



## NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Saskatoon, SK

Day 3

April 22, 2023

### EVIDENCE

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**Witness 14: Michele Tournier**

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[00:00:00]

**Shawn Buckley**

And our final witness of the day is Michele Tournier. Michele, can you state your full name for the record, spelling your first and last name?

**Michele Tournier**

My name is Michele Tournier. M-I-C-H-E-L-E T-O-U-R-N-I-E-R.

**Shawn Buckley**

And, Michele, do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

**Michele Tournier**

I do.

**Shawn Buckley**

Now, your family is in the business of chuck racing. And we'll have a bunch of viewers that are not from the Prairies. Can you please explain to us chuck racing and your family's involvement in it?

**Michele Tournier**

Okay. That was probably my hardest thing, to make it a simplified explanation.

It's an equestrian sport. Where there's a chuckwagon and a driver sits in the wagon box. And there's four thoroughbred horses hooked to this wagon. And they're in an infield with three other competitors and there's a figure-eight barrel setting that they have to go around. There's also two mounted riders, one in the back, one in the front. And everybody

stands still. There's a horn that blows and everybody goes as fast as they can out of the barrels. And it goes around the racetrack. It's a timed event.

And there's prize money every day. And if you travel from show to show every weekend, mostly Saskatchewan and Alberta; and some of the shows, if you make the final or you've been a competitive wagon, there's dash money at the final day. And advertisers spend money to have the chance to advertise on the wagon tarp and that's how you make a lot of your revenue. Some of the locations have a canvas auction or a tarp auction where bidders come and buyers want to maybe showcase their company, their logo, a cause maybe that they're wanting to promote. And they do bidding and buy the chance for the rights on your wagon tarp.

So my husband does that, my son-in-law, my son: they're all drivers. And then my other son is one of the mounted riders that rides for all the various drivers. And each driver pays him a fee for each race. So we make our living at that. It was our sole income for many, many— We've done this for about 35 years. And the last maybe, 10 years, that's our sole source of income. And the other ones maybe have a little bit of other income, but that's still the bulk of how my entire family makes our living.

**Shawn Buckley**

So you're chuck racers. And just so that people understand. So you know and there's some— You can make a decent living doing this, as I understand.

**Michele Tournier**

Yes.

**Shawn Buckley**

But you know, the advertising on the wagons and the prize money— I mean, you can make a really reasonable living.

**Michele Tournier**

Yes, very much.

**Shawn Buckley**

What happened then? We get this pandemic and what happens to your family's income in 2020?

**Michele Tournier**

Well, there's a lot of talk. The Calgary Stampede is the main— It's in July. But in March, there's an auction and that's the most lucrative auction. So there was starting to be rumblings in February already about public events, whether they could have this auction. Would they go online? Then it was looking, I think Mayor Nenshi was already talking about emergency. And it wasn't looking good. So kind of starting to absorb that there's a chance that we wouldn't be racing. And we thought there was a chance possibly because it's an outdoor event, where we heard like maybe the NHL was starting to shut down a little bit. But that was just kind of a little bit of false hope.

So we were all sort of in limbo until it was finally finalized that, yeah, there would be no racing season. Usually for about two months: we leave home the end of May, go for the summer. And for about two months prior, we do training and getting things ready. So you don't know: should you train, should you get things ready? Or you just sort of going to experience summer at home for the first time in many, many years?

**Shawn Buckley**

So in 2020 they cancelled the whole season.

**Michele Tournier**

Yeah. All public events, everything was done.

**Shawn Buckley**

Now, I presume your horses cooperated and they stopped eating?

**Michele Tournier**

Yeah, they were good at that. And a thoroughbred eats—they're a high metabolism horse. I know we probably had about 55 thoroughbreds between my son and ourselves.

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And you know, you have other things that you have to maintain. And being self-employed, it's not like, "Well, I'll see if we can go on EI?" and all that type of thing. So you just sort of absorbed. And we also wondered, would 2021 look any better?

**Shawn Buckley**

Right. But just for 2020 basically, your income then became zero.

