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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): I'd like to call to order the meeting of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs of the 42nd Parliament, first session, and this is meeting number 68.

Before we begin, I'd like to recognize that we are on the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin people, a very important recognition especially as we've started as a nation to understand the truth of our history and move to reconciliation. It's so important that we now have the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in front of us today.

We want to hear from you. We recognize the very significant work you are doing in that process of reconciliation. *Meegwetch*.

To move forward, we will proceed with the commission presenting for 10 minutes, and then we go through a series of questions. The first round is seven minutes each. The second round is five minutes. It will alternate with the MPs here. It is quite structured, but I will try to be flexible, and I will give you signals if we're coming close to the end so that you can wrap up.

I wish to begin the procedures. I know a lot of people want to hear from you. I turn over the floor to you. Welcome.

Ms. Marion Buller (Chief Commissioner, National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls): Good morning, Madam Chair and members of this committee. Thank you for inviting us to appear before you today to speak about the progress we're making in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

I'm Marion Buller. I'm the chief commissioner. With me today are my esteemed colleagues and fellow commissioners, Michèle Audette, Brian Eyolfson, and Qajaq Robinson.

This is the first time we've had the opportunity to appear before you to report on our work, our very important work, and it's important to note that we are now a few weeks into the second year of our two-year and four-month mandate.

The tragedy of our missing and murdered indigenous women and girls is felt so deeply and painfully by indigenous families, but it is also a painful legacy felt by all Canadians. Parliament and the Prime Minister of Canada have chosen to finally address this terrible legacy. The profound commitment of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is to listen to

those who have suffered, to share their stories with all Canadians, and to learn what we can do to prevent other families from experiencing such suffering.

We are not inventing our mission on our own. Rather, we have been given the mandate by the government, with detailed terms of reference. These terms of reference were written following extensive consultations with indigenous communities across Canada, survivors of violence, and the families of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. Those consultations have very strongly informed our terms of reference.

The terms of reference were adopted by all of the provinces and territories, so that makes us truly a national inquiry.

In fulfilling its mandate, the national inquiry is subject to the structures of working in the federal government. We have to adhere to the human resources, information technology, and contracting rules that apply to all areas of government. The national inquiry is not alone in finding these rules frustrating. Constructing the national inquiry was time-consuming; simultaneously, however, stakeholders were expecting urgent engagement and attention to the matters that so deeply concern them.

The good news is that despite the many challenges to the national inquiry, we are on track in getting our staff, offices, technology, and networks in place, and that's to deal with the important, painful substance of our work.

At the same time, the national inquiry research team has done a comprehensive review of related work and has assessed what has been done and not done by governments to follow up on the findings of the various reports and studies. It was essential to conduct this assessment so this national inquiry can take stock, learn from what has worked and what hasn't worked, and map out its own areas of emphasis so as to get the most value possible from all of our engagements, reflections, and ultimately, recommendations.

This has been a difficult year, and for many people, our progress has been too slow, but we wanted to do this right because we know there are risks associated with doing this work quickly and superficially.

There are four principles that apply to our work.

First, we want to empower and support people, not revictimize them. We are finding, of course, that the survivors of violence and the families of people who have been victimized and lost have undergone tremendous trauma. Therefore, we are not going to go into communities and asking people to put themselves at further psychological risk by talking about their experiences unless we are sure that we can provide them with the supports they need. We have put a health team in place, educated our national inquiry staff on trauma-related issues and service delivery, and of course we have adopted a trauma-informed approach to our work.

Second, we want to find solutions together, not impose them. In other words, we want to take a decolonized approach.

•(1105)

Indigenous people in Canada have been subjected to the colonial policies and agendas of the French, the English, and the Canadian governments. For hundreds of years, experts have sought to solve the “Indian problem” through a series of imposed solutions. No one ever seriously thought to consult with the indigenous people—let alone indigenous women specifically—about missionary work, reserves, the pass system, the Indian Act, forced relocations, or the child welfare system, simply because they did not trust indigenous people to run their own lives.

We want our work to continue to contribute to the resilience and revitalization of indigenous people. We believe that the most effective strategies will come from indigenous communities and nations themselves.

