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Chair: The Honourable Marc Garneau



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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order. Good morning, everyone.

Welcome to meeting number 44 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. We acknowledge that we are meeting on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Pursuant to the House order of reference adopted on Thursday, November 24, 2022, and pursuant to the motion adopted that same day by the committee, we are meeting to proceed with the study and clause-by-clause consideration of Bill S-219, An Act respecting a National Ribbon Skirt Day.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022.

[English]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of all who are here today.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. Interpretation for those who are on Zoom will be French and English. We do have Inuktitut translation, but not Innu today.

I will give a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For those on Zoom, use the “raise hand” function. The clerk and I will try to identify you in the order in which the hands went up.

To help us with the study and clause-by-clause consideration of Bill S-219, we have the good fortune of having some witnesses here today. I would like to welcome them in person.

First of all, we have the sponsor of the bill, Senator Mary Jane McCallum. Welcome, Senator.

We also have some witnesses, two of which are with us so far. We have Chief George Cote of the Cote First Nation, as well as Madeleine Redfern, as an individual. We also hope to have Chris Kulak as an individual.

[Translation]

Lastly, we have Marie-Josée Wapistan, Innu nation representative on the Council of Elected Representatives of Quebec Native Women Inc.

[English]

We will now get under way. The way it works is that we will offer each of the witnesses up to five minutes to make their remarks. When we've gone through all of the witnesses, we will have one round of questions from members.

Without further ado, Senator McCallum, if you are ready, I would like to propose that you go first, followed by Chief George Cote, followed by Ms. Redfern. I see somebody else has just joined us. Chris Kulak, you will have an opportunity to speak for five minutes as well.

Senator McCallum, the floor is yours.

Hon. Mary Jane McCallum (Senator, Manitoba, Non-affiliated): Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to testify today on Bill S-219, which, as you can imagine, is near and dear to my heart.

Before I start, I would like to let everyone here know that I worked with Chief Cote and Isabella Kulak's family. This is their bill. People sometimes say to me, “This is your bill.” It's their bill.

Through this bill, the ribbon skirt should be seen as symbolic of the wider indigenous culture to be celebrated. It also serves as an educational tool intended to combat the various forms of violence against indigenous people as well as convey to all Canadians the history of indigenous peoples' experiences living under colonialism in this country. This bill will create a forum for dialogue within which we can explore the dark side of Canadian history in ways that do not dishearten or shame, but rather inspire us to enact a process of reconciliation for ourselves, both within our communities and the wider Canadian society.

In Cree there are no gender-related words like “he”, “she” and “them”. Rather, it's all-inclusive. I used the term “indigenous people” to underscore the intended inclusivity that is inherent in this bill. Furthermore, this inclusivity is intended to transcend even indigenous people, as today the ribbon skirt is embraced internationally. Many non-indigenous people have adopted this form of dress.

The main focus of the ribbon skirt bill is to combat gender violence against indigenous people and the weaponization of the ribbon skirt to instill shame—in this instance, against a young first nations girl who was proudly wearing her regalia.

The intent of Bill S-219 is to understand the impact of violence against indigenous people, to celebrate the choices made towards inclusion, to facilitate dialogue and understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous citizens of Canada, and to encourage acts of reconciliation and relationship-building.

The title of the ribbon skirt bill is meant to be viewed as inclusive to all people who choose to wear the ribbon skirt, regardless of race, gender, religion, etc. We know that it is not a pan-Canadian regalia; however, it would be beyond the intent of the bill and impractical to begin naming various items of cultural significance. The ribbon skirt was chosen as the singular item for unification and dialogue, as that was the item that had been weaponized against indigenous people.

The intent of January 4 is to highlight and celebrate the various forms of indigenous dress, regalia and culture at large, and to educate Canadians on their origins, use and importance. This intended reconciliation in action occurred this past January 4, 2022, when Isabella Kulak was joined by a young Ukrainian schoolmate who also modelled her own regalia.

They did this on their own. The community was instructive. What better way to embrace reconciliation?

Ribbon skirts themselves are meant to be worn. They're meant to be danced in, each skirt fashioned with uniqueness. They're a sign of pride, of spirituality, of taking back our spirit and of making ourselves visible. They're meant to empower us to be seen. The ribbon skirt will continue our healing and will continue to transmit our history. It is a way to give voice. As we collectively wear our dresses, we gather strength.

I want to conclude with a poem. This is from *jingles speak to the healing*, by Vera Wabegijig:

we carry our stories on our backs
sometimes stories are heavy,
weighing down, curving the spine
like trees bending from the northern wind
sometimes stories are shared
like seeds floating on a summer breeze
taking root wherever they land
becoming medicine from the earth
our stories take root
ground us in the earth
so we can gather the strength
to stand like the trees
and reach for sky

Thank you.

● (1105)

The Chair: Thank you, Senator McCallum.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to Marie-Josée Wapistan. All of today's witnesses are with us now.

[*English*]

We'll now go to Chief George Cote.

Chief George Cote (Cote First Nation): Good morning.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to acknowledge that we are on unceded territory of the Algonquin.

My name is George Cote. I am the chief of Cote First Nation in Saskatchewan. It's an Ojibwa tribe with a community of about 4,400.

I'd like to thank Mary Jane McCallum for bringing this bill to the Senate. I acknowledge all of the leaders who are here today, all of the staff and, of course, my people back home in Cote First Nation. Chris Kulak is online, along with his wife and, of course, Isabella. Isabella is the reason I'm here.

