

Ay-hiy nanaskomon (I give thanks to the Creator, Mother Earth and to you) for the invitation to give testimony to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. I'm grateful to live in Canada where I can travel from a remote First Nations community and speak to Members of Parliament in Cree. You gave me a great gift by giving me the opportunity to be heard.

At the conclusion of my testimony, several committee members invited me to provide a written brief. Please accept this letter as a written brief.

I have struggled for years to get answers from our leaders regarding the Onion Lake Cree Nation's finances.

I have read the few documents provided by the band. I have read more detailed documents that have been leaked to me. That reading has raised more questions than answers.

I have contacted officials at Indigenous and Northern Affairs, but they've been unwilling or unable to provide answers.

I have attended band meetings and asked questions of our leaders directly, but they too have failed to provide answers.

I have gone on a 13-day hunger strike to demand transparency.

I am now partnering with the Canadian Taxpayers Federation to launch a court application to compel my chief and council to publicly provide transparency.

I know my experience is different from the stories that you often hear from our leaders. They say they provide documents when requested and answer questions in public meetings. But think about that in the context of the way things work in Ottawa. I watched Question Period in person for the first time after the committee meeting and it was entertaining, but it wouldn't be good if it were the only source of transparency. A few band meetings a year aren't enough for First Nations communities. There needs to be clear requirements for transparency and strong standards for accountability.

Grassroots people in First Nations communities are the best people to keep their bands out of financial trouble. It's important to remember that as you study default prevention and management policies. Think about how things work in Ottawa again. People such as the parliamentary budget officer and auditor general do good work, but the best transparency comes when MPs knock on a voters' door during an election. Empowering grassroots people is the best way to strengthen accountability.

We need tools such as *The First Nations Financial Transparency Act*. Our people deserve to see where our money is going on publicly available websites. In fact, the law needs to go further so that we can submit freedom-of-information requests to our leaders and bring concerns to an

auditor general for First Nations communities. These are all things other Canadians take for granted and people in First Nations communities desperately need.

One of the committee members asked whether I agree that it's important for accountability to come from within First Nations communities. I absolutely agree. But there's an important role for the federal government to play.

When the treaties were signed, my ancestors knew we would have to grow food through farming as well as our traditional hunting and fishing. We must be self-sufficient rather than depending on government. That's why my ancestors required that tools for farming were to be included in the treaties. Getting tools from government was not a mark of dependency – it was a partnership between the Crown and our people to equip us for self-sufficiency.

Grassroots people in First Nations communities must have the basic tools of transparency. The federal government must provide those tools through *The First Nations Financial Transparency Act*. Give the grassroots the tools of transparency and we will strengthen accountability from within First Nations communities. The government is making it a priority to strengthen the nation-to-nation relationship between the Crown and First Nations and it's important to remember nations are made up of people and our leaders derive their power from the people.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my story with the standing committee – it was an honour I'll always remember.

Regards,

Maskowikamihk (this is my Cree name meaning Bear Law Lodge)  
Charmaine Stick