R. v. Ekpakohak, 2014 NWTSC 32 S-1-CR-2013-000087

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES IN THE MATTER OF:

HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN

- v -

## ADAM JAMES EKPAKOHAK

Transcript of the Reasons for Sentence delivered by the Honourable Justice L. A. Charbonneau, in Yellowknife, in the Northwest Territories, on the 17th day of March, 2014

## APPEARANCES:

Ms. W. Miller: Counsel on behalf of the Crown

Mr. M. Martin: Counsel on behalf of the Accused

Charge under s. 140(1)(a) Criminal Code of Canada

THE COURT: Mr. Ekpakohak pleaded guilty
to a charge of public mischief contrary to

Paragraph 140(1)(a) of the Criminal Code, and I
must now decide what the sentence should be for
that offence.

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The Crown and defence have presented the Court with a joint submission as to what the sentence should be. Sentencing involves the exercise of considerable discretion on the part of the sentencing judge. That discretion is not absolute. It must always be exercised within the framework of sentencing principles that are set out in the Criminal Code. The discretion is narrowed when a joint submission is presented. Judges are required to give a joint submission very serious consideration, and they are required to follow joint submissions unless a judge comes to the conclusion that the joint submission is clearly out of the range of sentences for the type of offence. In other words, it should be followed unless it is clearly unreasonable.

I have considered the joint submission that was presented to me this morning and the reasons that were given to me for it. I have come to the conclusion that it is a reasonable suggestion under the circumstances, and I have decided to follow it.

I do want to put reasons on the record, though, as to why I have concluded that this is a fit sentence for this offence and taking into account Mr. Ekpakohak's personal circumstances, and I think it is important also that certain things be said about the type of offence that Mr. Ekpakohak has committed.

To put my decision in context, I will first go over briefly the facts that Mr. Ekpakohak has admitted. The Indictment charges that he caused the RCMP in Ulukhaktok to enter upon an investigation by falsely alleging that his then-spouse tried to murder him.

How that came to be was that Mr. Ekpakohak attended the nursing station in Ulukhaktok in the early morning hours of August 22nd, 2012. He had a large injury to his neck going from the front of his neck to the back, an injury that took 16 sutures to close. Fortunately, the cut was not deep; it only went as deep as the fat tissue along the neck. Had the wound been deeper, at least in the view of the nurse who treated him, it is the type of injury that could have killed him.

The photos that were filed this morning that show the injury demonstrate very clearly just how serious and large a cut this was. These are

1 frightening photographs to look at.

The police were called to the health centre, and Mr. Ekpakohak told them that he and his spouse had been out in a cabin outside the community approximately ten kilometres out of town, that they had been drinking alcohol, that at some point there was an argument, and that she got mad at him. He alleged that she started beating him up and that he defended himself, that the fight stopped, but the argument resumed sometime after and at that point he decided he would just go back to town. So he got on his quad getting ready to leave. He alleged that she jumped on him and knocked him off the vehicle and then took out a steak knife and slashed at his neck with it.

The same day as this accusation was made, the RCMP arrested his spouse on a charge of attempted murder. At that point the police had more than ample, reasonable grounds to believe that this offence had been committed. She was brought into custody, and she spent four days in custody until she was released on terms that included a requirement that she reside in Kugluktuk with her mother.

During the course of the investigation the RCMP took a statement from his spouse. She gave

a very different account of what took place at the cabin. She denied being responsible for Mr. Ekpakohak's injury. On her version of events there was a fight and there was an argument, but she was the one who ended up leaving the cabin on foot, and the last thing she heard Mr. Ekpakohak say as she was leaving was that he was going to kill himself.

The police continued to investigate and, to get further clarifications from Mr. Ekpakohak, spoke to him the next day on August 23rd. He was reluctant to speak them. Eventually he said he had a blackout and did not remember what happened. He also said on that date that it was not his spouse who had inflicted the injuries to his neck. The RCMP continued to investigate and tried to get more information from him, but he refused to cooperate and refused to discuss the matter further when they approached him sometime later.

Eventually on the 14th of November, the police spoke to Mr. Ekpakohak again, this time advising him he was being investigated for public mischief. He was cautioned and advised of his rights, and then he provided a warned statement where he confirmed that his spouse did not attack him with a knife but that, in fact, he had

inflicted the injury upon himself because he was
angry and disappointed about how the evening with
her had turned out.

