

# EP02: DEPUTY MINISTER DEBORAH RICHARDSON

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

**Kerry Wright** [00:00:03] Welcome to QCC's podcast series, The Path of Public Service. Each episode QCC will bring you intimate conversations and valuable insights with inspiring individuals who are of service to the public and striving to make a real difference that benefits every Canadian. All personal views expressed by guests and our host are their own and would rarely be agreed upon. While we can't offer an opinion that speaks to everyone's likings or sensibilities, QCC will continue to recognise those in public service, offer a kaleidoscope of perspectives and operate in good faith to build trust with you. Our QCC member and all public citizens. Things get exciting when we hear from listeners. We're all part of a team making our podcasts together. Your insight of our episode will help us greatly. Please share your opinion by going to [Ontario25.ca/PodcastFeedback](https://Ontario25.ca/PodcastFeedback). I'm Kerry Wright. After serving the public for two decades as a career specialist, I recently took my own career leap into producing content for both podcasts and radio. It is my privilege as a producer and QCC's host to help showcase the contributions of public servants in QCC's episode, I will guide you through the lens of a bold and brave trailblazer. Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson is the highest-ranking Indigenous person in the Ontario Public Service. You'll hear what she wishes she'd known upon entering government and how public service forever changed how she deals with

opposing views. What's clear is that Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson still embodies the spirit of what brought her to public service in the first place. Formed of the qualities she most admired in her mentors. Without further ado, on to our conversation. You've thrived as a steward of public trust in sectors where real leadership matters. Law, banking, economic development and government growing up. Can you walk us through some of those defining teachable moments that profoundly shaped who you are, your cultural lens, and how both informed your spirit of public service?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:02:21] So my father is First Nations from New Brunswick, and my mom is German, Scottish from Saskatchewan. And my dad had joined the military. My mom and the very first posting that they had was back in New Brunswick. And so growing up we spent a lot of time in the summers and I saw very much a difference between on reserve first nations people and off reserve. Part of it was on my dad's mum's side of the house. They had moved off reserve and part of it is because they had kids that were taken away for residential schools down into the States, down to Maine and then to Philadelphia. And so my grandmother didn't really want us coming with people from the reserve, like really tried to keep us away from that. And so it's when I first kind of noticed that, well, we were First Nations, we shouldn't really

chum around with people who are First Nations, but it's not because First Nations people were bad in her view. It was because she was afraid of having us taken. That was kind of entrenched into our family and just to protect the family from having other kids taken away.

**Kerry Wright** [00:03:34] Now, that's understandable that she would try to protect her family. I'm thinking, though, as a child, that's confusing because sometimes as adults, we don't always take the time to explain that to the child. So you have to conjure up what that means in your own head. What were you thinking?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:03:50] I did wonder, you know, and maybe it's I wondered as I became older and more aware of what the challenges were. But I also knew that in our family we were different too, because we did a lot of outdoorsy things, like we did fishing, we did hunting. And many people who are non-Indigenous and non First Nations do that. But things that were just entrenched into our family, you know, getting together and how we eat meals and meals that were off the land and traditional from New Brunswick. But like I said, it was really interesting in terms of the sort of intergenerational impact of this fear that my grandparents had about us being taken. And it wasn't necessarily meaning because we were social. We knew everybody. The North Shore of New Brunswick, very small. Dalhousie, New Brunswick, Eel River Bar, First Nation. I'm from Papineau First Nation, which is near Bathurst. Very small communities and everyone knows everyone. But there's that fear from my grandmother in particular. My grandfather, not so much, but my grandmother definitely. And then also just being aware of a lot of activism that happened on my dad's side of the family around just Indigenous rights. But

kind of seeing all of those things happen when I was a kid in terms of all of the things that my family and or community was involved in. So kind of seeing that from afar. But my dad was in the military. He was the first person in our school to go to university to get his master's in business. He was in the military. We lived all over the world. So I wasn't there all the time. In terms of in New Brunswick, it would be we'd go in the summers and visit. Then we'd go to my mom's family in Saskatchewan and see all this stuff. But I think my whole life I knew definitely that my dad had really worked hard to create something that he didn't experience in terms of the rest of his family. You know, his family's always been been very hardworking, but they didn't pursue a lot of post-secondary education because that wasn't what they did at the time.

**Kerry Wright** [00:05:54] Your dad sounds like a very noble and interesting and intelligent man at that stage. Where you saying to yourself, Dad, I'm a champion for you? Or as a child? Are you saying, Dad, don't make waves?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:06:06] I think a part of it was probably dad, don't make waves. You know, and it's funny because it was even later, once my dad had retired from the military and then he started a whole second career. He was vice president of the bank and focussed on Indigenous economic development. But he ended up moving down to Peru and and married a Peruvian woman who's just lovely. And I have a brother who's Peruvian, but he had a more rights based agenda the older he got in terms of Indigenous rights and sometimes felt that working within the current system, it didn't push the envelope far enough. But that was kind of once he retired and then once he went back to our community and he's on band council right now, he has found those

ways of creating those wonderful economic development opportunities that happen within local community municipality businesses. So it's almost like he went from being more moderate to being more of an advocate to stabilising more what he's doing now and has worked a lot with Indigenous youth to create opportunities and increase their awareness around economic development. So yeah, he definitely was a real role model and he's definitely an important force.

