



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Aboriginal Groups Call on A.G. to Fund Participation in Missing Women Inquiry

Coast Salish Territory/Vancouver, BC – The Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs (UBCIC), First Nations Summit (FNS), Carrier Sekani Tribal Council (CSTC) and the Native Courtworker and Counselling Association of B.C. (NCCABC) today called upon the Attorney General of B.C. to reverse his earlier decision and fund the Aboriginal Groups to participate in the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry headed by Commissioner Wally Oppal, Q.C.

“It is totally unacceptable that the Province would establish an Inquiry into the deaths and disappearances of so many missing Aboriginal women and not allow Aboriginal people a voice at that Inquiry.” Grand Chief Stewart Phillip of the UBCIC said. “Once again, it will be a case of the Christy Clark government speaking on behalf of Aboriginal peoples subsequent to deliberately muzzling our voices.” Grand Chief Phillip also called on the Government to commit to funding counsel for both those families not yet represented at the Inquiry and the Participants recommended for funding by Commissioner Oppal.

Earlier this year, Commissioner Oppal granted the Aboriginal Groups and others Participant status at the Inquiry. Oppal also recommended to the Attorney General (A.G.) that B.C. provide funding to the Participants so that they could participate in the Inquiry. The A.G. of B.C. rejected the Commissioner’s recommendation in respect of all Participants except for the families of 10 of the murdered or missing women.

On Monday, June 27, 2011 Oppal held a pre-hearing conference in Vancouver to hear directly from Participants to understand and to determine, among other things, the effects of the A.G.’s refusal to provide funding.

“Aboriginal peoples will have no confidence, trust or respect in a Commission which does not include their voice”, said Hugh Braker, President of the NCCABC. “This Commission has been hobbled before it even starts by the A.G.’s decision. At best, the Government risks Aboriginal People ignoring the Commission.” he added.

Terry Teegee, Vice Tribal Chief of the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council stated, “The Highway of Tears continues to be an issue in the North and without the funds to participate we will be muzzled once again by the Provincial Government.” Teegee further said, “Christy Clark is

claiming to put 'families first' and we challenge her to live up to her words and to acknowledge that First Nations' women, who are critical to a healthy family, also matter under her mandate."

Chief Douglas White, a member of the First Nations Summit Political Executive said "When the women went missing the government refused to consider the possibility of a serial killer and refused to investigate the growing numbers of missing women. When Pickton was identified as a serial killer, the government refused to launch an inquiry into why so many women had to be murdered before anyone listened. Now that the Inquiry has finally been appointed, the Government is effectively preventing an Aboriginal voice at that Inquiry. The Government of B.C. has consistently downplayed and minimized the murders and disappearances of poor and vulnerable aboriginal women while pretending to care", added Chief White.

"The police, the various levels of government and a branch of the A.G. Ministry are all represented at the Inquiry", National AFN chief Shawn Atleo pointed out. "It is the aboriginal voice that will be missing. That is shocking to all Canadians. The A.G.'s suggestion that the Inquiry counsel can simply 'fill in' for the Participants, who do not have counsel, is unacceptable. Aboriginal people have a long history of justified suspicion and distrust of the police and Government. Commission counsel cannot reflect that."

B.C. A.F.N. Regional Chief Jody Wilson-Raybould stated, "The Missing Women Commission of Inquiry must respect that the First Nations' organizations, women's groups and all families of missing and murdered women have a great deal to contribute to the Inquiry. The Inquiry will raise the awareness of marginalized Aboriginal women and the children that have been left behind. Collaboration on key issues and inclusivity of all affected parties will result in solutions that will contribute to safer and healthier homes for Aboriginal women and children".

NCCABC President Hugh Braker added, "It is important that the Inquiry look at the bigger issues of racism and prejudice. Many Aboriginal people ask why it is that when west side rich white women go missing the west side of Vancouver is flooded with police but when poor aboriginal women in East Vancouver go missing no one seems to care. Why don't agencies respond as urgently to complaints about missing and murdered Aboriginal women as they do when other women go missing or are found murdered? The perception of prejudice needs to be investigated and the only people who will raise this concern at the hearings are the Aboriginal groups."

Commissioner Oppal reserved his decision after the hearing on June 27.

NATIVE COURTWORKERS TO WITHDRAW FROM MISSING WOMEN INQUIRY WITHOUT FUNDING

"The NCCABC is confirming that it cannot participate in the Missing Women Inquiry without funding," Hugh Braker, NCCABC President said. "The NCCABC is a social service organization and has no funds to participate in the Inquiry. At the same time, we are the only Aboriginal organization with 35 years' experience working with Aboriginal people in the Justice system. This Commission is being knee-capped by the Government before the Commission even starts. If more organizations are forced to withdraw because of lack of Government funding, then I

doubt the Commission will have the voices necessary to continue to proceed as it has. The NCCABC will make a motion on the first day of the hearings to be removed as a Participant should there be no funds for us to proceed.”

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Backgrounder attached

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Backgrounder

Aboriginal Groups Call on A.G. to fund Participation in Missing Women Inquiry

In the mid to late 1990's and 2001-2002, many women were reported missing to the Vancouver Police Dept. (V.P.D.) Despite fears being raised by members of the public and others about the possibility of a serial killer and despite calls for investigations, the V.P.D. did not investigate the reports of missing women. Aboriginal groups joined in the calls for more intensive investigations and for an investigation as to whether there was a serial killer at work.

In February of 2002 the first of many murder charges were laid against Mr. Robert Pickton after police found the remains of some missing women at his pig farm. While imprisoned awaiting trial, Mr. Pickton told an undercover officer that he had murdered 49 women and wanted to make it 50.

After Mr. Pickton was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison with no parole for 25 years, Aboriginal groups and others called for an inquiry into the handling of the missing women's case and the stags of proceedings by the Crown. The government refused to order an Inquiry.

Only after years of demands by Aboriginal groups and others did the Government of B.C. finally appoint an Inquiry to look into some aspects of the matters. The Order in Council establishing the Inquiry was made September 27, 2010. The terms of reference for the Inquiry are found at www.missingwomeninquiry.ca. The Government then appointed Wally Oppal, Q.C. as Commissioner of the Inquiry. Mr. Oppal had previously sat as a Justice in B.C. Supreme Court and the B.C. Court of Appeal and was Attorney General of B.C. He had also previously conducted an Inquiry into policing in B.C.

Commissioner Oppal granted ten groups or individuals Full Participant status in the Inquiry. Commissioner Oppal granted a further 12 groups Limited Participant status at the Inquiry. Those Limited Participant groups included The Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs (UBCIC), First Nations Summit (Summit), Carrier Sekani Tribal Council (CSTC) and the Native Courtworker and Counselling Association of B.C. (NCCABC). Commissioner Oppal also recommended on May 2, 2011 that the AFN, UBCIC, CSTC, Summit and NCCABC (among others) receive funding from the Province in order to participate in the Inquiry.

On May 25, 2011, Attorney General Penner announced that the B.C. government would only provide some funding to ten families of missing or murdered women and not to any of the other Participants at the Inquiry.

On June 27, Commissioner Oppal held further hearings to hear from the Participants on what the effect is of the denial of funding.