations, etc.

The other question I have right now is why the Conservatives, this government, after.... I'm so surprised.

[Translation]

Madam Chair, from every province and territory, thirteen first ministers unanimously supported the Native Women's Association of Canada's call for the urgent establishment of a national inquiry into missing and murdered women and, of course, for a plan of action. These are Mr. Harper's counterparts.

In addition, the entire international community and the United Nations, through its Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, point out first and foremost how important it is for Canada to act urgently, to establish an inquiry and to shed light—as I mentioned earlier—on the disappearances and the murders. Mr. Anaya says the same thing.

In addition, the women, the people associated with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and Violence against Women say the same thing. Not long ago, this fall, they came and said, right at the outset, that Canada absolutely had to take steps, as a matter of urgency, and establish a national public inquiry to shed light on the issue. That is the second group from the United Nations.

The Organization of American States, which also has women and commissioners working in the areas of human rights and women's rights, says the same thing. So this is no whim on the part of the Native Women's Association of Canada; it is no whim of a few people saying to taxpayers that we are going to spend their money for nothing.

Canada's first ministers, the international community, organizations working in parallel with the United Nations, like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and KAIROS—I could name thousands of them—and thousands of Canadians who are not even indigenous by origin are signing the petition saying that this is an urgent need.

Why am I a little irritated? Because I am a human being and I have just come from a meeting in Winnipeg.

• (1820)

[English]

I'll switch to English.

I just came back from a meeting with the aboriginal affairs ministers from across Canada, and I was glad to see that the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Monsieur Valcourt, was there. For the past six years, we didn't have any federal ministers attending those meetings. It's either because there's an election coming soon or he does care. And I think he does care, because I heard him on other issues, and I felt like, "Jesus, why is he not like this when we talk about missing and murdered aboriginal women?" Why? I'll say this. I witnessed. I was there.

Four issues were discussed during those meetings: education, *développement économique*, housing, and disasters. On the issue of ending violence for aboriginal women and young girls, *nyet, zéro*, nothing. He didn't say a word on violence against women and young girls—nothing during his presentation. He didn't say a word about

the special committee. He didn't say a word about why his government said no to a national public inquiry.

But he had a long piece of paper on what to answer if Michèle Audette asked him the question. And I did ask him the question. I said to the minister, "It's either a strategy for you or I hope you forgot it, but how come you didn't say a word about this important issue? I believe it's not an indigenous women's issue. It's not only a first nations, Métis or Innu issue. It's our issue, as Canadian people, Québécois people, and aboriginal people."

His answer was so disappointing, but I have a feeling that it wasn't only from him. It was, I guess, coming from *le bureau du premier ministre*. I have a feeling. His answer was, "Why should we do this? It's too expensive." I said, "Monsieur Valcourt, you lose a dollar? There is no price for that." He said, "I gave \$30 million. Our government believes in action." I said, "Oh yeah? You believe in action? Tell me why, since we did the database, the research, across Canada—second-hand information, which was long and tough hard work, professional, and scientific. It went so well that we lost the funding."

Okay fine, the program was ending. But we could have renewed it and become a real partner in showing that, my God, there's something wrong happening here and what can we do to change this?

They believe in action. We lose the money. Okay, fine. Then after that it will go for a national centre where the indigenous component is not there, so we will be diluted again. We're showing the international community that maybe we have fewer aboriginal missing and murdered women. "Look, the numbers are going down." I hope I'm wrong, and I'll apologize if I'm wrong; I have no problem with that.

Coming back to that \$30 million and action, I told him in front of everybody—premiers, ministers, national organizations, leaders, etc.—in my presentation, "Monsieur Valcourt, I have to say that the research we have done over the past 40 years shows that the numbers are increasing, mostly from 2003 until today." We ended that research in 2010. I told him it is sad that we lose one or up to seven women every month, and it's getting worse.

There's another problem. Canada will send sympathies, which is okay and perfect when we talk about *les crimes haineux*, hate crimes, I guess, in English. I'm sorry if I've mixed it up, but it's coming from here. When a woman in India is raped by six men, Canada will send its regrets. We'll support and do something, which is great. We need to be proactive with the international community. But at the same time, we had a woman in Thunder Bay in her thirties, a mother, who was raped and beaten so badly that the two Canadians thought she was dead. They dumped the body. It was minus 30 and between Christmas and New Year's Eve. She walked five hours to her house and called 911, but she never received a letter from your government to say "*Je suis désolée*. I am so sorry."

We have another loss, a young Canadian girl from New Brunswick. It was so sad. She was bullied through Facebook. She didn't deserve that at all. But look what happened. She was a young white Canadian girl. Harper met with the father, met with the family, sent his regrets, and moved all his government to say, "We will find a way to stop the bullying through cyber attacks or the Internet." You have the premier from that province saying "I will bring in legislation on this." That, for me, is action. I commend *Nouveau-Brunswick* and I commend Prime Minister Harper for standing up and saying, let's see what we can do to change policy and laws.

● (1825)

But that was for one death, one woman. For us, it's up to seven women every month, and nobody stands up to say, "Okay, Canada, let's change."

I was really polite with you, I was really patient with you, and I was really nice. But my God, let's stop being hypocritical. Let's move on this time for real, with really concrete changes to legislation, changing the way the RCMP do things with the communities, with the women, with people across Canada, through new programs, new curricula, etc. I'm sure we can do so much, instead of just meeting once a week and saying, we'll see what's the cheapest and put that in our report.