**Kerry Wright** [00:07:23] You know, as you reflect, it becomes clear that your father was a mentor that really helped motivate you to go all out to be the best version of yourself. Teaching you about traditions, working hard, education, business, travel, activism, and clearly the value of being civic minded.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:07:46] Oh, certainly. Like, absolutely. I think that a lot of things came from him and even more so from his parents and my grandfather in particular, where just, you know, my grandfather was a foreman in a mill in Dalhousie New Brunswick and just the work ethic. But I think that the most important thing that I learnt from them and my mother is involved in that too, is respect and kindness for people no matter who they are and no matter what their circumstances were. I remember back in the day my dad picking up hitchhikers and people would think that that was just so horrible. Right. But it was just something that he did back then because he knew somebody was down and out, needed a ride and would help them out.

**Kerry Wright** [00:08:26] I can relate to it, though, because as a child I lived in British Columbia and in a place called Chilliwack because my father was in the

military at that time, and I remember him picking up hitchhikers, too.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:08:36] It still happens in small communities, right? Like, I think my husband's from Nipissing First Nation. And, you know, some people in the community might not have a car. And so people hitchhike, right? But you hitchhike with people that you know. Yeah. When I was done law school and I lived in Toronto with my dad for a period of time, we would walk down the streets of Toronto and a number of people who were living on the streets knew him by name because he took the time to spend with them. And I think that really motivated me later on in some of the different jobs that I've had in my sphere where I've gotten to know people and it doesn't matter who they are, if they're a CEO of a company or they're living on the streets, they're still a person and somebody has had a journey that's brought them to where they are. I got that, I think, from my my grandparents, because that's very much how they work. There's no hierarchy and you're not better than anybody else.

**Kerry Wright** [00:09:34] I would say that both generational wisdom and the time you spent with your dad in communities continue to help plant that seed of public consciousness. So when did that seed become a growing interest and shift to your hands on involvement with with social issues?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:9:53] I think it was probably more when I ended up in high school and then university and you actually start to read about these issues and learn about them. And I think it was almost every paper that I had a chance to write about in both my undergraduate and then law school was really about the difference between the

haves and the have nots and why are the have nots have nots, right. And so a lot of the papers that I wrote were around, for example, the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the correctional system. And then when I was in law school, I got involved with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples because that was going on at the time. And then there was a First Peoples Conference on the Constitution that I was a volunteer at as a university student, and I started to just get a lot more involved in understanding what was happening in broader society. So I think it was really, I would say high school and university that my eyes really opened up when I actually read it and saw it. And then I kind of correlated back to what the journey that I'd seen myself and experienced.

**Kerry Wright** [00:10:58] In hindsight with all of the legal, financial, social and civic choices that lay before you can you recall the moment you seriously considered choosing opportunities that would take you down the pathway of public service? Or perhaps it was a calling that chose you?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:11:17] I don't know, because anything that I've done, including when I was writing these papers, right or you think about it, was, what can I do to make this world a better place and everything? Every job that I've done has been all about that, right? So whether, you know, when I was in banking, I worked a lot in the what was called Aboriginal banking back in the day, but I worked a lot in that space about how can we better support First Nations people who are looking for a mortgage on reserve, right, because you don't own property on reserve and the associated risks with lending to when I worked at the Friendship Centre here in Toronto, how do you provide better services to the urban Indigenous

population in Toronto. In criminal law, I would see a lot of people obviously who were Indigenous, who were in conflict with the law. And then I was working for a First Nations rights based company called OI Employee Leasing that was in litigation with the federal government on Indian taxation issues on and off reserve. It was when I was working there that I got a phone call saying, "Hey, there's a job with the federal government. Do you want to apply for it"? And I remember at the time, I think I even talked to my dad, and I think he was shocked that I would consider something at the federal government because, you know, I was thriving in the banking sector and in other opportunities. But I started to think, hey, you know what? We need to have our people everywhere. We need to have our people in all pockets of society to be able to implement change. So did it choose me or did I choose it? I don't know. But once I dabbled in there, I saw that there was a real ability to start to make some significant change.

**Kerry Wright** [00:13:03] I feel like you're a living, breathing example of someone who doesn't say, "What am I going to do? Oh, this is where the jobs are or this is where the money is". You already have a good sense of yourself. You know what your gifts are to the world. And so what you do is you seek out experiences that best, shine your gifts, that best explore your talents and where you can grow and you can learn. And what happens is that, lo and behold, the universe speaks and the opportunities unfold. And then that's why there's a common theme throughout all of your jobs, all of your careers. There's that desire to make a difference. There is a desire to to want to make changes that are meaningful, that actually change people's lives on a daily basis. So that is honestly quite exciting for me and I think for our audience as well, because it's inspiring.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:14:08] I think at the end of the day, you always want to do something that makes you feel good. If somebody said, Well, where do you want to be in five years? I never really know what the answer to that is because I want to go to where I feel good. And what makes me feel good is something that place my values in an environment that's kind and environment that makes a difference, an environment that's collaborative. And at the end of the day, if I can look in the mirror and feel good about what I'm doing, then I thrive. And I do think you're right. I think that the creator does look after us and tests us and whatever that creator is to different people. Right. I think that if you're grounded in that spirituality and that faith and hope, good things are going to happen because working in the Indigenous space can be very overwhelming and frustrating because of where we are today, because of all the things that have happened way before and that continue to happen. And so I think that the more you start to just see that progress and just moving ahead and moving ahead and finding ways to do that in different places and spaces, and then it feels good. So yeah, no, I think I love how you summarise where you think and where I've gone different places because I've never really thought about it like that.

