



West Coast LEAF and EVA BC withdraw from Missing Women Inquiry

Aug. 9, 2011 – The Ending Violence Association of BC (EVA BC) and West Coast LEAF (the Coalition) have withdrawn from the Missing Women Inquiry, citing the government’s failure to provide funding for counsel for community groups (full letter below).

Inquiry Commissioner Wally Oppal granted standing to 13 community groups and recommended that these groups receive funding commensurate with their differing levels of participation. Commissioner Oppal found that the participation of these groups was necessary to the work of the Commission and that they required counsel in order to participate.

However, on July 22, Deputy Attorney General David Loukidelis confirmed the government’s decision not to fund any of the 13 groups.

“The failure to fund counsel for Aboriginal, sex worker and front line women’s organizations essentially shuts these groups out of the Inquiry,” says EVA BC Executive Director Tracy Porteous. “We will not participate in an Inquiry that will not listen to the voices of those who were closest to the missing and murdered women and their communities.”

“Contrary to Premier Clark’s recent statements on the importance of Aboriginal women’s safety, the government’s decision on funding indicates that they don’t take seriously the safety of Aboriginal women, sex workers and women living in poverty,” says Kasari Govender of West Coast LEAF. “The failure to provide adequate resources at this early stage does not bode well for the government’s commitment to implementing the Commissioner’s final recommendations.”

The Attorney General of BC’s decision to only fund the victims’ families means that one lawyer would represent all non-police Inquiry participants. By comparison, last year’s Cohen Inquiry into missing salmon stocks provided funding for in excess of 26 lawyers to be involved representing various perspectives.

West Coast LEAF’s mission is to achieve equality by changing historic patterns of systemic discrimination against women through BC-based equality rights litigation, law reform and public legal education.

EVA BC works to coordinate and support the work of victim-serving and other anti-violence programs in BC through the provision of issue-based consultation and analysis, resource development, training, research and education.

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Letter to commission:

Dear Commissioner Oppal,

Re: Withdrawal of participation

We are writing to withdraw our participation in the Missing Women Inquiry.

Ending Violence Association of BC and West Coast LEAF were deeply disappointed to read Deputy Attorney General Mr. Loukidelis' letter of July 22, 2011 confirming the government's decision to deny funding to the 13 groups to whom you granted standing. Without funding for counsel, these groups are essentially shut out of the Inquiry process. While we very much support the Families' interests in uncovering the truth of what happened to their daughters, our coalition cannot participate in an Inquiry into the deaths of so many marginalized women when the Inquiry lacks the essential participation of Aboriginal groups, sex worker groups, and front line women's organizations.

The Commission's announcement on August 2, 2011 that it would be hiring counsel to "present the perspectives" of Aboriginal women and the Downtown Eastside community is insufficient to meet our concerns about the community's lack of voice in this process. These broad categories of community voices do not do justice to the long and nuanced histories that each of the different participant groups speak from. The diversity of the community participants will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to represent as amicus counsel. The problems in the justice system that give rise to the Commission's mandate were born of women being silenced; without the ability to instruct counsel and have counsel directly represent their (diverse) views, the voices of marginalized women are again being co-opted and silenced.

We are extremely concerned that the government's failure to commit the necessary resources to this Commission is an indication that the government is failing to take women's safety seriously, particularly the safety of Aboriginal women, sex workers and women living in poverty. The failure to provide adequate resources at this early stage does not bode well for the government's commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Commission in your final report. While we appreciate your efforts to persuade the government to decide otherwise, the denial of funding and the silencing of community voices undermines the credibility of the work of the Commission. The truth cannot be obtained without the participation of those who were

closest to the victims and their communities, and we cannot move forward without uncovering the truth of what happened in the past.

From the perspective of this coalition, this Inquiry is significant because it could be a in a position to uncover and remedy the systemic reasons for the police failures to properly investigate the cases of these missing and murdered women. It is no secret that the groups that have essentially been shut out of this process would have drawn your attention to the many layers of discrimination and disadvantage that these women and their communities suffered, and drawn the clear connections between this inequality and the justice system's failure to protect them from sexual and violent predators such as Mr. Pickton. It is no secret that the groups that have essentially been shut out of this process would have been critical of police and government conduct during the years in question in regard to these particular women in these particular communities. It is deeply unfortunate that the government's decision not to fund these groups may act to insulate the justice system from this vitally necessary critique.

Despite government claims to the contrary, the Inquiry will be responsible for presiding over adversarial issues of considerable controversy for which counsel is required to represent the participants' various interests. The government's failure to fund community participants, while public funds are being used to finance representation of police and government counsel, will result in a lopsided and inaccurate account of these highly charged issues.

On this basis and with regret, West Coast LEAF and Ending Violence Association of BC will no longer be participating in this Inquiry.