We committed ourselves to identify and follow specific cultural protocols when working with communities. We will ensure that we are welcome in a community before we go there. This takes time and effort, but it is essential to engage truly with communities.

Third, we want to include those who need to be heard. The families of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls are often left feeling excluded and shut out by the police, the courts, social workers, and the media. We define families broadly by what we term “families of the heart”. These include foster families, adoptive families, and close friends. We recognize the importance of including indigenous women who are LGBTQ, non-binary, or two-spirited in our work.

Fourth, we want to build on the good work already done and not reinvent the wheel. We’re not studying indigenous women, girls, LGBTQ2S people. We are studying the systemic causes of the violence they have experienced and the efforts and the policies of governments and agencies in response to violence. We have analyzed 100 reports containing about 1,200 recommendations. This is the most comprehensive literature review concerning existing reports, studies, and articles on violence against indigenous women and girls that has been completed to date.

As commissioners, we have collectively and individually been meeting with and taking advice from survivors, families of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, our national family advisory circle, elders, knowledge keepers, young people, experts, academics, and representatives of national, indigenous, local, and feminist organizations.

Much of this work—the consulting, developing policy, hiring and training staff, and reviewing and analyzing reports—has gone on behind the scenes, but we are confident that this time and effort has been well spent. The work of the national inquiry is becoming increasingly public. Throughout the summer our staff members have been visiting communities across the country and will continue that outreach.

To talk about what we have done, I turn now to Commissioner Audette.

•(1110)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michèle Audette (Commissioner, National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls): Thank you very much.

[*The witness speaks in the Innu language.*]

When we were given this mandate, which is very near and dear to my heart, we knew it would not be easy, that there would be challenges, and that we would have to be sure to do the work properly.

We do not want the inquiry to be limited to a few quick consultations, for things to be done hastily, and to end up with a poorly prepared report destined to be shelved with all the other reports.

In closing, it is extremely important to tell you that the commissioners and the team supporting them is made up of 60 people who are extremely dedicated to this major cause. We feel the pressure every day, from within and from outside. We know that and will continue to make sure that the work is done properly for indigenous women and girls.

[*English*]

Ms. Marion Buller: Thank you.

In conclusion, Madam Chair and members, the loss of indigenous women and girls to all forms of violence is a national tragedy. It has traumatized generations of families. Shining a light on all of the causes of violence, murders, and disappearances is a daunting task. We intend to continue that with our community hearings, expert panels, and institutional hearings.

This work is necessary. We will expose the hard truths. The road ahead, we know, will be rocky. All of us can and must act together to create a better future for indigenous women and girls.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

The first round of questioning goes to MP Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Commissioners, welcome. Thank you for joining us this morning. I know your schedule is quite hectic, given that hearings resume next week, so in that context, I think it's even more appreciated that you are here today to discuss the issues surrounding the commission and the work that you are mandated to do.

I want to start with the interim report I think you have to deliver in the fall. There's some confusion as to whether sufficient work has gone into that report. In your mind, you believe that the commission has undertaken enough work to be able to report something substantive as of this fall.

Ms. Marion Buller: Madam Chair, I'm very pleased to take a moment to talk about our interim report. I can't, of course, divulge the precise content of that report, but I am satisfied, especially based on the work that our research team has done and our experiences in Whitehorse, that we have a good body of knowledge and research to rely on for our interim report.

Thank you.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: With respect to the nature and the scope of the work that you're mandated to do, there's been some confusion with respect to policing and the role of police in the entire mandate of the commission. Can you elaborate as to where policing fits into this, what kind of engagement you've had with the police, if you've had a cross-section of different police services co-operating with you, or if you're getting some push-back from these departments?

Ms. Marion Buller: Madam Chair, I'm glad to have the opportunity to address the issue of policing. In the interests of time, I'll be concise in my response.

We have always intended to investigate policing, and I think the best way of describing it succinctly is that we intend to investigate the investigations. We have already commenced our engagement with police services across Canada, specifically the RCMP, OPP, Thunder Bay police, and more in the works, to obtain documents from them. So far, the agencies have been very co-operative and forthcoming about their files.