**Kerry Wright** [00:15:31] You said you want to do things that make you feel good. You want to do good as well. And you're acting in good faith. So what do you look forward to?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:15:40] I look forward to knowing that I'm making a difference. I look forward to sitting back at the end of the day and it could be the end of a week or whatever and feel like, oh, you know what? Yeah, I really feel like we made some movement

on that file or we really made a difference on X. And then, of course, what do I look forward to, of course, is just the time that I spend with my own family and my own personal life, too, because it's not all about work, right? It's about also how you just feel. And in this journey of life that we're on.

**Kerry Wright** [00:16:14] Yes, for sure. So. Can you talk about the rationality or style of your decision making that best allows you to feel good and equally serves having a good relationship between you and your minister and the ministry teams and the common good of Ontarians, especially given an uncertain world, the competing demands of the public arena and at times incomplete or imperfect information.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:16:44] Late government Ontario. \$198 billion budget. 67,000 people. The government of the day has different priorities. And we're here. Like when I say we, the bureaucrats, the bureaucratic part of the Ontario Public Service is here to give the best advice possible. And I think optionality is really, really important. So you want to be able to say, oh, you've got this problem that you're trying to solve. So let's look at both those options. But what you're saying is if you don't have complete information, I think you just need to be honest. And that's where you need to have really good relationship with your boss. Like my boss is the secretary cabinet and most importantly with the political staff, the the chief of staff to a minister or the minister, him or herself, having that relationship and that dialogue so that they're not blindsided by the fact of, okay, I need this problem solved and you only have half baked answer - why is that? I think we need to be honest about why there is the half baked answer, and if you need some more time to have a more complete answer or a solution to the

problem that's being solved, then you need to be able to do that. And I think that's part of the challenge because we do have very crunchy situations that we try to work through within government and whatever the problem of the day is. Right? And I think that the more you have that rapport, the more that you have the network with the different partners or stakeholders you need to involve to come up with creative solutions. I mean, you need to be able to do that. So you opened with you need to have a good relationship. Oh my goodness. That is the most important part. It's all about relationships. Yes. And then it's about having the right data to make informed decisions. And our job is to provide that optionality, provide that data. And if it's incomplete, we should be honest that it's incomplete and look for more time, or if it's life or death situation, then you need to take into account the weight that you would attach to those options that you provide.

**Kerry Wright** [00:18:42] How much more does data play a role in supporting the modernisation of government? Has it been an advantage in resolving agreement in the most civil way possible or even knowing what people care about?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:18:55] Absolutely. And you think of Treasury Board, for example. In my current role, like you have a number of ministers who sit on Treasury Board and you want to be able to give them the best information possible that looks at risks associated with whatever it is that you're proposing. It looks at the data that you have available. All of those things so that decision makers can ultimately make informed decision making. That's how government works, right? But then it's not just as easy as Treasury Board or Cabinet. You also need to be able to work with bargaining agents. Is it advocacy

groups or is it partners? You need to be able to work with other groups to be able to do that. And so that's part of your evidence too is what's going to be the reaction of X if you do Y, right?

**Kerry Wright** [00:19:39] Yeah. And it also forces you to take a look at a different perspective.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:19:43] Oh, absolutely. And I think I've worked with ministers of all stripes. I can honestly say and I've been a Deputy Minister for seven years, I've worked in the public service for a number of years. I've never seen a minister who doesn't want to do the right thing and isn't very appreciative of all of the advice that the public service gives. Now, sometimes a decision might not be where we thought it might have gone, but at least it's an informed decision and we've gone there. So yeah, I think that the majority of people don't just want to check the box. That's my feeling, at least what I've seen in government.

**Kerry Wright** [00:20:18] Yes. Well, when you're considering stakeholders and when you're considering partners or another person to do business with other deal breakers for you.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:20:27] I think for me, the lens that I always have is making sure that all voices are heard, making sure that, for example, Indigenous voices are heard, making sure that Francophone voices are heard. Women's voices are heard. Or black or racialised voices are heard. And I think that we don't live in a homogeneous society. We have to realise that there's a lot of differences and if you're going to really get to equity, you have to be able to hear the voices of those in different perspectives. And it kind of goes back to what I was telling you about my

grandfather talking to everybody and nobody's voice is better than the other. And I think that if we're in a true democratic society and we really want to make a difference in government on the ground, you need to create space for those voices. So yeah, I think it's a deal breaker if we don't want to talk to all voices. And that's part of the nice part of being in the Treasury Board is I can create direction so that those other voices are heard as people are developing their different initiatives that they're proposing.

