



Inquiry into hate in the pandemic: Hearing transcript

Transcription prepared by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

Presentation date: February 10, 2022

Presenting organizations: Tl'etinqox Government

[ORGNAME] attendees: Chief Joe Alphonse

BCOHRC¹ attendees: Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender, Sarah Khan, Carly Hyman

Please note that third-party personal information has been removed from this transcript.

[Introductory comments by Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender not included in transcript.]

Third party personal information removed by BCOHRC Staff

Chief Joe Alphonse: I didn't read all the stuff. Welcome, I am Chief Joe Alphonse, I've been Chief now in my community for 13 years, nine years prior to that I was executive director for Tšilhqot'in National Government. I represent my community Tl'etinqox, and I'm also the Tribal Chair for Tšilhqot'in National Government. I represent about 3,500 people or so in our nation, so yeah. I'm elected Chief, I also come from a hereditary family. I'm a fifth generation in my community, I'm not a hereditary chief, my cousin **[Third party personal information removed]** is.

I'm okay with you guys sharing any part of this interview in any form. I'm not shy of the media, I'm not shy of owning what I say. If I don't have the heart to tell you in your face what I think of you, then I'm not going to say anything. So, whatever I say, I'm willing to own that. And that's been my life, is to try to improve the quality of life for my members, the people I represent. To try to represent my people the best way I can with the knowledge that I have and the experiences that I have.

¹ BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

And I want to share whatever I think I have a pretty good grasp where our people are at and what they stand for. And as director for T̓silhqot'in National Government for nine years I also held just about every position in the Tribal Council the nine years prior to that.

One of the main issues that I set out in life very early was to win Aboriginal title. And I accomplished that. We had a big team, but I'm the only member of that team that was there right from day one, from start to finish, and beyond now. So, improving the quality of life for our members is the root to who I am and what drives me.

So, throw racism at me, whatever, that's fuel to the fire. That's what keeps me going. We want equal opportunity, we want all of that. There's no... You want third world conditions, then don't go to another country, just drive down to your local First Nation Community, and take a walk through. Something as simple as getting good quality water, most communities are on a boil water advisory and stuff.

So, improving life and improving knowledge of who we are, that's a big part of our world, is prove who we are. Provide education, provide... In today's day and age, even people that live right adjacent to a First Nation community don't even know who we are. They refuse to learn.

It feels like only recently we've been looked at as people. We got to the Supreme Court of Canada, and even on the eleventh hour before going into the Supreme Court of Canada there was pressure from every First Nation to withdraw our case. [inaudible] when you have majority of the Supreme Court judges are Conservative Party judges, [inaudible] judges. Said, "It doesn't matter. We love a good fight. We'll keep fighting. This is who we are as T̓silhqot'in people."

We have six war chiefs that were executed after the Chilcotin War. If any of the chiefs want to withdraw, they can deal with those six chiefs when we cross over into the other world. I'm not one of them. We'll keep fighting.

Everything we've done in 20 years, I said there's nothing I would change. We've done everything in our power. The only question is, does that court system over there, are they finally ready to look at us as humans, as people? Only thing we can't change. And if they don't recognize us or see us as that, then we'll go home, we'll regroup, we'll come up with a new strategy and we'll come back fighting even harder. Fortunate for us, that recognition was granted.

We live in an area that's very, if you don't mind me saying, very redneck. And when they really try to press you and push you and force you to live a certain way because that's how Indians are supposed to live, and they get the benefits, well, we're going to push back and fight back just as hard. No nation of people should live like that. So, you have to understand that environment in understanding who we are.

We also live in a province, I often tell people it's probably the lowest education levels out of anywhere in the province. You look at the education scores of our students and stuff like that, the Williams Lake area always comes in last in the province. So that's where we live. And racism, you don't have to look very hard to find it here. During this pandemic, there was a lot of unknowns early, and a lot of struggles, and a lot of fear. Unfortunately, fear seems to evoke racism even more.

And when we've had... My community of Tl'etinqox is the largest First Nation community in and around the Williams Lake area. My community is 50% of the T̓silhqot'in Nation. I represent 2,000 people. So, it's



the most central community out of all the T̓silhqot'in communities where some of our communities are pretty remote. One of our communities doesn't have electricity, they only started receiving a telephone line or access to telephone 10 years ago.