**Michele Tournier**

Completely zero. Absolutely zero.

**Shawn Buckley**

But your costs of having to feed and care for the horses remain?

**Michele Tournier**

Yeah.

**Shawna Buckley**

What happened in 2021 then?

**Michele Tournier**

Well, 2021 there was still—you know, went back and forth. Some events got to go, let's say, in late 2020. Then they start to shut down again. So it looked like Calgary again was going to be cancelling. Because well, that city has a little bit different— The mayor there's a little bit involved with the Stampede as well.

But back in 2020, when they cancelled Stampede—because all public events and there was this big emergency—they welcomed the infield, where the stands were for a Black Lives Matter protest for about 3,500 people. Somehow, I guess it was safe to host that but nothing else could go on.

So 2021, they cancelled wagon racing again at Stampede but I think they had the rodeo. And we were in the circuit mostly in Alberta. That circuit seemed to be trying to figure out how to have racing and following the rules. And the other circuits, mostly in Saskatchewan, and they looked like they were going to not try and follow the rules, were just going to try and have our sport. So we decided to switch to the more Saskatchewan circuit. It's a less lucrative circuit but at least we could go racing.

My husband wasn't keen. He was ready to say, "You know let's just call it a day, we're going to be done with this." So we sort of were leaning towards that. And then the kids and I, we thought they seemed like they're really after small business, self-employed. Western culture has been under attack way before COVID and wagon racing is a very family-based sport. So we said kind of to my husband, "We really need to go, because they win if— If we don't go, we're doing exactly what they want."

So we convinced him and we had pretty much a whole circuit at least for 2021. And there was a show that opened up in Lloydminster area that was not quite as lucrative as the Stampede, but you still had a chance to be back in the game.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay, so 2021 wasn't a bust, but it wasn't as good as the regular years.

**Michele Tournier**

Right. Correct. Yep.

**Shawn Buckley**

Now, I want to switch gears because you had a sister and something happened to her during COVID. I'm wondering if you can share that with us.

**Michele Tournier**

Yeah. Early March of 2020, she was feeling unwell—my sister-in-law, this is, in Saskatoon—and she only has one kidney from something else. She was starting to get a little bit nervous, even before she was feeling unwell, of being around people because she was considered a vulnerable— Almost everyone was considered a vulnerable and I think maybe it was to help keep the fear. So she ended up feeling unwell, so my other sister-in-law brought her to the hospital. And they figured it was her kidney that was giving her problems.

So my sister-in-law had to drop her off at the door because nobody could go in. And so she was met with her doctor by herself. And they admitted her. And the doctor then told her that things didn't look good. She'd be having a surgery that could possibly have her, when she came out, wearing two separate bags. So that she heard by herself because nobody could be in there with her. She managed to get her lawyer admitted into the hospital to see her so she could get her affairs in order, again by herself.

So she had her surgery. And she came out of surgery to her own room; nobody was there again. She was told, yes, you will have two bags. You've had your bladder removed. You've had your bowel removed. You've had part of your intestine removed. So she called us and told us how it went. The doctor told her, "Nothing more we can do for you. And since there's no visitors allowed, you may want to go home."

**Shawn Buckley**

So let me just stop you. So even though she's going through what literally is an end-of-life process, she's not allowed even a single visitor in the hospital?

[00:10:00]

**Michele Tournier**

At that time, there were no visitors allowed at the hospital.

**Shawn Buckley**

And she would be very weak and drugged up and be getting all this information and there's no one there to help her?

**Michele Tournier**

No. She could FaceTime a little bit. But my niece actually worked at that same hospital and she asked if she—not on her floor though—if she could maybe go and see her aunt. This was right when things started. And nobody could really give her an answer. And they didn't think that would be a very good idea.

So they arranged for her to go home. And at that time the rules were: in people's households, only the members of their own household could be in your house. We didn't follow none of those rules anyway, but— So she went home to live out her last days and we would go and visit her. This was, I think she got out on May 8th. And her wish was, because she knew that there was nothing they could do for her, is that we could just all be together for Mother's Day.

