

Lindsay Poll

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LP: Currently I am a flight attendant cabin crew member for almost 21 years now. I'm married. I have five children. My parents live close by; they help us raise the children. I'm a flight attendant with WestJet and I'm now involved in the local CUPE and CUPE National. I'm with the National Indigenous Council.

Q: Tell us about your background.

LP: It's crazy, I guess. I guess I'm going to have to start with my parents. My mom's actually an immigrant from Nazi-occupied Holland. They fled World War II like many others and ended up coming to Canada to be safe, because they lost everything. They lost their house with bombings; they lost their heart. They lost a lot of their soul from that war. It was really difficult. My mom tells me some of the stories, and it's really hard to hear. So, they came to Canada.

My dad is from Lac Ste. Anne and the Michel First Nation. In 1958, the Michel First Nation had their land taken away through a referendum vote, and were promised land in exchange for becoming Canadian citizens. They never got that land. It was a very difficult referendum within the band on that specific reservation, because it was like 49 to 51. It broke apart families; it caused a lot of hurt. A lot of families ended up going to Lac Ste. Anne to the Métis settlement. We had family members go to Alexis, Alexander. We even have family members on Tsuut'ina near Calgary, on Morley, on all of them around. So we just kind of scattered after that happened.

My grandparents lived just near Lac Ste. Anne. From there it was tough. Then my grandparents moved south to Frank Slide, or the Crowsnest Pass, which is right near Frank Slide, where my dad went to school. They had a lot of racism and a lot of struggles. My *mosom* was a coalminer and was a member of the coalminers' association. They lived their life and had the house and raised seven children in total. My dad went off to school to become a teacher and my mom was a social worker. My dad's aunt introduced them, and the love began. My parents are funny. My dad is like an ultra-marathon runner and my mom was a long-distance runner. So their passion for running went really deep. It was great. My mom was a social worker and it was a really hard line of work. My dad tried to become a teacher and then we ended up moving around a bunch. We ended up in Calgary because my dad got a job at the Calgary Catholic Board. He had to get married. My mom did not want to get married, even though she had children.

Q: Why did they have to?

LP: Well, Calgary Catholic Board of Education - it's a requirement to be married. A male and a female must be married in the Calgary Catholic School system. My mom, being married previously, didn't want to be married, but she needed to get married to have my dad keep his job. So she gave in. But she refused to give up her last name. So she had a different last name

from my dad and I, which was fine. My mom is a strong feminist, has always fought for children's rights and women's rights. I think maybe that's where it comes from.

My *oma* was a kindergarten teacher on my mom's side, and my *kokum* on my dad's side was a cook in a hospital. She worked very hard. Both of my grandmas were very hard workers and tried to do the best for their families. Then my parents got married. They got introduced from my dad's aunt, who was my mom's boss. I probably shouldn't say that. But it's been 40 years; so I think it's okay now. But my mom's boss introduced them. So, when we moved to Calgary, I was five or six years old. It was really funny because my mom never wanted to get married. I kept saying, "well mom, are you my real mom?" Or to dad, "are you my real dad?" My mom refused to get married. So I was like, well if you're not married then are you my parents? I didn't understand where I fit in. But yes, so my mom gave in and got married. She wasn't super happy about it, but she did it anyway. I'm very proud of her. But she didn't change her name, didn't change anything. She wanted to start her own business. My mom is a very powerful woman. She went to many banks trying to get loans and trying to get all of this money to start her own business. They said, no, you're a woman. This was in the mid '80s. No, you can't have the money. You can start a business, but your husband needs to sign the paperwork. My mom was like, no that's not how this is gonna work. So, then she'd go to another bank and get told the same thing. Then she was like, no, I am my own individual and I don't need a man to sign for me. She did finally take my dad in to try to help with this loan, and she was refused the loan because my dad is an Indigenous man. She was not allowed to have a loan. So that made her really angry.