About a week later the Crown stayed the proceedings against Mr. Ekpakohak's spouse.

Counsel have advised that she now lives in Inuvik and that the spousal relationship between she and Mr. Ekpakohak is over. I also heard that she was advised of her right to provide a victim impact statement, but there is none on the file. I have to assume that she chose not to prepare one.

Mr. Ekpakohak's counsel told me about
Mr. Ekpakohak's personal circumstances this
morning. I do not propose to repeat everything
that was said, but I do want to refer to some of
the things I was told.

I heard that he grew up in an environment where his parents, who are both residential school survivors who suffered abuse when they were at Grolier Hall, drank to excess.

I heard he had an older brother that he respected and admired a lot who looked after him during those years and that he was very close to this brother. Tragically, this brother committed suicide when Mr. Ekpakohak was a teenager and it has affected him deeply, and it continues to affect him. I was able to observe that myself,

as it was fairly obvious even this morning as his counsel was talking about this topic during his submissions.

I also heard that Mr. Ekpakohak has been able to be gainfully employed at various times doing various jobs. He has worked as a labourer, as a gas service person, he has done some work in carpentry, and in addition to that he is a carver. So he is someone who can work and he definitely has some skills.

I heard as well that he started using alcohol and drugs when he was 17 and that he recognizes that this is something that contributes to him getting into trouble with the law. That is very obvious from his criminal record which is a lengthy record and includes a variety of convictions for all sorts of different offences between 2004 and 2013. There are driving offences, property offences, drug offences. There are assaults, and there are breaches of various court orders. It is clear that Mr. Ekpakohak has been regularly in trouble with the law although he has never been sentenced to very long jail terms.

The types of losses and tragedies and difficulties that Mr. Ekpakohak faced growing up are, sadly, not uncommon in small communities in

this jurisdiction. There is very little doubt that those circumstances contributed to

Mr. Ekpakohak coming to abuse alcohol and have contributed to some of the struggles he has had living a crime-free life. I have taken those circumstances into account in deciding that the proposed sentence is a fit one under the circumstances.

But I have to add, and I am sure I am not the first person to say this, Mr. Ekpakohak must realize that as much as this Court and others can have compassion for the circumstances that he faced as a child and as a young adult, nothing can be done to change the past. But he does have control over how he will behave from this point on.

He has young children, and it is up to him if he wants them to have a father who abuses alcohol and is in and out of jail and is not there for them or whether they will have a father who will be positive and a strong figure in their eyes.

It sounds as though maybe Mr. Ekpakohak did not have that when he was child, and it is up to him to decide whether his children will be in the same position he was or whether he will make the change happen for them, and the Court really

1 hopes that he will do so.

The last sentence that Mr. Ekpakohak received according to the information that I have been given was in October 2013, and he received a global sentence of eight months' imprisonment at the time. I heard that his release date would have been February 28th, 2014, so the time he has spent in custody since then has been by consent on this charge.

I have talked about the offence and I have talked about the circumstances of Mr. Ekpakohak, but now I want to speak more generally about this type of offence.

Public mischief can cover a wide range of conduct which, in turn, can have a wide range of consequences. When it involves falsely accusing someone of a serious offence such as in this case, that can be very serious. The offence in this case falls at the high end of seriousness of what this type of charge can relate to. Falsely accusing someone of attempted murder is a serious matter.

As the Crown noted, some resources were expended to investigate this matter thoroughly, as all serious charges should be. While they were busy doing that the two police officers stationed in Ulukhaktok, which is a very isolated

community, were not able to deal with other investigations and attend to other matters that needed their attention. Police officers are busy enough as it is investigating the offences that have actually been committed. It is a terrible waste of their resources to have to investigate something that did not happen.

Even more significantly, Mr. Ekpakohak's actions resulted in an innocent person being charged in her community of a horrendous offence. The impact of that, especially in a small community like Ulukhaktok, with which the Court is familiar, is huge. I have no doubt that news of the type of injury that Mr. Ekpakohak suffered must have travelled very quickly in the community of Ulukhaktok that morning. And because he was seriously injured and there was no question about that, it may well be that many people thought that his spouse was, in fact, guilty of this terrible crime. People may well have found it quite unbelievable that there would be any other explanation for his serious injury. In fact, the truth in this case, the fact that he inflicted this injury upon himself, is incredible. By many standards it would be considered an unbelievable story. So I have no doubt that in the community from the time that this matter was reported and

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in the following days, there may well have been a lot of people who thought that this particular woman, Mr. Ekpakohak's spouse, had actually tried to slice his throat.