So, I think we do our utmost to protect our membership. Safety and health are number one concerns in any community. The first major project I got accomplished as soon I got elected in 13 years ago was to get a new health building facility established in my community. And we had high standards, and when that building was done it was considered the highest energy efficient building on Indian reserve land in British Columbia.

So, health is definitely a huge priority, and amongst this crisis it's very, with our history as Indigenous people, around the time of contact 90% of our people were... The population was wiped out. So, we have to take this stuff serious and not take it lightly.

When SARS came, same thing. It didn't hit Canada or whatever, but we had a nurse that went over and helped there and stuff, and before that nurse was allowed back in our communities, we want to make sure she was quarantined and all of that, and everybody thought that we were rude. I said, "We're not being rude, we're being careful." And something like that could wipe people out. You have to take that stance and you have to take that difficult position sometimes.

So COVID coming in, we definitely have taken steps, we limit the number of people coming into our communities and stuff like that. But we found ourselves alone. Government agencies, specifically the RCMP, they weren't there. We as a community, chief and council, you create policies and whatnot, but the RCMP wouldn't do anything to support that. And even provincial regulations that were there, those are just policies. That's not law, we're here to enforce law does not enforce policies, is what they told us.

So, routine calls for assistance and whatnot, we didn't get it. And we're right there on the main highway, Highway 20, and I remember the two hours that one day, I was there for two, three hours, and there were some community members that weren't abiding by our regulations, driving a big white GMC Jimmy. So, they had six, seven people sitting in there having the party of their life, whiskey and pot and any other type of drug you can imagine, driving up and down that highway.

I finally told the RCMP, I said, "You're not here to enforce policies and stuff, then why don't you start by enforcing the laws you already have? You got a fucking party going on in that fucking Jimmy that keeps driving by here, and the whole time you were sitting here talking with us, they drove by four different times. I guarantee you you're going to find alcohol, whiskey, beer. You're probably going to find marijuana, coke, and who knows what other type of drugs."

They chose to turn and look the other way. They didn't even deal with that. So, a lot of our... We had at that point, probably on average our community we employ 10 to 12 people on a daily basis, seven days a week. They're security people. They come down, they start work in the evening, and they stay all night till morning time, from sunup to sundown. We don't get any government funding for that. We employ them through different ventures that we have, and whatever funding we get, so that's the nearest form of any kind of enforcement agency because we can't rely on the RCMP.

But I guarantee you a little white lady from Williams Lake Ministry of Children and Families comes along and she puts one call, and there'll be ten cops with her all jumping for joy, they're going to go into a house



and they're going to remove a child, and they're all happy. So RCMP stuff, completely useless. From a First Nations perspective, I don't even know why they're there.

My mandate is to create a safe and healthy community, but I can't count on the RCMP. You need some form of enforcement agency to create a safe environment. When you don't have that, abusers find out, they're going to target your women, your children. So, it's really important that there be a really healthy relationship with the RCMP. And when you live in a rural community, it's a difficult thing to do. Women that are in abusive relationships, it's hardest on them. So that definitely was a major issue that we've had.

Businesses we deal with in Williams Lake, definitely we had a couple cases in our community, and it seemed like the businesses in and around Williams Lake were wanting to identify Anahim, Tl'etinqox, also the Anahim community, who was from Anahim.

So, RBC, the bank here in Williams Lake, was actually asking every First Nation person coming in, "Where are you from?" White person coming in, they never asked any white people where they were from. And a couple of our members said that they were from Anahim, and they were immediately told that they weren't allowed to enter and go into the bank. Some, they need financial assistance to take care of rent and different things like that, so it put our community members in some pretty hard situations financially, because they couldn't cash their cheques and stuff, or deposit into their accounts for cheques to be taken out of their account and stuff like that.

So that was huge, and that was common practice for a lot of businesses in Williams Lake. And we called them out through the media, you can probably find stuff on that in the media. So again, I'm more than happy to share that. I'm more than happy to share the RCMP stuff, because the RCMP themselves know exactly how I feel about them.

We held RBC to... We wrote a letter to the national office, and they came, and we offered a solution to do cultural sensitivity training. So, we had that done with the RBC office in Williams Lake, and they actually sent a lot of their national and provincial workers to that as well. But that was pretty common for, like I said, businesses doing that throughout Williams Lake. Pretty sad state to be in.

