



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Red Deer, AB

Day 1

April 26, 2023

EVIDENCE

Witness 9: Colin Murphy

Full Day 1 Timestamp: 08:47:38–09:13:24

Source URL: <https://rumble.com/v2kjwek-national-citizens-inquiry-red-deer-day-1.html>

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Leighton Grey

Welcome, Mr. Murphy. Our next witness is Colin Murphy. He is a proud Albertan. Calgarian. Welcome to the National Citizens Inquiry, Mr. Murphy.

Colin Murphy

Thanks for having me.

Leighton Grey

Firstly, I wonder if you wouldn't mind just stating your name and spelling it for the record.

Colin Murphy

My name is Colin Murphy, C-O-L-I-N M-U-R-P-H-Y.

Leighton Grey

Sir, are you prepared to tell the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help you God.

Colin Murphy

I am.

Leighton Grey

Sir, I understand that, as I mentioned, you are from Calgary. You're a businessman.

Colin Murphy

Yup. In business for over 22 years.

Leighton Grey

You have kind of an interesting business in that you produce and run large-scale sporting events and music festivals, right?

Colin Murphy

That's correct. We're a service provider for those events.

Leighton Grey

And you are involved in this with your wife.

Colin Murphy

Yeah. She helps on the side. It's been a family business. My dad started it a long time ago, and so it took a long time to slowly build up the inventory, build up the reputation, and the client base that we have.

Leighton Grey

So I understand that when the pandemic was declared, this was hugely disruptive to your business.

Colin Murphy

It's interesting. In the event space, when you get to be well known, you almost have your year laid out, especially when you've been doing it for 20 years. So around December/January, when it was coming to light that COVID was coming around, you immediately start to go, "Where's it going to impact me in three months? Five months? Down the road," right?

But you already have your summer laid out in December. So it's more: When's it going to hit? And what's it going to do? And how as a business can I get through whatever they're going to do? But it's unprecedented. You don't know what they are or aren't going to do to you. But you see it coming for sure.

Leighton Grey

Is it fair to say your business is somewhat seasonal, or do you have these events going on year-round?

Colin Murphy

I would say 80 per cent of my revenue comes in the summer. Those are almost all annual clients that always occur. You might get a deviation of five, ten per cent, more or less, but you always have the same clients. You're doing the same events. It's a great time. You know what you're doing. You have the staff. Everything is allocated perfectly.

Then in the winter we were lucky enough. It gets thinner. It's quite competitive, but we had one or two really solid clients. It was a sporting event, and you traveled all around Canada, and it was a great, great contract. We really loved working with them and just seeing all around Canada.

Leighton Grey

I understand that just in the first year, bearing in mind that the pandemic was declared in March of 2020, just in that first year though, your business lost over a quarter of a million dollars. Is that correct?

Colin Murphy

Well, so COVID happens, and everyone starts getting really, really nervous about it. And no one knows what's going to happen. So they basically cut everything in March. We were not allowed to do any more events. So we go home, hang with our family, and ride this thing out to see what's going to happen.

I believe it was around April where I think Quebec was first. They basically cancelled the summer. They said, "No more events in the summer." And quite quickly, Jason Kenney completely followed suit and said, "We're not doing anything this summer."

So I've got three permanent staff, including myself, and four or five contractors. And basically, our revenue went from \$300,000 to zero. We had to lay everyone off, had to cancel everything, and basically shutter the business. Everyone had to go off of employment because we didn't have the means.

The problem was that one of the things that was established was that the government was going to cover 75 per cent of the wages. But if you have no revenue, you can't cover anything. So basically, what ended up happening was we shut down to ride the wave out. And again, I'm going to be sympathetic. No one at that time knew what was or wasn't happening. You could get some data, but to be sensitive, you basically grinned and beared it and said, "Let's wait and see what's going to happen." This is the first summer. So the whole thing was completely shut down.

Leighton Grey

Notwithstanding that really catastrophic situation in 2020, I understand that you were able to retain and maintain some of your customer base.

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Those of us who lived in Alberta during that time remember the phrase "graduated reopening," which started to happen—did you just cringe?—started to happen in 2021, right? And I understand that there was sort of a "bubble" approach that permitted you to put on some limited events in 2021. Is that right?

Colin Murphy

So most events have to work eight months to six months out of their event date to get organized and actually get all the ducks in a row.

The problem was that they shut down the summer, but when September came along there was no guidance. There was no leadership. There was no— Everyone was chasing everyone else saying, “What do we do? What do we do?” I honestly don’t think— No one wants to take accountability, so they defer everything to the next person. Even my clients— I don’t blame anyone. But everyone’s looking for answers and deferring to the next person, deferring to the next person, so that when they’re wrong, they can actually say, “Oh, that wasn’t me who made a decision. I relied on them.”