**Kerry Wright** [00:21:32] Yes, I know that the Ontario government is making every effort, at least they're setting goals for 2025 to get some parity with regards to seeing people work in government that represent the people in Ontario. And that's important. I don't think you can have these conversations without looking at things historically and recognising colonialism. So getting back to the workplace in Ontario, what I really applaud about that is the Ontario government is a living example for parity.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:22:06] No, absolutely. And maybe I'll just try to unpack a little bit about what you were sharing, because I think it's excellent. So, I mean, I think the very important thing is that the face of the Ontario Public Service is reflective of what the labour market is. Right. We do have leadership diversification goals within the Ontario Public Service to make sure that our leadership is reflective of the broader society. So that is absolutely in place. And each ministry and each deputy minister is held to account on the leadership diversification, and we actually produce so that all staff can see the progress that we're making in that. So that is absolutely, really, really important. When we talk about decolonisation, it's actually a corporate process that you have to do. Right. Like I said, we're

creating, for example, a black equity and an Indigenous equity office. Those teams are going to come in. We're going to look at our policies and our procedures, and we need to decolonise. When I see that, are there barriers in our recruitment process? Are there barriers in how we retain staff within the organisation? Are there barriers about how we move staff up the ranks, so to speak, within the Ontario Public Service? And we need to understand that. And to do that you actually have to involve the people that experience the barriers, right? So to me that's kind of the very first layer that needs to happen. And it's a corporate process, right? The second layer really is indigenisation. And I could apply that to any community or any lens, but I'll use it because I'm a Mi'kmaq woman. Indigenisation means you actually involve Indigenous people in what you do. Right. And it's not just Indigenous people from inside of government, it's Indigenous people from outside of government, too. And to get that expertise and that lens in terms of what we do. Are we doing the right policies and programs? Do these really meet your needs? Do they work? It's not kind of a cooked up in an office of government and pushed out.

**Kerry Wright** [00:24:06] Yes.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:24:07] It's more of a grassroots. And if we're talking about family wellbeing programme, for example, don't you think we should actually talk to the families that need family well-being programs to find out what works for sure? I remember Sylvia Marechal, who she retired from the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, saying one time at a meeting because she led a lot of initiatives around ending violence against Indigenous women and girls. And she spoke about performance matrix and we think that they should be a certain thing.

But within the community, for example, a performance matrix may be that, you know, all of a sudden a parent took their child to the park where they'd never done that before because they didn't know how to be a parent because of residential schools or the intergenerational trauma or whatever. Maybe that's a performance measure versus have you decrease the number of kids in care or whatever those things are. So I just think we have to flip it on its head. And so that's Indigenized, right? Once you do that, it's only then can you get to reconciliation because people want to jump right to reconciliation and say, Oh yeah, we're reconciling because we've done this. No, you need to actually decolonise, Indigenize, and then you get into the reconciliation because the system is starting to work. You diversify your leadership. You do the different all the different things. So that's what I think. There's a bit of a framing that needs to happen and a bit of a science. It's not just as simple as go and read the Truth and Reconciliation Report and you're done. It's not a check the box. It's an action to make meaningful change.

**Kerry Wright** [00:25:38] Yes. And I love everything that you just said. And kudos to you for recognising just how vital that is.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:25:46] Oh, it's so vital. And I think about when I first was a Deputy Minister, I've been Deputy Minister now about seven years and Indigenous affairs. You know, we were working on the response to the truth, the Reconciliation Commission or even the response to end violence against Indigenous women and girls. If you look on line on those reports and what was proposed, it really came from a community walking together, which was the Ontario's response to ending violence against Indigenous women and girls, was actually based on a

strategy that a group of Indigenous women put together in terms of what they felt would work towards ending violence against Indigenous women and girls. And a lot of that was about family well-being, working with men who, if they're the perpetrators of violence, there's this amazing programme that the French is run. It's called I Am a Kind Man programme and really looking at the whole of the system, it was just really amazing. But it was from the voice of Indigenous women and again, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The response that the province had, which was journey together, was really working with survivors and people who worked their whole life in the space. Like I think of Kim Murray, who's now working for Six Nations, but she was the Assistant Deputy Attorney General at Indigenous Justice at the time, but she was the Executive Director of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. So she was able to take a lot of those learnings as we developed our response around Indigenous justice responses that were recommended through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. So again, it's about listening to the voices of those whose programs and services impact them and making sure that you capture those voices. Working in corrections the same thing. Like really during COVID, we needed to work very closely with a number of the communities in the north as we were working hard at decreasing the inmate population. So we worked closely with police, with the crowns, with defence counsel and with Indigenous organisations to make sure that when people were released that they were able to get home safe or have a good, a safe place to go. And that took a lot of coordination, whereas it could be just let people out fend for yourself when we're talking about very vulnerable individuals that that need those supports and that that social fabric that we need to provide

to them. So yeah, so it's, you know, you need to be able to work with communities and can't be paternalistic.

**Kerry Wright** [00:28:25] Absolutely. You know, I think you're talking, too, about engagement. You're talking about engaging people that have a stake in what's going to happen.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:28:33] I think that citizens demand it. Right. And and so they should.