Beyond that effect, she spent four days in custody in the cells of the small detachment, and then she was released on terms that required her to leave the community where she lived for many years. Fortunately, the prosecution against her did come to an end before it had time to move along too far in the process, but the charge was still pending for a number of months. And really, until today, until the day where

Mr. Ekpakohak actually pleaded guilty to this charge and admitted publicly that he lied about what she had done, there may well have remained some lingering doubts about whether she had actually hurt him or not.

Domestic violence is a very prevalent crime in this jurisdiction. Many complaints are made, and many charges are laid in conjunction with this type of offence involving violence between spouses. And violence between spouses is a very serious social problem. The authorities are expected to take those types of complaints very seriously. Any time the system is abused in the way that it was in this case, when a person

knowingly makes a false complaint whether it is

out of spite, revenge, desperation, or whatever

drove Mr. Ekpakohak's actions that day, it

compromises the whole system. It trivializes the

cases of real spousal violence and the

devastating consequences that they have.

Not so long ago the Territorial Court had occasion to comment on this, dealing with someone who had made a false complaint to police in a different context but had followed through with an application for an Emergency Protection Order. It was later found and established that it was a false complaint. This was the case of R. v. Simmonds [2011] N.W.T.R. No. 8. At paragraph 23 of that decision, the Territorial Court said:

"I will start from the premise that family violence is a notorious problem in our jurisdiction, as it may well be throughout the country. We as a community struggle to deal with the many pervasive, long-lasting, harmful effects of family violence. Resources are scarce and the problem is many-facetted and it is complex. Protection Against Family Violence Act is but one attempt or one tool to try to address the problem and to assist the victims. The legislation is preventive as opposed to reactionary, which the criminal law is. The legislation was enacted to give applicants another tool besides the criminal law to address family violence. Ms. Simmonds abused this legislation. She abused the system for her own end, and, by that, she has harmed the administration of justice, she has tarnished a route provided by the legislation that has laudable goals. She has brought unwarranted criticism to the legislation which might have, still may have, the result of making that legislation less effective for those who truly do

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need protection. And if for no other reason, in a jurisdiction where family violence sometimes seems an insurmountable problem with too few resources for the victims of it and it sometimes seems even fewer solutions to deal with it, for that reason Ms. Simmonds' actions have to be denounced."

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These comments were made in the specific context of the misuse of the Protection Against Family Violence Act, which is legislation that allows people to seek the protection of the Court without necessarily making a criminal complaint. But those comments are equally applicable to people who misuse police resources and other resources by making a false accusation of domestic violence. That type of abuse raises similar concerns and justifies a denunciatory sentence and one that will hopefully achieve deterrence.

The seriousness of making false accusations was also underscored by this Court in

R. v. Fraser, 2007 NWTSC 13. In that case the accused had falsely accused police officers of having sexually assaulted his girlfriend while she was in custody after having been arrested on a drug charge. At paragraph 6 of that decision the Court said:

"Although the Criminal Code terms this offence "public mischief", that is really a misnomer, because the word "mischief" in the English language has the connotation of something minor, or wrongdoing that is merely annoying or irritating. It may be that some crimes of public

mischief are minor, but this one is not. It is a serious offence against the administration of justice. As stated by the Alberta Court in the Ambrose case, the sting of this kind of crime is not so much causing the police to waste their time and resources, but, rather, the real harm done is the danger that innocent persons might be prosecuted and lose their reputations, their jobs, their livelihoods."

The facts in Fraser were obviously quite different from what they are here, but the point remains the same about just how serious it is to falsely accuse someone of committing a serious crime.

In Fraser the Court was sentencing the accused for the public mischief charge as well as for a drug offence, but in giving his reasons for sentence the sentencing judge said that if he was sentencing the accused only for the public mischief charge, he would have given him 18 months' imprisonment. At the same time there is no question that the range of sentences imposed for this serious type of offence can be quite broad. In Simmonds, which I referred to earlier, the ultimate sentence was a conditional sentence of three months' imprisonment.