She ended up going to TD Bank, and they were the only ones that would – I believe it was TD Bank – the only one that would sign a loan over to her. It was at super high interest. She started her business. She ran a day home agency, the first of its kind. She was the manager of all the paperwork and placing kids in homes and doing checks, because she had a very extensive social work background. Her passion was child safety, because she saw a lot of really awful things in her line of work before. She would make sure kids were in safe homes; she would do that line of work. I remember my first job was licking envelopes to send out to all the day homes. I had to put postage stamps on everything and lick and stick everything and clean toys. My mom was super-innovative. She always had toy libraries and always found ways for multiple streams of income. My mom was the official first side hustler person out there I swear. She's way beyond her time.

My dad was working as a teacher. He worked with a lot of Indigenous kids. My parents were always huge on community. We ended up having my aunt and her son live with us, and then my dad's brother and his son. We all lived in a house. It was really nice; it was family all around. My dad, my mom, my uncle, all worked out of the house, and my aunt stayed in the home and took care of all the kids and raised us. My dad would load up the car with a bunch of kids from the 'rez' that he taught at the school, and he would bring them to the house. My aunt would feed everybody and we would play. My aunt and dad and everybody and mom would just fill their backpacks full of food, because there was a lot of poverty in the communities around Calgary.

So my parents would send people off with backpacks full of food, and feed them lunch and make sure the kids always had everything they needed. I don't think now you could do that; you'd probably get in trouble. Those boundaries are very important with teachers, but back in the '80s nobody really cared. They were just the Indian kids, and that's what I felt like a lot of the time. My dad was like, no, these kids are coming and getting fed. My parents would go to Costco and spend hundreds of dollars, and we would have pantries full of food just to share with everybody who came over and always make sure we had food for them. Taking care of the community was so important to them, to my parents.

Q: Was that school close to an Indigenous community?

LP: Yes, to the Tsuut'ina in Calgary, near Calgary. That was the Catholic School Board. My dad worked for Calgary Catholic. He bounced within schools. Then mom grew her business and we were, my siblings and I were athletes. My parents always put us in sports. We swam; we did whatever sports we wanted to do. My parents were really great about that. My mom worked long hard hours, and my dad cared for us. He drove us everywhere, cooked dinners, cleaned up. Because he was a teacher, he had very strict time that he worked. He was also a ref and he was very involved in school activities. He was the one that always picked us up after swimming or when I used to row. When I started wrestling, my dad was a wrestling ref. My dad did all those things while my mom worked long, long hours to provide for us financially. My mom was more the primary financial earner in our house.

Q: You lived the life of an Indigenous person living in a large city. It wouldn't be correct to say that you were totally assimilated into the mainstream society though, because you were living the kind of life you described?

LP: Yes, very much so. My *kokum*, my grandma, was actually quite devout in Catholicism through the community. She gave her life to Catholicism and was devout in those teachings, and raised that in my dad. But when I was really young, my dad really started to pull away from those teachings and really went deep into our First Nations Indigenous and Métis teachings to go back to the real root of who we were. I was raised very community-based in Indigenous communities and teachings because my dad refused to participate, or he didn't refuse, but he didn't want us raised Catholic. He wanted us raised really understanding both worlds and understanding how important it was of who we are to be Indigenous and be proud of it.

Q: Regarding both worlds, you've got the Catholic side; what is the other side?

LP: It's just your everyday spirituality: your connection to the land, your connection to water, the connection to all the animals of this land. The white colonial teaching is that we're the top of the pyramid; we are the owners of everything. But the teaching, that is the teaching of the land of our people, is that when Creator went to the animals, he said, "I'm going to bring this two-legged beast to the world, will you give your life and take care of this beast? This animal is going to be hairless and no fangs and no claws. It's going to be the lowest of all of the animal

kingdom. Will you give your life to care for this creature that I'm going to put on this earth?" All the animals agreed. They agreed to give their life to sustain us. That's why when we eat animals, we pray to the spirit of that animal and have gratitude, because that's our brother and sister animal who's given its life to keep us alive and keep the agreement between the Creator and the other animals. So, it's really quite the opposite of the colonial ideology that is taught out there.

Q: That really underlines your approach to the environment, doesn't it?

LP: Yes.

Q: Would you describe an environmentalist as one who believes we need to restore that balance with nature?

