



ABORIGINAL LEGAL SERVICES

Gaa kina gwii waabamaa debwewin - All those who seek the truth

For Immediate Release:

Last week was a dismal week for Indigenous people in Canada: the Brian Sinclair Working Group now calls for public will to demand change

June 7, 2021 Toronto: Last week, Canadians faced the discovery of 215 unmarked graves of residential school children who were buried away from their loved ones. In the same week, the federal government released a disappointing response to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) 2 years after its conclusion. Also the public Inquiry into the death of Ms Joyce Echaquan concluded. These events saddened us all but it also sparked sympathy and self-reflection.

The three stories coming so closely together is a reminder of the ways that, for Indigenous people, systemic racism in education, child welfare, health care, and policing are in many ways inter-related and connected to larger histories of colonialism, white supremacy and exploitation. Dr. Mary Jane Logan McCallum, states “the past week was a reminder of the long history of resistance on the part of Indigenous people through the use of various mechanisms at hand; we have not been short of better ways of living together in Canada. Rather, we are short on will to do so.”

Exploring and confronting the truth of the colonial legacy is a difficult journey but a necessary one. It is not a journey that has just begun, rather Indigenous people, communities and allies have been advocating on these issues for years. Christa Big Canoe, the Legal Director of Aboriginal Legal Services says “Unfortunately, awakening the nation’s and world’s consciousness seems to require something so horrific and immediate to invoke sympathy”.

Big Canoe added that “the knowledge of lost little souls from Indian Residential School, or a video as alarming as the one Joyce made in her last moments result in instant reaction, tribute, emotion and sympathy. These are good human reactions, but we need continued engagement by more people that lasts beyond a week of memorials. We need to collectively perpetuate change and long term responses.”

In the expert witness report submitted by Dr. Annette J. Browne during the Quebec Coroner’s Public Inquiry into the death of Ms. Joyce Echaquan, Dr. Browne states:

“It is often the most recent tragic incidents that catch the attention of officials and decision-makers responsible for health care services. While these incidents require a full analysis, in the process, attention is potentially diverted from the everyday experiences of racism and discrimination that Indigenous peoples experience in the health care sector and other sectors. The risk in conducting inquests is in overlooking everyday experiences

of racism and the everyday taken-for-granted practices that give rise to negative health care experiences.”

Members of the Brian Sinclair Working Group have watched, studied and listened to the legal processes that have been cataloging the discriminatory actions against Indigenous people, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Brian Sinclair’s Inquest, The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Women and Girls, and the Public Inquiry into the death of Joyce Echaquan. For years sound recommendations to improve quality of life, provide retribution, bridge gaps in the social determinant of health for Indigenous people, and create safe spaces and places for Indigenous people have come out of these processes but have largely gone unheeded or unheard. It should not take the bodies of children or capturing racist rants by hospital staff against a dying Indigenous woman to pull together the will for change. Now that some of that public outrage has been captured, will there be enough traction for it to last?

Past inquiries and commissions have led to dismay; made promises to do better; and have made recommendations that do not seem to be followed through. Dr. Lavoie, a specialist of Indigenous health policy and services stated: “We’ve been here before, and it was not enough. It is becoming increasingly evident that Canadians must critically explore the source of our prejudice against Indigenous peoples, if we truly want change.” She added “The time for critical introspection is long overdue. As a country, we need to confront our collective prejudice, to name it and openly talk about solutions. Only when we realize the sources and impact of prejudice, will there be a commitment to implementing meaningful recommendations.”

If the non-Action plan that the federal government released last week to address the violence against Indigenous women and respond to the National Inquiry’s Calls to Justice is any indication of the commitment for change, we have a long way to go. Big Canoe asks for “long term allies willing to speak up for those buried children, MMIWG2S+, women like Joyce Echaquan, and those who face racism every day. These legal processes capture important truth but we should not require any more evidence in order to demand real change, real plans to implement recommended solutions and a resounding demand for no more anti-Indigenous racism in our laws, policies, practices and systems.”

The Brian Sinclair Working Group:

The Brian Sinclair working group was formed to examine the role of racism in the death of Brian Sinclair and the inquest that followed. It continues to bring to light ongoing structural and systemic anti-Indigenous racism in Canadian health care and legal contexts. For more, see:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/wxf3v5uh2pun0pf/Out%20of%20Sight%20Final.pdf?dl=0>

Dr. Mary Jane Logan McCallum is a Professor in the Department of History at the University of Winnipeg and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous People, History and Archives, specializes in the history of racialized health care and the Indigenous histories of health, education and labour in Canada.

Christa Big Canoe is the Legal Advocacy Director of Aboriginal Legal Services and the former Lead Commission Counsel to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls National Inquiry.

Dr. Josée G. Lavoie is a Professor with the Department of Community Health Sciences in the Faculty of Health Sciences, College of Medicine, University of Manitoba, Director of Ongomiziwin Research, one of the oldest university-based Indigenous health research centres in Canada.

Dr. Browne's full Written Submission made May 28, 2021 to the Quebec Coroner's Public Inquiry into the death of Joyce Echaquan can be found at:
<https://www.faq-qnw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Dr.-Annette-J.-Browne-Expert-Witness-Written-Submission-May-28-2021.pdf>

For Media enquiries

Dr. McCallum at m.mccallum@uwinnipeg.ca

Christa Big Canoe at canoecd@lao.on.ca or 416-697-5467

Dr. Lavoie at josee.lavoie@umanitoba.ca or 204 509-4527