In other cases the Court has refrained from imposing jail at all; for example, in

R. v. Tesar [1991] N.W.T.R. No. 159, the

Territorial Court judge who was sentencing someone for causing another person to be arrested

improperly said that ordinarily, jail should be imposed for this type of crime, but in that case the Court did not. And similarly in the case that was filed by counsel here, R. v. Lapoleon, 2008, B.C. PC 80, in the cases cited in that decision all show that there is a broad range of sentences which can be imposed for this type of crime.

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It is mitigating that Mr. Ekpakohak has pleaded guilty. I would not consider this a plea at an early opportunity considering that the matter did get to the point of being set for trial. At the same time, I recognize that as a result of his waiver of the preliminary hearing, the complainant never had to testify on this matter. That makes a big, big difference as far as a mitigating effect on the guilty plea. I also accept that because this trial was set to proceed in Yellowknife there were considerable resources that were saved as a result of a guilty plea. Finally, when he was given a chance to speak directly to the Court this morning, Mr. Ekpakohak's words were words of apology to his spouse, to the police, and to his community; and I accept that it was a sincere apology, and I accept that he is truly remorseful for what he has done.

It is deeply disturbing to think that

Mr. Ekpakohak, in a state of intoxication,

actually cut his own neck. It suggests a level

of despair that is hard to imagine. He has been

in and out of court for many years. Change is

needed, but he is the only one who can effect

that change.

Given the number of breaches on his criminal record, I would normally be quite reluctant to place him on probation because that sentencing tool has not been helpful to him in the past. It has actually led to more charges and more sentences and more jail for him. But given the unusual facts of this case and the fact that Mr. Ekpakohak will need help to deal with his issues, and also to give his former spouse some level of comfort that he cannot contact her whenever he wants, I have decided that probation is a useful thing to include as part of this sentence.

Public mischief is a secondary designated offence. The Crown has asked me to make a DNA order having regard to the seriousness of the offence and to Mr. Ekpakohak's record. Defence does not oppose that request, and I am satisfied that this is a proper case for making that type of an order.

So, Mr. Clerk, a DNA order will be issued.

I have discretion to waive the victim of

3 crime surcharge because these events occurred

4 before there was a change in the law that removes

5 the Court's discretion to waive the surcharge.

6 Given that Mr. Ekpakohak has been in jail for

7 some time and will be in jail for some time yet,

I will exercise my discretion and will not

9 require him to pay the surcharge.

I have heard from his counsel that

Mr. Ekpakohak's detention conditions have been

more difficult than might otherwise be the case,

that he has had problems with other inmates.

More specifically I have heard that there have

been two recent altercations, very recent

alterations where he was injured and that for his

own protection he is being held in segregation.

Defence counsel asks me to take this into account in two respects; first, in the calculation of how much credit Mr. Ekpakohak should receive for the time he has spent in remand; and secondly, in endorsing the warrant of committal with the recommendation that Mr. Ekpakohak be transferred to another facility. It is a little bit difficult for me to assess these arguments and how these incidents should impact on the credit that I give Mr. Ekpakohak

for remand time.

I certainly accept that these altercations 2 3 took place, but I know very little about the circumstances or the reasons why they occurred, whether there is any shared responsibility on Mr. Ekpakohak's part for some of these incidents. 6 I am not saying he is responsible for them. I am just saying that I do not know, and it is 9 difficult to gauge them with the information I 10 have. I do accept that whatever the cause, as a 11 result of these incidents he has been injured, and I do accept that whatever the cause, it has 12 13 resulted in him being held in segregation, and 14 that has prevented him from having access to some 15 of the things that inmates in the general 16 population have access to.

But at the same time I also heard that while he has been in custody, he has taken the opportunity to take counselling and take part in healing circles. I do not know how much of that took place before or after February 28th, but he has had access to some things while in custody.

So I am satisfied that some enhanced credit is appropriate, but I do not think it is appropriate for me to give him the maximum ratio as suggested by counsel. For the 17 days

Mr. Ekpakohak has spent in remand, I will give

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him credit for 21 days and reduce his sentence
accordingly.