It was something like this that came also from my heart to the minister, and I wasn't surprised by his answer. It shows that this government does so much, but how come numbers are increasing? How come we have 633 first nations communities and we only have 40 shelters to protect women and children—40 shelters here in Canada? We have *nyet*, zero second housing houses to which women can go afterwards. A shelter is just to protect you; there is no real healing process there or empowerment for the women.

● (1830)

I was doing an interview today with four women. Three were non-native Canadian women. It was a live interview. The people were asking, "How come you are five times more at risk of dying from a violent crime, you first nations women, aboriginal women, Métis, Inuk? How come? We live in the same country."

Then another one asked, "How come there are so many problems in your community?" I said, "Do you know how many ministry people work for my people? It is very few, while you have three levels of government. You have the federal, with many departments, many ministries; you have the provincial or the territorial; and then you have the municipalities. We have Indian Affairs—INAC or Aboriginal Affairs—and provinces with their aboriginal affairs." I

said, "My God, we don't have much in the way of programs and services in our communities, so where do we turn? Where do we go?"

I would like to become involved with this committee. I made sure that I spoke with the executive of NWAC. I said, that's it; this is enough. If I don't see a black and white commitment from this committee saying what the role of NWAC is and what the role of the committee is and how we're going to work together.... If I don't see it in the next 10 days, we're going to pull out. We are going to pull out.

It's official. The Conservatives don't want a national public inquiry. Fine. You want action; so do we. So we'll go back with the families, because we're the only national organization. And I hope it will be well understood that since 1974 we have been working non-stop for the families and the children—non-stop: elders, youth, you name it. We went everywhere at the international level to say this is what's happening, and yes, we know the root cause.

Your colleague, Bernard Valcourt, thinks the inquiry will only bring out the root cause. Come on. We know the root cause and we know.... My God, we live with the effects every day, so of course we know. But we know also what kind of solution could change things. But it seems that it doesn't work.

I don't have the authority to put in new legislation. I don't. Maybe I should run in the next federal election. Why not?

I don't have the authority. You do. Use that opportunity. Use that power you have. Make major change. Mark the history—you have time. I'm talking to every party right there in Ottawa.

We're also the only ones who, on a daily basis and also every year, maybe twice a year, bring families together. Some will say, "Pah, my God, listening to families...what more can they say that we haven't heard before?" Did you know that talking, for aboriginal people, is a way of healing? I'm sure it is for Canadian people also. Some are making a lot of money just by listening to people.

[Translation]

I am thinking about psychologists, psychiatrists, and so on.

[English]

But for first nations people, because I'm first nation and I don't want to.... Maybe for the Métis it's the same, and for the Inuit: talking, sharing, and listening, it's a way of healing. It's a way of knowing that I'm not alone in going through that grief. Then I become stronger and stronger, so I can help other people. Because I don't have enough services, maybe I can be creative and make networks with family and support. We're the only ones who do that.

But if Canada really believes in action, and I mean this government, Monsieur Valcourt and Prime Minister Harper, if they really believe in action.... Every Speech from the Throne, every one, all the time, talks about victims, the rights of victims, protection, safety, public security, etc. We're against violence, of course, but at the same time, the Canadian people were cutting the funding for the native women of Canada. They were cutting. There was no more funding. Because they seem to complain too much, maybe?

No. As a real partner—a real partner—you have an opportunity, members of this committee. If in 10 days I get a letter, a contract or something that says, “This is what we agree, you and I”, and it's in black and white and we will do it for real this time.... The last time, we had meetings, we had private meetings, and we lobbied non-stop, but what happened? Not much. Not much—let's be frank.

So for me, I'm open. I would say that you have in front of you a passionate mother. See? I brought my kids. For me, I'm willing, like I said. All your colleagues.... And it doesn't matter which political party it is or if it's Canadian society—everywhere I go, if I can make a small moccasin step every day. I don't have to be here, but I believe in what I do because beautiful women are with me and surrounding me—kids, families, etc.—and I see them. It's so beautiful what they do at the community level. They push for change.

If you were walking with us, with NWAC—they're small steps, but we are adding up all those moccasin steps—can you imagine the major step, the major shift, we could do here in Canada?

• (1835)

[Translation]

The ball is now in your court.

[English]

Are there any questions?

Voices: Bravo!

[Applause]

The Chair: Thank you for that, Michèle.

It's a shame you can't hear the applause because there were shouts of “bravo”.

Before I open it up for discussion for 20 minutes, let me say that we all agree that this is one of the greatest tragedies in Canadian history. That's why we're here. All 12 of us are here because we care, because we've expressed an interest in being here—every single member of Parliament who is here in this room. We're here because there was a Liberal motion put on the floor earlier this year and every party voted for it, unanimously, which wouldn't have happened if we didn't want this to happen. It was a Liberal motion that suggested this

committee be constituted, and the rest of us agreed that this was a good idea.

Therefore, I would say to you that we are here to make change. When we reached out at the beginning, it was in response to your request to be a part of this. I've now sat on three other committees and I've never seen a recurring witness and an expert witness done in this way.

For that reason, I think NWAC is special. You are a real partner. I'd like to continue the dialogue in conversation as well, and we can certainly have offline discussions if you like. We should have a little bit of back and forth here. I'm happy to take instruction. We can do it in our usual way, or we can ask if you have any questions for us. I think we should have a format similar to what we usually do: have the committee members ask you some questions and then you can tell us what you think.

Those are the comments I wanted to make before we started the discussion period.

I'll start a speakers' list, if any other members would like to have—

• (1840)

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Let's go with a normal routine, Madam Chair.

Romeo will start off for us.

The Chair: Is that the will of the committee?

Okay.