Anything that's about racism, you don't have to look far. Any First Nation that's sitting, and you ask them, "Have you encountered any racism?" And they'll give you a long list of things. So, it's not that we're really digging and we put out notice and we give people a couple of weeks to come up with stuff and then bring it forward. Stuff like that is almost daily basis here.

Hospitals, health, providing help... I just put in a call to my health department, and they come forward and said we had a community member who was trying to check in to see a doctor at Cariboo Memorial Hospital being repeatedly asked if he was drunk. Even after answering several times, rather than taking health-related and the nature of his visit, the receptionist continued to ask him if he had been drinking. He became upset and left the hospital.

And that's a common story. I recall two brothers, they've both passed on now, one of them was having severe stomach pains and refused to go to the hospital. He died on his couch of appendicitis. And his other brother, **[Third party personal information removed]**, his other brother **[Third party personal information removed]** had a heart issue and he ended up just resorting to trying to deal with it himself. He used to



carry a big bottle of Anacin wherever he'd go, and finally he went to sleep one night and never woke up in his bed. Refused to go to the hospital, refused to go deal with...

Because a lot of our people, we're fluent speakers. I'm a fluent speaker in my language. [Speaking Tsilhqot'in]. I just said that I can speak my language, I've always been able to speak my language. I've been able to speak my own language from childhood, and when I can speak my language, I look at the world in a different way than English speaking people do. And it's a humorous language, it's a very descriptive language, so in our language our people are very humorous and describing in their description of events and stuff.

But a lot of our people and in our way of the world, we look at people and... In English, we look at somebody, right away the first thing that I think in your English way is that you're a female. Female person first and foremost. And then we try to figure everything out from there. In my Indigenous ways, are you a good person? Are you a funny person? Are you a mean person? And all of those things, and we have all of these categories. And at the very bottom, probably the last thing they try to determine is whether you're male or female. And in some cases that doesn't even really matter, so it's a non-issue.

So, when we look at the world that way, my people, a lot of them that are Tsilhqot'in-speaking people, they look that way. So, when they're looking at someone, they're looking at you or anyone else and they're trying to speak English, they're a little off, and then you'll hear a Tsilhqot'in person say "he," talking about you or whatever, "he is a good person." Or they're talking about another guy and they're saying, "She's a pretty good guy."

To them it's not... But in English, English people, they think that's so funny. But that's how we are, we don't judge people based on their sex. So, your English way and culture is funny to us because you judge people based on that.

So, when our people are in the hospital and they're making reference to a female nurse, they'll tell the judge, "He wasn't very good to me." Immediately what does that doctor or whoever else say? "How much have you been drinking? How intoxicated are you?" And then they write that person off and they don't want to deal with that person. Why? Because that person, a lot of them say they haven't drunk in 20, 30 years. And yet that's what they're subject to.

And another one, **[Third party personal information removed]** was transported by ambulance to Royal Inland Hospital in Kamloops. The patient had underlying pain, a pain condition that had not been properly diagnosed by her doctor in Williams Lake. She was discharged, but she was in the Kamloops hospital, and they accused her and said she was only doing this for painkillers.

And they discharged her, and because she was transported down by ambulance, she didn't have her own clothing. She ended up finding somebody to lend her a jacket or something like that as she waited outside Kamloops Hospital. And when the family contacted me, they were on their way to Kamloops, so I just followed up this morning and they got ahold of her. So, the family was able... Nowhere to go, no clothing, no wallet, no way of, well, I'm just going to go down across the street and rent a hotel room till my family can get me.

As a community, we have to actually make plans for that type of stuff. We have hotels right across the street from Royal Inland Hospital and place like that depending on what city and developed long-term



good relations with those facilities because the hospitals will often kick our members out. I think that's a pretty sad statement, when you're a political body, administrative body, and you have to plan for that, there has to be a budget. It's like... Yeah.

Just down the road from us we have Alexis Creek, 10 kilometers down the road we have Red Cross outpost clinic. Same treatment there, we get a lot of complaints, people coming back from there saying they are very rude to them. But a non-Native member goes in there and there's no issue, so our people actually see the difference between a white person and a First Nation by the Red Cross nurse out there.