But, basically, most of my clients could not get any planning or anything done going into the next winter. But I was very lucky because one of my clients was able to establish a bubble and through those means we were able to hire some people back on and get through that with the revenue.

However, we came back up to the summer, and there were no guarantees the summer was going to be open. Because the summer was closed before, everyone was still nervous. So everyone had to basically hold back on all their plans. So once the bubble was gone, then you still did not know what was going to happen in the summer until Jason Kenny, again spontaneously, said two weeks before the Stampede, “Hey, we’re open! Let’s go!”

Leighton Grey

Right. COVID-free forever. Who could forget?

Colin Murphy

Let’s rock it!

Leighton Grey

I understand, also, that through your business you run events, you produce events, outside of Alberta and that this posed a problem for you in terms of the differences in restrictions as between Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and other provinces. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Colin Murphy

What’s interesting is people don’t really know how things flow.

So we’re going to get into vaccination time. The whole goal was that once everyone got vaccinated, everyone could return to normal; we could start doing events again.

Unfortunately, I’m not vaccinated for my business, and I’m looking at this— One of my main clients who did the bubble and they presented me with a scenario in August saying, “Great news, we’re open for business.” But it was going to be 90 days on the road.

Now I’m sending three to four crew on the road all around Canada. At that time, the quarantine rules were different in every province. And they were spending about 12 to 14 days in each location. So what was happening is that I’m looking at my chart here saying, “I’m going to send four people to St. John’s.” They get to St. John’s, and all of a sudden on day eight or day nine, it doesn’t matter what they’re doing, they get COVID. Well now, they have a 14-day period where they have to quarantine in St. John’s. But their plane leaves in five days, and the event’s all done. And they have to go to another event. So as a logistics manager, I’m a small company. I don’t make millions and millions of dollars. So I’m going, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, I can’t take this liability.”

My client, they like my services. But I can't provide them the services because of the unknown because of all these weird regulations and where things were. And so because of that, one of my best clients— These are people who we've worked with for a long time. The volunteers at these events, we would see the same ones. It was such a community. And my workers, who I absolutely adored, they did such a good job. And for no reason of my own, all of it got wiped out. Just all gone.

You can't do anything about it. You can just go, "Oh, that was nice. That's a good memory, and let's move on from here."

Because there was no consistency across the board, it was impossible to schedule anything. So unfortunately, I had to get rid of that contract, which was my winter contract. And so then things got even thinner. And that was when things started kicking in and everything else was changed.

Leighton Grey

I understand that you tried to bring your frustrations with the lockdown restrictions to your elected representatives but without much success.

Colin Murphy

I'm very fortunate because I have Jason Copping in my riding,

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and we all know what a wonderful person he is. So when COVID was hitting in April, the very beginning, I had a long conversation with him on the phone. I basically was saying what I believed to be where this may be heading. Not that I was right or wrong but just "Hey, watch out for this."

Multiple times throughout this whole ordeal he does answer the phone. I've had several conversations with him. I've gone to his town halls. I've tried to present things to him to try to mitigate and, early on, try to open up earlier and/or provide alternatives to the way the course was being set for us. Every single time he would— He would basically just ignore you. He would just stare blankly at you and go, "Okay, Okay, Okay," and then nothing would get done.

If he wanted something from you, he would answer your calls. But if you sent a video to him or some statistics or anything to him, there was just no response. I'm not saying he should listen to me. I'm not a medical person or anything. But I was pleading to look at those people who he should be listening to. People who are way more knowledgeable on the subject than me, and there's tons of resources, especially now. But they're still not doing it, and I have no idea why.

Leighton Grey

I understand, sir, that despite all of this, you're still involved in your business, but not to the same level. Why is that?

Colin Murphy

Well, you can't. I don't trust the government anymore. I don't trust anything they're going to do. All the events are there to bid on. For me to actually go and say, "Okay I want to get this contract back, or I want to get this contract back." Then now, I have to hire people. Now I have to train them, and I trained guys for five or six years. Now I have to go through that labour of training people and trusting them on the road with my equipment and my reputation.

Once you've done all that, then you bid on the event. Now you're deep into money and deep into investing in personnel, and all of a sudden, the government will come along and change it. So I don't trust any of that, and because that trust is broken, I really can't do anything more.

We're doing well. I'm happy. I've got fantastic clients, and I'm back to when we were small. You grind it out. You do what you can. My dad's 78, and he's still joining me on the road. So you do what you can.