It really took a lot of courage for this young lady to do what she did, because to open the eyes of not only our community, but the province, Canada and the international community, and to show how proud she was to be indigenous, wearing a symbol with the ribbon skirt.... Unfortunately, the teacher she had at the time was ignorant of the culture of our community.

Forgiveness was given by the family. Instead of turning this into a negative.... Speaking with Chris and his wife Lana, after it broke the heart of his young girl, who went to school with something that she was very proud of to show her identity, which was taught by her grandmother, Stella Pallet, and her grandfather, Vincent Cadotte.... You can see the importance of how we have to teach our youth who they are and where they come from. In education, it's very important that we let other people know about our culture.

In the spirit of truth and reconciliation, talking with Chris and Lana, we decided to make this have a positive impact on our nation. We decided that we would have a ribbon skirt day and Isabella would wear a ribbon skirt, along with all of the women and her peers. They wore their skirts on a special day to acknowledge what she went through.

A ribbon skirt is something that our community and our ladies have been wearing in ceremonies. It represents a lot of issues with regard to what our people have been going through, with murdered and missing women, suicide and a lot of the addictions that are in our community. It's a way of us coming together and healing.

With the participation of the Good Spirit School Division, Cote First Nation and the Kamsack Comprehensive Institute, we decided to come together and come up with a day when this young girl, Isabella, could tell the world her story in a manner that was supported by her dad, Chris, and her mother, Lana.

I really appreciate this couple, who reached out to the chief and council of Cote First Nation to make this something that's going to bring the community together. It's not only our first nations communities, but also the non-first nations communities.

The senator talked about this young Ukrainian girl who stood beside Isabella, wearing her mom's dress that she wore when she was in school. It shows how much of an impact it made on her fellow students.

That's what we wanted to do. You'll probably hear a bit more from Chris with regard to how it made him proud that a young girl opened the eyes of the world.

We're so blinded by so many things, and racism plays a big part in our lives. How do we end that? We end that by listening to our children and by watching our children. They're so pure. Isabella was so pure, but her heart was broken. Coming together, we can heal that little heart.

• (1110)

When she saw the impact she made, not only in our nation but in the world, it turned her life around. It turned the family's life around. It turned Cote First Nation around, and hopefully it will turn the country around. Hopefully it will turn the world around.

I really appreciate the time and effort that the Senate is spending on this bill. We really appreciate it. We're honoured to be here.

I really thank you, Chair, for this time, and I'll just leave it at that.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Cote.

We'll now go to Ms. Redfern, our third witness. If you're ready, you have five minutes.

Ms. Madeleine Redfern (President, Nunavut Inuit Women's Association): [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: I think you may still be on mute.

Hello. I think we hear you now. Go ahead, please.

Oh, it went back on mute.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Josée Wapistan (Innu Nation Representative, Quebec Native Women Inc.): Can you hear me?

The Chair: Yes, but Ms. Redfern is speaking right now. When she's done, you can go ahead, Ms. Wapistan.

[*English*]

We're not hearing, so perhaps the technicians can speak to Ms. Redfern and see if there's something that can be done.

In the meantime, we will go to our next witness, Mr. Chris Kulak.

Mr. Kulak, I offer my apologies if I'm mispronouncing your name. Perhaps you can tell us what it is. We're giving you the microphone for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

• (1115)

Mr. Christopher Kulak (Father of Isabella Kulak, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Garneau.

My name is Christopher Kulak, [*Inaudible—Editor*] Cote First Nation, Saskatchewan.

I'm very honoured to be here representing my family, Cote First Nation, and my daughter Isabella.

A great many things have transpired since January 4 and since our first ribbon skirt day at the Kamsack Comprehensive Institute. I remember the day that I got the phone call from the director of education—or the deputy director, then—Donna Kriger, discussing the incident and what had gone on. Donna was very gracious and didn't give me the impression that she had any disbelief in what I was saying.

We were immediately working on solutions. That really gave me some hope that this leadership in the school division was going to do something about what was going on. I remember how we were speaking about faith and belief. I remember speaking about the coat of many colours, and how the Creator made such a wondrous variety of people that we might have fellowship and be close together, learn each other's ways, learn to be tolerant of each other and love each other. These are all values that my family stands very firmly on. We have to be the change that we want to see in the world.

I'm raising seven girls with this in their hearts. I get the strength to do this as a father through my wife and my family's culture. We are just so humbled to be honoured in such a way and to stand for all the first nations and indigenous peoples that fought so hard and so long to persevere through racism and all the colonial measures meant to keep first nations people down.

All the knowledge keepers and people with cultural pride carried all the traditions on even after the potlatch laws outlawed all ceremonies. Those people are champions. Maybe many of them aren't here today to witness what's about to happen, but it's because of those people's efforts. With no recognition and no help, they kept these things alive in Pauline Pelly and Stella Pelly, and now on to my wife and her sisters, and then on to my children. There's a generational giving that went on, and the generational defiance against racism was a quiet defiance before. I'm so pleased that my daughter's unintentional activism has led to such a large-scale and positive outcome.

I want to thank Senator McCallum for her tireless work on this bill and her tireless advocacy for first nations people. I want to thank Chief George Cote for being such a wonderful chief, mentor, friend and leader of the community. I also want to thank this whole panel and committee for allowing me to appear as a witness. I'm so pleased and proud.

