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Child, youth overseer gets the Ted Hughes stamp of approval

By Vaughn Palmer

VICTORIA - When the B.C. legislature convened Wednesday afternoon, the faces looking down from the public galleries included one of our most eminent citizens, Ted Hughes.

The ostensible reason for the brief and controversial sitting was the appointment of a new child and youth representative.

Hughes himself had recommended the creation of the watchdog post in his review of the troubled child protection system.

Because of that proprietary interest, the 78-year-old former judge had boarded an early morning flight in Saskatchewan -- where he is serving as full-time federal commissioner on residential schools -- to fly home to Victoria to be on hand as the legislature moved to appoint the new representative.

He came, as well, to offer his endorsement of the soon-to-be-appointee: Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, administrative judge of the Provincial Court in Saskatchewan.

"Impressive choice," Hughes told reporters, as the name circulated through the legislative corridors Wednesday afternoon.

Well, yes: Four degrees, including a doctorate of laws from Harvard. Twice chosen by Time magazine as one of the most promising individuals in Canada.

Hughes also drew attention to her special qualifications for the child protection post. She's aboriginal, born to a Cree father from Manitoba and a Scottish mother.

Natives account for fully one-half of the children in care in B.C. And Judge Turpel-Lafond would know something of their challenges first-hand.

"Like so many native homes, hers was rife with alcoholism and violence," according to a profile of her published in Saturday Night last year. "She regularly witnessed her father striking her mother and suffered abuse herself."

British Columbians can expect her to speak her mind, too. "She'll say what needs to be said," says Hughes, who has been known to do that himself from time to time.

Quote: "The biggest mistake people can make about me is thinking I have no independence in my perspective."

She said that in the spring of 1998, when she was made a Provincial Court judge at age 35.

She wasn't long in showing she meant it, generating headline after headline with her outspoken views.

One of her most controversial cases involved a 12-year-old girl accused of arson who suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome.

Instead of incarceration, Turpel-Lafond ordered the government to create a treatment program for the youngster.

Some thought she crossed the line more than once. Right-wing politicians threatened to take her to the judicial council. The New Democratic Party government went to the appeal court to overturn some of her decisions.

But after eight years on the bench, her stature was indisputable. Indeed, her name was among those being touted for eventual elevation to the Supreme Court of Canada.

Instead, she's agreed to uproot her husband (academic and former native leader George Lafond) and four children and move to the West Coast for a five-year, \$220,000-a-year posting as representative for children and youth.

"We're very lucky to have her," Hughes emphasized, which is not to say that he was involved in the selection process.

He learned the name only as it leaked out in the last 48 hours, when he'd already made up his mind that he wanted to be in Victoria.

But it made it all the more satisfying to know that the post would be in good hands. If you'd searched the whole world over, "you couldn't have come up with a better person for the job."

So said Hughes after the house adjourned Wednesday, by which time the appointment should have been completed, it having been the unanimous recommendation of an all-party committee of the legislature.

But the Opposition used a procedural move to delay the appointment. Not out any objection to the candidate, but to register a protest at the B.C. Liberals' decision to scrap the regularly scheduled fall session of the legislature.

A point worth making. And it may have provided enough time for Turpel-Lafond to be here in person when the house gets around to formal ratification, as expected, on Monday.

But no one should lose sight of the main point, Hughes said. Superb choice, endorsed by both parties, and certain to be formalized in "a few days at most."

As for the procedural wrangle, "it was just another day in B.C. politics," as Hughes put it "and nothing to lose any sleep over."

With that he picked up his coat and shuffled away, en route to the airport and a 7:30 p.m. flight back to Saskatchewan and his day job.

Plus, he's thinking he should put through a call to Turpel-Lafond later today. Congratulations are in order, of course, and he may have a thing or two to tell her about B.C.

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