

B.C. natives sue federal government for millions over 'Sixties' Scoop'

BY SUZANNE FOURNIER, POSTMEDIA NEWS MAY 31, 2011



Photograph by: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix

VANCOUVER — A class-action lawsuit that could cost Ottawa millions of dollars has been filed in the Supreme Court of British Columbia on behalf of aboriginal children affected by the "Sixties' Scoop."

The "Scoop" refers to the thousands of native children who were allegedly taken between 1962 and 1996 after the federal government signed over its responsibility for Indian child welfare to the provincial government.

The B.C. government received money for each status Indian child taken into care.

This is the first Sixties' Scoop class-action suit filed in B.C. and only the second in Canada. An Ontario case was given court approval in 2010.

A Vancouver lawyer representing victims said the Sixties' Scoop victims could win "millions of dollars in federal compensation," such as that given to residential school survivors.

"But the purpose of this lawsuit is for the survivors to seek justice for the wrongs that were done to them," said Jason Murray. "Just as the residential schools closed, aboriginal children were again taken away, into foster care.

"The federal government needs to accept responsibility for the damage done to generations of children alienated from their culture and spirituality."

Sharon Russell filed the lawsuit. She said social workers "wiped out my family" by snatching her and

her four siblings away from their parents and splitting them up into different foster homes.

"My youngest brother, Billy Rodgers, died in foster care, lost and alone without knowing he was a Gitksan hereditary chief," said Russell, 54, a Fireweed Clan member of the Gitksan Nation.

"I held him once when he was a baby, with my siblings there and a foster mom willing to take us all, but Billy was taken away and we never saw him again."

Russell said her grandparents could have stepped in as caregivers when her parents had difficulty with alcohol. Instead, she was taken away at the age of seven to a non-native Richmond, B.C., home "where there was no love. . . . I had my face slapped for crying for my mother and was told she was just a drunk."

In 1996, First Nations were given more jurisdiction, although not as much funding, over their own child and family welfare placements.

More than half of the 9,500 children in provincial care today are native, although First Nations form less than four per cent of B.C.'s population.

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