We live in the country and normally Mother's Day was sort of at our place anyway. So the whole family was there. We were all at my house to grant her wish. It was a really good day. She was strong enough for that, but it was a long day. That was May 10th. And then, when she went home, she died by May 19th. So had we listened to the government that would have been— Like, there wasn't another chance for us to see her again.

**Shawn Buckley**

Right. I want to switch gears and have you talk about the effects on your grandchildren.

**Michele Tournier**

With the schools and their activities?

**Shawn Buckley**

Yeah. And then, you know, even just the fact of how it's more of an effect for rural children concerning isolation when the school was closed down.

**Michele Tournier**

Yes. The schools closed, I think it was maybe March, April—I can't remember—of 2020. So the kids were kind of sent home.

**Shawn Buckley**

And what happened with the sports?

**Michele Tournier**

Well, they stopped hockey early. All their activities got stopped. And they would go home and finish the school where you're in the country so it's not as if— You know, it's an effort to go visit other friends. And then other friends, some of their families were more scared of COVID, so they didn't all meet.

It can be quite lonely in the country, especially for children, and if they're pre-teens. And then even in the fall, my daughter decided to keep them at home and homeschool. They had a little bit of a hockey thing started—just practice. And the kids had to wear masks under their cages in order to be on the ice. And I think they had to be in little, small groups. And I mean, they should be gone out doing things and not at home as much as they were at home.

**Shawn Buckley**

Now, there was an incident you learned about with your daughter and your ten-year-old granddaughter driving. Can you just tell us about this? Because it kind of speaks to the fear that was created.

**Michele Tournier**

Yes. We all were on the same page. I was fortunate: in our family we were all on the same page to not be scared. And the kids weren't scared. But my daughter was driving with her ten-year-old in—they live out by Meadow Lake. And my ten-year-old daughter, they happened to see a police car. So I think they're at Tim Hortons drive-thru or something. My ten-year-old granddaughter ducked and my daughter says, "What are you doing?" She said, "I don't want the police to come and arrest us because we're not supposed to be together." My daughter had to explain, "That's not for us. We're fine."

So you thought you had them not scared. And they weren't scared of COVID, but now they were scared that they're breaking the law by being in the vehicle with their own mother. So it did a lot to the kids.

**Shawn Buckley**

Yeah, how did that make you feel to hear that story?

**Michele Tournier**

Well, very angry. Very angry that— But the kids shouldn't be scared like that. I mean, they shouldn't be scared. It scared them enough that they might think their mother is going to go to jail or something, or get a ticket for being in the vehicle with their own child. I mean it's, I don't know, it's just so absurd.

**Shawn Buckley**

Now, you had shared with us earlier about the Black Lives Matter protests, that they were allowed. Do you know whether or not—because it was illegal to have gatherings. What was the number in Saskatchewan at the time?

**Michele Tournier**

Well, at that time, when the Black Lives Matter happened in Calgary,

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there was I think zero public events. Like, nothing. But they did allow that.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay. Are you familiar whether or not there was police presence and fines with these Black Lives Matter protests?

**Michele Tournier**

Not that I heard. And I know there wasn't in Saskatchewan when— Like, I was at quite a few protests and fines were involved, police presence. And other protests were left alone.

**Shawn Buckley**

So can you can you share with us, you said that you went to other protests. What types of protests did you go to? And please describe in detail the police presence that was there.

**Michele Tournier**

I went to quite a few here in Saskatoon at the Vimy Memorial. And they were just about freedom: defending our rights, the rights to choose, leave the children alone, this type of thing. So the police would know we were kind of the Saturday group. And sometimes there was a large group, sometimes smaller. But the police presence was— There were marked cars in many places. A lot of times the roads were blocked off, so no traffic.

In the beginning, they didn't block the roads because they weren't sure. But then they started to block the roads and that way anybody driving by couldn't honk, couldn't see our signs. There were undercover vehicles in many places. You could see police with cameras. You could see cameras mounted taking pictures. It was quite eerie in a way actually, to see all that. And knowing we've basically always been law-abiding citizens. I would be shocked if too many at these protests actually weren't pro-police before.