LP: Yes. When I was younger, I was a typical athlete. I pulled away from my community when I got older. It was tough, because I wasn't always accepted by the Indigenous community and wasn't accepted by the white community. I was too white to be Native but I was too Native to be white. It was just this really difficult road sometimes. I was always being questioned if my dad was really my dad. I remember going through customs once when I was really young and they were like, are you sure this is your dad? I'm like, yes, I'm pretty sure he's my dad. My brother had a different last name, my mom had a different last name, and my dad and I have the same last name. They're like, are you sure? It was just this constant questioning of who you belonged to, and always since I was little having to defend my relationship with my parents to be like, no that's my dad. Could you stop? Or authorities questioning, well is he? Are you safe, are you okay? It's like, yes, I'm safe; this is my dad. Having those questions as a child is just really tiresome and frustrating. I was a little bit upset at my mom for not changing her last name, but now as an activist and watching what women have done before me and what my mom did is just so powerful. I'm so proud of her for standing up and not doing those things.

Q: There seems to be a bit of a divide between First Nations and Métis peoples.

LP: There is. It's tough. It's a hard feeling to be in sometimes. I know I struggle with it and I often have conversations with Métis scholars. I have a cousin who's getting her PhD at the U of A in Indigenous Studies, and I'm very proud of her and the work that she's doing. We often have these conversations about Métis and how it happened and what it looks like. Was it love, or were our Indigenous women stolen and forced into these relationships? Were they taken advantage of? Where does it fit in? It's a very difficult, it can be very difficult to navigate those feelings and live in that. I do have some Métis from my family, and understanding how those families came together and came to be. I think it's a very powerful history. It's also a very divided, difficult history that I don't think can be answered. All we can do is understand that we have to stand together, because the government just wants to tear us down. They do that to us to pit us against each other, and we can't let them do that to us.

Q: First Nations peoples have some special rights. Are there any rights that pertain to being Métis?

LP: There is Métis status. The Métis Nation doesn't go on blood quantum, it's just the family lineage. It doesn't matter how much you have; it's can you show lineage. My family's last name is Loyer, which is a very deep métis name. But we're also Letanger; we also have the name Belcourt, Callahoo; the Callahoo Highway, the city of Callahoo. That's all my family's names. As long as you can show lineage to those, you have the ability to claim that heritage and that identity. There are things that come with it. The Métis Nation of Alberta just won on February 14th - now I'm worried I might get this wrong, because it is a newer signing. But it gives Métis in Alberta equal status to First Nations with their Métis status cards.

Q: Would that include rights to some traditional lands?

LP: As far as I know, yes. But I could be mistaken in some of it. I find Métis governance can get kind of confusing, and I struggle with it.

Q: Canada's Métis were defrauded of a lot of their scrip.

LP: Yes, and a lot of people don't know. We used to be called the ditch people or the road allowance people. We weren't allowed to live in the townsites and we weren't allowed to live on reservations. So we lived along the road allowance. The last road allowance community or the last ditch-people community was torn down in 2001. So, it was in the 21st Century; it wasn't a hundred years ago like people like to think.

Q: This is very informative, as many people aren't aware of the things you're talking about.

LP: And I find that so crazy.

Q: How was it that you became a flight attendant?

LP: The Creator has really taken care of me my entire life. I kind of ran away to play rugby in another country. So I spent right after high school quite a bit of time in Japan playing rugby and just being an irresponsible teenager, enjoying myself. Coming home, I was working at a dental office. I was dating my husband who's now my husband, dating my boyfriend at the time. I was just trying to figure life out, thinking maybe I'll go to college or maybe I'll, I don't know what I was going to do. I ended up with a really bad head injury from rugby, which kind of ended my career in athletics. I also have a learning disability. So school was just not my forté. It wasn't anything I was really good at. I carried a lot of shame in school being singled out, being called stupid, or being put with students with severe disabilities and not really being in English class or Social or any of those. So, I didn't get a lot of those beginning parts of education, because I was pulled out of class. I was deemed too stupid to be there. My parents fought really hard with schools to treat me better and to give me better opportunities.