First on my list is Mr. Saganash.

[Translation]

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): [*The member speaks in his native language*]

Michèle, you are very lucky to be able to be at home, unlike me. I was not expecting to hear what you have just told us, but I thank you for it. I very much appreciate your very commendable passion for the issue. Your remarks were so convincing that you could have ended by saying:

[English]

“I rest my case.”

[Translation]

I hear your passionate cry loud and clear. You mentioned the next federal election and said that you were perhaps thinking of running. On our side at least, we welcome you with open arms.

I want to go back to the letter you mentioned at the end. You are quite right to emphasize that more or less the entire world, the entire universe, wants an independent, national public inquiry. On our side, at least, we agree with you completely. I use the words “independent” and “national” because, at times, this kind of committee is found wanting in that respect. So could you tell us about the current process and what we can do as we wait?

You also spoke about recent developments. Recently, you had discussions with Mr. Valcourt. Could you give us more insight into them? As to the letter you mentioned, as you understand things and as a result of the discussions you have had up to now, what should that letter contain?

I also completely agree with you about the reconciliation you mentioned. Healing also comes from talking. As a survivor of the residential schools myself, I can totally understand you. What we went through in the residential school system was literally cultural, linguistic and political imprisonment. It was cultural because we were taken away from our homes. It was linguistic because we were prevented from speaking our own languages. It was political because it was done solely because we were aboriginal. Yes, it is high time for that to change. We have had the apology; now let's have some action. I completely agree with you.

But let us go back to the letter. What should that letter contain, as you understand things up to now?

● (1845)

Ms. Michèle Audette: [*The witness speaks in her native language*]

Thank you very much, Romeo.

My dear committee members, our friend Romeo Saganash has just said something very important. I am not criticizing those of you around that table, I am criticizing a system, a structure. Members of all committees have their hands tied by their political parties. In the knowledge that, officially, the Conservatives currently have no intention to hold a national public inquiry, it is going to be difficult for the other parties to negotiate for such an inquiry to be mentioned in any recommendations. At that point, I am already afraid.

Before I answer Mr. Saganash, I am going to digress a little and talk about the bigger picture that really allows us to understand the role of the committee. I am well aware that there are limits. I cannot go into Parliament every day and say that this or that must be done. You have expertise, but you do not have the expertise that is most important, the expertise of the indigenous women, the families, and the others affected by the issue, or the expertise of our organization that has been dealing with this issue since 1974.

First, I want you to accept, as Ms. Ambler has done, that we are recognized as experts. But I do not just want to be an expert who comes to see you now and again. We have people in the office who can sit down with your people to prepare meetings, to begin discussions and to try to focus on what is feasible in the short, medium and long terms. We have to work together and say "let's go; that works". We have to have discussions. You have already done it with one indigenous woman who was on a committee. Why can it not be done for years into the future with the Native Women's Association of Canada?

You recognize our expertise, but you also must know that we are working for our people, our families. But those families are not even invited. Is there not one full day when you can take off your hats of people who are used to operating in a certain way and speak with your hearts? I often hear that people say that they are concerned, that this touches them. So come and meet us. Why not meet with families who could suggest solutions better than I can, or the people in our

office can? I want to feel, I want to see, what you are going to do to make your concern into a priority.

In those meetings, it is important—

[*English*]

The Chair: Michèle, our next speaker has something to say on that particular point.

Since Mr. Saganash's seven minutes are up, I'm going to call on Mr. Dechert now.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Audette, good evening. We haven't met before. My name is Bob Dechert. I'm a member of Parliament from Mississauga. It's very nice to meet you.

I'm a new member of this committee, so I'm starting fresh. I hope you'll forgive me if I missed some of the things you said previously, but I did have an opportunity to read your testimony from the last time you appeared before the committee. I appreciated that.

I am here representing the Minister of Justice, in addition to myself.

I appreciate your comment on the things our government has prioritized: justice issues, standing up for victims, making our communities safe and clean, and making our first nations and aboriginal communities safe. I appreciate that and I would like to mention that in a moment.

You mentioned the families. I just want you to know that just before you began to speak tonight, all members of the committee agreed that we will be hearing from the families on the 9th of December. We're going to invite a number of them from across Canada to be here. We want them to tell us their stories.

I can tell you that from my personal perspective, I see them all as victims. We really do want to listen to victims and hear what victims need from our justice system. My view is that we'll find there's a lot of commonality in the needs of first nations and aboriginal victims and the families of missing and murdered aboriginal women and those of other victims in terms of information they have a right to receive from the investigating authorities and others.

I hope you'll appreciate that opportunity we're providing to families. We really want to hear from them. Perhaps you can suggest to us some names of some families you think it would be good for us to hear from. Perhaps you yourself will have an opportunity to attend on that occasion. We want to do it in a respectful way, in a traditional way, if we can, given the buildings we exist in here on Parliament Hill. We want to make it as unthreatening to these victims and their families as possible, because we want to hear from them. You mentioned that talking is a way of healing. I think it's the same in all communities. We want to hear the stories and we want to share the grief and hopefully participate in the healing with you and the victims.

You mentioned that you wanted to see a letter or a contract from the government. I'd be interested in hearing—maybe you can put something to us that we can take a look at.

The other thing I wanted to say to you is that this committee is here to receive recommendations. I know that your organization has provided some recommendations previously, and I assume more recommendations will be coming. We're hoping to collect recommendations from other witnesses we hear from, including the families. Then our report at the end of our work, which will be sometime in the spring, will reflect those recommendations and include some recommendations to the Government of Canada.