Kitchi meegwetch.

That's all I have to say. The best thing we can do now as Canadians is to really come together in a true act of reconciliation that makes the nation take note of the public sentiment and what needs to be done here. I think we are achieving that in this bill.

I thank everyone involved, including the technical people who worked so hard to help me get on this morning so that I could be here. I thank you for chairing the meeting, Mr. Garneau.

Kitchi meegwetch.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Kulak.

We'll now try connecting with Ms. Redfern to see if it works.

If it works, you have five minutes, Ms. Redfern. Go ahead, please.

I'm afraid we're not hearing you for some reason. I'm not quite sure what it is. We'll keep trying.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Wapistan, if you are ready to give your opening statement, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

• (1120)

Ms. Marie-Josée Wapistan: [*Witness spoke in Innu as follows:*]

Kuei! Tshipushukatinau niminueniten tekushinian ute tshetshi aimitukuat.

[*Innu text translated as follows:*]

Hello! Greetings. I'm very happy to be here to speak with you.

[*Translation*]

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Marie-Josée Wapistan, and I am from the community of Natashquan. Speaking in Innu—

The Chair: Just a moment, please. There's an issue with the interpretation.

[*English*]

Is somebody getting the English translation?

Some hon. members: Yes.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We are listening, Ms. Wapistan. Go ahead.

Ms. Marie-Josée Wapistan: Good morning.

[*Witness spoke in Innu as follows:*]

Kuei! Niminueniten ute tekushinian, tshetshi natshi-imina tshetshi natshi uauitamatukuat ne innushkuat e utunishkuakunupat.

[*Innu text translated as follows:*]

Hello! I'm happy to be here to speak to you about indigenous women.

[*Translation*]

I am honoured and proud to be here today.

I am from the community of Natashquan, *Nutashkuan* in Innu. I represent the nine Innu communities that belong to Quebec Native Women Inc. One of the reasons I'm speaking in Innu is to show that our beautiful language is still alive and is an important part of our identity. Something else that sets us apart as indigenous women in this country is the ribbon skirt, which symbolizes strength, identity and pride. When an Innu woman wears her ribbon skirt, it radiates her strength and beauty. The ribbon skirt must be worn for ceremonies because it is sacred and embodies the woman's strength. She is shown more respect when she wears her ribbon skirt.

You see today just how much of an impact the wearing of a single ribbon skirt at a Saskatchewan school can have. The skirt brings

us together and carries a message, one that crosses provincial and national boundaries, because the ribbon skirt holds the same significance for many indigenous nations on the earth. It knows no borders. The ribbon skirt is a very powerful symbol, as you can see. Its significance resonates with various indigenous peoples.

We aren't looking for just a national day. We want a day that makes it clear that the disrespect for our identity is no longer acceptable. Our girls and sisters express their identity by wearing their skirts, and as women, we want them to be shown respect. When we wear our skirts, we are also embodying life. Indigenous women are directly connected to our nurturing Mother Earth and all of her strength and splendour.

That is basically the message I really wanted to deliver to you today. I could have given my presentation in Innu, my language, and I can still do so, but I'm not sure whether my five minutes are up.

The Chair: You're actually at three minutes and 30 seconds, so you have a minute and a half left.

Ms. Marie-Josée Wapistan: All right. That is what I wanted to say to you today about ribbon skirts.

Thank you, *tshinashkumitinan*.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wapistan.

[*English*]

Ms. Redfern, would you like to try to see if we can hear you?

You can hear us. Unfortunately, I'm terribly sorry we can't hear you. We would have loved to have heard you.

If it gets resolved, perhaps, before the end of the hour, we will have a chance to ask you for your comments, Ms. Redfern.

In the meantime, we need to proceed with the round of questions. There will be one round of questions, beginning with Mrs. Wagan-tall.

You will have six minutes.

• (1125)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you so much, Chair.

It's a real honour for me, a humbling honour for me, to be able to be here today and take part in this particular session.

I want to thank Senator McCallum for the beautiful work that you've done in presenting this, giving credit to those you appreciate and love and doing this on their behalf. Thank you.

I have also the privilege of knowing Chief George Cote. Cote First Nation is in my riding. I have not met Isabella and her father yet, and I look forward to that on January 4. The invitation has been extended, and it's on my calendar. I'm looking forward to that very much.

I have to say, Chief George, that right from the first time I met you and those in your community, it was very clear that there was a sense of pride in who you are and a desire to be conciliatory and work together. My first event was going out to the first nations school there and talking with grade 4 students, as I thought, about Canada. Arriving there, I found out that it wasn't just the grade 4 students. Everybody was in the room, including parents, and it was an opportunity to talk about what we share.

The excitement in the room was real, and I had an opportunity to share things like the forum for young Canadians and that they could, as they got older, enlist and possibly be part of that. Parents were writing that down. I was honest. I said, "I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing here. What should I be doing to show my respect in the room? How do I tell who an elder is?" and this kind of thing. They were just so remarkable in interacting with me. It was a real privilege and a sense of belonging, I have to say.

I want to thank you for the way that you really brought me into your community and shared very real experiences there, the very good and sometimes the very hard.

I would like to ask you and Isabella's father Christopher a question. I'll just mention my background is Ukrainian. Seeing that combination here is very exciting for me as well.

