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## MISSING AND MURDERED ABORIGINAL WOMEN Inquiry—Debate Continued

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Thursday, March 7, 2013

## THE SENATE

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### MISSING AND MURDERED ABORIGINAL WOMEN

#### INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Lovelace Nicholas, calling the attention of the Senate to the continuing tragedy of missing and murdered Aboriginal Women.

**Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition):** Honourable senators, I note the adjournment is in Senator Jaffer's name, and I would wish that it return to her after my comments.

Honourable senators, I rise today to participate in the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Lovelace Nicholas calling the attention of the Senate to the continuing tragedy of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. I feel strongly that this is an important issue for the Senate to examine because, in spite of its magnitude, this topic has never occupied a very significant space in the realm of public awareness.

As Senator Cowan said when he spoke of the hundreds of missing and murdered Aboriginal women last December, this is a list of national shame. Why, in a country as rich and advanced as Canada, has this been allowed to happen? Why must it be such a long and difficult process to bring it to the forefront of the national conversation? By joining the debate begun by the Honourable Senator Lovelace Nicholas, I hope I can help bring to this issue the attention it merits.

Appropriately, tomorrow is International Women's Day, and the theme that the Government of Canada has named for this year is "Working Together: Engaging Men to End Violence against Women."

The basic facts are shocking. Indigenous women living in Canada are five times more likely to die a violent death than other women, according to a recent Statistics Canada study. Studies have shown that they are three and half times more likely to experience violent victimization and three times more likely to be victims of spousal violence than non-indigenous women. Between 2000 and 2008, indigenous women and girls represented approximately 10 per cent of all female homicides in Canada, although they make up just 3 per cent of the female population in Canada.

When we talk about missing and murdered Aboriginal women, we need to understand what we are really dealing with. The Native Women's Association of Canada estimates there are over 600 missing or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. Of those, 67 per cent are identified as murder cases; 20 per cent are missing persons; 4 per cent are cases of suspicious deaths; and 9 per cent are cases where it is unknown whether the woman was murdered, is missing, or died in suspicious circumstances.

What is particularly tragic is that most of these cases involve young women and girls. More than half the victims are under the age of 31, and 17 per cent are girls under 18.

How many of these cases are solved? Honourable senators should first know that the national clearance rate for homicides in Canada, meaning those cases that are solved and police identify a perpetrator, is 84 per cent. Yet, this rate falls below half when it comes to homicides of Aboriginal women and girls.

It is with a great deal of emotion that I am speaking on this topic, both as a woman and as a representative of the West. We know that the preponderance of these cases occurs in Western provinces. A total of 16 per cent of the over 600 missing and murdered Aboriginal women come from my home, Alberta, a rate exceeded only in British Columbia, where 28 per cent of the cases originate.

Honourable senators will notice that I say "over 600" but do not cite an exact figure. The fact that the number cannot be verified with any certainty demonstrates exactly what is so shameful about this national crisis. We have not even been able to quantify the problem. We know that women are disappearing and being murdered by the hundreds, but we have no idea exactly how many.

It is past time to get serious about addressing this. I hope that no one in this chamber disagrees at this point that we need a national inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women.

**Some Hon. Senators:** Hear, hear!

**Senator Tardif:** There was a time when these problems were not as clear as they are now. We knew anecdotally that violence against Aboriginal women was a consistent problem, but a dedicated investigation had not been undertaken. In 2005, the final year of the Liberal government, Canada invested \$10 million to examine the inherent circumstances and trends, working in cooperation with the Native Women's Association of Canada.

What we discovered was alarming. There were serious concerns of whether police were providing indigenous women with an adequate standard of protection. There was also evidence that the apparent societal indifference to Aboriginal women systematically allowed perpetrators to escape justice. Something had to be done. It was increasingly clear that a national inquiry was the only way to develop comprehensive, action-oriented solutions to this Canadian tragedy.

Regrettably, a change in government in 2006 stopped progress in its tracks. The new Conservative government cut the funding to the Native Women's Association and its Sisters In Spirit research initiative, responsible for tracking and collecting the cases of missing and murdered women. They further mandated that any future funding for the association could never be used for the Sisters In Spirit initiative.

This government redirected that money to police initiatives to track missing persons in general, but these initiatives were not focused on the specific patterns of violence against indigenous women and girls. In the view of experts in the field, this was a misguided shift in direction.

It has been more than five years now that we, as a party, have been calling on this government to institute a national inquiry

into missing and murdered Aboriginal women. This is no longer a new issue, the existence of which needs proving. It is a tragedy of epic proportions and affects all Canadians. The time has come, honourable senators, for the Government of Canada to work in collaboration with all stakeholders in order to provide justice for the victims of violence, healing for affected families, and to end the violence for good.

• (1610)

I was proud to see men and women gather in cities across Alberta on February 14 for the annual Women's Memorial March which raises awareness about violence against women. In Calgary the march was chaired by Suzanne Dzus who said:

I have a daughter, I have a granddaughter.... Being afraid and worried about having violence committed against them is not the world that I want for them. Indigenous women are such a small portion of the Canadian population, but they make up such a large percentage of women who are missing and murdered.

In Edmonton the memorial marches were first organized in 2005 by Danielle Boudreau after the murders of her friends Rachel and Ellie-May. I would like to read an excerpt of what Ms. Boudreau has written about her experience.

It all started for me back in 2004, when Rachel Quinney was found murdered in a field Northeast of Sherwood Park, Alberta. She was 19 years old and her body had been mutilated. The headlines in the paper at the time used so many demeaning words as if to justify the death of a young woman whose life had taken a wrong turn. A year later on May 6, 2005 another friend of mine was found in a field,

also murdered and once again demeaned in the media. I couldn't sit back and do nothing, I felt I needed to tell the country who these women really were.

In a heart-wrenching turn of events, Ms. Boudreau's own younger sister, Juanita, was found murdered in her home, stabbed to death by her friend on February 26, 2006, just a week after Juanita herself participated in the women's memorial. Still Ms. Boudreau continues her advocacy work year after year.

The efforts of determined community members like these Alberta women and many more across the country are inspiring, but communities organizing to raise awareness and combat stereotypes are only half of the equation, honourable senators. The partnership of government is needed if we are to have any hope of addressing this crisis in a meaningful way.

Government action brings resources and legitimacy and ultimately, hopefully, real change. In this chamber, the majority of the disagreements between the government and the opposition are rooted in a fundamental ideological difference with respect to the size and role of government in a society. On many issues we can debate the positive or negative impact of governmental involvement in a particular area; international trade, health care, or education, but I believe that today there should be no disagreement when it comes to the crisis of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. We need government to take a leadership role in addressing this ongoing tragedy.

**Some Hon. Senators:** Hear, hear.

(On motion of Senator Tardif, for Senator Jaffer, debate adjourned.)

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