



## **JUDGES, FIRST NATIONS LEADERS DISCUSS CHILD PROTECTION**

Thursday, June 9, 2016 (Membertou, NS) – Members of the Nova Scotia Judiciary were in Membertou today to hear from First Nations leaders about the challenges facing Aboriginal communities in Cape Breton, particularly child protection.

The meeting was the first of its kind in Nova Scotia, arranged by the Honourable Lawrence O’Neil in response to the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as some alarming trends the Associate Chief Justice has noticed himself while presiding over Family Division in Sydney.

“As the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Report confirmed, the consequences of the residential school system are too often reflected in the individuals and families who appear before us,” Associate Chief Justice O’Neil said. “Aboriginal children and young people are drastically over-represented in Nova Scotia’s child welfare system, which often contributes to problems with the law and their own families later in life.”

In Nova Scotia, 23 per cent of the children in foster care are Aboriginal, yet the same group makes up only six per cent of the child population.

The problem is not unique to this province. Statistics Canada reported that in 2011, 48 per cent of the 30,000 children and youth in foster care across Canada were Aboriginal, even though that group accounted for only 4.3 per cent of the Canadian population at the time.

“It is significant that these discussions are taking place in our Mi’kmaq community,” said Chief Terrance Paul, Membertou First Nation and Co-Chair of the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq Chiefs. “It reflects a forward thinking approach on how First Nations need to be part of any process that directly impacts our people.”

In its report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued 94 calls to action, the first five specifically targeting child welfare. The recommendations include better training and education, stricter monitoring, increased resources, national standards for child apprehension and custody, and increased awareness of the impact of the residential school experience on Aboriginal children and their caregivers.

Leaders from six First Nations communities were invited to Thursday’s meeting in Membertou, as well representatives from the provincial departments of Justice and Community Services, Nova Scotia Legal Aid, the Unama’ki College of Cape Breton and

other community-based organizations that support Aboriginal parents, children and families.

The Chief and Associate Chief Justices of the Nova Scotia Appeal Court and the Supreme Court, and all the judges of the Family Division, were also on hand. Their attendance demonstrates the Judiciary's willingness to adapt to the changing realities and needs of all Nova Scotia families, Associate Chief Justice O'Neil said.

"Today's meeting was a modest first step in addressing the issues behind these legal and social problems," he said. "It was an opportunity for us to listen and learn directly from those who are working in these communities every day, and I hope there will be more such opportunities in the future."

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