I would like you to go a little further in sharing why you went the route you did and how reconciliation can take place out of a very dire and hurtful circumstance and bring the healing that was able to be brought because of the choices made throughout that whole circumstance.

Chief George and Christopher, if you would be willing, that would be wonderful. Thank you.

Chief George Cote: Thank you, Cathay.

I remember when you and your husband came to our community and I took you around and showed you some places, our village, our school and our band administration office. It was really great to have you and your husband in our community.

This gives us an opportunity, as well, Cathay, with the Good Spirit School Division. It opened an avenue or a door in regard to the curriculum and its being in the school system. Since some of the communities or some of the schools don't know the background and the culture of the first nation communities that are in that district, we made an agreement with the Good Spirit School Division. It had been over 40 years since the last agreement was signed. This agreement gives an advantage to us to put our language, our history and all the things that we went through as a first nation into the non-first nation schools. There's also land-based training to bring the schools out to our community to give them some cultural activities that they can use, that they can participate in, so that they know what our children are being taught in our nation.

With Isabella opening up that door and with the teachers as well, we have a cultural room in the school already, and some of our elders go there to share stories with those who are interested. We're not trying to push it onto them, but here's an opportunity for us to let the non-first nation schools know a little bit more about us, as we learned a lot about the Europeans coming to Canada.

When I was in school, I never learned anything about my background. All I learned about was the Europeans, but now here we have a new agreement that we can put forward, and we're doing that in our school to learn more about our language. Our language was lost as a result of history, but now we're trying to bring it back and revitalize it. It's also to make all cultures, whether it's Ukrainian, Russian or whatever in that community, be proud of who they are and wear their attire any time of the day. It doesn't have to be just January 4.

Thank you, Cathay.

• (1130)

The Chair: Mr. Kulak, do you want to add to that? We still have time.

Mr. Christopher Kulak: Yes. Thank you for asking, Cathay. Thank you for being here.

I was a transplant to Saskatchewan. I grew up in northern Alberta in a town called Whitecourt. I grew up in a very busy oil and gas area. I came to Saskatchewan to build cellphone towers for SaskTel and I met my wife. We started our family, and I began my journey into indigenous culture as an outsider.

I don't know much about my background. I'm a Germanic Russian immigrant. My grandparents were the first generation to come here, and my parents were first-generation Canadians. I didn't have a cultural pillar to stand on until I married my wife and had my children. Cathay was speaking about the welcoming nature of first nations communities. If you're part of their community, you're part of their community. They've accepted me and my family. I feel like I have somewhere to be now. Chief George Cote and all the elders on the reserve have invited me to ceremonies and to participate with my family.

I'm so glad that this has translated into the education system, as George has spoken about, and I now have friends in the community. Non-indigenous friends come to ask me questions about how to get in touch with leaders on the reserve and what's involved in doing certain things on reserve land. A lot of people have lots of questions, and these questions weren't being asked before.

None of these conversations were being had, and there were lots of barriers and blockades up that were mostly visual and traditional. Communities stayed separated and individuals stuck with their own race of people. It was unacceptable, but there was no mechanism to get everybody speaking. Now with all this dialogue, all this talk and all these different levels of government involved, and school divisions...and especially to watch the children at school enjoy the cultural space in the indigenous room.... My wife Lana is the indigenous community worker for the GSSD here, and she's put a lot of energy, along with her colleagues, into making that room a safe space for everyone.

As George said, we don't push it on people, but when people sign the waivers to allow their kids to come smudge in the indigenous room and you see non-indigenous kids coming for spiritual support through that, it gives me hope as a believer and as a father that the wondrous variety of people the Creator made all may be seeing each other now as human beings and as equals.

I think the advocacy that my daughter displayed was definitely through the hand of the Creator. Nothing is by mistake, and the divine nature of what's going on here shows that the Lord is in all things and guiding us all here today to do the right thing and show some unity and some respect and to realize that our mistakes of the past can be righted and that we need to do the best thing for the youth of Canada now. I believe that's what we're doing today.

I hope that answers what you asked of me.

Thank you very much.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kulak.

Thank you, Mrs. Wagantall.

We'll go to Mrs. Atwin for six minutes.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I've been very much looking forward to this day for quite some time. I'm going to try my best not to cry.

I want to thank everyone—Chief Cote, Senator McCallum, Madame Wapistan, Chris Kulak and your amazing family, and our other witness whom we hope to hear from as well.

It really is about unity, and that's what I'm feeling and that's what I'm seeing. This is such a concrete demonstration to bring us together, to bring our country together, to bring cultures together. It's nice to have some positive things to celebrate as well.

Chris, maybe I'll start with you. I can't wait to get our families together, to meet your seven beautiful daughters as well, and your wonderful wife. That's what this is about—it's bridging and making those connections. I'm also a non-indigenous person raising two indigenous sons, so it's really important and it speaks to this work of reconciliation and being brought in and respecting these teachings and finding yourself there as well.

You made a comment about making the nation take note, and I really feel that's what this does. It's one thing to have this incredible dialogue that's so critical for reconciliation, but to put it into something like legislation, to have a national day to recognize the triumph of an indigenous child who took an incident and turned it into something so positive, I think it can teach all of us some really powerful lessons.

I would like to ask you, Mr. Kulak, why you call her “Bella the Brave”. Perhaps you could share that and a little bit about how she feels about what's happening right now in her honour.