And recently **[Third party personal information removed]**, underwent heart surgery and eventually discharged. She has had to return to the hospital several times regarding pain around the surgery area. The patient indicated that she had been asked by the hospital staff, "Are you here again?" Been told several times, "There's nothing wrong with you." More recently she had been advised by her doctor that she is now facing a serious health crisis related to that surgery.

So yeah, **[Third party personal information removed]** visited her physician and told her that at a local clinic she had been advised that she was pregnant. Her physician then did some tests and later advised her that she wasn't pregnant. She patient then checked at another clinic, who advised her that she was indeed pregnant. She returned to her own physician, who told her that she was not pregnant and that she should seek psychiatric care.

Several months later, she began showing signs of pregnancy **[third party personal information removed]**. She believed that her own physician did not respond in a professional manner to the patient's suggestion that she **[third party personal information removed]** due to being Aboriginal and living in a less than stable manner.

So yeah, and I'm sure if I... That was one person I talked to, one staff member. Given more time, we can talk about these issues all day long. It does not stop. Government officials dealing with First Nations, there's a real need for cultural sensitivity training, especially anyone representing health field, government agents, RCMP especially.

I was the very, very first person that the RCMP... What's her... Commissioner Brenda Lucki, when she was appointed, I was the very first person that met with her. And I met with her about systemic racism in the RCMP and the need for the RCMP to overhaul their training. They have absolutely no clue what they're dealing with when it comes to First Nations people. And she absolutely denied everything that I suggested to her. That you can put in the media. That you can put on any news, any time.

And I'm willing to sit down with her and tell her everything that I believe, and I won't hesitate to call her... That she is part of the problem. If people are unsure and want to know, I tell people there is online cultural training that my wife has put together. Deyen, D-E-Y-E-N. I tell them it's much needed, and even my own staff in my community have taken it, my own members, and even my own members end up learning a lot. **[Third party personal information removed]** said, "You know, I held so much anger at my mom, and after taking this course I now understand where she was coming from."

So, a lot of that is coming to light now with the 215 bodies, gravesites that were unmarked graves found at the Kamloops Indian Day School or Residential School. And now in our area, St. Joseph's Mission, what



they've uncovered there is only a tip of the iceberg. That's where the majority of my members came from... Went to, I should say, a lot of them didn't come home from there.

So that's allowing... And up until then, up until the 215 gravesites were discovered, it was like as Indian people we're not allowed to talk about those things that happened there. And now suddenly people are willing to sit and listen. And our incarceration rates and all that stuff is extremely high, and that all stems to residential schools.

And animal right activists come along, they tell me they want to stop, whether it's guinea pigs or whatever, from being subject to medical experimentation, I tell them, "Well, I'm okay with that. Because when they stop doing that... They used Indian kids at residential schools before. I don't want them to go back to that." So, a lot of the nutritional facts that you have, that came from experimentation of Indian kids at residential schools. So, there's some pretty hard stuff that happened in places like that, and for our members to recover from something like that with no funding, with no acknowledgement, is wrong.

And people that come and they want to continue to access natural resources from our territories and live a privileged life without paying respect to the Indigenous people is a root to a lot of these problems. A healthy Indian population means a healthy Canada. And if Canada wants to get to a healthy place, they need to heal and fix its relationship with Indigenous peoples and racism and everything else. Nobody's born a racist, so it's taught, it's learned.

And if they're going to teach racism, then we teach our culture. And that's where a program like Deyen comes in strong. Anyway, I'll leave it there. You said there was a question-and-answer period, I couldn't quite get to all the questions that were... So maybe you can correct me if I've gone off path here or anything, so [Speaking Tšilhqot'in]. Thank you.

Kasari Govender: Thank you so much, Chief Joe. I think maybe just Sarah has one question for you, and then we'll let you go.

Sarah Khan: Thank you so much for your presentation. We are extremely grateful for you taking the time to give us your time today and sharing everything that you've shared. You've mentioned a number of actions that you and your Nation have taken to prevent, respond to and address hate, and I was wondering if there are any other things that you'd like to mention such as specific protocols or teachings, laws or practices that your nation has to address hate right now, or during times of crisis, or in the future? So, if you have any thoughts that you'd like to share about on that question.