My parents have always been activists and always fought for what was right. I think that's where I get it from - I'm sure that's where I get it from. So going playing rugby, then coming home, I was working at a dental office and didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I just was told by this guy at my husband's job, he was a bartender putting himself through school, he was a scientist; so he was getting his degree in Ecology. We were just trying to figure things out, because we were just young kids. This guy he worked with was like, well, I work at this crazy company called WestJet. I work in the call centre and this is what it's like. I was like, oh well maybe I'll try. So, I did a resume and got a call. Flight attendant was what I was going for. I got a phone call and I just so happened to go back to Japan with my husband for his graduation when he graduated his degree in Ecology. So, I got a call while I was in Japan to do an interview. I was like, I'm in another country right now. They were really lovely about it. I got home after a few weeks, called them back, had an interview. Back then you went and did a one-on-one interview, and it was like a three-hour interview. You had one-hour sessions with three different people, and I got the job. I was like, okay I guess this is what I'm going to do for a bit. I went into training, five weeks of training. Really learned that we are true safety professionals, we're not just people who serve drinks. If there's a fire on the plane, we're the ones that have to deal with it. If somebody's hurt, if somebody's even just sick, or if anybody needs anything, we are at the front line of that. If we see people having odd behaviour; human trafficking. I've been in a situation where I've stopped human trafficking. I have also brought light to elder abuse onboard the airplane. I've had situations where couples have been physical with each other, and having to pull them apart. There's been a lot in my career that has happened.

As the years went on, I just really liked what I did. I loved the flexibility, I loved all of those parts about it. I wanted to be a parent and so did my husband. We were newly married, a couple of years into this job. He was working for Parks Canada. Just kind of living my life but not so much in my traditional way - how I live now. I was just more trying to figure it out, trying to figure out what I wanted to do. Do I like my parents? Do I not like my parents? Do I want to do this job? Do I want to go to school? My husband and I, my parents helped us buy our first home. Then we started going down the road of starting a family, which was not easy for us. We did lots of fertility treatments and all of these options, and it just didn't work for us. When I was twenty-four, I just said, "Enough, I can't do this anymore; we have to go through the world of adoption;" which I was always drawn to anyways. It was fine. It was always something we were going to do; we were going to have one and adopt one. That wasn't the path that the Creator had chosen for us. We really delved into adoption, and learned some really awful things about international adoptions.

Q: Like what?

LP: Some of the really awful things are that, like say if you go to Eastern Europe, a lot of those kids have traumatic births. A lot of them have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. A lot of them have Attachment Disorder. They've never been touched; they've never been loved. They just kind of get thrown on the side of the road. Then you adopt these children. It costs thousands of

dollars. You bring them home and then there's no support for them when you bring them to Canada, because you've chosen to bring them here. In China, when it was the girls in orphanage crisis of like the '90s and 2000s, where baby girls were abandoned, it cost six figures to go and adopt a child from that country. There were rules where you had to be within a certain body mass index. You had to both have degrees. Now this, remember, was in 2005. I don't know what the rules are now, because I have many children and I'm not looking to adopt internationally.

But some of those things. Or, even in African countries we looked at. I learned, and this was the start of coming back to my culture, I learned that guerrilla organizations were paid by white people to go into villages and murder mothers and steal their children and put them up for adoption. I was mortified, when I found that out. It took me back to the beginning of colonization in this country, where white settlers came in and stole the children to adopt, sell, child trafficking, to white families. It stopped me in my tracks. As soon as I found that out, I was beside myself. I talked to my husband about it and I said, we need to adopt from here. Why are we doing this? What are we doing? It took a lot of conversation from both of us and a lot of going to my parents and his parents, and then started talking to elders and just learning more about our social system. Seventy-two percent of kids in care are First Nations; that's in Alberta. That's an Alberta number; 72 percent of kids in Alberta care have Indigenous blood running through their veins. The systemic racism that happens within our child protection system is just awful and heartbreaking. I was like, if we're going to bring children into our home, I want to bring children of my culture, of my community. What are we doing here? So we started going to Social Services and adoption sessions and meetings and learning. We started going through the process of adopting a social local adoption funded by the government, not a private social interaction or sorry, a private adoption agency.