Mr. Christopher Kulak: To get back to “Bella the Brave”, I guess Bella is my most petite little girl. She's very quiet. She's a scholar and a dreamer and a lover of Johnny Cash music and Elvis

Presley, the old things that I guess she listens along to as I listen to my old-fashioned music.

She's kind of an old soul and maybe feels out of place without an iPhone 14 and all these things that everyone else has, but maybe that's what has made her a little different, in that we promote more of these old-fashioned family values in our home. We always tell our girls, “You've got to stand up for what's right and what you know to be true in life.”

Even though she didn't fight back with her fists that day, she came home, and we could see her pain on her face. She slowly opened up to her mom about what had happened and how she'd been shamed. That's brave to not lash out and to hold it until you can speak to someone with wisdom, to seek wisdom from someone who can give you wisdom.

That's how we try to raise our kids: to try not to be too reactionary and try to take the time to listen the other side. When someone's wrong, you look for community around you to help you deal with that. Society has forgotten how to do that. There are a lot of people lashing out on social media and attacking people and not doing a lot of listening.

Bella is brave because she's a small little girl who likes to trap rabbits with her dad and wear sweatpants and go into the woods. It was hard for her to put on that skirt. Sometimes she feels like her skin is a little bit pale to be feeling like a native person, but in her heart she's *anishinaabekwe*. Her culture and her ceremony give her that, and her ancestry.

I told her: “You wear that with pride. That's where you come from. Your Auntie Farrah Sanderson made that for you, and it comes from all the hard work from your ancestors who worked so hard to keep those traditions alive.”

When we went to the backyard to take the photographs for the newspaper and she put her hand in the air to signify her defiance against this racism, it really spoke to me as well, because in Russian our name, “Kulak”, means “the fist”. That's the significance of the fist, and significance of the skirt is her first nation ancestry.

Together, I guess that's how I showed her how to be brave. You don't have to necessarily lash out to be powerful, and now a little girl from Cote First Nation is pretty powerful indeed.

That's all I have to say on that.

• (1140)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: *Meegwetch.*

That's some pretty powerful imagery that you shared with us as well. Again, I just cannot wait for the opportunity to meet her and to celebrate this with your family.

If I could, I'll turn now for my remaining time to Senator McCallum.

It's been such an honour to get to know you through this work, Senator. I wonder if you could go back to the talk about inclusivity, and how this is about building those bridges, and it's really about the unification piece.

Hon. Mary Jane McCallum: Thank you for your question.

I'm sorry that I didn't acknowledge all the MPs for all the work that they do, especially MP Atwin for agreeing to sponsor the bill. Thank you.

It was easy for me to look at inclusivity because I had already heard a story about Isabella and what she had done. I just modelled after her. When you look at inclusivity and when I look at where we came from.... I was in residential school for 11 years. I know colonialism, as do a lot of people, whether they're indigenous or not. Where we come from is not where we're going, because we came from exclusion. We came from marginalization.

I looked at what Isabella and Chief Cote modelled. It was being inclusive and wanting to do the right thing. That comes from our ancestors.

I did not acknowledge our ancestors. In their time—and our leaders today—they persevered. They are adamant that we would not remain where we were. If Canada is going to progress, it's going to have to do it walking side by side with indigenous people. If it doesn't, we're not going to progress as a country.

The inclusivity is so important in this bill, because we've always wanted to be a part of Canada. This bill will do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Atwin.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, go ahead. You have six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses. Thank you, Mr. Kulak, Isabella's father, Senator McCallum, Mr. Cote, Ms. Wapistan and Ms. Redfern.

Senator McCallum, thank you for humbly and selflessly pointing out that the bill belonged to a young girl and a community, not you. As I see it, our job, as parliamentarians, really comes down to making room for others. Isabella did what she felt was right. Like her, we want to do what is right, while humbly representing first nations and indigenous people. I wanted to acknowledge your comment, senator.

Now, I'll turn to the issue of children. Ms. Wapistan and Mr. Cote spoke about children and young people, more broadly. Pride and culture keep coming up in the committee's discussions. Ms. Wapistan added respect to that.

We are talking about enacting a national ribbon skirt day, but all the witnesses have told us that it's about more than ribbon skirts. Ms. Wapistan, you represent Quebec Native Women Inc. Tell us, if you would, what January 4 means to indigenous women, young women and youth?

Tshinashkumitinan.

Ms. Marie-Josée Wapistan: For the next generation, the ribbon skirt represents their pride in their *kukums*—grandmothers—and in their mothers. It's important to be proud of our strength. In our everyday lives, wearing a ribbon skirt is an expression of who we are as indigenous women and a way of honouring our mothers and grandmothers, who wear it every day.

• (1145)

Mrs. Marilène Gill: It's about the message it sends, then.

I must tell you how humbled I was—I'm using that word again—when the Innu nation honoured me with a ribbon skirt. I didn't feel worthy of it.

For first nations and indigenous people, the ribbon skirt is a very powerful symbol. It sends a very powerful message. As you mentioned in your opening remarks, it's also a medium for information, awareness and communication between nations.

I wore the skirt, which depicts Joyce Echaquan. The purple represents women, the red represents missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, and the orange represents the survivors. There are other symbols as well, and I am reminded of how powerful those messages are.

Do you think the skirt can be a way to inform and educate, and to forge ties with indigenous people?