**Kerry Wright** [00:28:38] Feel like there's a shift, because there used to be this sense almost as if the public were the enemy. And now there's a lot of consultation that goes on with the different agencies, the institutions and members of the public. Yeah. Do you think there was a catalyst for that?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:28:52] I think that there's a lot more success. I think that it has been a shift over time. I do remember earlier in my days in government that it did seem that people weren't as responsive to citizens. But over my time in government, I've seen a lot more responsiveness and wanting to work with communities and wanting to make a difference. It's interesting too, because working with Indigenous communities, for example, and resource development, the courts tell you that you absolutely have a legal duty to consult and engage, but the smart companies and smart governments will realise that it's beyond the legal duty to consult. It's the right thing to do, and it makes business sense because communities prosper. We all prosper.

**Kerry Wright** [00:29:32] Yes, exactly.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:29:33] First Nations groups have signed treaties in this province, and we

need to be able to work alongside them and with them.

**Kerry Wright** [00:29:41] Yes.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:29:42] And when I say them, I'm one of them. So.

**Kerry Wright** [00:29:44] And speaking of consultation, I was thrilled to see the ministry in consultation with the Ontario Human Rights Commission and the new initiative that's happening up in the north in Thunder Bay.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:29:57] It's interesting you mention the North, because when I first became the Deputy Solicitor General, I wanted to go out and, first of all, job shy with correctional officers to learn exactly how vital their role is because people are like you're a social worker, you're a police, you're a security guard. It's amazing, actually. People don't know what happens inside, beyond the walls, but correctional officers and the people who work in corrections are very phenomenal, compassionate, caring people. So I really wanted to find out a little bit about that and went to tour a lot of the facilities. And when I went to Kenora in Thunder Bay Correctional Facilities, I was quite taken aback by how many of my people were in those jails. And so I was thrilled. The building of the New Thunder Bay Correctional Facility, but also there's two temporary facilities going up in both Kenora and Thunder Bay. And I think that's going to make a huge difference for staff and the people who spend time in those jails. So it's going to be amazing. And the other piece, having development in the north, the Indigenous communities, also businesses should be able to be involved in the construction and the trades and all the different things around those capital projects. That's also really,

really important. Yeah, no, it was a it was a real eye opener for me being at corrections and seeing, seeing so many of my people inside the jails.

**Kerry Wright** [00:31:21] Sounds like there's a lot of healing that needs to go on and the new infrastructure seems to support that.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:31:26] It'll make a big difference. And I think also having the additional staff in terms of people to work with, people who visit the facilities in the area of mental health and wellness and recreation and those things. Part of the challenge is that the vast number of people who go in the jail are only there for a short time because people in the provincial system, most of them are on remand actually, and haven't even been convicted of an offence. And then anyone who serves less than two years, less a day is here. And it's very hard to do programming when people are just kind of on remand because they're not jails where people actually stay for an extended period of time. There's very few sentenced offenders in the provincial jails. So that's part of the challenge, too. And I think you're right. I think the new facilities creating that additional space is going to make a huge difference in some of those northern jails that we have.

**Kerry Wright** [00:32:20] So when you look at the wheels of systematic change and you also want to make a difference, I think people can relate to that. But when, again, those processes are slow. How do you remain hopeful and know that there's a greater purpose and that you can make an actual difference without getting burnt out in the process?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:32:44] So Anishinaabe talk about seven generations and we're really

reflecting on the impact of our decisions through understanding our place in creation. So great grandparents to great grandchildren with us in the middle or seven generations. And we all have to think about how we're link to that web of life and that reaches back to our ancestors and forward to our descendants. And every single action, word, gesture exists not only in that moment, but as a ripple in that continuum of time.

**Kerry Wright** [00:33:24] Yeah.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:33:25] Yeah. We were chatting earlier about the increased crime that's happening against people who are from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. And so I'm First Nations. I have five kids, three stepchildren, two biological children. So they're first nations and black. And so my two daughters who are black, when you ask about the why and how you're motivated, I want it to be that I'm creating a better place for them and a better place for their kids. And my one daughter actually was living down in Atlanta for the past six years, and she just moved back over the last two months. And when I hear about all these racially motivated hate crimes that happen in the US and with guns, I was just always so fearful about her living in the States and these horrible, horrific things that are happening so well. I'm not black and I haven't experienced anti-black racism. I am an Indigenous woman who has experienced anti-Indigenous racism, and then I am the mom of black children. And these issues matter. They should matter to all of us as human beings. And the change is not going to happen immediately. And if we need to check that box to say, Oh, I made that change, I made that change, we're never going to make the change. We have to look at it, like I said, for the seven generations and just know that every little

thing we're doing is going to make a difference.

**Kerry Wright** [00:34:56] What do you wish you'd known when you started out?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:35:00] I think my approach definitely has softened. So when I first started out, I think in my career I was a lot more of an advocate and I would get very angry at views that I would view contrary to my own. And I wish I had known that softness and that gentleness because I think I might have been able to get further. I don't mean career further in terms of whatever I was advocating for quicker, because sometimes you need to call people in versus calling people out. It's taken me a long time to be able to refine that.

**Kerry Wright** [00:35:37] Are you talking about an understanding of people just want to be heard?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:35:41] Yeah, and I think it goes back to that. And sometimes people, they don't necessarily need to be convinced of something, but they need to have all the information and then they need to go away and reflect on that information versus if I get angry at you and then that's going to ratchet it up and you're going to get angry. And the conversation oftentimes takes a lot longer. It might get to where you need it to go, but it takes longer. So I think it's more just figuring out how you present things, how you package things, how you bring people on board in a non-threatening way. And sometimes it's really hard, especially in issues that have to do with racism or inequities. I think that that's always a challenge, but it's a little bit of a dance.