In terms of engagement also, I have a forensic investigation team who will review police files to look at patterns for investigations, patterns of interviewing techniques, and things of that nature.

• (1115)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Just probing on that a bit further with respect to the RCMP, which I believe have jurisdiction over a number of different areas across the country, can you elaborate on what type of co-operation you have had with them, if you're able to share that in a public forum?

Ms. Marion Buller: Yes. Our legal team in particular has been meeting with representatives of the RCMP to discuss the nature of the files that they're seeking, to make arrangements for a data management privacy protection, and things of that nature. The RCMP has been, as I've said, very forthcoming and co-operative.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Commissioner, one of the challenges with respect to the commission appears to be communication and concerns over the way communications have been undertaken with respect to families and the overall scope of the work. Can you elaborate on what kinds of processes you have in place now that will sharpen the level of communication that you will have going forward?

Ms. Marion Buller: I'll be blunt. Our communications have been lacking, but we're moving forward in a very aggressive and strategic manner. First of all, our community relations teams are on the ground in communities every day. We have also gone to contract

with a communications adviser to help back up and support our communications team.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: With respect to what is reported as staffing challenges—obviously there are legal and privacy implications—are you able to share with us your going-forward strategy on staffing and how you were going to rev up to a full complement of staff to support the work you do?

Ms. Marion Buller: We are hiring staff across Canada. I don't know if it would be accurate to say “daily”. I would hate to be inaccurate in that regard. Of course, we're looking at having to have staff on the ground all across Canada, which creates challenges in itself, but we're finding ways of meeting those challenges in a very productive way.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: At what point will you have a full complement of staff, or do you already have a full complement that will allow you to complete the work in a timely manner?

Ms. Marion Buller: At this point we are close to a full complement of staff. Of course we also have to rely on outside contractors.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: To the other commissioners, and very briefly, why did you agree to be a commissioner?

Ms. Qajaq Robinson (Commissioner, National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls): Wow. When I received the call asking if I would take on this role, I did not think it was for this. To be blunt, I didn't see it coming from a mile away. It took a lot of thought and a lot of consideration. I have a little boy. He's going to be seven in a couple of weeks. The implications it would have for him day to day over the next few years weighed heavily, but he's an Inuk boy. The realities that face indigenous women are also faced by indigenous men and boys.

I thought about my son. I thought about my god-daughters. I thought if I can play a role in this, and if my tools can assist, I would do so. I've heard from families, and for them I have given what I can and will continue to.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to continue those answers in the next round or later on during the questioning.

We're moving on, and the questioning now goes to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, and also our gratitude to all the commissioners. We know the work you're undertaking is not just a job. It's going to be very challenging, and these stories you're going to hear are going to be very difficult. Certainly, I know they will rest very heavily in the years ahead. I do want to acknowledge that you have decided to head down a very difficult journey.

I was at the launch in August over a year ago. I know there was great anticipation. I had always thought, and I know many other people thought, that the fall would be spent getting organized with a work plan, whether you needed to lease space, get computers, literature reviews. Last January I fully expected, as did many, to see you out in the communities and starting hearings.

There was an article of great concern written in *Maclean's*. I'm building on watching the Senate in this day of technology. It's nice we could watch the Senate last night from home.

I have huge concerns. I don't know any minister who has to spend two months getting staff on board. Certainly, the TRC was under the same rules. As members of Parliament, we are responsible to get things up and going. You have a secretariat within the PCO. Are you not getting the support you need? To me the basic logistics of computers and BlackBerrys and hiring staff.... No minister waits to get their staff in place. You indicated maybe they did. They don't. I can assure you.

Maybe you can tell me a little more about those basic support and logistical challenges.

Ms. Marion Buller: Madam Chair, I'm very pleased to talk about the challenges because they're serious ones. We do work with corporate services at the Privy Council Office. They are our financial advisers. They are our administrative help, in some respects.

I want to start by saying the individuals who work with us work extremely hard. They are dedicated and they want us to succeed. I don't want to lose sight of the personal side of the work we do with the Privy Council, but we are bound by the same rules that apply to government departments across the country.