Ms. Marie-Josée Wapistan: Yes, when we wear our skirt, it's about everything it represents. People in every indigenous nation wear ribbon skirts. Through the skirt, we are thinking about Joyce Echaquan and our murdered and missing sisters.

The four colours of the ribbon represent the colours of the four directions: yellow, red, black and white. All of that encompasses the strength of indigenous women, who proudly wear those colours on their skirts.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: As you pointed out, wearing your ribbon skirt is incredibly symbolic for you. At the same time, it can have a tangible impact on society.

What do you hope this national day will achieve? What are your hopes in that regard?

Ms. Marie-Josée Wapistan: Today, we are in an era of reconciliation. If we want to walk that path, we have to include our customs and traditions, and for women, wearing a ribbon skirt is one of those traditions.

Everyone—indigenous youth and women, our grandmothers and grandfathers, the people of Quebec and Canada—should be proud of those customs and traditions in this era of reconciliation.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: My time is already up, Mr. Chair.

[*Member spoke in Innu as follows:*]

Tshinashkumitin ishkieu Uapishtan.

[*Innu text translated as follows:*]

Thank you, Ms. Wapistan.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

We now go to Ms. Idlout for six minutes.

Let's have one last go to see whether Ms. Redfern is able to blast through the ether so we can hear her.

Go ahead, Ms. Redfern.

Ms. Madeleine Redfern: I'm so honoured to be in front of the committee.

I want to thank and acknowledge those who are bringing forward this bill, and especially the bravery of Isabella.

I think many or most indigenous women in this country, including our children, have experienced systemic discrimination. I'm really sad that Isabella went to school displaying something that clearly was important to her culture, her family and her community and it simply failed to be respected as special and unique.

As our member of Parliament from Nunavut has explained, the ribbon skirt is not actually part of our culture and our tradition. The amautiit, which are what we wear for carrying our children, and the kamiik—boots—are all handmade and require immense special skill. There is absolutely no intended disrespect to the bill. As I think Lori has explained well, in the spirit of inclusivity, it's just to simply recognize and acknowledge that ribbon skirts are not really part of our culture.

Maybe the language in the proposed bill to bring about that level of inclusivity or that recognition of the distinction between the different cultures is to not try to undermine the spirit and the intent of the bill. We as indigenous women, we as women, and the fathers of our children want to be able to proudly wear our traditional clothing in the schools, in our ceremonies, at our meetings and in our conferences as a way of demonstrating that we do exist, and what we wear is an incredibly important way of demonstrating that our culture is strong and alive and that we do want to advance it.

This is not to disrespect Isabella, her family and the folks who are sponsoring this bill, but I do think a very small amendment to the bill would bring about and foster that level of inclusivity, because it is something that our children have also experienced, that our people have experienced when we do wear our traditional clothing. The goal of this bill—as we totally understand and support—is to try to recognize and demonstrate that we should be able to do this proudly without fear and without discrimination.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Redfern.

We are at the end here, but I'm told that Senator McCallum raised her hand when the question was asked by Ms. Irlout, so I would like to offer her the opportunity to comment.

Hon. Mary Jane McCallum: Thank you.

When I look at the amendment, I ask, “What will it contribute to the bill?” That's the question I ask, because this came up in the Senate. There was one senator who told me that it's not practised by everyone in Canada. I said, “Do you know what the focus of the bill is? It's violence against children.” It just happened that it was a ribbon skirt that was weaponized. There is no symbol, except maybe the drum, that is universal across Canada.

What I recommended to her was that she append it as an observation instead of as an amendment, because Isabella, her family and

the chief would like this bill passed. Appending it would bring out this issue.

When I look at my family, I see that not all my of family wear the ribbon skirt. I do, but not all indigenous—first nations, Métis, Inuit—wear the ribbon skirt. I recognize that. However, they do support it and they have supported it across Canada.

I'm concerned that because it's not going to accomplish anything, it will deter the bill.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you, Senator.

Mr. Kulak, can you hear us right now?

Mr. Christopher Kulak: I can. Can you hear me?

The Chair: Yes, we can.

There was some commentary with respect to a proposed amendment. I don't know if you caught any of that, but in fairness, do you have a comment?

Mr. Christopher Kulak: Yes. I believe at this point in all of the effort that's gone into getting here.

The bill was cancelled when the last election was called, and we had to reintroduce it in the Senate. I think the spirit and intent of the bill are as stated. They are to represent and signify all important pieces of regalia and all important pieces of tradition. It happened to be the ribbon skirt that is the symbol of those things where we live, which is not to exclude anyone else.

I agree with Chief George Cote and Senator McCallum on what the purpose of the amendment is. I think the spirit of the bill speaks to all first nations people to not exclude anyone. We've always spoken about this issue in that context. It is to be representative of all first nations and whatever piece of regalia or apparel may be representative of their nation. That should be the idea behind the national ribbon skirt day: Please wear what makes you feel proud and indigenous.

It's not to take away from anyone else's particular items of significance, but I don't see the purpose or the necessity to amend the bill at this point.

That's my feeling on it. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kulak.

With that, on behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Senator Mary Jane McCallum for her testimony this morning, as well as Chief George Cote for his testimony.

[*Translation*]

I would also like to thank Marie-Josée Wapistan.

[*English*]

Finally, thank you to Madeleine Redfern.

Let me also say thank you to Mr. Chris Kulak. I think I speak on behalf of all of the committee members when I say you are fortunate to have a young daughter who is both courageous and wise. We very much appreciate your speaking on her behalf and telling us about what she went through.