We went through a social adoption agency through Social Services. We found out there was lots of support. There were supports for permanency, supports for the children with disabilities, just a lot more support. We knew the children that we would be bringing home would come from trauma. Whether they have a disability or not, their first separation is being taken from the first person who's supposed to love them the most, and that bond is broken. So, they automatically have that trauma on them. So we wanted to make sure that we could have the support to take care of these kids. We were asked if we would take a whole family. What did we want it to look like? That took a lot of praying and really going back to my teachings, and going to my parents and elders and saying, I need guidance. What do I do? It brought me back to sweat lodge, brought me back to praying and turning to Mother Earth, and turning to the wind and trees to tell me what I needed to do. I was so lost. Sorry, it's going to make me cry. I was just so lost. I didn't know where I belonged. I didn't know what my purpose was in life. I felt like I was just wandering the land lost. Going through this process of adoption forced me to go back to my teachings and my community and really healing that detachment I had made from my youth, and going back to the strength of my parents and my grandparents and my ancestors, and going back to the womb of Mother Earth through sweat lodge. That's what we call sweat lodge; a 'mother's womb.' Every time you go into the lodge and do your many rounds and your praying, when you come out it's like coming out new. The doorway of the sweat lodge is to the east,

which is the start of new. When you come out it's like being reborn, and you're back to your most pure state, when coming out of sweat lodge.

Q: Thank you for explaining that. It's the first explanation I've received.

LP: Oh, I could give you a whole teaching on sweat lodge.

Q: So, you found the answers by going back to your cultural heritage.

LP: Yes, and it was the best thing that I ever did. It was the best teaching I ever got from Mother Earth and my parents and everybody. It sent me on this trajectory that I'm on now. It took a long time. It wasn't always great. I had to do a lot of healing and a lot of asking for help, and being able to admit that I didn't know those stories, or didn't have those teachings, or I didn't listen to my dad when I was younger for those teachings. I was too caught up in my own selfishness of childhood to recognize the gift that my dad was trying to give me for so long, and my *kokum*, my grandma. We would go berry picking when I was little, and we would do medicine picking, and she would talk about medicines. Until I was older, I didn't realize the value of what I was given for so long. It wasn't until you're trying to get what you want and seek your own family, where you learn those things. I think, if I was just instantly given the ability to be pregnant and bear children, I don't think I would have maybe come back to my culture.

Q: Does this have anything at all to do with your involvement in the union? Why are you involved in the union? Or is that a completely different story?

LP: No, it's kind of similar. My dad actually ended up his career at the teachers' union. So my dad is a huge union activist and a huge union worker and supporter. I always carried that big activist union piece of me, because I do struggle with corporate ideology – money before people or people being statistics. That's what drew me to WestJet in the beginning is that we never had a first class; everybody was in the same seat. We played the toilet paper game. I remember we got in trouble from maintenance so many times, because we would have these big rolls of toilet paper. You'd put one on one side and one on the other; so you'd have the ABC side and the DEF side. You'd put the one end of the toilet paper in one toilet and the other end of the toilet paper in the back toilet, and you pushed the flush and saw which toilet paper roll ended faster, and then that side of the plane got off first. That was encouraged. It was fun to go to work. We told jokes on the airplane, like how many pilots does it take to screw in a lightbulb? None--they don't have a house; they're all divorced. Then pilots would come on the PA and make jokes. I'm trying to remember them. How many flight attendants does it take to screw in a lightbulb? It would just be this banter between the two, the front end and the back end. It was just this connection and care and love, and knowing that these folks have my back - they've got my back. There were some difficult moments dealing with racism in the workplace.

Q: Like what?

LP: It's tough being Indigenous. You have a lot of male white pilots who work up in the bush, and they have this idea of who we are and what we are and where we fit in. Sometimes they would make comments and I would have to straighten them up a little bit. But safety-wise on the airplane, I knew that we would be safe and we would have fun. If we put all those things aside, it was fun. You would have people on the airplane where this half won the toilet paper race and this half lost. That half of the airplane waited until all of this side of the plane got off, because they won. It was like this. It was just fun. It was carefree. Then we got larger and management changed and people's thought processes changed. People wanted different expectations. Now the workforce was growing up, because so many of us were in our late teens and early 20s and late 20s, and now we're all starting to have children. We're all in relationships; this is now looked upon as a career. We are taking our jobs seriously. Maybe not ourselves, because we're still having fun, but we take the safety of the airplane very seriously. We are looking at retirement: what does that look like? What does putting our kids through college look like? What does dental look like? I have five children that are all siblings who have disabilities that we've built our family through the adoption process, and they all need braces. They all need mental health care. They all need - what does their future look like? Some will have to live in supportive living because of the disabilities that they have. How can my children be supported? How can I be supported as a parent? What if my kid gets sick? What if I need a day off? What does that look like? What is your plan to keep me safe as a worker?