Leighton Grey

So you've got this great family Alberta business that employs yourself and your wife and your dad and all these other skilled people, has great potential. You had a dream that it would grow much bigger. You obviously have incredible expertise that's applicable.

But what's holding you back really is something emotional and psychological and, to some degree, rational. And that is your distrust in your government because you're afraid that if you do invest all that time and energy—and every business owner knows what this is like. I feel you, okay. To have a sense that a government, which is supposed to be there to support you, to help you grow your business, or at least not interfere with your ability to do that; you're worried that that's the very entity, the very force, that's going to come along and pull the rug out from under you.

Colin Murphy

Well, when you have a business, the right way to do the business is you believe in something. You put your house on the line. You buy equipment. You get a loan. Basically, you put everything on the line. So when the government shut down the summer, the first year, you lose all that money.

It didn't pay for your trucks, didn't pay for your trailers, didn't pay for your loans, didn't cover anything. Everyone is like, "Oh, the government's going to support you. Didn't the government give you something?" They didn't do anything. The federal government gave you a loan and, basically, said, "Hey, here's a little bit of money. Take all you want. Pay us back," and that's coming into fruition. It kicks in in December or something like that. Then the provincial government gave a little bit of money here and there. But again, we're talking about a lot of money, risking it all on the line, and I already went through all that.

That's the problem. I don't know how people nowadays— Look at all your small businesses. They all believe in something, and they pour it all into it. You own a restaurant. You own a gym. You own a hair salon. You're a trucker. You put all your money to buy a truck you want to drive across Canada and deliver product. And out of nowhere, the government can just change it. It's crazy, and there's no recourse. There's no recourse for their actions. They just go, "Oh yeah, well, we made a decision." Hey, pay for my grocery bill every year, thank you very much.

Leighton Grey

And the problem is compounded by inflation

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related to the pandemic, higher interest rates, debt, costs of things like gas and fuel, all these things. I expect you have to run equipment and machines, large-scale machines.

Colin Murphy

Yeah. The biggest problem is the supply chain right now. The supply chain is completely disrupted. You guys won't see it, but parts are very hard to get. If you want to get a power distro—it's this thing that converts power so you can run all these things—they say six weeks. But it's probably nine weeks to probably twelve weeks. Before, that was unheard of. The parts don't exist.

And that's now. I don't know where the crunch is going to go. I'm not going to get on the line and foresee that. But there's been a massive change in how things are working right now. And the labour force in our industry is quite thin. In other words, people who you used to be able to— You used to be able to get crew. They're called crew, and they come in, and they help out. There used to be a good supply of crew. And I don't know where they are anymore. They're really not around.

Leighton Grey

So not to put too fine a point on it, comparing where you are now to where you were pre-pandemic, you have the wherewithal to run your business, but the landscape has changed completely.

Colin Murphy

Oh, yeah. And you don't know where it's going to go. You have no clue where it's going to go.

Leighton Grey

Predictability, of course. Thank you, sir. Is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you want to say to the Inquiry?

Colin Murphy

The frustrating part that I have with this whole thing is a lot of people were vilified, but it seems that people don't talk anymore to each other. You can talk to friends and family members, and everyone has a little thing that's wrong. Everyone has a story. But they don't share the stories in one unit, one big group. And because they don't share in one big group, they can't connect the dots. Not saying there are any dots. Not trying to get in trouble here. But it would be nice if somewhere down the road, there is an event or there is a continuous event.

I know it happens in Europe a lot. They go to the news agencies, and they post things on the walls there, or they have marches. In Canada, we've backed away from doing some of that. But we really need a national acknowledgement of the effects of what happened here.

I know that on April 28th is the WCB, Workers' Compensation Board— They have this actual day where they commemorate people who lost their lives on the job. I really think there has to be a really big push. And we have to hammer it through media, who don't listen to us. And we have to all get together. People have to see the effects of all of this. Because by having little chats here and there, they're not talking, by not talking— For my kids right now, I'm worried about the future. It's not just the consistency of labour; it's the consistency of life, the way of life. Because that's all changed. People get used to change, and I don't want some of the change. I don't think it's good change.

Leighton Grey

You don't want Deena Hinshaw's "new normal?"

Colin Murphy

I don't want passports. I don't want any of that stuff. It's just crazy.

Leighton Grey

Sir, thank you for that suggestion and for your testimony. I'm going to turn it over to the panel now and see if they have any questions.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you for your testimony. I'm sure there's a lot of Canadian businesspeople who could relate. My question is what changes need to happen for you to trust government again?

Colin Murphy

Well, I honestly don't know. Decentralized decision-making is key, I would say, with government. I would trust certain avenues.

