***Ottawa Public Law Tour – Track 5 Ottawa River Islands***

**Transcription of podcast**

Track 5: The Ottawa River Islands. It is time to cross back into Ontario. Head south along the Portage Bridge, recrossing the Ottawa River. As you do so, you will pass over an island in the middle of the river. It is officially called Victoria Island, but this modest spit of land weaves together many themes in our public law life in Canada. It emerged almost eight thousand years ago out of the receding waters of the Champlain Sea, the meltwater of the last Ice Age. As long ago as four thousand years, although we can’t be sure, it became a meeting place for indigenous people, evolving into a spiritual place, because of its proximity to the now-obscured Chaudière Falls.

The island was called *Asinabka*, “place of glare rock.” That indigenous history was overwritten, as it was in many aspects of our public law, by the colonial period and the industrialization of the Ottawa River. That industrialization meant that the island became a hub of the lumber industry, and it was named Victoria Island after a far-away queen. The remnants of that industrial heritage – lumber mills and then power generation facilities – are visible in the ruins festooning the island, and in the still-visible features you see in the water around the island.

The usurpation of the indigenous heritage began to change in the 1990s. In 1997, the island hosted a gathering of indigenous elders, an effort to unify the indigenous populations of North and South America. In 2003, renowned Algonquin elder William Commanda envisaged the island as a peace and healing centre, and indeed, there have been ceremonies since to repatriate the souls of indigenous people who fought in the World Wars.

Now the indigenous presence on the island is reflected in the Turtle Island Tourism Company, and Odawa Native Friendship Centre has created what it calls an “Aboriginal experience encampment” on the west end of the island. And it is here that Chief Theresa Spence pitched a tent and engaged in a hunger strike in 2013, part of what is known as the Idle No More movement. Her intent was to bring attention to indigenous issues, and bring them back into consideration as part of Canadian politics, generate an awareness about lack of housing and clean water on remote reserves. And so during that cold winter, this spit of land hosted a parade of politicians, including two former prime ministers, visiting the Aboriginal leader, quickly becoming a symbol of the challenges of indigenous and non-indigenous reconciliation.

As best as I can detect as a student of Canadian politics, little lasting change has come from that hunger strike, but it is worth noting that then, in May 2015, the first event of the powerful Walk for Reconciliation associated with release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report on Residential Schools started by lighting a sacred fire on this modest island. And days before that ceremony, an Ottawa area woman held a sacred ceremony in honor of missing and murdered Aboriginal women, including her daughter. This little island, in other words, has become a symbol of both hope and of loss.

Take some time to wander around this unusual island, and then finish walking across the Portage Bridge. As you reach the Ontario bank, you will see a recreational path running along the Ottawa River in the direction of Parliament Hill and ultimately at its base along the river. If you were to follow this path in that direction, it would take you back to Entrance Bay where the Rideau Canal enters the Ottawa River. If, instead, you were to pick up the path as it heads west further upriver, you could follow it for many kilometres into the far west end of Ottawa, passing the War Museum and several popular beaches as you go. Pause this podcast until you reach the end of the bridge.

Our tour shall continue along the Portage Bridge road, which turns into Wellington Street. You will walk up this sidewalk past the National Library and Archives of Canada, and just past there to the Supreme Court building. Press pause now and when you reach the part of Wellington proximate to the Supreme Court building, go to Track number 6.

<end of Track 5>