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Inuit being left out - survivor

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Northern News Services

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NUNAVUT - Paul Quassa attended residential school in Chesterfield Inlet.

In many of these schools, children were discouraged from speaking their language. So as part of the healing process, he believes it is important for survivors of the schools to be able to speak their language to share what they went through.

"We have the right to speak our own language and I'm sure survivors would prefer to speak Inuktitut," said Quassa. "We would feel a lot more comfortable with a commissioner that can understand and communicate in Inuktitut."

The Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) recently named its three commissioners: Justice Harry LaForme and commissioners Claudette Dumont-Smith and Jane Morley, who come from Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia, respectively.

Marius Tungilik has been involved with the residential school reconciliation process for more than 15 years.

He sent an e-mail to Robert Watts, interim executive director of the TRC, on Aug. 6 asking for the appointment of an Inuit commissioner. A week later, he had yet to get a response. A spokesperson for the commission said they have no record of receiving correspondence from Tungilik.

Tungilik said he thinks there are two reasons an Inuk commissioner should be part of the travelling commission.

"When we hear about the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it sounds very exclusive," Tungilik said.

"I think it is important not only for other Inuit to feel comfortable to tell the commission about their experiences in residential schools - and how it affected them and their family and their community - but it's also important for symbolic reasons."

Quassa and Tungilik both believed First Nations in Canada have traditionally been given more voice than Inuit. "I don't think it has been serious about including other cultures," said Tungilik. "They call it the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission and maybe that's all it is - Indian.

"We are just as Canadian as First Nations. We are not First Nations to begin with. We are Inuit. We have a unique culture and a unique language."

Commissioners were selected by representatives of parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The 11-member panel included ITK president Mary Simon.

Jim Moore, executive director of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), said his organization has been calling for a commissioner from the Arctic from the outset.

Simon "advocated very strongly for one of the commissioners to be from the Arctic - one who is aware of Inuit issues and aware of their residential school issues," said Moore.

When no Arctic commissioner was named, Moore said Simon contacted chairman LaForme and the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Chuck Strahl to make sure the processes they develop are reflective of, and suitable to, the experiences of students in residential schools.

"So far, they have appeared to be very open to that," said Moore.

He added LaForme travelled to Cambridge Bay in June to meet with the community, where Simon spoke to him about the Inuit experience.

Kim Phillips, spokesperson for the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said the TRC has received positive feedback from the North so far.

"The commission recognizes that Inuit experiences are unique from those of First Nations and Metis survivors," said Phillips.

"The commissioners have only been in place for just over two months and already have met with the ITK to discuss the TRC's mandate and consult on the commission's work ahead," said Phillips.

Inuit survivors will be able to tell their stories in Inuktitut through an interpreter.

Phillips mentioned LaForme's trip to Cambridge Bay, and added that TRC staff participated in community information sessions with residential schools survivors, hosted by the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation in Inuvik, Paulatuk, Sachs Harbour and Tuktoyaktuk, in July. Phillips said Inuit will, through interpreters, be able to share their stories with commissioners in Inuktitut.

Phillips said the commission would be setting up a 10-member committee consisting of regional representatives, to be in place by early September, to provide commissioners with advice and guidance, as well as hiring community liaisons to provide local representation for the TRC.

Tungilik would be interested to learn what the roles and expectations of the liaison officers would be.

However, he still believes there should be an Inuk commissioner.

"I feel excluded as a member of the Inuit community," he said. "I don't think we will be given any serious consideration without an Inuit member at a higher level."

"If this is going to be a nation-building exercise and if this commission is going to try to seriously address residential school reconciliation as a national issue, I don't think it's right to exclude one culture over another," said Tungilik.

Nunavut Tunngavik declined to comment on the issue.

ITK released a statement in June estimating that 3,500 Inuit attended residential schools.

Commissioners will travel across Canada over a five-year period to hear about the experiences of residential school survivors.