I've heard one recommendation that you have set out—and I think we've heard that recommendation before—but presumably there are other recommendations you'd like to share with us as well. I think it would be a shame if we were to cut off this committee now before it has an opportunity to list all the recommendations. I don't think it's the intention of anyone here to prohibit or forgo any recommendation, but we want to hear all recommendations. Presumably, some of the recommendations will not be simply to do some more study but will involve some concrete things we can all move forward together on.

You may have heard that our government has brought in a number of initiatives to address specifically the issue of violence against women. You may have noticed that there have been a number of private members' bills on human trafficking that have been passed by all parties in the House.

•(1850)

When you spoke to the committee previously, on May 30 of this year, you mentioned that human trafficking was a big issue for aboriginal women and that you think many of them are the targets and the victims of human trafficking.

I hope some of that human trafficking legislation, which has been supported by all of us as parliamentarians—I think virtually all of these bills have been unanimously supported—will be of value to the people you represent, and you see that we're making an honest effort to try to reduce the occurrence of human trafficking in Canada and bring it to an end.

As I mentioned earlier, you've probably heard that our government has been consulting with people across Canada for a number of months now on a victims bill of rights. As a lawyer myself and as a member of Parliament, it seems to me I hear from the people I represent all the time that they have lost faith in our justice system. They don't think it serves the law-abiding people or the victims, and there needs to be a rebalancing of our justice system between victims and offenders. When people lose faith in our justice system, they take the law into their own hands, they just don't cooperate with authorities, and the problem gets worse.

It seems to me, and maybe you can tell me where I'm wrong, that the victims we're talking about in this case, the aboriginal women and girls, are victims that our justice system has failed somehow; that we're not paying attention to their needs; that they have lost faith, and the aboriginal community in general has perhaps lost faith, in the Canadian justice system, because it has failed to serve those law-abiding people it is supposed to serve.

So we very much would value your input, the input of the people you represent, the families, on how we can address these issues and add things to our victims bill of rights that address their concerns and the problems they've identified over many years, and we can help restore the faith of all Canadians in our justice system.

I'd appreciate hearing your views on those things.

Thank you.

•(1855)

The Chair: Thank you for your comments, Mr. Dechert.

Over to you, Ms. Sgro.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Ms. Audette, every time I meet with you and hear you, you always leave me in tears and frustration over how we can possibly try to reconcile the loss of so many—so many murdered women, without question.

By the way, this evening I'm replacing Dr. Bennett, who's out of the country.

I have met you many times at the rallies. I'm sorry we're here; I wish we were having that inquiry that we very much wanted, but I have to say that we are where we are. I appreciate the fact that the government supported the motion and that we have something before us. But I hear so much frustration in your voice. Over the many years I've been here, I've been hearing this plea for justice to be done for the lost women. I've seen the studies and I've seen the briefs, and we still are where we are.

By the way, I do support your initiative; I think it would be more helpful to the committee if you were sitting here with us as this process goes on. But at the end of the day, what will give you the satisfaction that this committee will move forward? Right now it's the only vehicle that's on the table. I would encourage you to use it and move forward on it.

At the end of the day, when March comes and a report is put together by the committee, what do you want to see in that report that would make it worth the time and the effort that you will be putting in, hopefully over the next few months?

Ms. Michèle Audette: Just as a response to the previous speaker from Mississauga, *le député de Mississauga*, I'm touched. I can feel that you are sincere, really sincere, and I'm glad, but I'll stick and stay with my position that if NWAC doesn't see something so that we feel we're a real partner, and that will go for you, *Madame la députée libérale, Madame Sgro...*

We're burnt out. Let's be frank. I know that it's the only vehicle right now, but I've been in politics for the past 20 years for Quebec native women and now for NWAC, and it's not the first time—and I know it's not going to be the last time—that we're sitting here hoping we will bring back some recommendations. But most of the time—and I agree with Minister Valcourt on this—and I'm not afraid to say this, this ends on a shelf with dust.

There are two things I really want to see. We can have a discussion after, your people with our people, and build that contract or that paper that will say, "This is who we are and this is what we're hoping to achieve together as real partners." That's one thing.

There's another thing if we see this. Of course we believe in you, each person sitting there. You're a human being also. You believe in your political party and your line, of course, and this is the beauty of democracy, and I commend you for this. The other thing is that if for one time, this time, you would really fight, and fight for the rights of aboriginal women and the young girls, knowing that there's a bill for the rights of victims, that could be another good discussion we could have, where maybe—maybe—there's a great solution.

But I'm not going to share right now what I've been thinking, because I don't want what happened the other time. We shared and shared, and then, poof, we never heard from the committee—ever. I don't want this to happen again. *Et voilà*.

● (1900)

The Chair: You have two minutes left.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you, Michèle.

I guess I'm almost.... I don't want it to be on a shelf either, and I think all of us would like to find some answers, but I've been on committees before and I've heard all the good words, and I can understand your frustration. I think we all feel the same thing, but we have to work within the system that we have, unfortunately. Maybe at the end of the day one of the recommendations goes back to calling for a public inquiry, but that doesn't mean that it's going to happen either, and that's part of the frustration.

What happened to your community happened to Canadians. It would never have been quiet, and we all know that...it was exactly because it was aboriginal women. The work that should have been done, the justice that should have been done, wasn't there, but I'm here tonight with the others and trying to move it forward, and we can't do that without your help.

I guess I'm going to say to the committee in all sincerity, why is it so difficult to have NWAC at the table with us? I think we all care about this issue. We all know that it's going to be a difficult couple of months and we're not going to be able to come up with recommendations that are going to be able to solve all these problems. But at least if Michèle is prepared to come to the table with us and work with us, I'd have much more faith that at the end of the day we're really going to accomplish something.