With that, we will suspend—

Go ahead, Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Before we end the ribbon skirt day conversation, in an effort of reconciliation, is there a way that both parties could sit down and we could somehow iron this out?

The Chair: We'll get to that very shortly, because we're going to do clause-by-clause consideration.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: With that, we will suspend.

Thank you again to our witnesses.

• (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1215)

The Chair: We are back in session for clause-by-clause consideration of Bill S-219.

I have here a page of reminders about how we do clause-by-clause study, but given that we have recently gone through Bill C-29, is it okay if I dispense with that? Does everybody sufficiently remember how it's done? I have a feeling that is the case. Therefore, we will proceed with clause-by-clause consideration.

As you know, pursuant to standing order 75(1), consideration of clause 1, which is the short title and the preamble, is postponed.

[*Translation*]

Shall clause 2 carry?

[*English*]

(Clause 2 agreed to)

[*Translation*]

Shall the short title carry?

[*English*]

This is clause 1, the short title. I don't see any objections. Therefore clause 1 is carried.

(Clause 1 agreed to)

The Chair: For the preamble, we have a proposed NDP amendment. I will turn to Ms. Idlout and invite her to move her amendment and describe it as she wishes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Chair, before we get to that, there has been some talk amongst the parties. We want to make sure that people feel comfortable with this. We do understand that while the ribbon skirt is important to many indigenous communities, it is not to all. To reflect that, we are suggesting a small grammatical amendment, which we feel is small enough in

grammar to not be something substantive that changes the entire bill.

I'd ask that the legislative clerk read that out. I think it would satisfy everyone at the committee and we could have unanimous consent. This would be to replace the amendment offered by the NDP so that we could make sure that this is a speedy transition with the January 4 deadline coming just around the corner.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll turn to the legislative clerk.

Do you have the amendment, Clerk?

Ms. Marie-Hélène Sauvé (Legislative Clerk): Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would point out, however, that this would unfortunately not constitute a strictly grammatical modification to the bill. It would be a substantive amendment.

From my understanding of discussions that took place earlier, in the second paragraph of the preamble, it would read in the English version, "Whereas, in many indigenous communities, the ribbon skirt is a centuries old spiritual symbol of womanhood...". The rest of the second paragraph would proceed as it reads.

I would also propose wording in French, if I may.

[*Translation*]

Once again, in French, the second paragraph of the preamble would begin "que, dans plusieurs communautés autochtones, depuis des siècles, la jupe à rubans est un sym-".

The rest of the paragraph would stay the same, as currently worded in Bill S-219.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sauvé.

[*English*]

If, based on your discussions, this is something that you would like to bring forward, I want to first ask Ms. Idlout if she is ready to drop her current amendment.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik, Iksivautaq.*

Yes, I am willing to withdraw the amendment I had submitted earlier and have that replaced with "whereas, in many indigenous communities".

Qujannamiik.

The Chair: That's very good. Thank you.

I'm just going to suspend for a minute to talk with the legislative clerk.

• (1220) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1220)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, all I would say from our perspective on this side is that we support the unanimous consent change as requested by Mr. Battiste and Ms. Idlout.

The Chair: There are just a number of factors here. On the proposed amendment, I owe it to you to read out the following, because it is a substantive amendment. You can then react to that.

There are two things I want to say.

First of all, whether it was the original NDP-1 or the proposed change, the amendment seeks to make a substantive modification by adding new elements in the preamble. In *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, third edition, the following is stated on page 774:

In the case of a bill that has been referred to a committee after second reading, a substantive amendment to the preamble

—you'll recall this from Bill C-29—

—is admissible only if it is rendered necessary by amendments made to the bill. In addition, an amendment to the preamble is in order when its purpose is to clarify it or to ensure the uniformity of the English and French versions.

Based on that, in the opinion of the chair—I'm doing what conventional chairs will do—the proposed amendment is substantive and has not been rendered necessary by amendments to the bill itself. I therefore rule the amendment inadmissible. That would apply to the proposed change as well.

You can react now, but first let me finish one other point that I would like to make.

Just so you know, if we make an amendment, it will of course have to go through the House of Commons to report stage and then to third reading, and then it goes to the Senate. It will have to go back to the Senate, because it's an amendment. Even though it originally came from the Senate, it has to go back to the Senate. An amendment has been made to it. Just be cognizant of the fact that January 4 is not very far away.

With that, the floor is open.

Go ahead, Mr. Zimmer.

• (1225)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just as a point of clarification, you said if it's to “clarify” the meaning or intent. This particular change is done with that exact intent. It's to clarify.

The Chair: You have to understand that clarification is in the context of the original bill. You can clarify all sorts of things by adding all sorts of things into bills.

I'll turn to the legislative clerk on that.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Sauvé: My understanding of what is in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, although I don't really have any specific examples at this stage, is that when it comes to “clarify”, that is when there's something that causes particular confusion or when there's no uniformity between the French and English versions.

My advice to the committee is that this proposed amendment would not fit that particular description. It would constitute a substantive amendment and it would require approval by the Senate.

The Chair: The key word here is “confusion”.

I don't think that applies here, and that's why I've ruled it as inadmissible.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Mr. Chair, can you just repeat the clarification with regard to when you can change the preamble?