Chief Joe Alphonse: Yeah, what can you... Policies, we have our own policies. I think we make it known what our position is on issues all the time, it's very important. People sometimes want to keep First Nations quiet, but then they complain that they don't know what their First Nations' positions are.

So, we develop our own policies. We have policies right now, for example, everybody has to be double, and triple vaccinated in our community. You're going to work for our community, represent our people, that's mandatory. And anyone we do business with all have to be vaccinated, stuff like that.

And be transparent, be open, be whatever. If there's issues, deal with it head on. Amongst the non-Indigenous people, I'll say that in a very polite way, I'm not thought of very highly in the Williams Lake area



because I call those things out. I deal with the rednecks by being a redneck myself, and that's the best way I can describe that. Deal with rednecks by being redneck right back to them.

From an Indigenous point of view, education is powerful. Whether it's dealing with your own young people, and you want your people to adhere and listen, stand up for themselves, but don't push it beyond that. Some of our members have been living in a dysfunctional way, and families and generations, it's challenging to break that cycle and we have our work cut out. But the first order is recognition from Canada that we're a people and that we actually...

In 2022, we're the only Indigenous peoples in Canada or anywhere in the world that actually owns any land. We have title lands. 2,200 square kilometers of land that doesn't belong to Canada, doesn't belong to British Columbia, it belongs to T̓silhqot'in people. That's an inspiration to all Indigenous people throughout the world. So, stand up for yourself, but be respectful.

And if there's a group out there, I find the most prejudiced group or racist groups that are out there, they don't want to grow from that. They don't want to hear the truth. They don't want to learn, get educated. Because in doing so their positions are going to change.

So, it's a complicated issue, it's a big issue, but we need to keep chipping away at it one piece at a time. So, I'm not sure what else I can really say besides that.

Kasari Govender: Thank you so much. Oh, sorry, Sarah I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Sarah Khan: No, I was just going to say thank you.

Kasari Govender: OK. Thank you so much again, Chief Joe, it's been really helpful for us all to be here with you and to listen to your stories from your community. And certainly, it leaves us with a strong impression of some of the discrimination and racism that members of your community are facing, and particularly in the healthcare context.

So, thank you again for being here. I'm just going to pass it over to Camellia for some final comments before we let you go.

Camellia Bhatti: Just echoing Sarah and Commissioner Govender, Chief, thank you so much for not only sharing the stories of your members but also for sharing your knowledge today. I think a big takeaway for me today is you taking the time to explain how people see one another and how that has affected their interactions in the healthcare system, and how that effects the way they navigate through racism, especially up here in the north. So, we just so appreciate your time and your willingness to share with us today. Thank you so much.

Chief Joe Alphonse: Just when you made that comment, another big, huge issue which is kind of related, but a issue that always comes forward. As Indigenous people, we have medicine people that work on you and stuff like that, and they'd go into ceremony and they'd go into a little sweathouse, and often the patient would lay there, and the medicine person would come in. And there could be one or two people sitting around, but the whole focus of that room would always be the patient.



And everybody in that room wasn't allowed to say anything. And it was the medicine person and his chants and all of that that he would do. So the whole focus was the person, the patient, and the person would always know that everyone was there for them.

But now when our people go into a hospital and they're a patient, they're on the table and there's doctors and nurses talking about, "Oh, did you see that TV program last night?" And they'll talk, and then someone will laugh. But our patient that's sitting on that table automatically thinks that they're laughing at them. I'm laying here 100% vulnerable and they're laughing at me.

So, it becomes a real issue for our people to trust going into that type of thing. So that's why I say education is the strongest tool we have and why we need to share our stories where we're more than willing to share our experiences, for the better of everyone. So yeah, thanks for listening, and I wish you guys all well.

Camellia Bhatti: And before I let you go, I will send an email. Did I lose you? Oh, no, there we go. I thought I lost you. I will send an email tomorrow, but we just wanted to remind you as well that if anyone does want to submit a video or written submission for this, the deadline is March 31st for that. But I'll send an email to yourself and **[Third party personal information removed]** tomorrow with the details on that.

Chief Joe Alphonse: [Speaking Tsilhqot'in]. Thank you.

Kasari Govender: Thank you.

Sarah Khan: Thank you so much.

