

Joint Letter to Premier Clark Regarding Missing Women Commission of Inquiry

20 of the 21 Organizations Granted Standing Have Signed this Letter

September 28, 2011

Premier Christy Clark
Office of the Premier
PO Box 9041
Station Provincial Government
Victoria, B.C. V8W 9E1
VIA FAX: (250) 387-0087

Dear Madam Premier:

We write to you as organizations directly interested in the crucial human rights concerns at the heart of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, established by your government's September 27, 2010 Order in Council. Regretfully, we write to advise you that this Commission is in serious jeopardy. We are asking for you to intervene in this broken process, meet with our organizations, hear our concerns, and take steps to ensure that the Commission lives up to its vital mandate to determine why so many women's lives were lost and what can be done to prevent a recurrence of this tragedy.

We would be remiss if we did not, first, thank your government for establishing the Commission of Inquiry. We asked for this Inquiry to take place, and your government established an Inquiry in response. The subject matter being canvassed by this Commission is information we have wanted to be brought before the public for years. This Commission appears to us to represent the sole opportunity for that information to be heard, and for government to reform policy in response in a manner that is constructive, engaged and meaningful for our communities. We want this Commission to succeed, and we want to participate in it. The success of this Commission means nothing less than the human rights, physical safety and security of girls and women we care deeply about, people who are our friends and family members.

All of our organizations share the goal of ending violence against girls and women. This Commission has as a key mandate identifying the systemic failures that led to brutal violence against women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, and failed to prevent it. That violence against this group of vulnerable women continues to this day; the problem has not been solved with the arrest of William Pickton. This Commission is therefore not just a necessary step, but is only one step towards ending violence against women. Its failure and its loss of legitimacy among women and girls and those that support their safety is a disappointing continuation of successive failures of governments to enact meaningful policies to eradicate violence against women, and, in particular, against Indigenous women and other vulnerable and disadvantaged women.

This Commission also represents an important opportunity not just for truth, but for some reconciliation between police and Indigenous and marginalized communities. This Commission in itself will not solve the myriad of issues between police, members of Indigenous communities, and women who live in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, but it will go a distance to better understanding the problems and perhaps healing some old wounds. If this Commission is

allowed to fail, which would certainly be the case if it is ultimately seen as illegitimate by affected communities, the result will be to not only aggravate old wounds, but open new ones. For these reasons too, we want this Commission to succeed, and we want to participate fully and meaningfully in it.

Despite our unflinching desire for this Commission of Inquiry to succeed, and for our communities and organizations to be able to participate in it, the people and communities who are intended to be benefited by this process have been made to feel that their participation is not needed, or even particularly desired. This outcome will negatively impact the findings and credibility of this Commission. For example, the unique experiences of women who live in the Downtown Eastside must be heard given the unique intersection of systemic challenges these women face before effective recommendations affecting them can be made. Some groups among us have formally or informally withdrawn because they are not able to participate given the current structure, process and resources. Others are considering whether they can remain involved. These deeply worrying concerns have been largely met by silence from your government, or by reassurance to the larger public that the non-participation of these groups will not affect the legitimacy, effectiveness or the conduct of this Commission.

Our concerns are simple but fundamental: that those with information critical to the inquiry are assisted and supported so that their information can come before the Commission; that the hearings, when held, provide a fair and safe opportunity for those with evidence to share their information and be heard; that groups granted standing have representation by legal counsel of their choice, just as the police do, so that they may probe and engage with the evidence that comes to light; and that, when the hearings are concluded, government will act in a constructive way in reforming policy based on the information collected. It is only through a fair and safe opportunity for truth telling and cross examination of police and government witnesses that the aims of the Commission around preventing violence against women, ensuring accountability, building trust, realizing reconciliation and creating meaningful policy reform can be achieved.

We urge you to appoint someone senior within government to hold an emergency meeting with every group granted standing in this Inquiry, either in a group, or individually, to determine how this Commission of Inquiry may be fixed. We urge your government to repair the inquiry process based on these consultations so that we may all move forward.

Today is September 28, 2011. The Commission hearings are scheduled to commence on October 11, 2011. We hope to hear from you by October 5, 2011 at the latest.

Thank you, in advance, for your consideration. Please help us protect those we all care about by ensuring the success of this Commission; a process critically important to the people and communities our organizations represent, but ultimately of vital importance to all people in British Columbia and across Canada.

Yours truly,

The Family of Dianne Rock; of Georgina Papin; Marnie Frey; Cynthia Dawn Feliks; Cara Ellis; Mona Wilson; Helen May Hallmark; Dawn Crey; Angela Hazel Williams; Jacqueline Murdock; Brenda Wolfe; Andrea Joesbury; Elsie Sebastian; Heather Bottomley; Andrea Borhaven, Tiffany Drew; Angela Jardine; The

Assembly of First Nations; Amnesty International Canada; The B.C. Civil Liberties Association; The Carrier Sekani Tribal Council; Don Larsen (of Crab Water for Life Society); The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre; The Ending Violence Association of B.C. (EVA BC); The February 14th Women's Memorial March Committee; First Nations Summit; The Frank Paul Society; Native Courtworker and Counselling Association of BC; The Native Women's Association of Canada; The Providing Alternatives Counselling & Education Society (PACE); The Sex Workers United Against Violence Society; The Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs; The Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU); The WISH Drop In Centre Society (WISH); The West Coast Women's Legal Education Fund; The Women's Equality and Security Coalition; The Aboriginal Women's Action Network; The Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres; Coalition of Childcare Advocates; EVE (formerly Exploited Voices now Educating); Justice for Girls; The National Congress of Black Women Foundation; The University Women's Club of Vancouver; The Vancouver Rape Relief Society; The Poverty and Human Rights Centre; The Asian Women Coalition Ending Prostitution; The Provincial Council of Women.