IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

IN THE MATTER OF:

HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN

- V -

JONAS MODESTE

Transcript of the Reasons for Judgment by The Honourable Justice L. A. Charbonneau, sitting in Deline, in the Northwest Territories, on the 15th day of February, A.D., 2012.

APPEARANCES:

Ms. A. Paquin: Counsel for the Crown

Ms. B. Rattan: Counsel for the Defence

Charges under s. 267(b), 267(a) & 252(1) Criminal Code

| 1 | THE | COURT: Mr. Modeste faces three |
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| 2 | | charges in this trial, all arising from the |
| 3 | | same incident that happened on March 26, 2010, |
| 4 | | almost two years ago now. These charges are |
| 5 | | one count of assault causing bodily harm; one |
| 6 | | count of assault with a weapon, the weapon being |
| 7 | | a snowmobile; and one count for failing to remain |
| 8 | | at the scene of an accident for the purpose |
| 9 | | of escaping civil or criminal liability. The |
| 10 | | victim in the two assault charges is Frank Elemie |
| 11 | | Junior, who is Mr. Modeste's cousin. The two of |
| 12 | | them have known each other all of their lives. |
| 13 | | The witnesses called by the Crown at trial |
| 14 | | included Mr. Elemie Junior, Mr. Walter Modeste, |
| 15 | | and a police officer, Corporal Sheldon Robb. |
| 16 | | Certain matters were the subject of admissions |
| 17 | | recorded in an Agreed Statement of Facts |
| 18 | | that was marked as Exhibit 1 at the trial. |
| 19 | | In addition, a map showing portions of the |
| 20 | | community of Deline was entered as Exhibit |
| 21 | | 2, and during his testimony Mr. Elemie Junior |
| 22 | | made certain notations on it to illustrate |
| 23 | | and explain certain portions of his evidence. |
| 24 | | Other witnesses referred to the map as well |
| 25 | | in explaining where different things happened |
| 26 | | during the course of this incident. |
| 27 | | There was also a book of photographs |

that was filed as an exhibit. It shows four photos of Mr. Modeste's snowmobile, taken by the police officer. The officer also explained the damage that he saw on the snowmobile when he investigated this. There were two photographs of the area where the collision happened and two photographs showing Mr. Elemie Junior's injuries.

That was the evidence presented by the Crown at the trial, and Mr. Modeste, as was his right to do so, chose not to present any evidence.

There are certain matters that are not in issue. It does not appear to be disputed that on the day in question, during the early evening, Mr. Modeste and Mr. Elemie Junior were both at the residence of Walter Modeste. There they had socialized and consumed some vodka. According to Mr. Elemie Junior there were other people there. According to Walter Modeste it was just the three of them in the house at that point. But it is of no consequence whether somebody else was there with them or not.

The mood was fine and friendly for a period of time, but at one point an argument broke out between Mr. Jonas Modeste, the accused, and Mr. Elemie Junior. That argument had to do with certain things that had been said between them in the past. Mr. Elemie Junior admitted

in his evidence that he punched Mr. Modeste in the face because he was upset.

Shortly thereafter Mr. Elemie Junior was asked to leave by Walter Modeste and he did, and he started walking home. He showed the Court on Exhibit 2, and also marked with a red dotted line, the path that he took to make his way home. The collision where he was injured and which forms the subject matter of these charges happened a relatively short time after he left Walter Modeste's residence, under ten minutes. By that point Mr. Elemie Junior had almost reached his house. He also marked on Exhibit 2 the location where the collision took place; he marked that with a red X.

As a result of the collision Mr. Elemie

Junior suffered a number of injuries, including
an abrasion and hematoma on his forehead, and
more significantly a broken tibia on his right
leg. After the collision Mr. Modeste did not
remain at the scene. Mr. Elemie Junior ended
up being assisted by someone who drove by a
short time later in a truck, and he took him
to the Health Centre.

I will first address Count 3 because it is far less contentious than the other two counts. Yesterday defence counsel acknowledged that the

evidence before the Court is to the effect that Mr. Modeste did not remain at the scene after the collision, and that on a proper interpretation of Section 252 of the Criminal Code this charge has been proven.

The Crown did file a number of authorities dealing with the interpretation of this provision, which has evidently given rise to a fair bit of case law and litigation over the years. I found those cases very helpful and I thank counsel for them. Some of the litigation about this section has been on the issue of how the term "accident" should be defined. For example, whether it requires that injuries or damages be caused, and also, whether an incident caused by the deliberate actions of the accused person should be considered as fitting within the definition of accident.

