

# 40th PARLIAMENT, 3rd SESSION

## Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

### EVIDENCE

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**Monday, November 22, 2010**

**Mr. Chris Courchene (Level 1 Carpenter Apprentice, Building Urban Industries for Local Development):**

Bonjour.

My name is Chris Courchene. I'm a member of Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba. I live in Winnipeg, and I am a carpenter's apprentice. I am here today to tell you my story and how it relates to the legislation being considered.

The first 11 years of my life I mostly lived with my grandparents on reserve. I went to school, and it was a fairly functional environment. Then I turned 11. My mother did the best she could, but she suffered from having attended the residential school system. She was a drug addict and an alcoholic and was very abusive. This was her hurt. She wasn't able to look after me the way she should have, had she had a normal upbringing herself.

She got me involved with a local street gang when I was 11. I want to repeat this: My mother got me involved in a street gang when I was 11. The gang offered me belonging, opportunity, and safety. Between the time I was 11 and 24, I was arrested more than seven times, and I have more than seven offences.

I spent more than half of this time in jail. Every time I got out of jail, I had good intentions for starting a new life, but I continually hit dead ends, partly because I was unemployable with my history, partly because of alcohol and drugs. The cycle of offence, arrest, conviction, time in jail, and release would repeat itself over and over until I was 24. It was then that I was hired into a program called BUILD, in Winnipeg's inner city.

BUILD is an aboriginal social enterprise that accepts people with backgrounds similar to mine where we receive training, job experience, and a supportive environment. It helps us go from being unemployable to being an asset in the labour market.

While at BUILD, I took a parenting course and realized the patterns I had to break in order to be a good parent to my two children. I took a budgeting course, WHMIS, first aid, and CPR and even obtained my driver's licence through their driver's licensing program.

Now I am ready to take steps to move on to my second apprenticeship level. But I can't do this with a criminal record. I am prevented from obtaining a good career job with employers such as Manitoba Hydro. I haven't reoffended now in soon to be five years, and I was intending to obtain a pardon, given that I will soon reach five years with no offence.

I have now completed my grade 12, my level one apprenticeship, and my driver's licence. I am career-oriented and am a loving, committed parent to my two children.

Prime Minister Harper offered an apology to aboriginal peoples here in the House of Commons. When I heard about this apology, it encouraged me to heal and put the past behind me, and I look forward to becoming a productive citizen and a member of society.

I feel that the proposed legislation paints everyone with the same brush. I think that the pardon should be meant for people who clearly have demonstrated without a doubt that they have reformed and that they have a very negligible chance of reoffending. I know that with this legislation you are hoping to reduce crime. I think that is commendable. There have to be consequences for actions, but painting everyone with the same brush won't serve that purpose.

I hope that you allow me to apply for a pardon. I'd like to move on with my life. Thank you.

**Mr. Mumtaz Muhammed (Participant, Community Office, Opportunities for Employment):**

Thank you today for the opportunity to have me speak to you here today. This is the last place I ever expected I'd be.

I'm an ex-offender who is trying to put his criminal past behind him, but the way our society is structured, and how far I've become unstructured from society, on its own is a long and trying endeavour. It's an absorbing road that one may never find a way out of, so people choose to give in. But I refuse to quit, because I know that with my family, my beliefs, and my goals that I've set forth, those things that I achieve will bring me happiness and a sense of self-worth.

I believe that by increasing the pardon waiting period to make it impossible for anyone with more than three indictable offences to apply for a pardon, many lives will be affected--as well as mine. If this new bill were to pass, it would close many doors for me and condemn me to live with my past indefinitely. I may never be able to achieve a job with respectable pay like the one at Turning Leaf, which I acquired through the help of the staff at Opportunities for Employment, who didn't discriminate against me and believed in me, believed that I could do it.

I volunteered at Turning Leaf. It is an organization that works with children with disabilities, and it was a rewarding experience. I'm passionate about this work, and my referrals from this organization will tell you that this work is a great fit for me and for my skills as well. Though they couldn't hire me because of my record, they hoped that after I received my pardon I would come back and work for them.

I'm in the middle of my pardon process and trying to get all the necessary documents. It may still take quite a while. But if this bill goes through, I will not be eligible for a pardon at all, and the field of work that I love may never be accessible to me. Many opportunities in my life will be impacted by this new change, and I'm pleading for you to consider this bill, because my future opportunities will be limited.

Thank you.