As for the second request, the recommendation that he be transferred to another institution to alleviate some of the issues, again, I do not feel I have enough information to be comfortable making a specific recommendation.

I do not have all the information about various facilities and the types of programs that are available in those facilities and which ones might be more best suited to assist Mr. Ekpakohak for the rest of the time he will spend in custody.

I would note that according to what I heard, these altercations that occurred recently resulted in injuries to him; they were not minor incidents. I also take it from what counsel has said that the correctional authorities are in the process of reviewing his placement in light of these recent events, more specifically, the altercations of March 4th and March 7th. I will say this much: The Court is relieved to hear that these are being looked into and that the correctional authorities are considering how best to approach this as far as whether a different placement is appropriate. I think it is best to allow them to carry out their assessment, and I

will not make any recommendations about placement in the absence of clearer information about what has happened.

> Mr. Ekpakohak can you stand up, please. Mr. Ekpakohak, you heard what I said. I hope that you really are able to get the help that you need and not be in and out of jail for the next 10, 15 years while your kids are growing up. There are a lot of things you can do with your time other than drinking, and I really hope that when you are finished serving your sentence you will be able to go back to your community and use those skills in the right way and remember the terrible things that happened, including what you did to yourself that night, and just find a way to stay away from alcohol. It does not sound like it is something that has ever been good for you, and I just hope that this time will be the last time I see you in court.

For all those reasons I have been talking about, I am going along with the suggestion that the two lawyers made. For the crime of public mischief that you pleaded guilty to, I will sentence you to a term of eight months in jail as was suggested. I will give you credit for 21 days for the time you already spent in custody. So there will be a further jail term

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of seven months and one week.

In addition to that you will be on probation for one year. You heard what I said. You have breached many court orders before. Probation is not there to punish you; probation is there to give you a little bit of help, perhaps, after your release. So you can take counselling as directed and report to the probation officer so that they can help you.

I am also going to put conditions in there about contact with C., and that is for her protection, for both of your protection, because it appears that it is best for the two of you not to be together. The first term of probation is you are to report to a probation officer when and as directed and within 48 hours of returning to your community. 48 hours after your release, basically, you have to report.

The second term is that you will take counselling when and as directed. That is something that your probation officer and yourself can talk about, whether it can help you. If there is A.A. in Ulukhaktok, and there probably is, you probably should go, but I will leave the details to you and your probation officer to work out.

The third condition is you are to have no

- 1 contact with C.K. unless she initiates it. You
- 2 are not allowed to contact her. But I will put a
- 3 fourth term in recognizing that you have children
- 4 together, and that term will be if you have a
- 5 need to communicate with C.K. regarding the
- 6 children, then you have to contact her through a
- 7 third party.
- 8 THE ACCUSED: Okay.
- 9 THE COURT: The reason I am breaking it up
- 10 in two like that is that I do not want you
- 11 contacting her in general unless she initiates
- it, but if something comes up with the children,
- then you should be able to contact her because
- that is important, but again, not directly. You
- have to do it through a third party.
- 16 THE ACCUSED: Okay.
- 17 THE COURT: Do you understand all that?
- 18 THE ACCUSED: Yeah.
- 19 THE COURT: All right. You can sit down.
- There will be an order for the destruction
- of any exhibits I have received in this matter
- once the appeal period has expired.
- Ms. Miller, is there anything that I have
- 24 overlooked?
- 25 MS. MILLER: No. Thank you, Your Honour.
- 26 THE COURT: Mr. Martin, is there anything
- I have overlooked?

1	MR. MARTIN: No. Thank you, Your Honour.
2	THE COURT: Well, I want to thank you
3	both, counsel, for your submissions on this, and
4	I want to commend you for your work in resolving
5	this case.
6	We will close court.
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8	PROCEEDINGS ADJOURNED ACCORDINGLY
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1	CERTIFICATE OF TRANSCRIPT
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5	I, the undersigned, hereby certify that
6	the foregoing pages are a complete and accurate
7	transcript of the proceedings taken down by me in
8	shorthand and transcribed from my shorthand notes to
9	the best of my skill and ability.
10	Dated at the City of Edmonton, Province
11	of Alberta, this 17th day of March, 2014.
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17	Tiffany Low
18	Court Reporter
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