The difficulty is this: it's time. Time is always ticking for us. If it takes a month or two months to get a computer, or if it takes a month or two months to hire someone, that's 10% or 20% of our time. It's not like we have no end in sight. The end of our work is approaching very quickly and every day counts. Every delay is bigger for us than it is for a government department.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

As I say, I'm not sure that the TRC experienced those same challenges, so I certainly was puzzled to hear that, given this is such a priority initiative of the government, not all the stops are pulled out to support you.

I want to now go into the communications aspect. This is, perhaps, a suggestion more than anything. Over the last while we tried phoning the number. As an MP, I make sure that 90% of the time when someone phones my office, they get a live person. People calling my office might not have phones available, or they might get to a place where they have no phone. To not have a live person they can talk to, but an answering machine saying we'll call you back sometime, I don't think works.

Why is there not, out of the 50-plus staff, a live person there on the end of the phone? Not the mental health phone, but someone reaching out to say, "I'd like to tell you my story." They've managed to get to a phone, but all they reach is an answering machine.

Can we have one of those 50 people answering that phone live? To me, that's just a basic communication thing that needs to be done.

• (1125)

Ms. Marion Buller: I think it's important to know that we do have real people answering the phones for us. There are times of the day, however, given the time zones across Canada, where there is a voicemail message. I can assure you we do have a very live person

answering that phone, and I should say in different languages as well.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you. Perhaps the experience those people chatted with me about, in terms of their contact, meant they were very unlucky in their frequent reaches out.

I noticed that yesterday you talked about possibly looking for a two-year extension—you didn't have a time frame—that you were perhaps going to approach the government. You hadn't approached them yet. Again, I know that the TRC took five years. They had a budget of \$60 million. You have a budget of approximately \$54 million. When you ask for an extension, do you believe you will have to ask for additional dollars?

Ms. Marion Buller: Madam Chair, when we ask for an extension.... At this point in time it's premature to say whether we'll have to ask for more funding, because this involves a rigorous analysis as I'm sure you can understand.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: You talked about the forensic investigating, and I think that is a very important feature. I saw that your legal team is a very large team. Are they the ones responsible for this forensic investigating, in your org chart on your website? If not, who is?

Ms. Marion Buller: The legal team is overseeing the operation of the forensic review team, but the forensic review team is made up of individuals such as crown counsel, defence counsel, forensic interview experts. We're trying to arm-wrestle an elder to sit on that committee as well, plus some other people. I hope I haven't missed them.

The Chair: Thank you.

All right, questioning now goes to MP Georgina Jolibois.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, NDP): [*Member speaks in Dene*]

Good morning. Thank you for being here. I represent the riding of Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River. I speak my first language Dene and I greeted you in Dene and thanked you for being here.

I'm going to get right to the point.

Chief Buller, I had the opportunity to meet some of your staff over the summer and I've been really busy over the summer meeting families in my riding and from across the province. I do have concerns about your report because it's contradicting what's happening on the ground. The biggest piece is about families getting through registrations, the amount of registrations that are occurring, community meetings, and the actual hearings that will occur across Canada. Families can't afford to get to these hearings and to get to these areas.

Are you offloading responsibilities to community-based organizations, and RCMP, as well as municipalities and reserves and tribal councils across Canada?

Ms. Marion Buller: I'll try to answer that quickly and clearly. Our community outreach teams go into communities in advance to prepare families and survivors to give evidence later on at a hearing in that same community. That's very important outreach work. We want families to be registered in advance—

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, NDP): That's not the question that was asked. I asked about offloading responsibilities to ensure that these hearings, registrations, and community meetings are occurring.

Ms. Marion Buller: The answer is no. We are not offloading these responsibilities. These are clearly our responsibilities and we take them very seriously and do a lot of work in that regard.

• (1130)

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, NDP): Have you clearly communicated with the province, territories, municipalities, reserves, and tribal councils about their responsibilities, about what you asks of them are? Based on the experiences that I have had on the ground there seems to be a lot of offloading that is occurring right now.