I must admit that at first blush, because the term "accident" is not defined in the Criminal Code, I might have been inclined to think that within its ordinary meaning it does not include something that arises from the deliberate act of a person, because to me at first blush that is inconsistent with the notion of an accident, as it is normally understood.

| 1 | That is the conclusion that was reached |
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| 2 | by the Supreme Court of Newfoundland in the |
| 3 | case of R. v. O'Brien [1987] N.J. No. 406, |
| 4 | which was one of the authorities given to me |
| 5 | by the Crown. But there are problems with |
| 6 | that interpretation, and those problems have |
| 7 | been underscored by Appellate Courts from other |
| 8 | jurisdictions who have concluded that even in |
| 9 | situations involving the deliberate action on |
| 10 | the part of the accused the provision applies. |
| 11 | The British Columbia Court of Appeal |
| 12 | reached this conclusion in 1988 in the case |
| 13 | of R. v. Hansen [1988] B.C.J. No. 2600, and |
| 14 | that interpretation was implicitly adopted |
| 15 | again by that same Court many years later, |
| 16 | in 2006, in R. v. Chase [2005] B.C.J. No. |
| 17 | 1660, [2006] B.C.J. No. 1252. The Quebec |
| 18 | Court of Appeal reached the same conclusion |
| 19 | in R. v. Riseberg [1987] J.Q. No. 48, and |
| 20 | although the point was not specifically |
| 21 | argued, it appears a similar interpretation |
| 22 | was implicitly accepted by the Nova Scotia |
| 23 | Court of Appeal in R. v. Chisholm [1998] |
| 24 | N.S.J. No. 274. |
| 25 | So having reviewed these cases, and with |
| 26 | the benefit of both counsel's submissions |

27 yesterday, I have come to the conclusion that

when considering the scope of Section 252 and its purpose, the positions adopted in British Columbia, Quebec and Nova Scotia by the Appellate Courts in those provinces is a preferable one, and that whether the collision that happened in March, 2010 was the result of a deliberate act on Mr. Modeste's part or not, Section 252 applies in this situation.

The evidence establishes the other elements of this offence clearly. Mr. Modeste was in the care and control of a motor vehicle. After the accident, although he stopped briefly, he did not remain at the scene. That being so, the presumption set out in paragraph (2) of the provision is available to the Crown to establish his intent to escape civil or criminal liability. I conclude there is nothing arising on the evidence that rebuts that presumption or raises a reasonable doubt about Mr. Modeste's intent.

That being the case, and as his counsel very reasonably conceded yesterday, he must be found guilty of Count 3, and I so find.

With respect to Counts 1 and 2, the Crown's position is that I should accept the evidence of Mr. Elemie Junior in its entirety, and that on that evidence both charges have been proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Defence counsel

argues to the contrary, that I should have a reasonable doubt on the issue of Mr. Modeste's intent. Defence argues that there is no evidence showing Mr. Modeste intended to hit Mr. Elemie Junior with his snowmobile. Defence counsel urges me to approach Mr. Elemie Junior's evidence as to what happened in those key moments with a lot of caution because Mr. Elemie Junior's perception of events was clouded by his consumption of alcohol.

Defence also argues that Mr. Elemie Junior had other options available to him as the snowmobile was approaching. Mr. Elemie Junior acknowledged that he took a few steps towards the snowmobile and put his foot on the hood of the snowmobile. At that point his intention was to try to jump over the snowmobile. In essence, the defence is arguing that the injuries that he suffered as a result of the collision were not caused primarily by anything deliberate Mr. Modeste did, but rather by Mr. Elemie Junior's choice to jump over the snowmobile, or try to.

In a criminal case the Crown, of course, bears the onus to prove each and every element of the offence beyond a reasonable doubt. If the evidence or lack of evidence gives rise to

a reasonable doubt about either Mr. Modeste's intent or the question of causation Mr. Modeste is entitled to the benefit of that doubt. That rule requiring proof beyond a reasonable doubt applies to the assessment of credibility and reliability of witnesses. In other words, if there is a reasonable doubt that arises about Mr. Modeste's guilt based on credibility or reliability of witnesses he is entitled to the benefit of that doubt.

I found Mr. Elemie Junior to be a very forthright witness. He testified in a clear manner. He was not inconsistent about any of the significant details about what happened, and he was not shaken at all on cross-examination on those important details. He readily admitted things that did not put him in the best of light. He admitted that he was the one who brought up things from the past and caused the argument at Walter Modeste's house. He admitted that he threw the first punch at Mr. Modeste.