**Kerry Wright** [00:36:26] Well, that begs the question, what is the greatest challenge of doing?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:36:31] I think the biggest challenge is making sure that whatever you do involves everybody, because if you try to do something from a top down approach, you're never going to make that change because the people that you need to help implement the change aren't necessarily at your level. So I'll use an example. In the government we had a third party review of our policies and processes around workplace harassment and discrimination, and they came back that there's racism in the system and the system isn't working for black, racialized, and Indigenous employees in the interior public service. So as a senior management team, the first thing we did was we apologised, which I don't think any Ontario public service has actually done that. We apologise but made a commitment about concrete actions and to implement those concrete actions we've established a working group that's comprised of all levels of this organisation and all geographical regions of this organisation, and we're working on implementing it together. And already I think we're starting to see change whether it's. Through employee survey results or other things as people start to feel like the system is addressing systems. So I think absolutely key is involving people at all levels of the organisation but also showing commitment at a senior level. But I think also holding people to account on those things because if you don't hold people to account, it becomes a check the box exercise versus I actually made change in my organisation.

**Kerry Wright** [00:38:09] What are some common reasons why people tend to give up their life in public service?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:38:15] I mean, our turn in public service is I think it's at like 6.7%. That includes our attrition rate. So I think that's pretty standard. We're not seeing a mass exodus of people coming out and that includes retirement and people who are moving on. There can be lots of motivators for people wanting to leave, whether it's more money somewhere else, better opportunities. But in my experience, the biggest reason why people leave a job is because of their leader. That's why it's even more important for us to be able to work on leadership development and making sure that our managers, our leaders have the skills necessary to be good leaders.

**Kerry Wright** [00:38:52] Yeah, more of a leadership by example model rather than a directive. Trickle down as as you've mentioned earlier.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:38:59] Yeah, yeah.

**Kerry Wright** [00:39:01] So what do you want to do that you haven't done yet?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:39:03] I think for me the most important part is around leadership diversification. Ideally, every person in this organisation will feel that they belong. We haven't done that to create this culture where people feel like they truly belong. And to me, I've got a good matrix because I measure that in the employee survey. So from year to year I'll be able to see how well we're doing with making people feel that they belong. So I think we have a long ways to go in that. So as a leader responsible for kind of the people side of the House, I think that will be really, really important within the Ontario Public Service.

**Kerry Wright** [00:39:43] I agree because I think we live in the most multicultural society in the world. And if you ask Canadians, they always say they're very proud of their multiculturalism. But I think it's not enough to be proud. It has to be more of a racially conscious leadership. Now that will make all the difference. It's like, okay, diversity is what you see. Inclusion is what you do. And then the conversations and the action together intersect. And I feel Canadians are still in the diversity area and they're half in with the inclusion and a half not. So I hope it's towards a better representation.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:40:25] We all have to be anti-racist leaders.

**Kerry Wright** [00:40:27] That's a good way of putting it. That's a really good way of putting it. Yes.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:40:31] And I think people aren't as comfortable even just saying those words. So I think part of what we need to do is just a broader society is be able to have conversations like this. Right. Have the conversations around racism and what does it mean to be an anti-racist leader? How do I have these conversations at my house? Right. How do I have those conversations around the kitchen table? How do I have these conversations in my workplace? You know, how many leaders after the incident that happened in Buffalo looked back with their staff to have a conversation today? Those are the things that we need to talk about was one of the first things that you and I talked about when we got on the line earlier today.

**Kerry Wright** [00:41:08] Yes. Yeah. And I think you hit the nail on the head when you mentioned at some point that it's all in the package and the delivery. Right.

But I think there's also a sense that when you make change, there's always going to be people that perceive it as a threat or perceive it as a loss for them. So if we can change the dialogue so that it's not always about you're wrong and you should sacrifice this for these people, it should be about the benefits, about how we are adding something of value to the society, not taking something away. So education is part of that. But the tone, the vocabulary, the words, they matter. And as we keep referring to, look what happens when you change that tone, you see an escalation in violence.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:41:58] Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, absolutely. And you know what? We have a long ways to go as a society. I think that there's it's been tragic, but there have been a number of things that have happened that I think mainstream society or society who aren't Indigenous, who aren't black, are seeing things through a different lens. So I think, for example, the murder of George Floyd, I think, for example, the discovery of the unmarked graves at residential schools, the mosque shooting in New Zealand, you start to see these things that happen and I think it starts to educate more and more people about the injustices that happen and the different things that we have to do as a society to start to challenge this radicalism. Really, right?

**Kerry Wright** [00:42:50] Yes. Yes. It's now into mainstream. And there are now law makers that are part of what used to be a fringe element. So that's scary.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:43:00] Yeah, yeah, it's really scary. And so I think it's the more awareness that we create through, you know, through young people. All through the conversations at our kitchen tables, through just society, a role that

government can play, the private sector. I think all of us have a responsibility. It can't be left on the shoulders of the Indigenous community, for example, or the black community to educate about the injustices that happen.