We cannot let this community down again. We just can't do that. Otherwise, it really should be a pox on all of our houses, and that has nothing to do with politics. There has to be justice somehow, and right now the only vehicle on the table is this committee. If we could have NWAC at the table, I think it would build the committee's

credibility and it would help all of us achieve some goals that we want to see at the end of the day, whatever that is.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sgro.

Michèle, thank you so much for being with us. We do appreciate your frank comments. I'm sure there will be a lot of post-meeting discussion about them. Thank you for speaking to us tonight and for taking the time. I'm sure it wasn't easy for you to round up the girls and set all of this up, so we do appreciate the effort. We thank you and we'll be in touch.

We're going to suspend for just a couple of minutes to switch witnesses.

● (1905)

(Pause)

● (1905)

The Chair: Welcome back to the meeting.

Welcome to our guests, our witnesses. I believe we have Ms. Bushie and Ms. Hall, Robyn.

Welcome to our committee. My name is Stella Ambler. I'm the chair of the committee.

It's so nice to have you here with us today. Thank you for being here. I'm sorry we were a little late getting started. We have approximately just over 45 minutes. Please feel free to speak for upwards of 10 minutes, and then we'll have a little question and answer afterwards until 8 p.m.

Thank you again and welcome to our meeting. We look forward to getting your input.

Please go ahead.

● (1910)

Mrs. Burma Bushie (Co-Founder, Community Holistic Circle Healing, Hollow Water First Nation): My name is Burma Bushie. Thank you for your invitation. Both Robyn and I are happy to be here to share the work that we've done in our community in the last 30 years. Our vision has never changed right from day one as aboriginal women: we have a vision that we have been working on all along. Basically, what the vision entails is that one day aboriginal women will reclaim their place of honour within our society. We come from a matriarchal society, and part of our struggle is to find our way back to what was once a very strong society. Today we do have a lot of women who are taking on the leadership roles in the community and developing programs, and not only programs but a lot of new initiatives that take us back to who we are as Anishinabe women. That has always remained constant in our work.

We realize that we have many, many years of colonization and all the other problems we've had to live through. So we just want to start off by saying that the vision is still there, that we are still working on it, and we are moving forward.

Do you have anything to add?

Ms. Robyn Hall (Co-Director, Community Holistic Circle Healing, Hollow Water First Nation): In our community, the programs we have are not just in one stream. It's a collective vision we have.

We also take a holistic approach within the community, in which we involve the school, the justice programs, and the health programs, because we believe that in order to be holistically healthy, we have to encompass everything, whether that be spiritual, physical, mental, emotional—all of that.

We do that through our work. It is both preventive and restorative. We have many different avenues.

In preparing for today, we tried to figure out which avenue to focus on. For the purpose of this meeting, it is to look at the overall goal of what we want to accomplish. What the committee seems to be looking for in terms of recommendations is to see how we can get from where we are today to a place of health and wellness for all aboriginal women and aboriginals in Canada.

We would like to open it up for questions you may have of us and the work we do, where we could assist in any way.

• (1915)

The Chair: Thank you for those opening comments.

We appreciate it. It's always nice to have a little extra time for questions. We appreciate that as well.

Thank you.

We're going to start with Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My name is Jean Crowder, and I'm the aboriginal affairs critic for the NDP and the vice-chair of this committee.

Thank you for coming before the committee today and for taking the time.

I have a couple of questions. I found a report that was done back in 2001, a cost-benefit analysis on the programs run by your community. I want to put a couple of things on record about the effectiveness of your program. One was that for every dollar the provincial government has spent on the CHCH program, it would have had to spend \$3.75 for pre-incarceration costs, that is, prison and probation costs. For every dollar the federal government has spent on that program, they would have had to spend between \$2.46 and \$12.15 on incarceration and parole costs. They estimated that this program saved millions of dollars in incarceration costs. The evaluation also indicated that the recidivism rates went way down. They said that in the 10 years they examined, only two clients reoffended.

Further on in the report, they talked about significant signs in overall health and well-being for the community, which included

improved holistic health of children, more people completing their education, parenting skills, empowerment of the community, and so on.

Can you talk to me about the importance of long-term, continued funding for these kinds of prevention and restorative justice programs?

Mrs. Burma Bushie: Back in 1991, when the study on the cost analysis was done—right about that time, in the late 1980s—we started developing our data for the cases we were processing in court. We had quite a database to work with when the study started.

In the beginning the provincial government gave us \$120,000. The federal government matched that figure, so since 1991, our budget has been \$240,000. I don't have the latest stats, but I know at the time we had processed 86 cases in provincial court. Some of those would have been federal cases.

Just based on that, there's your answer. We don't require jails. We don't require treatment centres. Those are expenses that are aside from what we offer. Anywhere else you would be looking at those additional expenses.

So yes, very much so, we have been saving the country millions of dollars. We have shown, just by the recidivism rate, what it is we are doing right. We are touching people in ways that help them make those lifetime changes.

We have been asking the federal government and the provincial government for additional funding, but I guess they are not seeing or hearing what we have done in the last 20 or 30 years. I very much hope there is more funding coming our way.

We are in a position to be training other first nations that could come to our community and get the training we've developed. We did develop the training ourselves, because at the time there was no training in Manitoba to deal with offenders of any kind.

I hope that is one of the things that come out of this committee. Thank you.