Politicians have avenues of employment. How do I say this? Different jobs benefit from different political landscapes. So my political landscape benefits from certain ideologies. So it's biased for me to say what I think is going to help me because I really want more liberty and freedom to do what I want to do, less restrictions, and less saying, "You have to do everything this way and this way."

So I don't really know, but I say decentralized would really, really help. In other words, rules at least where, if there was a decision made in the federal level, it doesn't necessarily impact the provincial level because it might not agree with our certain values and beliefs here. I think there has to be a distinction because it exists in other things across all the other provinces.

So maybe decentralization and talking—getting more input. I will say one thing.

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My industry didn't speak up for itself. I think a lot of small businesses don't have a voice because they're all spread out, and they're everywhere. There's no real big centralized— The unions right now that are protesting, well, they're huge. But small business is the same size, if not bigger, but they don't come together and join that. So maybe some way of

collectively bringing people together and having one voice. I'm sure that would help. But it's a lot of work and I don't know how much time we have to do that.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you very much.

Commissioner Drysdale

Good afternoon. We've heard from several witnesses previously about the impacts on their industry. I don't know a lot about your industry, but some of the things that we've been hearing is that the mandates seem to favour large companies and destroy small companies. In other words, they have more resources, they have more money at their disposal, and some of these companies, for instance, our mainstream media companies, got hundreds of millions of dollars to support them.

So what happened in your industry? Did it consolidate? Were the small people pushed out?

Colin Murphy

Specifically in Alberta, three companies became one. In the last three years most of them consolidated into quite large companies. If you look at the large conventions, the large sporting things, those things, they'll all get— There's no question that now that they're so large, they have the workforce.

Some of my old clients— I gave up a client last year I've had for 19 years. I didn't give them up because I didn't want to do their event, and I didn't have any malice to them. I physically could not get the workers and provide the level of service that I was comfortable with to do the job. And so I said, "I'm sorry I can't do your event anymore, and here's some companies that are larger." They were able to get through it because they have deep pockets and/or they have other revenue sources that helped get them through.

I'm not complaining about it. Everyone has their merits and such. It's just unfortunate that as you're getting bigger and bigger and you have this five-, ten-year plan, it doesn't take much—and everyone tells this to you—it doesn't take much, for one little thing to happen, and it just changes everything. Gone.

Commissioner Drysdale

Well, it seems to be a common theme of a lot of the business owners. We've been talking about the consolidation or in some instances, monopolization of their businesses.

Can you comment a little bit on the ability of very large companies to address the needs of very small clients? I mean, Canada is a country of small companies, of small events. Are these large monopolies or consolidated companies able to properly service and are they interested in servicing those smaller events that you used to do?

Colin Murphy

I think most of them will. Most large companies will only go for the large ones. If they go for a small one, they'll bid really high, and they'll basically say, "Hey, if I get it, then I get it and we'll go in there." They'll blow it out of the park; they'll do a great job, for sure. But what they're doing is they're taking that small sporting event only as a finite budget. And so

where they might have allocated a certain percentage, if that goes up 40 per cent that impacts the bottom line.

And most sporting events on the small scale, it's for the community. It's not some guy who's a promoter, who's just pocketing the money. It's actually a group of people who got together and said, "If we throw this event on and we make money then that can help with the arena or it can help over here, over there." So they're very important.

But I would say the problem with the landscape is that 30, 40 years ago, businesses supported events. Whereas nowadays, the government got rid of a lot of that, the write-offs. So now a lot of events are very dependent on government funding for the event. So the events themselves have to make sure that they toe the line.

Commissioner Drysdale

Well, that's a really interesting point. I want to make sure I understand that. So some time ago, it was common for businesses or communities to support these events, but now the government supports them and, therefore, has control over them. Is that what you're saying?

Colin Murphy

Well, I couldn't infer that. But I'm just saying they definitely got rid of the way that sponsorship was done. Sponsorship in the past was done with a different model, I believe. But now it's totally different.

I think the problem is that you have large companies— It's just a business cycle, and unfortunately, the business cycle

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was interrupted by something larger, and I'm just a slight victim of it. I'm doing fine without it.

But there needs to be better preparations on how to mitigate the business cycle from being interrupted from external sources.

Because other areas did fine. I mean, Florida—that's the problem—is that Florida never closed. Florida stayed open. Sweden. So there were examples around the world where things were doing okay.

Commissioner Drysdale

Thank you.

Leighton Grey

Mr. Murphy, thank you for your testimony here today and for being part of the National Citizens Inquiry.

Colin Murphy

Thank you.

[00:25:45]

Final Review and Approval: Anna Cairns, August 30, 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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