He took responsibility essentially for the whole incident. Several times he said he felt bad because he felt this was all his fault, and although he was mad when he was first taken to the nursing station shortly after being struck, very soon after the police officer attended

the nursing station to speak to him, and after Mr. Elemie Junior had given him some information about what happened, Mr. Elemie Junior actually wanted to withdraw his complaint. He refused to give a statement at that time. It was only after he came back from the hospital in Yellowknife, where he was treated for his injuries, and after the police officer told him that Mr. Modeste had come into the station and admitted what had happened, that Mr. Elemie Junior agreed to give a formal statement to the police.

During his evidence he made a point of saying more than once that Mr. Modeste is a "good guy," and even at the end of his evidence, when all of the questions were finished and he was about to leave the courtroom, Mr. Elemie Junior asked if he could say something, and when I permitted him to do so, again he reiterated that Mr. Modeste is a "really good guy."

So from all of this it is very clear that

Mr. Elemie Junior does not have an axe to grind

against Mr. Modeste. He is not trying to get

Mr. Modeste in trouble. He testified at the

trial, he said, because he had no choice, which

is true. He was under subpoena by the Crown and

he took an oath to tell the truth, so he had no

choice. I infer from everything that he said

that if it had been left up to him this matter would not have been pursued in the criminal courts, and while this does not automatically mean that his evidence should be accepted, it certainly gives credence to his credibility in the sense that it is very clear to me that he is not out to get Mr. Modeste, he is not out for revenge, and he feels bad about everything that happened and about these proceedings taking place.

All that being said, as far as his description of what happened, Mr. Elemie Junior did not at all back down from his description. There is an area of inconsistency in his evidence, and it has to do with how he assessed his own state of intoxication as a result of consuming vodka at Walter Modeste's house. In his examination-in-chief he placed himself at a one on that scale of one to ten that counsel often use with witnesses to get them to describe their level of intoxication, with zero representing complete sobriety and ten representing being heavily intoxicated, close to passing out. Mr. Elemie Junior put himself at a one on this scale in his examination-in-chief.

In cross-examination he was reminded or asked if he remembered saying to the police

that he was at a three on that scale, and he

answered that he may have said that to the

police, but he still remembered what happened.

Corporal Robb, using the same scale, placed

Mr. Elemie Junior at a five, so slightly higher.

Corporal Robb testified he has had a lot of

experience dealing with people and dealing

with intoxicated people.

The signs of impairment or observations that he based his assessment of Mr. Elemie Junior's intoxication were that he had some slurring in his speech, a smell of alcohol on his breath, and glassy eyes. He also said that he had seen Mr. Elemie Junior many times around the community of Deline, which is not a large community. He had seen him in a normal sober condition, and Mr. Elemie Junior was different when he saw him that day at the nursing station.

Of course, one factor to consider is the fact that Mr. Elemie Junior appeared different to Corporal Robb that day may have been in part because of what had just happened to him, which was far from normal. In addition, while the use of the scale of one to ten can be useful up to a point in allowing the witness to express or explain their view of a person's level of

1 intoxication, it is far from precise.

there are some inconsistencies on that issue,

I do not find that they lead me to conclude

that Mr. Elemie Junior was so intoxicated that

his account of events should be rejected or

discounted, or that there should be a doubt

about whether he remembers things correctly.

When I consider the evidence as a whole, I

conclude that Mr. Elemie Junior's consumption

of alcohol that day, and the passage of time,

may have made certain details unclear about

the events, but as far as the key aspects of

the events I find his recollection reliable.

That is even more so because his evidence is in many respects corroborated by other evidence. His description of hitting the hood and the front of the snowmobile is consistent with the damage that was observed to the vehicle by Corporal Robb. His description of falling on his forehead is corroborated by the injury he suffered to his forehead. His account of punching Mr. Modeste in the face is corroborated by the fact that Corporal Robb saw Mr. Modeste a few days later and he had a black eye. His recollection of being asked to leave the house by Walter Modeste is corroborated by Walter Modeste's testimony.

His evidence about how much time he had been walking before Mr. Modeste caught up with him on his snowmobile is also consistent with how much time Walter Modeste says Mr. Jonas Modeste remained in his house after Mr. Elemie Junior had left, before Jonas Modeste also left.

I accept Mr. Elemie Junior's account of events. So the facts as he described them are what must be analyzed to decide whether these charges have been proven beyond a reasonable doubt by the Crown.

