



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Red Deer, AB

Day 1

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EVIDENCE

Witness 5: Sünje Petersen

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[00:00:00]

Leighton Grey

Leighton Grey, appearing as agent here at the National Citizens Inquiry. I'm going to have the pleasure of asking some questions of a witness named Sünje Petersen. Ms. Petersen, can you hear me?

Sünje Petersen

Yes, I can.

Leighton Grey

Welcome to the National Citizens Inquiry. Thank you for being here today virtually to give your testimony. I understand that you're prepared to swear an oath to tell the truth.

Sünje Petersen

Yes.

Leighton Grey

Alright. And could you please, for the record, state your full name and spell it.

Sünje Petersen

My full name is Sünje Petersen, and I was born in Germany, and I'm commonly called Sunny.

Leighton Grey

Hmm. [speaks a sentence in German]

Sünje Petersen

[responds in German]

Leighton Grey

Do you promise to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Sünje Petersen

Yes.

Leighton Grey

I understand that you are joining us from Whitehorse, Yukon. Is that correct?

Sünje Petersen

Yes, that's correct.

Leighton Grey

In reviewing the notes of what you proposed to give as your testimony, you want to talk about how business closures and lockdown restrictions, or non-pharmaceutical interventions by another name, affected you and your family's business. Is that correct?

Sünje Petersen

Yes.

Leighton Grey

Okay. Do you want to talk about that? I understand that you have a tourism business that was impacted by COVID restrictions in the Northwest Territories [NWT].

Sünje Petersen

Yes. So we live in Whitehorse, but our outfitting area or tourism operation is in the Northwest Territories. And mainly, our clientele comes from overseas, or at least from the United States, so 95 per cent of our clients are from outside the country. So with all the border closures, our business was zero. So not only could we not have our American clients, but because the NWT also closed its border to the rest of Canada, we weren't allowed to take Canadian clients, either.

Leighton Grey

Ms. Petersen, would you mind turning your camera on for us?

Sünje Petersen

Oh, let me see. I'm not really good at this stuff. Video, it is on, but it shows not "Start video." I don't think it will work.

Leighton Grey

All right.

Sünje Petersen

Yeah, I'm really sorry. It says everything is on, but it does have a slash through it, and it said, yeah, and I'm not good at this, and the husband isn't here.

Leighton Grey

Can you click the button with the slash?

Sünje Petersen

Yeah, but then it says, "Start video," but nothing happens. I have it. It's an external one. I have it in, Logitech webcam, then I open that. "Cannot start video; failed to start video camera. Please select another camera setting."

Leighton Grey

All right, we can hear you really clearly, so we'll just carry on. Okay?

Sünje Petersen

Yeah, I'm sorry, though.

Leighton Grey

No, there's no need for an apology. I understand that you lost about one and a half years of income in your business. Is that right?

Sünje Petersen

Yes, that's right, because the borders did not reopen until— So we lost the entire business year in 2020, and then we lost almost half our season in 2021 because the borders opened late. Our business usually starts in the middle of July. So we were set to start July 15th, but the border didn't open until August 9th, I believe, for Americans, and September 7th for the rest of the world.

Leighton Grey

And I understand even after you were able to reopen that, in fact, you had to apply for a special permit to fly into your remote fly-in camp and that this is very problematic for you. Is that right?

Sünje Petersen

Well, yeah, it's a very remote camp, and this is where all the silliness really comes in. So everybody wants it to re-open. But first of all, in 2020 nobody was allowed to go to the NWT. Our family had to apply for a special permit in order to go to our area. We fly in, I should really say that. So almost everybody who comes to our area comes in directly from Whitehorse, Yukon, so they don't even travel through the NWT. And so in 2020, we need a special permit for our family to go there and just check up on things.

And then in '21, everybody actually had to apply for a separate permit and had to state that they are self-isolating in camp.

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And also, everybody was supposed to phone in every few days and state their COVID symptoms. I believe that was in 2020, maybe not so much in '21. But yeah, so it was a special permit for tourism operators to bring in their clients. And like I say, we're totally remote. Those people never touch ground in populated NWT.

Leighton Grey

I also understand you brought your concerns to the attention of a health officer by way of a series of emails, but that the health officer was worried about some sort of possible cluster or superspreader event?