Ms. Marion Buller: Madam Chair, I'm not entirely clear what's meant by offloading, but I can reassure—

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, NDP): Expecting these very organizations, provinces, and municipalities to do the legwork for registration and identifying families. In my riding this summer before I met with your staff, I learned from your staff that there were only four families registered in my riding who could fit the category of participating. That is a huge concern, the amount of registrations that have to occur to register, because we have more than four missing and murdered women in the north.

From my conversations with the RCMP and various organizations, I believe the expectations were not clearly laid out by the inquiry. That's what I mean by offloading. Again, I want Chief Buller to answer the question.

Ms. Marion Buller: We go into each community with a plan. We form partnerships with organizations, governments, individuals, grassroots organizations to help carry out that plan because they want to help.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, NDP): How have you made sure that is clearly stated, because, again, my experiences have shown that local governments, local responsibilities, are expected to do more without the resources. Your organization has the resources to do so, but not at the local level. I'm looking for more answers than what you're giving.

Ms. Marion Buller: I'll give you some other examples. I'm happy to do that. The important thing to remember is that we work in partnerships with communities one on one.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, NDP): My experience is that this is not clear based on the feedback I'm getting.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Madam Chair, can the member please have the respect to allow Commissioner Buller to answer the question. She's posed the same question over and over, but she has not given the commissioner the opportunity to actually answer it.

The Chair: MPs have the right to take this questioning. But I'd ask the member to allow the response to be completed and then we do have time for you to ask additional questions. Thank you.

Ms. Marion Buller: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Our community outreach is planned. In each community we look forward to building partnerships, because communities want to partner with us. We're mindful of their limited resources. We also are mindful of the fact that, in many communities, there are people who want to speak to us and want to register, and we want to make that as simple as possible for them. It is important that families register with us, and I can say as of earlier this week we're up to 735 people registered. The first step in registering with us is to make sure that the proper health supports are in place for those families and those survivors of violence, so that when they do come forward and speak to us they have those proper supports in place.

Yes, registering is important—

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, NDP): I'm sorry to interject. Are you familiar with rural, remote areas, and the lives of families living in the north with no services and no access to services?

How can you speak such words when on the ground I know of families for whom even the cost of getting to register, the cost of attending a community meeting, the cost of non-selected families getting to the actual hearings...? We're talking about missing and murdered aboriginal women. We know that these things you speak of aren't happening on the ground, based on my experiences. Can you answer that, please?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

[Translation]

Ms. Michèle Audette: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will answer these extremely important questions.

First, we commissioners come from different regions. Some of us and some of our employees come from very remote regions. We are going through this as individuals and as a group.

Next, the national inquiry must work with the provinces to some extent, while maintaining its independence. The provinces have received funding from the federal government specifically to work with families and survivors. The national inquiry must investigate, do extensive research, and make recommendations. That is the first thing.

The second issue is knowing how to reach the families. Partnership with the communities is extremely important. If your community would like a visit from people from the national inquiry, I can guarantee they will go see you, because it is important to reach out to remote communities.

• (1135)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Questioning now moves to MP Will Amos.

[Translation]

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Meegwetch. Thank you very much for being here.

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is tremendously important to the entire country, but especially to the Pontiac. My fellow Algonquin citizens are very well informed about your inquiry. The families and friends of Maisy Odjick and Shannon Alexander are still looking for answers.

I never forget that. I am very grateful to you for coming to tell us what is happening and what progress you have made.

I would like to talk about cooperation, in particular as regards your dealings with the Sûreté du Québec police force. My colleague talked about the RCMP, but I would like to know how you would describe your cooperation with the Sûreté du Québec.

Ms. Michèle Audette: From the outset, when the Quebec team was created precisely for linguistic reasons—it is the only government that operates solely in French—the lawyers on that team began a dialogue with the Sûreté du Québec. That was from December until now. There is very good cooperation. Several thousand files have been transferred to USB keys so we can do the necessary analyses.

Certain cooperative efforts might be more difficult than others for files that are still open, which is to be expected. Our lawyers are constantly in discussions.

My colleagues and I have been pleased with the openness shown by the Sûreté du Québec thus far.

Mr. William Amos: I would like some more details about this.