• (1920)

Ms. Robyn Hall: When you look at incarcerating a male, I believe the average amount is \$118,000. For the program we have, as she stated, our budget is \$240,000. We not only work with the offenders but also provide victim services. We also provide family services. We also provide services for elders.

We encompass all of those programs into that one. It's not just servicing that one person. It's actually giving service to the entire family. As I'm sure you're aware, in aboriginal communities often the families are very large and significantly widespread throughout the community.

At one time, when we received money from the healing foundation, we increased our programming to encompass more family-based programs. We brought in our land-based programs, as well as different ceremonies, and just increased it in that way. Then when the funding was cut, we didn't want to stop that. We started to look for alternative ways to fund it, which was a struggle. Obviously we lost a great deal of funding at that time. We tried to incorporate it into our health programs and into our school. A lot of times funding is limited. The parameters are set by someone outside the community, so you can only spend it in this silo.

At times, for sure, it's difficult for us to function within the budgetary guidelines of government.

The Chair: Thank you.

Over to you, Ms. Truppe.

Mrs. Susan Truppe (London North Centre, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank you both for your presentation today.

I'm the Parliamentary Secretary for Status of Women, so I do have a couple of questions about some of the work your group has done. Before I do that, I just want to clarify, are you still getting the funding, the \$120,000 each from the province and from the federal government, on an annual basis?

Ms. Robyn Hall: Yes.

Mrs. Burma Bushie: Yes.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

I understand, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, that when the program started in the 1980s, it was started specifically for sexual abuse. What did you do back then that was specific to sexual abuse, and what are you doing now? I know you do a great job with the work you're doing.

Mrs. Burma Bushie: We started with sexual abuse in our community because that was one of the root causes of the chaos we were seeing on a daily basis. We certainly had no intention of starting from there; however, we couldn't avoid it.

Once we made the decision to deal with sexual abuse, we then developed a process that we called a community approach. That community approach takes in the RCMP, probations, and justice people, such as prosecutors, defence lawyers, and judges.

Once we got into that arena, there were timeframes that we were presented with. For example, once we became engaged with a family, how were we going to make sure that we remained connected with the family until the justice piece was finished? That also included child and family services, because for a lot of the children who were disclosing, automatically child and family services became one of the programs. We had to make sure that we were working within their parameters of making sure the children were safe.

When we first started the process, we had to develop it from the Anishinabe philosophy and values. When we developed our assessment tools, we based them on the four dimensions of a person. They all have to be in balance.

For example, if the offender came in with addiction problems, then the first thing we had to do was to make sure that person cleaned that part of his or her life. Sometimes that required residential care. Sometimes we had to develop a community process for the person rather than have them go to treatment. The process also had to take in individuals, families, the community, and the nation. These were the levels we looked at for assessment.

We also used the concept of circles for the ongoing work that had to be done. That involved individual circles. Next were circles with the whole family—the victim and the whole family or the offender and the whole family. The third type of circle involved the victim and the offender coming together.

We use traditional ways of healing, such as sweat lodges. In the beginning, sweat lodges were all we had, but in the years since, we've brought a couple of other lodges back to our community—the fasting lodge and the moon lodge.

● (1925)

So we had all these traditional ways of working with individuals and families, but we also had to use contemporary ways, including seeing therapists for one-on-one counselling, one-on-one therapy, or group therapy. Years later we also were able to incorporate on-the-land types of prevention programs and other types of therapies that were more in line with our culture.

Those were the ways we worked with people in the beginning. Then about half-way into our work with the justice program we brought in the judge, the crown, the defence, and the RCMP. We set up a sentencing circle, which is exactly the same as a court trial and court, except that all the evidence is pre-recorded and reports have been distributed to all the key people, and everybody is on board in terms of what the recommendations are asking for.

We have a position paper on incarceration because of our observations of what happens to people when they are gone away to jail. Basically everybody has a time-out kind of situation, because the victim and the families that are left behind and the community that is left behind cannot really do very much. The key disrupter of the whole family system is gone to jail for maybe 18 months, and that person is sitting over there. There's a lot of work that person has to do back home. There's a lot of restitution and a lot of repairs that have to be made to victims and the families.

So that's the whole intent of the community approach. It's the offender who has done wrong and it's the offender who has to make right all the wrong he has caused and all the harm he has caused. Without that person—

● (1930)

The Chair: Sorry, finish up your thought there, and then I'm going to give Ms. Sgro an opportunity.

Mrs. Burma Bushie: After the sentencing circle, there is a probation period for another three years and the same kind of work continues for the next three years. At the end of that time, there's a giveaway ceremony that the offender sets up for the victim.

Those are the key pieces of how the community approach works.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you very much. You're doing a great job there.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will turn it over to you.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you very much, and congratulations on the restorative justice program. I'm a big supporter of these programs and I really applaud the work that you and others are doing.

I want to ask you about what I understand the focus of the work of this committee to be, which is the amount of violence and the missing and murdered indigenous women. What can this committee recommend through the government of the day to reduce the violence that continues among women in your community in particular? Do you have any suggestions on how we could better protect many of the women in your community? What would you like to see done?

Mrs. Burma Bushie: One of the key areas we've worked with over the years is the whole attitude of my community. There was a time when it was okay for women to be treated that way, to be physically and sexually abused and all that comes with that. My community developed the attitude that women were to blame.

That's one of the key areas that every community has to work on. It's a crime against women to use power over them; it's not right. As women in our communities, we have a lead role in making sure that attitudes change, and that requires a lot of prevention programs, a lot of education, but it's coming from us, the women in the community.

If anything is to change, it's going to be done by the women in each community, and if we could somehow reach each other some way, like having a crisis line to each community, where women are supporting each other, because I think our communities are almost the same across the board....