Sünje Petersen

Yes. So I was writing back and forth with Dr. Kami Kandola, the Chief Public Health Officer of the NWT. I tried to state to her the following points: We are in a remote location. Our people don't go and meet anybody in NWT. They will not stay in base camp. It's one-on-one guiding, so one client with one guide. They are staying 14 days. And in case of emergency, we are set up for a direct flight back to Edmonton, or the Yukon if we had to. But everything— There was no touch with anybody. We couldn't infect anybody.

But Dr. Kandola got back to me. Her main concern supposedly was that there could be a cluster outbreak in a remote location. Now, I don't know how you get a cluster when you have two people. And her other thing is best-laid plans might not work out, and our healthcare system will be overwhelmed when your one client will use it, which we weren't intending to. And so I kept going back and forth with her on all these things. I said, "Why is there no testing? If you come in Frankfurt, Germany, there's a COVID test, and they are allowed in." Also, the Yukon, for example, allowed clients to come in if they went to a remote location. And Dr. Kandola didn't. We had only five Canadian clients booked for the 2020 season, and we really, really wanted to take those clients. It would have made a huge difference to us.

And so I asked her, "So what are your epidemiological reasons for not letting these people in? Five people, what is that? And they are coming one by one compared to a supermarket or a Walmart full of people in downtown Vancouver." I wanted to know a number. I said, "What would be the infection rate? What is your real problem? Why are you blocking me?" And I did not get an answer to that. I never got a proper answer to my questions. And furthermore, there were 84 NWT doctors who actually wrote a letter to Dr. Kandola and said, "What you're doing, your lockdowns, it's killing people. It's causing huge disruptions in the communities. We can't do that." And she blocked that, too. So on the one hand, she was telling me, "Oh, I talked to other people, and this is our reasoning, and I talked to other doctors, and this is what we've come up with." But on the other hand, her own doctors in her own territory didn't agree with her. And she shut them down. So this is what happened.

Leighton Grey

Many small businesspeople in urban settings were frustrated by the circumstance whereby places like gyms and restaurants and retail outlets were shut down during COVID, while big box stores—I won't name them, we all know who they are—were left open. And many of

them actually had restaurant counters and things like that operating inside. You had a similar situation or a similar frustration in your case because at the same time that all these things were unfolding for you and these lockdowns were affecting your business, there were in fact, mining operations taking place in the southern part of where you live and camps that are much larger than yours. And yet those were all allowed to continue to operate. Is that right?

Sünje Petersen

Yes, that's correct because I wrote that to Doctor Kandola. I said, "There are workers who are going into mining camps. On top of that, there's also truckers coming and going; there were nurses coming and going." Like, there was all kinds of workers. But she said those were essential, and I was not.

Leighton Grey

So you spent a lifetime really over 20 years building up this business, right?

Sünje Petersen

Yes.

Leighton Grey

And it was only by being very resourceful and resilient that you were able to save your business from bankruptcy.

Sünje Petersen

Yes, if we wouldn't have been in business for almost 20 years,

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and if we wouldn't have had savings, we would have gone bankrupt. Because we lost one and a half years of income. Just think about anybody out there, anybody listening here or even— that's what I said to Dr. Kandola, too, "How about we slash your income for one and a half years? When are you going to do that?" So this is our life. This is not just the job I go to, it's our lifestyle, it's our business.

And it goes further than that. It's our family that's impacted. But it's also our guides. It's the aviation companies that fly people in and out; it's hotels, restaurants. We make roughly 1.5 million dollars revenue every year and on top of that, that's all money that comes from overseas. So it's a good income for Canada. So we have 1.5 million revenue. We ourselves of that make maybe four to five hundred thousand for our family. Our kids work with us. So the rest of the million goes to other people within here, within Canada. All that is blocked; all that is shut down.

Leighton Grey

Well, all of that sounds incredibly stressful. I'm curious, though, how was your mental health impacted by this? Obviously, your civil liberties were suspended. But leaving aside the economic part of it that you've talked about, what about the personal side? Were you able to see family overseas? Or I understand that you had a family member actually who

passed away during this period; you were not able to attend for that family circumstance. Can you talk about how all this affected you and your family personally?

Sünje Petersen

Yeah, so when it first started, we were in complete uproar. I mean, they closed everything down in March. At first we were hoping they would open up, for our season to be normal. By the time May rolled around, we were like, “Oh my God, what are we going to do?” We have emails every day coming in: people like, “Are we going to be able to come hunting? When will the border open?” So our work impact was a lot larger than it usually would have been. There was the stress to deal with and then just thinking what— All our life basically fell apart. Okay. Like, this is what we do. That’s what we live for. And none of that was happening.

