

Coyle: Was fuzzy inquiry worth \$53M?

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By **Jim Coyle** Queen's Park

As he responded Tuesday to the judicial report on now-infamous allegations of a pedophile sex ring in Cornwall, Ont., Attorney General Chris Bentley looked about as comfortable as a guy who'd stepped naked into the hotel corridor to fetch a newspaper and heard the door click shut behind him.

Under the circumstances, just about any place probably seemed a better place than where he was.

To be fair, Bentley and Community Safety Minister Rick Bartolucci had been handed rather a tall order.

How did they acknowledge dismay at the eye-popping price tag of \$53 million for the surprisingly inconclusive results of the four-year inquiry while remaining sensitive to the pain and trauma caused those who had, in fact, been abused as boys and teens?

Bentley did it in the most discreet way possible.

When a reporter asked the ministers if any investigation costing so much while taking so long and producing such modest results wasn't by definition a failure, the attorney general was invited to reply first.

"Thanks very much," he said, dryly.

As usual, the medium is the message. And Bentley knew \$53 million was a whole lot of medium – apt to overshadow most of what Mr. Justice G. Normand Glauze had written therein.

It was "a very thorough examination," the attorney general observed in impeccable deadpan. In fact, "it's hard to imagine a more thorough examination."

Even so, its conclusions as to whether such a ring had operated in Cornwall in the 1990s were limited and its recommendations not dissimilar, arguably, to what could have been generated from existing literature on sexual abuse.

In defending the cost of the inquiry, New Democrat MPP Peter Kormos identified the chief problem with the exercise.

"The community of Cornwall still has many unanswered questions and suspicions linger to this day."

Historically, judicial inquiries do have an element of blank-cheque about them. This one in particular, established in 2005 and looking at alleged offences going back decades in a community grown toxic with rumour and innuendo, had more than the usual risk of exceeding budget and timetable.

More than that, however, was the apparent mismatch between the community's need for healing and catharsis and the costly vehicle of a judicial inquiry.

Over and over, what Bentley and Bartolucci described as the inquiry's chief virtue – its role as a forum for healing – seemed to have more in common with the Oprahisms of therapy than the fact-finding mission of judicial inquiries to identify what happened, who was responsible and how such things can be prevented.

"The opportunity for them to have some closure is, I think, of paramount importance," Bartolucci said.

"This community needed to be heard, those who were victimized needed to be heard," Bentley added. "(By) somebody who was there to listen, and listen just to them and hear their story, hear their pain."

Still, he said, there are probably ways to ensure that the process "be as empathetic as we would like it to be without ... the lawyers in the room." Changes already made to the Inquiries Act should, he said, produce "answers quicker, faster in future."

Whatever it did accomplish, it's doubtful the report will meet Bartolucci's wish that "every question that everyone had would be answered and that there was complete satisfaction."

More likely, the findings that institutional backside-covering trumped victims' rights will get lots less attention than the question put by PC critic Bob Runciman.

"Now, we need to determine why it cost more than \$50 million to find that out."

Jim Coyle's provincial affairs column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.