I started asking these questions and getting these questions and not getting an answer, and it was very frustrating. I would turn to my dad and ask him, because he worked for the teachers' union. I have friends at Air Canada and they would talk about their union. I was like, well why don't we have that? Why don't we have this type of teachings in our airline? There was a lot of head-butting between the employer and the employees with this, and it was a very tumultuous time. I think that the workforce is scary. It's scary to make this big change, this big shift from a small organization where you literally know everybody, to a medium-sized organization, to a large organization and not knowing anybody. That shift has been very hard for people. I think being part of a union brings that solidarity back and knowing that me personally - somebody's got my back with work.

Q: Have you been able to make any gains in that direction?

LP: With the union and the employer?

Q: Yes, in terms of the things you were talking about.

LP: Specifically, when it comes to indigeneity, a lot of these things are federally regulated, which is what airlines fall under. We don't actually fall under different provinces. So we're mostly attached to CUPE National. Some of those gains are the recognition of National Truth and Reconciliation Day, or what used to be known as 'Orange Shirt Day.' That's now put in place. We do have five cultural days that are - I believe they're unpaid cultural days. But specifically, in terms of traditional teachings, like powwow or food gathering, hunting, any type of traditional

ceremony, we can have up to five work days given or five days off given for those traditional moments. I am trying to seek and make change to have the wording of family changed, because family is not a colonial structure for us. It's not a man and a woman and 2.5 children and one set of grandparents each. I have ten grandmas, and if they die, I have traditional ceremony that I have to go to to support them. So having bereavement days that are only for people that you're biologically related to doesn't really work for Indigenous communities. Family is very different. I have five children. I have friends who take care of their nieces, who are their children. They're actually their guardians, but they're their children. They raise them; they take care of them. So, changing the wording around what a family is to the more traditional realm of what a family is, and breaking down those barriers. And giving those teachings also when it comes to gender identity. We talk about male female. 'Two-spirit' is a very specific Indigenous teaching of the two-spirit ones, and they carry the strength of the man and the woman. These teachings need to be recognized. If we have a male who has female parts when they breastfeed, why would we call it breastfeeding? Why can't we call it chest feeding? So just changing the language to more inclusive language to make people feel safe in their workspace.

Q: Do you still engage in such things as sweat lodge?

LP: Oh yes, tons!

Q: How often?

LP: COVID has been very difficult. COVID has destroyed many things. Pre-COVID, it was a weekly gathering for us, where we would go into a sweat lodge and pray and participate in community. Now, it's I think in the past year I've only been able to go to one. But I am working with my elder, because I have a small family farm that we're going to put a sweat lodge on the farm, and we're going to start running a lodge. My children are going to learn to become lodgekeepers and firekeepers and medicine carriers and knowledge carriers, and really start bringing the next generation into lodge more.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to add?

LP: I think my biggest legacy push that I want before I retire - or cross over to the greatest hunting land ever - is I really want to decolonize structures of how we deal with people. What I would love to see that I think if I could have a magic wand and I could get my three wishes, it would be an Indigenous person in an executive seat at every local in CUPE. I would like to see supports so the Indigenous council in every province working with each local to make sure that their Indigenous workers are supported properly within the local, using restorative justice to deal with conflict. So, removing the tables that are a colonial construct, and putting it in a circle, and talking and getting to know each other, and making those connections - but also understanding that not every Indigenous person has those teachings. These are the teachings from me and my community. It could be different in B.C. But that's why it's so important to have Indigenous councils in every province to support those local Indigenous executives on every

local, supporting the Indigenous community, bringing those teachings to the table and making it a common way of managing people, through the Indigenous lens and Indigenous teachings.

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