Mr. Elemie Junior's evidence about what happened on the road, or the most significant parts of it, were that he was walking up the road, he was getting fairly close to his house and near an intersection, and he heard the noise of a snowmobile behind him. At first he thought nothing of it because a snowmobile on the streets of Deline is not an unusual thing. Then he heard the noise of that snowmobile change as though it was going faster. That caught his attention and he turned around to look. That is when he saw Mr. Modeste on his snowmobile 300 or 400 feet away, coming up behind him. Mr. Elemie Junior showed on photograph number 5 where Mr. Modeste's snowmobile was. The snowmobile, he says, was on the right side of the road - this is when you

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are looking at the photos - and that Mr. Elemie

Junior himself was on the left side of the road,

again looking at the photograph.

Mr. Elemie Junior described the road as being wide enough for two vehicles to pass.

This was confirmed by Corporal Robb, and the photo also shows this to some extent.

Mr. Elemie Junior says Mr. Modeste was looking at him. Mr. Elemie Junior did not move at first because he said he did not think that Mr. Modeste was actually going to try to run him over. Mr. Elemie Junior thought he was just trying to scare him.

Mr. Elemie Junior said the snowmobile was going fast, he said 60 to 65 miles an hour, which would mean over a hundred kilometers an hour. I find as a fact that the speed was likely lower than what Mr. Elemie Junior's perception was, in part because I accept defence counsel's submissions that had the snowmobile been travelling at over a hundred kilometers an hour it could be expected that the consequences would have been much more serious to Mr. Elemie Junior. But I do accept that the snowmobile was travelling at a fast speed.

Mr. Elemie Junior then realized he was going to get hit if he did not do something.

He explained why he tried to jump over the snowmobile. He explained that if he had tried to get off the road he would have been in deep snow, he could have been stuck, and could then possibly have been run over because he would have had no way to get away, and he explained that if he tried to run in the other direction, run on the road, which was quite slippery, he was worried that he might fall, and again could be run over.

So in that split-second moment he decided that his only course of action, or the best one, was to try to jump over the snowmobile. So he took a few steps and put his foot on the hood of the machine as it was coming towards him. He says the speed at which he connected with the snowmobile caused him to flip a few times in the air, and then he landed on the ground on his forehead. He did admit in cross-examination that trying to jump over the snowmobile was his decision, but he also said that he did not want to run the risk of being run over, which he thought could happen if he tried to get away some other way. He said he did not want to get run over and end up paralyzed.

So that is the factual basis upon which I must examine whether the charges are proven.

The Crown argues that because of the way the term "assault" is defined in the Criminal Code the charges are made out if the Crown has proven that Mr. Modeste intended to actually collide with Mr. Elemie Junior, or if the Crown has proven that Mr. Modeste intended to threaten to apply force to him by driving in his direction because assault, of course, is defined as the application of force, but also the threat to apply force. I agree with that submission from the Crown.

On the issue of intent, which is one of the two points on which defence says this case should fail, the Crown does not have any direct evidence. That is not unusual. The Crown cannot adduce direct evidence of what is going on in an accused person's mind at the time of the event. The Crown must rely on two things: The notion that people generally intend the natural consequences of their actions, and also circumstantial evidence that may shed light about Mr. Modeste's state of mind and what his actions were aimed at doing.

In the evidence the following elements of circumstantial evidence are present, and in my view are relevant, in establishing what Mr. Modeste's intent was: The first is the

approaching Mr. Elemie Junior. The second is the absence of any evidence that he tried to slow down to stop or to avoid the collision at any time. The third is the conditions that were present at the time, namely a wide road, good lighting conditions, no other pedestrians, vehicles, dogs, or any obstacle that could have impeded Mr. Modeste in driving a snowmobile to explain why he continued driving in Mr. Elemie Junior's direction. The fourth is the altercation that took place at Walter Modeste's house a short time before this.

While Walter Modeste's evidence was vague
in some respects, and I must say left me with
the impression that he may not have been entirely
forthcoming about his recollection of what
happened at his house, he did say that after
Mr. Elemie Junior left at his request Mr. Jonas
Modeste wanted to leave too, and Walter Modeste
was sufficiently concerned about what might
happen if both went out at the same time that
he tried to keep Mr. Modeste in his house longer.
He kept him there by talking to him. It is clear
that he did not want him to leave right away, and
I find that that is quite telling.

27 Whatever Walter Modeste saw and heard in

his house of the argument and the altercation, and whether he told the Court the full details of what he saw or not or whether he remembers those details or not, what is clear is that he was really concerned about the altercation between these two men continuing. He did testify that Mr. Modeste seemed okay, but I find that Walter Modeste's actions speak clearly. In trying to keep Mr. Modeste with him inside the house and not let him leave right behind Mr. Elemie Junior, what that tells me is that Mr. Walter Modeste was quite concerned about Jonas Modeste's state of mind.