Among the files that you need, how many have you been unable to receive owing to issues related to their transfer?

Ms. Michèle Audette: More than 7,000 files that have been transferred pertain to aboriginal issues in Quebec, on all matters combined. As to the files we are still awaiting, I will not answer that right now, out of respect. You can ask us again in a few weeks or a few months. I can say, however, that there are not very many. I can count them on my 10 fingers, so there are not many at all.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you. That is good news.

Thus far, how many files have been shared between the Sûreté du Québec and the RCMP? What kind of cooperation is there in that regard?

Ms. Michèle Audette: You should ask the RCMP and SQ that. I do not have that information right now, but I can ask our legal team. If we have that information, I will gladly pass it on to you.

Mr. William Amos: Okay.

I have no further questions for now.

[English]

The Chair: Would you like to share your time?

We'll go to MP Mike Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you.

We heard that the commission is organic and that it's learning and adapting, based on the engagements and the community hearings you've had. You said you're focused on constantly improving how the commission operates.

Can you describe or share with us some of the lessons you've learned and how you've adapted as a result of this process, this evolution?

• (1140)

Mr. Brian Eyolfson (Commissioner, National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, member, for the question.

Particularly with our community hearings, where we're hearing from family members and survivors, there are a lot of regional differences in how we approach these hearings. We had our first community hearing in Whitehorse, and we learned a lot from that hearing. We got a lot of positive feedback. We learned that ceremony was extremely important and supportive to the participants, but that varies from region to region.

We've learned it's very important to have our team go out—that's our health, community relations, and legal teams—in advance into the communities, talk to grassroots organizations, talk to the families and survivors, and find out what's appropriate in terms of local protocols and in terms of the needs of the local families and survivors to be able to tell their stories at the hearing. We're making adjustments with every hearing that we have when we go from region to region.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you, Commissioner Eyolfson.

Michèle Audette, would you like to also comment on some of the transitioning that you've seen as far as the relationships are concerned, once again, to follow up on Ms. Jolibois' question, and the process that you've gone through once you enter into the community—not just the outreach that occurs, but the process of engagement with individuals to try to bring them to the committee hearings, etc.?

[Translation]

Ms. Michèle Audette: Of course.

I will answer you in French if you don't mind.

One of the changes we made over the summer involves the approach used with the communities. Our unity, family and health branch immediately put families at the centre of the process. We meet the families during our community visits. They guide us on how to conduct our hearings in their territory. This communication has been very productive: in the space of three weeks, we went from 400 registered families right across Canada to 735 individuals and survivor families. This exercise is done internally using a community approach that is by and for the families.

[English]

Mr. Mike Bossio: That's outstanding. Thank you so much.

The Chair: The questioning now moves to the five-minute round, and we begin that session with MP Arnold Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our guests for being here today.

Whenever we're dealing with these topics I always like to put a face to them, because lots of times we talk about murdered and missing indigenous women and we talk about numbers and say, "There are 1,200 missing."

Particularly, I want to talk about Bella Laboucan-McLean. Her dad lives in my riding. I know him quite well. Every time we talk, I ask him how he's doing. I've followed her particular case through the entire media; it's an ongoing thing. It's one of those cases that I really hope the murdered and missing indigenous women inquiry can bring us some answers to. I know I've spent a bunch of time trying to help her dad maybe get a private investigator, talking to all the journalists that have done some research on this. From my perspective, that's really where we need to go.

We all have offices. We all have to deal with the rigour of the accounting system around here. It drives everybody bonkers. However, that said, this was announced as a major priority for this government. You've said that it takes a long time to get staff in place, people on the phones and things like that. Do you have a champion in the PCO, or are they actually difficult to deal with?

Ms. Marion Buller: I'm very pleased to say that all of the people we work with at Privy Council are our champions. Thank you.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yeah, but that's like trying to boil the ocean a little bit. The trouble is that the PCO deals with everything you see around here. We're all sitting here in Ottawa, and when we don't get an answer we simply go and knock on the PCO door and things happen. Within the PCO, if there is not a particular person dealing with it, is there someone in Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development to whom you can go and they will say "Yeah, it's them"? Or can you call the minister and say, "Hey, can you go chat with the PCO?"