Our oldest daughter was trained to be a downhill ski racer. She had to come home in tears because they shut the ski hills and sent her home. She wasn’t allowed to run races. On top of it, the following year, she wasn’t allowed to train because she couldn’t go up Mount Norquay unless she was injected with a COVID-19— I don’t want to call it vaccine because it doesn’t immunize.

My stepfather got sick the day after his second shot. EMS [Emergency Medical Services] had to come and pick him up. He was in the hospital for two or three months. He wasn’t able to make red blood cells anymore and he died, and I couldn’t go home. My father died while the travel ban was still in place. So I couldn’t go and be with my family then. My mother is in hospital now. Her liver is giving out on her, organ failure. Now I can go and visit. But I just want to put it in this order because that’s three parents out of four, seeing as I have step-parents. All of them are injected with a COVID-19 vaccine. I mean, the thing that we didn’t know when we would be able to operate anymore. The fact that we couldn’t go on a vacation, that we couldn’t go overseas, be with family when they needed us.

The fact that our children were really impacted because they are 21, 18, and 16 now, so they were a little bit younger. Our oldest, her dreams fell apart. She couldn’t go to a university or any such a thing. She works for a company now where the COVID-19 injection is not required. It’s a trucking company. Then our next daughter, we usually homeschool. But the next daughter, she went to school in Whitehorse for half a year. It was a special program. It’s theatre, music, and dance. Her heart was hanging in there. She really wanted to do that. There were all kinds of problems there. They were not attending to that school properly. They didn’t let the kids do their arts, music, dance, and drama. She went back. The next year, she had to wear a mask while everybody else didn’t have to wear one anymore in the Yukon.

In reality, it affects you on absolutely every single level. There wasn’t one thing that was proper. I couldn’t go to a restaurant because in the Yukon, they blocked everybody. My kids couldn’t go sports. All the kids in the Yukon couldn’t go unless they were injected for COVID-19. They weren’t allowed to go and participate

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in sports and restaurants and social life. We weren’t allowed to have company over because we weren’t injected. What is this? I can’t even invite my friends over? This is not right. It really hit me on every level, professional, personal, friendship.

And then, on top of it, because I stood up within my community—I was in the Tagish Advisory Council—I stood up and I talked against this injection. Well, I don't want to go into it, but anyways, I'm not a doctor. You just heard everything from the other doctor. I tried to stand up within my community and warn people and say, "Look at it. This is a new technology. Maybe you want to check this out. This is wrong and this is wrong and this feels like Nazi Germany to me."

I'm sorry, I know it's an overused term, but this is what happened in East Germany. This is what happened in Germany in the 1930s. I could see the parallels. I was treated as a Jew here. I had to show my health passport, which I didn't have, so I couldn't do anything, right? There are people who don't talk to me anymore, friends, neighbours. That's fine, but it's not nice. Somebody even sent social services on me claiming I hit my child five years ago at the community hall. This is how evil people are when you don't do what they think.

Leighton Grey

But the comparison you draw to Nazi Germany is striking. It's a little-known fact that actually the Nazis did require people to carry health passes during that time period in history, you probably know that.

Obviously, this has caused irreparable damage to your family. I hope that you've been able to restore your business to some level of profitability.

My last question for you is, if you could say something to the Government of Northwest Territories or the Government of Canada or to this panel, the people listening, about what you think could be done better, or could have been done better in terms of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, what would you say about that?

Sünje Petersen

It's actually really simple. Don't lock up the world. Go and quarantine those people who are actually sick so that the rest can't get sick from them. But don't make the entire world into a hospital. This is not how it works.

Leighton Grey

Well, you've obviously read the Great Barrington Declaration, so bravo for that.

Sünje Petersen

I signed it.

Leighton Grey

With that I'm going to turn you over to the panel for questions. Who would like to go first? No questions.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us, Ms. Petersen?

Sünje Petersen

No, maybe just that this is just me talking here. But there are eight other outfitters in the NWT and there's a lot more in the Yukon: there's tons of tourism business. This was a big

deal for a lot of people, and it has cost Canada and Canadians a lot of income. But an income is really what keeps you alive and keeps you moving. It's tanked the economy so bad. I don't think anybody actually knows how much.

Leighton Grey

Thank you, Ms. Petersen, for your testimony here today.

Sünje Petersen

No, thank you guys for doing this. I'm sorry you couldn't see me.

Leighton Grey

We're sorry, too.

Sünje Petersen

Thank you.

[00:18:38]



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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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