● (1935)

Ms. Robyn Hall: To add to that, one of the things we've found over the years as a great prevention tool, and it starts in infancy, is reclaiming our identity: our ceremonies, our language, our land-based education. That's where the basis of our culture is and it's who we are.

For women who are addicted or who find themselves in violent situations, that's a symptom of something in their past. It's been broken; it's been abused.

By finding our identity, who we are and where we belong, and the roles of the women in our community, the roles of men, the roles of elders and children...by restoring those roles, aboriginal communities will flourish. We've begun to start in infancy, right through to elders. We've been on that track for the last 30 years.

I'm in my late thirties, so I came from the generation when it started. I consider myself second generation in this process. My identity as an aboriginal woman has grown tremendously, compared

to the women in the early eighties, the way I understand my culture, for example. For that to be the next step we take in first nations country is to be able to bring that back. It's what we lost. Nobody is bringing it to us. That's what Burma is saying; it's about our finding it, too, and in a way it's assistance we can get from each other. But it will come from us ultimately.

The question you're asking is how can you assist us in finding that? My recommendation is to be able to help with the preventive progress and with reclaiming our identity.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you.

Do I have more time?

The Chair: I'm not tracking time, so you have another minute or two.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Tell me about the relationship within your community when it comes to policing. I'm not sure in your area whether it's the RCMP who does the policing. What kind of a relationship do you have with them? A lot of criticism in the past has been with that relationship, as well as with difficulties in dealing with various issues.

I expect you have a very positive relationship because of your restorative justice programs. What does the rest of your community have when it comes to that partnership in policing in your community?

Ms. Robyn Hall: That was something we were just talking about. In our community, it is the RCMP, and they are actually stationed an hour away from our community. The difficulty we have with that is the turnover.

When we first began this process in 1985, as Burma was saying, we brought on the RCMP, the prosecutors, the defence, and the judge. The difficulty we have with this is that new people come in to fill those roles all the time, whereas in our community a lot of those roles remain the same throughout the years. It's almost a continuous re-education.

In the RCMP office, we probably don't have anybody who has been there continuously for the past 10 years. At one time, the whole office actually turned over within a year.

That remains an issue for us: continuously educating the outside services in regard to our process.

● (1940)

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Burma Bushie: To add to what Robyn said, I think it's....

Did you say something?

The Chair: We have to move on, I'm afraid, but hopefully you'll get a chance to explain what you were going to say in using another question as the basis.

Mrs. Burma Bushie: Okay.

The Chair: Ms. McLeod, you're next.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you for joining us tonight. As we try to reach for solutions, I think it's really helpful for us to hear from programs that are obviously making a real difference in the lives of the communities and to hear about what's working and what's not.

I know that every community is very different, but you seem to have something that's successful for your community. Are your neighbouring communities saying that they want to do what you're doing? Are they managing to do it also, obviously while changing things in a way that meets their community's needs? Is there anyone else doing what you're doing and how you're doing it?

Mrs. Burma Bushie: To answer that, I'll say that we participated in numerous studies by government. That cost analysis was just one of them.

We have developed a protocol that has been sanctioned by the provincial government, and the whole community approach includes the Métis communities surrounding our community. There are three Métis communities surrounding us. They're also part of the community approach.

The other thing is that we've opened our doors to communities outside, both aboriginal and non-aboriginal, and they've come from far and wide to see what we have developed. We've always told them that any piece of their process that can use out of this process is theirs to use.

Those are four avenues that we've tried to get that message across.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I'm from British Columbia. I'm the member of Parliament for the Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo area. You made that comment about your community being an hour away from the RCMP. I'm sorry, but I don't have the geography in my head. One thing I know that has been a very significant issue in British Columbia is the issue of women hitchhiking at night into town. Is that an issue in your community, and have you come up with anything? That's often where many of the tragedies have happened. Have you tackled that issue in any way, or is it an issue for you?

Mrs. Burma Bushie: At one time there was the issue of young women and men attempting suicide. They would be taken to a hospital in Pine Falls, by ambulance or some other way.

When they were taken by ambulance, once they were out of danger they were out the door and on their own. We had to set up a committee on our reserve, and we took our list of volunteers, with their numbers, to the hospital. We asked the staff there to please give us a call if anyone from Hollow Water, Manigotagan, or Seymourville came there and was discharged in the middle of the night. We didn't want people on the highway in the middle of the night. That's what we had to do.

It's the same thing with people who are let go from jail. Usually, it happens in the morning, after they have been kept in jail overnight. Their people are not phoned. They're just out the door. We didn't want them on the highway. That's another place where we had to leave our numbers.

• (1945)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: It sounds as though you, as a community, came up with a plan. Would you say you've now solved that problem? Is it still working for you, so that nobody is being kicked out the door and is on their own trying to get back home?

Mrs. Burma Bushie: It's not so much the community anymore; it's the families doing that for each other.

There are family members who will go pick up people in Pine Falls from jail or from the hospital.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Looking at your community, what do you think is the biggest challenge you need to deal with now?

Mrs. Burma Bushie: I think the same challenges are there to varying degrees.

As I said, we're still plodding along. We're heading to our vision. A lot of times the children are the ones who push and move community along. You never go from A to B in a straight line when you're dealing with community. It's almost as though we're coming out of a valley and we need to regroup again and look at what's working and what we need to work on. We're at that place again, and it's usually the children who give us the strength and the drive to deal with what needs to be dealt with.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go over to you, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Bushie and Ms. Hall, for speaking to us. I have to confess that I'm sometimes amazed that you're still willing to talk to us. There has been report after report and we're still struggling to really achieve concrete solutions.