This seemed like such a priority for them, yet we seem to have gotten off the rails a little bit. That's the public perception anyway. That's what we're trying to get to the bottom of.

• (1145)

Ms. Marion Buller: Madam Chair, to be very brief in the answer, which should be very long and more thorough, we have to maintain

our independence from government, but we are tied to government through Privy Council.

I have to say that the Privy Council Office has done a great amount of work on our behalf. As individuals and collectively, they have been creative in solving problems for us. They've been responsive to us throughout, but they have to work within the confines of policy and regulation.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: All right.

One of the other questions I wanted to go into is, what's your social media strategy? For each of our offices, we all have a social media strategy. Twenty million Canadians are now on Facebook, for example. I know in our previous studies on suicide, I've asked, "In your community, who's on Facebook? Is everybody on Facebook?" Pretty much unanimously they say everyone is on Facebook.

Do you have a social media strategy? Can you table a social media strategy, that sort of thing?

Ms. Qajaq Robinson: [Witness speaks in Inuktitut]

Before I answer the question, I want to express my gratitude that we are able to be here today.

Use of a wide variety of communications tools is really important to this work, as is reaching areas where there is no access to social media and you have Internet services that are incredibly poor. I'm sure some of you have spent time in the north and all of a sudden your phone didn't work.

We have a communications strategy. We've had some capacity challenges to build up internally, and contracting. As my colleague, Chief Buller, indicated, we do have some contracts coming into place to assist us with that, and looking at getting longer-term contracts to make this more robust.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you.

I think that pretty much runs my time out, but I have lots more questions.

The Chair: Questioning now moves to MP Salma Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the commissioners for coming out today and for all the work you are doing on behalf of Canadians.

As you mentioned in your opening statement, the inquiry has analyzed some reports, studies, recommendations, and articles that show the vulnerability of these indigenous communities to violence. I was wondering if the commissioners have figures or statistics that show whether the vulnerability to violence of the women and girls is higher than the men's.

Ms. Marion Buller: I'm certainly happy to provide those statistics, but I don't have them with me.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: It would be great if we could get those statistics, because it will help us to see if the numbers are higher for girls and women.

Has the inquiry found that any of these studies or consultations reveal possible reasons or causes for the increased vulnerability of women and girls?

Ms. Marion Buller: Without divulging the contents of our interim report that's coming up, the reports and studies that have already been done point to very important factors such as grinding poverty, geographical isolation, lack of a proper education, and the intergenerational traumatic effects of residential schools. A variety of factors has been identified.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: With the work you have done so far, have you seen, in the migration of women and girls from the reserves to the urban setting, any specific challenges or issues they face in that situation?

Ms. Marion Buller: There are well-established research and statistics to show the challenges young women face when they go from rural reserves to urban centres. The evidence is well established that they experience a lot of difficulty adjusting to life in an urban centre.

• (1150)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: As a result of the work so far, has there been progress in developing resources and strategies to reduce the incidence of violence?

Ms. Marion Buller: I will start with work that has been done by others. There are strategies and programs in place in indigenous communities across Canada that work very well in reducing violence, and we're able to give them a national showcase for the work they have done.

As for our work, we have started on our public education line of informing and educating the public, particularly through school programs, about violence against indigenous women and girls. We are hoping that education of the public will be one strategy that will help to reduce violence against indigenous women and girls. Before we make our final recommendations, however, we have to hear a lot more evidence.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: In regard to your mandate, how are you building diverse cultural, linguistic, and spiritual traditions of indigenous peoples into how the commission operates?

Ms. Marion Buller: It's hard to answer this quickly, because the cultural and spiritual aspects of indigenous life are woven into everything we do every day in the communities. We want to be respectful of local protocols and ceremonies wherever we go and incorporate those into the work we do on the ground in communities. I think the most important thing to remember at all times is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. There is great diversity across Canada. There is no such thing as pan-indigeneity; that's a myth. We work with that principle in mind.

The Chair: Very good.

