



Oral Closing Statement Phase 2 - Elliot Lake Inquiry

After listening to, and reviewing testimony during Phase 2 of this Inquiry, one cannot help but to recall an often quoted line of dialogue from a classic movie:

“WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE”.

Witness after witness, when asked by various counsel, what they felt would be a critical recommendation they would like to see made and implemented, they almost to the individual, responded; **COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION.**

Perhaps never more was there a critical need for improved communication, then during the Algo Mall collapse and the on going operations for rescue and recovery.

These witnesses ranged from the public inside the mall at the time of the collapse, the families of victims of the catastrophe, the concerned general public, the first responders, up to and including the teams of rescuers working on the rubble pile, and, the Incident Commander himself.

We, who live in Elliot Lake, witnessed the proceedings from the safety of the street, or, the comfort of our living rooms watching for news bulletins on television or the internet. We heard conflicting reports of a yet unidentified fatality, then possibly even more. We heard conflicting reports of people who were as yet, unconfirmed to be missing. We heard and watched City run News Conferences, at which, the Mayor sat almost silent; the named Communications Coordinator was basically unknown and invisible, while proceedings were directed, controlled and dictated by the CAO, who was, according to the Emergency Response Plan of the City, in charge of only the Community Control Group or CCG. It was usually he who responded to press questions or, he directed questions to various specialists who came from afar to undertake the rescue operation. It would appear reasonable that these individuals would have been more productive and even have preferred to be out on site as opposed to answering questions from the press. One must only recall the recent flooding disaster in Calgary and the public communications from their mayor to see how things here **SHOULD** have been done.

Instead of these specialists channeling their known information up through the Incident Commander and to the Mayor, whom is identified as the head of the CCG and the Official Spokesperson for the operation, they were left to attempt to explain what they were facing and doing to a press, who, in some instances, sought to slant and sensationalize the news. For the public, holding vigil on the street, even these news casts were not available, and they were forced to rely on second or third hand information. Not until some senior official from the Province or OPP arrived did the Mayor appear on the street, and that was usually to introduce them and let them speak to the people. No regular briefings were communicated to the people awaiting news on the street.

The families of victims spoke of being told next to nothing and ignored as to news of the fate of their loved ones, and were told that they were being done a favour to be told the smattering of

news they did get, again from people that would have been more use on the site then taking the place of those who should have been communicating.

We have been made aware of communications between a few members of council itself, who were never given any information as to what was happening on the ground, so that they could at least try to keep questioning constituents informed.

It was not the job of the Incident Commander to stop and speak with the press or concerned citizens. The Emergency Response Plan clearly spells out whom it should have been.

There were various testimonies as to difficulties with communications on the site itself, because of incompatible radio frequencies; decisions being made at lower levels of the chain of command, rather than the Incident Commander; conflicts on the ground appearing to be the result of what cannot be described other then a “testosterone contest” between various groups of professionals on the ground, due to some sort of “Who's really in charge” perceptions.

We see instances of the first group to arrive for the rescue from out of town who were simply assumed to be an advance group of another and larger group who had been requested by the first group. Who they were was not known by anyone, even their own so called IC on site, who was a member of the same organization. The Incident Commander had never heard of them and was unaware they were a separate entity. The public were never told that there were two groups of experts arriving who would coordinate and work together. Almost nobody was aware that the first to arrive group of outside rescue personnel was almost shut out of operational planning and relegated to “also rans”.

We heard of instances of interference from a Crown Ministry, who, unless the operation was declared a “Recovery” as opposed to a “Rescue” by the Incident Commander himself, has no business other then advisory, in the whole thing. Why they sat in CCG meetings, influencing the members thereof, instead of funneling their concerns only through the Incident Commander alone yet is a mystery.

While SAGE has made a number of recommendations for the consideration of Mr. Commissioner, we would emphasize that the progress of those tasked with the rescue and recovery of victims would have been much better had simple COMMUNICATION been practiced by all concerned. There is a definite need to strengthen all aspects of communications at all levels.

We can only hope that the Provincial Government will display a different attitude from the recently uttered opinion of our Prime Minister when asked to conduct an Inquiry into the deaths or disappearance of some 600 Aboriginal women, when he responded:

“WAY TOO LONG; WAY OVER BUDGET; AND RECOMMENDATIONS ARE USUALLY OF LITTLE UTILITY.”

SAGE would like to, once again, express our appreciation to both Mr. Commissioner and the Commission Staff and Counsel for permitting us to participate on behalf of our members and other concerned citizens of Elliot Lake. We have appreciated the opportunity to observe, listen, think outside our daily lives, and to be permitted to actively participate develop and submit our own Recommendations for the consideration of Mr. Commissioner in his final Recommendations to the Province of Ontario.

Thank you.