At any rate, I wanted to pick up on what you said with regard to the need for long-term permanent funding. We've heard a great deal from the government about addressing violence related to the trafficking of women.

I just found out that an Edmonton shelter that deals with human trafficking has closed. It's closing now because it lost its Status of Women funding. It was cut off, so that shelter closed.

I'm thinking about what you said, Ms. Hall, regarding the loss of the healing foundation money and how you had to scramble to find money from some of your existing programs and patch something together.

Did the existing programs, which you've worked so hard to put together, suffer in any way because you had to borrow from them and manage with the loss of the healing foundation funds?

• (1950)

Ms. Robyn Hall: Yes, for sure. By losing our funding, we had to pretty much go down to the bare bones of what it was we wanted to offer in terms of programming. We had to figure out what we wanted to keep and figure out how we could keep that. It probably took about two years to establish that. So within that two-year timeframe...we lost a lot of programming, to begin with, because we had to re-establish it somewhere else.

I mean no disrespect to this government, but it seems that once we have a program that's running and that's working, if we do well, then it's as if someone says, "Okay, you're doing well enough, so we're going to scrap the program", and then they move on to something else. For instance, we had the NAYSPS funding at one time, which is the national aboriginal youth suicide prevention strategy. We had put in a proposal for it, and they asked us how many suicides we had within that year. Our number was very low, which we credit to a lot of programs we have, so there was no need to... "No, this program is no longer needed because you do not have the number of suicides." We're obviously doing something good that we don't have a lot of suicides. It's almost like it's taken as, "Okay, that's cured, so we're going to move on to something else."

But it's building the approaches that we need to focus on. When we had the healing foundation, we were building on what we saw as moving our community forward. We saw the prevention strategies of building our identity and getting those programs in place, and then it stopped again. Then we had to restructure and go back a couple of steps, restructure, and now we're building again.

For me, especially in providing service in health and in justice, funding and juggling funding is often difficult within programming. It seems like it takes a step back and then it moves forward, then two steps back, and then it moves forward.

With CHCH, the Community Holistic Circle Healing funding, we have gone from a three-year program to a yearly basis now, so it's having to justify it from year to year. Then we end up going into survival mode with programs, rather than focusing on the program itself.

Does that answer your question?

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Yes. I do appreciate that answer, and this is the complaint that we've heard over and over again. Everything is start-up funding. As soon as you show that you're making progress, the funding is gone. It's as if there's no sense of planning or continuity.

What would you do if miraculously you got your healing foundation money restored? What would you be able to do?

Ms. Robyn Hall: When we had the healing foundation funding in our community, we actually took three streams because we wanted to look in different areas. One of them was a land-based program that focused on a lot of the physical needs, the cultural, the spiritual, and the ceremonial. Then we had what we call the SPA, which was the Society for the Preservation of Anishnabe, which focused on our history and revitalizing all of our ceremonies. Then we had our culture and our bands lodge, and it encompassed everybody in our community.

When the healing foundation stopped, we lost all three for a short time. Then we began to put the land-based program into our school. But we had difficulty with the funding for the Society for the Preservation of Anishnabe, so we essentially had to divide it into a whole bunch of different areas, and it's been dispersed quite a bit.

The Chair: Thank you. We're going to move on.

We've got about four minutes left, and I'd like Ms. Brown to get her time in.

● (1955)

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Madam Chair and ladies, I'm new to the committee. I've only just joined tonight as my first meeting. However, in 2010 I sat on the status of women committee, and we undertook a study on violence against aboriginal women. It would be very interesting to pull that study out and take a look at it, in light of what we are discussing here tonight.

Ms. Bushie, you made a comment a little bit earlier that I'm a little confused about, and I wonder if perhaps I didn't get the right context or if there is some clarification.

You made the comment—and this isn't a direct quote, I'm afraid—that there was a time when violence against women was acceptable. Did I hear that correctly? Is that what you intended to say, or am I hearing it improperly?

Mrs. Burma Bushie: Yes, that's what I intended to say. That's the history of my community.

Ms. Lois Brown: Can you tell me when that time was and what's changed that attitude?

Mrs. Burma Bushie: That attitude changed from our decision as women and as service providers in the community at the time. We all came together and came up with a declaration that abuse was going to stop. We didn't know how, but it was going to stop. From just saying the words, it seemed to snowball in ways that brought the whole issue of abuse, family violence, elder abuse, all those things, to centre stage. No one in our community could any longer run and hide and deny that this problem was there.

We really broadcasted it. We brought it out in the open. We got our chief and council to do resolutions stating that there was abuse against women and children and against elders. These are groups of people that, as aboriginal people, work to protect our children. That was the message that every Anishnabe person understood. We used all those values that I know I grew up with; people my age hung onto the values, even with all the chaos happening.

That was kind of our talisman, I guess you would call it, bringing in our children and allowing our children to speak about what was happening to them. That was another thing that really pushed us to deal with the problem.

It was all about changing the attitude. No man or grandfather or uncle in my community can ever say that their niece invited rape. No one. Even to this day. That is one thing, in spite of the valleys we've had to go through—with funding changes and people moving on and leaving—that has always been very clear in our minds as women in our community.

Ms. Lois Brown: I'm told I'm out of time.

I have some other questions, but perhaps we can pursue them another time.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, too, on behalf of the committee.

Thank you to both of you for spending your time with us this evening. We appreciated hearing about your restorative justice program. We really do appreciate your time.

Thank you very much.

This meeting is adjourned.

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