Now the questioning will move to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

I want to go back to some of the logistics, which you have indicated have created significant challenges. I think your budget was \$53 million. In round figures, how much of that budget has been spent? Have you any idea?

Ms. Marion Buller: I can give you percentages. By the end of the last fiscal year, we had spent about 8% of our budget. By the end of this fiscal year, we expect that we will have spent about 75% of our budget. Of course, we don't have a full calendar year for the next fiscal year.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Okay. From what you're indicating, if you do approach for an extension, given those figures, you're also going to have to approach for additional dollars.

My next question is for Commissioner Audette. Do you have computers and shared drives that are working?

Ms. Michèle Audette: This is my response: sometimes yes, sometimes no. It's very technical. My understanding is that for protection and security, if you make one mistake, your computer crashes or stops, or suddenly the Internet doesn't work anymore through your computer, or because we have three different computers from three different departments, they don't connect.

My hope is that soon we will have a platform where all of us can share drives. It has been a year now, so I'm anxious to have it.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I know you indicated that you have people across the country. Is there a home base anywhere out of which the majority of your staff are working, or is it truly a distribution? How many leases for office space do you have, or is it remote?

• (1155)

Ms. Marion Buller: We have a real mix of office spaces and home bases for our employees. We have five offices across Canada—Vancouver, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Ottawa, and Quebec City—but we have staff all across Canada working out of their homes, from Whitehorse to Iqaluit, to Halifax, and everywhere in between.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: With the time I have left, for the people who are either intimately involved in terms of what's happening or just the general public who would have seen articles, 150 people signed a letter saying they were very concerned about what you were doing. They might have read the *Maclean's* article that said this is really off the rails.

I'm going to give you the rest of the time to perhaps share why they should not be alarmed, or why they should be alarmed, in terms of what's happening.

Ms. Qajaq Robinson: This was never going to be easy. We're talking about hundreds of years of this dynamic. I look up at that painting of the Fathers of Confederation. It was an issue then; it was an issue 150 years before then. It can't go smoothly. There is no way to say this goes smoothly. We're not examining buildings. We're examining lives. We're examining the systemic reaction to this situation, the systemic causes of this tragedy.

You're also dealing with not one incident, but thousands of incidents, not only of disappearances and murders but violence. This is about violence more broadly.

However, we're listening and we're trying to adapt our process to make sure there are varied options and different spaces where people can share. They can share their experiences with us privately, in artistic expression, in letters, or in an open forum to the rest of the country. It is going to be difficult. I want to just raise my hands for the families who have fought for this and who want it, and who want to be heard and want to share.

We are trying our best. We are trying to do our best in a way that respects cultures, languages, the land, and the people who invite us in.

The Chair: That was very nice.

The questioning now moves for a couple of minutes to MP Mike Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Once again, I would really like to commend all of you for the outstanding testimony that you provided us today, and also the incredible sacrifices that you're all making to carry out this really important work. It's very moving, the work that you're doing, and we just can't express our gratitude for that enough.

I want to go back to the interim report because I think it's really important that people understand what the intent is of this interim report, that it's not a final report, that it's not a report that's a foregone conclusion to the final report. Can you give us a sense of the different resources that have been brought to bear in creating this report and, therefore, are going to be represented within the report? How does that reflect the intent of this interim report?

Ms. Marion Buller: The member has properly characterized an interim report, and I'm thankful for that. Our interim report really is a progress report on what we've done so far. It's really going to showcase the work that our research has done in analyzing those reports and those recommendations. It's also going to highlight some of the testimony, and other issues that we've dealt with as we've been doing our work. Without getting into too much of the detail in our interim report, it's going to be research-based and a progress report.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Is it also going to reflect some of the forensic work that your forensic team has also been carrying out, or is it too soon to bring that to bear yet?

Ms. Marion Buller: It's too soon to bring in the forensic analysis.

• (1200)

The Chair: With that we have to conclude.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Mike Bossio.

Thank you to all of you for coming out and sharing your experience to date. Obviously, everyone around this table and in Parliament is very interested in following your footsteps across the country. We wish you well.

Meegwetch. Thank you for coming.

We're now going to suspend and move into an in-camera session after a five-minute break.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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