**Kerry Wright** [00:43:27] No, no. But that's what happens, isn't it? I mean, recently when we had the leak of the Supreme Court in the United States, if you look at the crowds of people on the street, it's all women. When in 2020, there was Black Lives Matter. Now, what was nice about that is predominantly there were black people there, but now there were white people supporting them as well. And those things matter. Often when we talk about things that are happening in the world, we say they and we use that word a lot. What are they doing? But each of us have a responsibility, of course. And I'm thinking to myself, well, whether it be small little steps or an idea that's quite big. How can the average person mobilise themselves on a daily basis in small ways or advocate or or react proactively to make change rather than reactively?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:44:22] I mean, I think the first thing is educating yourself.

**Kerry Wright** [00:44:25] Yes.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:44:26] Going and read the executive summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. Go on to different sites to educate yourself around the Black community, the Jewish community and other communities, and educate yourself. Supporting Indigenous business, Black business, supporting businesses I think is really important to having those conversations. So, for example, the tragic shooting murder that happened in Buffalo. Having this conversation with

your family about how outrageous and wrong that is, that somebody would target people because of the colour of their skin to kill them and have the conversations at your workplace reach out. In this particular instance, if you have black colleagues and say, you know, that's really horrible, that happened. So then people know that there's empathy and that you're aware and you don't just ignore it. I think when George Floyd happened, I actually wrote a blog and I posted it on an internal website within Ontario. It's just finding different ways within your sphere of influence, just to educate people about things that happen in society or to create space for the conversations, because it's pretty darn scary when you think about it, right? Like all of these things that happened, imagine if your family was living down in Buffalo and in that area because everybody went to that grocery store. Right. Like just the fear that you'd have, like I said, the fact I had a black daughter living in Atlanta. It's the first thing I think about when stuff happens in Atlanta was, oh, my gosh. Right. It's just having an appreciation that people who aren't black don't experience anti-black racism. Right. Or the unmarked graves like I have family who went to residential school. And it was a real trigger for me as an Indigenous woman. And you know what? It was really great that I had colleagues that reached out and said, You know what, Deborah? Oh, my gosh, I saw that. I'm just I'm thinking about you. It's all I needed to hear. And it felt good, right? I didn't even need an explanation or I feel it was like, you know what? I'm just thinking about? You wanted to let you know. And I think that's what we do. It's it's part of the kindness and the empathy and the compassion that we should just show for human beings. Yes. Yes. Whether you're in the workplace, whether it's your next door neighbour, next door to you.

**Kerry Wright** [00:46:41] After talking to you, I really need to change the way I think about leadership. I mean, there is still this old school of thought about a leader is someone who's in charge. A leader has a particular title. But I really feel as we go forward, it's going to be important to think of ourselves as at some point in our life we're going to lead. And hopefully it's through leadership, through example, not because we happen to throw directions around and hey, you do this, you do that. But I think what's equally important is that each time we step up and become a leader, the key to our success, if we want the world to strive for good and to make differences that improve lives, I think they're going to have to exhibit qualities of empathy and compassion. Big time. Big time.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:47:35] And being authentic.

**Kerry Wright** [00:47:36] Oh, yes.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:47:37] Yeah. Because people don't want phoney baloney. Right? They want real. So the Anishinaabe word for warrior is a ogichidaa and chief is ogimaa and they both start with ogi. So, ogichidaa, ogimaa. And this prefix means to do something for others and ogichidaa literally means someone with a great spirit that does something for others. And ogimaa means someone who leads by doing something for others.

**Kerry Wright** [00:48:05] Oh. Oh, yeah.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:48:06] It's just beautiful.

**Kerry Wright** [00:48:08] Yes. Yeah. I'm glad you said that. What do you think is the most influential thing you've ever done?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:48:14] I think the most meaningful thing that I ever did was when I was sitting in the Ontario legislature and I saw 80 residential school survivors sitting up in the gallery and all three political leaders apologising to residential schools in this province. And the only other person that had been on the floor of the Ontario legislature who wasn't an elected official, had been Nelson Mandela. And to see the Ontario Regional Chief Elder Andrew West. The head of the meeting nation of Ontario and the head of the Inuit to Paris. All speaking on the floor of the Ontario legislature on that day. It's a day I'll never forget.

**Kerry Wright** [00:49:01] What is the biggest risk you've ever taken?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:49:05] Let me think. I would say I think one of the biggest risks I took was going in as the Deputy Solicitor General of corrections, because I wasn't I wasn't from corrections. And it's very much a rank and file organisation, the uniformed proud organisation. I didn't grow up in that organisation. While, I had worked in criminal law, I hadn't grown up in corrections and I think that was pretty risky. Again, it goes to your leadership style because you can't go into an organisation and think that you know everything. It's really you have to say, I know you're the expert in this space. I need to learn from you. And if you have your networks to find out how you're doing or what needs to get done, I think that works. But I think that was pretty risky just because it's a it's a very large operation and I didn't know a lot about it.