The next factor is Mr. Modeste's conduct after the collision. This is something that must be approached with caution, because a person could panic after an event like this, even if it was purely accidental, and have all sorts of reactions. So it does not necessarily show a guilty state of mind, but it is a piece of circumstantial evidence, among others, and the fact that Mr. Modeste did not stop at the scene for very long, did not remain at the scene, did not go to the police for a number of days after the fact even though the police had actually towed his snowmobile away.

27 So I conclude that there is a strong

that Mr. Modeste was upset at Mr. Elemie Junior and that he intended to drive his snowmobile at a fast rate of speed in his direction, either to actually run him over or to threaten him and give him a very good scare. I do not see how, under the lighting and road conditions that prevailed at the time, the trajectory of his snowmobile as described by Mr. Elemie Junior can be explained in any other way than through deliberate action, particularly in the absence of any other evidence.

In my view, it is quite significant that when Mr. Elemie Junior first turned around to look behind him Mr. Modeste was not on the same side of the road as he was. Mr. Modeste had to change the course, the direction of his snowmobile. He had to change sides of road in order to come at Mr. Elemie Junior. I find no basis to conclude or have a reasonable doubt that this was just a coincidence in all the circumstances. I find that this was a deliberate act.

The Crown does not have to prove that

Mr. Modeste meant to cause bodily harm of this

kind or any other kind to Mr. Elemie Junior.

What the Crown has to prove is that a reasonable

person in the circumstances would inevitably realize that his actions, the force applied or threatened to be applied, would put Mr. Elemie Junior at risk of suffering some kind of bodily harm, although not necessarily serious bodily harm or the precise kind of harm that Mr. Elemie Junior suffered here. In simple terms, the Crown does not have to prove that Mr. Modeste intended to break Mr. Elemie Junior's leg, but the Crown has to prove that a reasonable person, in his circumstances, would realize the risk involved in the actions that he was taking. I conclude that a reasonable person in these circumstances would inevitably realize that driving a snowmobile at a fast speed, directly at a person walking on the road, did put the person at such risk of suffering some kind of bodily harm. As I have already mentioned, another argument raised by defence is that it was Mr. Elemie Junior's decision to try to jump

As I have already mentioned, another argument raised by defence is that it was Mr. Elemie Junior's decision to try to jump over the snowmobile that is the cause for the injuries he suffered. But having considered that argument, I conclude that Mr. Elemie Junior's decision cannot be separated from the situation that he found himself in as a result of Mr. Modeste's actions, which I have

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On the issue of causation, the question to be asked is whether Mr. Modeste's conduct contributed significantly to the bodily harm suffered by Mr. Elemie Junior. In my view, that test is clearly met from the evidence in this case. I find that Mr. Modeste's actions were in fact the main contributing factor; they created this whole situation. From Mr. Elemie Junior's point of view, as he explained, he was in a very difficult position and one he had to react to very quickly. It may be that if he had been in a completely sober state he would have done something else or made a different choice, but sober or not sober, he explained why he decided against the other courses of action that were available to him.

It is important to remember, and I accept this and find this as a fact, at that point Mr. Elemie Junior no longer thought that Mr. Modeste was just trying to scare him. At that point Mr. Elemie Junior thought Mr. Modeste was going to run him over. So he did not want to put himself in a more vulnerable position by getting stuck in the deep snow on the side of the road, and he did not want to risk falling on the

| 1 | slippery road and being an easier target. |
|----|---|
| 2 | So he decided to try to jump. In hindsight, |
| 3 | looking at all of this very calmly now, it |
| 4 | may well be that his attempt to jump over |
| 5 | a snowmobile in motion does not seem like |
| 6 | a very good idea, but he would have never |
| 7 | been in the situation of having to choose |
| 8 | between these unappealing options had it |
| 9 | not been for Mr. Modeste's actions. |
| 10 | So for these reasons, and based on my |
| 11 | acceptance of Mr. Elemie Junior's account |
| 12 | of what happened that day, I have come to |
| 13 | the conclusion that the Crown has proven |
| 14 | its case beyond a reasonable doubt on both |
| 15 | Counts 1 and 2, as well as Count 3 for |
| 16 | the reasons that I have already given. |
| 17 | So convictions will be entered on these |
| 18 | three counts. |
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| 21 | Certified to be a true and |
| 22 | accurate transcript, pursuant to Rules 723 and 724 of the |
| 23 | Supreme Court Rules. |
| 24 | |
| 25 | Joel Bowker |
| 26 | Court Reporter |
| 27 | |