And so, the one day we came, we were going to— I knew it was all blocked off. So I knew there was a Free Palestine protest by City Hall. So I says, "Let's go drive by there. I'm going to video." So I videoed and sure enough there was, I don't know, at least 200 people there.

And at the time, it was no more than 10 people outside. And then they had their sign and they were chanting, “Free, free Palestine,” which I’m fine with that. But then you came our way and there was no traffic allowed, there was heavy police presence. Many people got fined for being at those protests, public gathering over 10 people. So.

**Shawn Buckley**

Was there a police presence at the Free Palestine?

**Michele Tournier**

I saw one policeman on a pedal bike when we drove by, that’s all I saw.

**Shawn Buckley**

So completely different.

**Michele Tournier**

Whole different, same day.

**Shawn Buckley**

What were you guys protesting for, or assembling for?

**Michele Tournier**

Well, the mandates, the masks, the gatherings. Just— The government, we were protesting the government is what we were protesting. And protest in Regina, tickets were given there and they were the government mandates, is what basically they were doing.

And we knew the police were getting paid very well, overtime, because our nephew was a former Saskatoon policeman. And when he was still working, they’d say, “Why don’t you take some shifts? You know, it’s good money.” And he says, “Well, I can’t. Like, I agree with the people. We shouldn’t be— People shouldn’t be controlled like this.” So we knew there was a lot of taxpayer money spent on that when, you know, actual criminals are wandering around.

**Shawn Buckley**

What do you think the purpose was of this heavy police presence at, basically, freedom rallies?

**Michele Tournier**

I think it was to intimidate, to make you feel uncomfortable. Maybe you wouldn’t come next time.

And then when you knew you were starting to get some fines, that was also a deterrent, because they were all \$2,800 fines. And people don’t want that. And I got stopped while I was walking and the police wanted my I.D. for just walking towards there. So there was a lot of an intimidation factor too. “You shouldn’t protest the government,” was basically the message.



**Shawn Buckley**

Now did anything happen with Crime Stoppers?

**Michele Tournier**

Yes. A lot of people at this one event had their pictures taken by the police and put on Crime Stoppers. It also happened in Regina where people were in the mall without a mask, I think. People were seen with their faces on Crime Stoppers. It was put out: “If you know these people, contact the police.” So some had their work, the place where they work, say, “I saw your picture on Crime Stoppers.” And this is, really— Like, they’re on Crime Stoppers? And then SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance] was contacted by a lot of pictures that were taken. That’s when we realized how much SGI, our government insurance, worked with the police. And that’s how they identified a lot of us from being who we were,

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and sort of a facial recognition thing, to know where to send the tickets to.

**Shawn Buckley**

And how did that make you feel, realizing that, just for protesting outside, people’s pictures would be put publicly in Crime Stoppers and the government’s insurance agency would be used to identify people that were protesting outside?

**Michele Tournier**

Well, it was very— Like, you couldn’t believe you were in Canada, that there was this level of government groups, agencies going against its citizens. It just—you really were shocked that this was happening in your own country, which was supposed to be free.

**Shawn Buckley**

And how did all of this experience affect you?

**Michele Tournier**

Well, I’ve lost a lot of faith in, well, many institutions, whether it’s government— I’ve always been suspicious of government but it was raised quite a bit. The policing, the judicial, the medical system with the silence. Those that enforced, I guess they enforced, but a lot of people that stood idly by and allowed this to happen to their fellow citizens. I’ve lost trust in our institutions and even in the people around you that seem to be okay with it happening.

**Shawn Buckley**

Thank you. I have no further questions. I’ll see if the commissioners have any questions.

And there are no questions. Michele, on behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry, I sincerely thank you for coming and sharing your testimony with us today.

**Michele Tournier**

You’re welcome.

[00:22:08]

**Final Review and Approval:** Jodi Bruhn, August 21, 2023.

*The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an “intelligent verbatim” transcription method.*

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