**Kerry Wright** [00:49:59] So now I'll switch gears and I'll ask you, what are some of the sources of joy that energise and replenish you right now?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:50:08] So obviously I spoke a little bit about my family. I'm very, very close to both my parents, Wendy and Jim, and I have three brothers, one is a prof at Princeton University, and then the other brother runs his own successful businesses. All of their kids, my nieces and nephews. And then, of course, my husband, Bob, who's my absolute rock with all of our five kids. It just it's so grounding to spend time with them. And we all work hard, but we don't live to work. We need to be able to create that space and that time to replenish. And so I love reading. I love travelling, love hanging out with my best friend Fiona. It's, you know, I love life. I love life. It brings me so much joy. And I'm the type of person I wake up in the morning and I feel happy. I'm the glass overflowing person. I am glass overflowing.

**Kerry Wright** [00:51:07] I like to call myself a pragmatic optimist. Honestly, I have to say, though, that when you enjoy life, it spills out. And the people you talk to, including me, you give them joy. So thank you very much.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**

[00:51:19] Thank you. You know, it's so fun hanging out. And, you know, it's it is really lovely when you just sit and you just kind of talk. We spend a heck of a lot of time at work. And if you carry your values about that inside and outside, it definitely makes a difference in how you feel about things on a day to day basis.

**Kerry Wright** [00:51:38] Well, I started off by saying that I was going to learn something from you, and indeed I did. So much insight and so much wisdom. Now, if you're up to it and you want to just have some fun, we just have a few minutes left. But I would love to give you some rapid fire fun stuff.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:51:56] Sure.

**Kerry Wright** [00:51:56] All right. Okay.  
Favourite activity with your family?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:52:01] I love it. Swimming in my pool.

**Kerry Wright** [00:52:04] Favourite story  
of all time?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:52:06] Like a book? Or just like a  
story?

**Kerry Wright** [00:52:10] Oh, whatever  
you want it to be.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:52:12] I think it would be the story of  
my great aunt who got taken by  
residential school. But when she was 90,  
she found us on Facebook and her  
granddaughter found us and we were  
able to reconnect and she was able to  
meet us before she passed away and  
meet her only surviving sister. She  
thought she was an orphan. It's a  
beautiful story.

**Kerry Wright** [00:52:29] Wow. If you  
could time travel, where and when would  
you go?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:52:35] If I could time travel, I would  
love to go forward to see great, great  
grandchildren. That'd be pretty cool.

**Kerry Wright** [00:52:43] Oh, you know,  
people usually go backwards, so that's.  
That's different. That's good. Dinner with  
a person living or dead. Who would you  
choose?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:52:51] I would choose my

grandfather, George Richardson. He's  
passed away. He's a lot of fun.

**Kerry Wright** [00:52:39] Okay. What is  
your hidden talent? I know a lot about  
your obvious talents, but what is your  
hidden talent?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:53:06] I do really like to write.

**Kerry Wright** [00:53:08] Would you ever  
skydive?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:53:10] No.

**Kerry Wright** [00:53:12] Name one song  
on the soundtrack to your life.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:52:16] Don't Stop Believin'.

**Kerry Wright** [00:53:17] What is the  
favourite thing hanging on your wall?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:53:20] My Norval Morrisseau painting.

**Kerry Wright** [00:53:23] Favourite  
season?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:53:25] I like the summer.

**Kerry Wright** [00:53:27] Cake or pie?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:53:27] Cake.

**Kerry Wright** [00:53:28] Place you most  
want to travel to?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson**  
[00:53:30] I've always wanted to go to this  
place called Isle of Pines. This former  
mentor of mine named Roger Barnes,  
used to speak about this off of Fiji kind of  
in that area, and it's owned by the

Indigenous community and the French community. Apparently it's phenomenal for scuba diving and snorkelling and an excellent cuisine, apparently.

**Kerry Wright** [00:53:51] Favourite junk food?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:53:54] Pizza, I like pizza.

**Kerry Wright** [00:53:55] Favourite day of the week.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:53:56] Saturday's.

**Kerry Wright** [00:54:01] Favourite childhood TV show?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:54:01] I think I liked Gilligan's Island.

**Kerry Wright** [00:54:06] Favourite ice cream flavour?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:54:08] Oh, I like that salted caramel toffee from Kawartha Ice cream. Oh, it's so good. Salted truffle.

**Kerry Wright** [00:54:20] Oh, sounds yummy. Oh, I think I know what I'm doing when I leave here.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:54:24] Oh, it's good.

**Kerry Wright** [00:54:25] What does a person need to be happy?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:54:28] Spirituality.

**Kerry Wright** [00:54:30] What is the best compliment you ever received?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:54:33] You're so kind.

**Kerry Wright** [00:54:34] And what is your best tip for making the world a better place?

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:54:40] Have a glass overflowing philosophy and have hope. Hope will make the world a better place all around.

**Kerry Wright** [00:54:50] Well, as long as you're still doing what you're doing, we all have hope. Thank you so much.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:54:57] It was wonderful spending time with you.

**Kerry Wright** [00:54:59] Take care. Bye bye.

**Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson** [00:55:00] You too.

**Kerry Wright** [00:55:02] Thank you so much for tuning in. And a very special thanks to Deputy Minister Deborah Richardson. If you enjoyed our series episode, please help us spread the word. It really goes a long way. Kerry Wright: [00:55:13] You can also share a fresh set of ears with your inside of our episode by going to [Ontario25.ca/PodcastFeedback](https://Ontario25.ca/PodcastFeedback). I'm Kerry Wright. Bye bye now. Take good care.