The Chair: Sure:

In the case of a bill that has been referred to a committee after second reading, a substantive amendment to the preamble is admissible only if it is rendered necessary by amendments made to the bill.

If we had put stuff in the bill, then we could backfit. That's why we look at the preamble at the end.

Go ahead, Mr. Battiste.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I'm apologizing ahead of time, Mr. Chair, for having to do this, but we don't necessarily agree with the learned advice you have received on this and we're challenging that ruling.

The Chair: No problem. I can take it. I've got a thick skin.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: You've challenged me before, by the way.

What do you propose? Do you want to vote on the changed one?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Vanessa Davies): Mr. Chair, the vote is on whether the chair's decision will be sustained.

The Chair: Okay.

Is the chair's ruling on inadmissibility sustained? Let's record it.

The Clerk: If you want to support the chair, you vote “yea”. If you don't, you vote “nay”.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: What we're trying to get at with this challenge is that this clause that we've all agreed to is admissible.

The Clerk: That's right.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: That's what we're challenging. We would like to see it admissible as a grammatical change.

The Clerk: That would be a secondary vote. Right now, you're challenging the chair's decision.

In a challenge to the chair, if you would like the chair's decision to be sustained, you vote “yea”, and if you would not, you vote “nay”.

(Ruling of the chair overturned: nays 11; yeas 0)

The Chair: I don't think you need to tell me.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: With that, is there now a motion to propose with respect to this issue?

• (1230)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: We would like to move that the line we deem a grammatical change be admissible.

The Chair: Let me suspend.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I think we have unanimous consent on that.

• (1230) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you for your patience.

On the business of the change you're proposing.... If, of course, you vote to do it, it will be done. However, I should tell you it is highly likely—in fact, it's inevitable—that it will have to go back to the Senate, whether you call it “grammatical” or not. That's the advice I'm being told. It is what it is, of course, but if you want it that way, I don't know if you'll make the January 4 deadline. That's beyond my pay grade.

You can vote on it. If it doesn't get back to the Senate in time, that's just the way it is.

First of all, let's take the vote, unless you're proposing....

• (1235)

Ms. Lori Idlout: I feel as if I need to clarify.

As much as I struggle with what's going on—seeing the way the bill is written right now, and generalizing all indigenous women who use ribbon skirts—it's such a small bill and it's so important to this family. I don't know whether we need to waste so much time on this.

I don't know what the process is after it leaves here if we do make those changes, and how long it would take the Senate to have their debate. It doesn't seem as if it's that necessary to use up all this time on something that, on January 4.... We could always later clarify through other means.

I like the senator's suggestion about.... What was it? Was it an observance, or something? Can you clarify that?

The Chair: It was “observation”.

Are you proposing something, Ms. Idlout?

Ms. Lori Idlout: Could we hear from the clerk about this observation, and how it works? That way, if it is an observation, perhaps it doesn't need to be an amendment that wastes more debate time.

The Clerk: The clause-by-clause process is a separate process from the observation process. Once the clause-by-clause process is done, we adopt the bill with or without amendments, and then, if it's the will of the committee, the committee could introduce another report subsequent to the bill being adopted in which there would be an observation that could contain the wording of the amendment. My understanding through our discussions earlier is that the Senate did the same on this bill, and the House committee would be able to do the same on their end as well.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Respecting Ms. Idlout and her intent to recognize Inuit and Innu women and indigenous women as well, respecting everybody, I think I would support her direction and come together as a committee to hopefully get some unanimous support for it.

Thanks.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the Bloc Québécois, we feel the same. I support Ms. Idlout's amendment and the other amendment clarifying that ribbon skirts are not significant to all indigenous women.

Of course, we don't want to delay the process to the point that we won't be able to mark the day on January 4. If Ms. Idlout agrees, we could submit a report and do it that way, since it's about being inclusive, not excluding anyone and respecting every culture and the differences.

That said, I will go with whatever the committee decides. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

Is it my understanding that what you're suggesting, Ms. Idlout, is that we'll accept the preamble as written but that there will be an observation made at some point in the report from this committee?

Ms. Lori Idlout: That's correct.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Mr. Chair—

The Chair: I'll go through my sheet here and do things properly.

Ms. Idlout, are you withdrawing your current NDP-1 amendment?

Ms. Lori Idlout: Under protest, yes.

• (1240)

The Chair: We don't need the “with apologies and with respect”, so we can....

Thank you, Ms. Idlout. Amendment NDP-1 is withdrawn.

I'm going to ask Mr. Battiste whether he will withdraw his motion.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I will.

The Chair: Therefore, the new proposed amendment from Mr. Battiste is also withdrawn.

Is there unanimous consent to withdraw the amendment?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, shall the preamble carry, the original one?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the title carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Shall the bill carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the chair report the bill to the House?

[English]

You're giving me my instructions here.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone. Thank you for your spirit of constructive engagement here.

Ms. Atwin, do you want to say a final word?

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: I would just say a heartfelt *meegwetch*, *wela'lin*, thank you to everyone on the committee for this work. It really was in the spirit of reconciliation today. It can only get stronger and help us move forward together.

Perhaps, Mr. Chair, when you do present the bill in the House of Commons, add that observation just to be fully inclusive. I wanted to put that caveat in there.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for the suggestion. That was the case with Bill C-29, by the way, so good.

Thank you.

Voices: Hear, hear!

• (1245)

The Chair: With this, the meeting is adjourned.

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