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Pedophile ring theory in Cornwall, Ont., will likely continue to swirl

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By Allison Jones, THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO - It's been more than 10 years since allegations that a pedophile ring operated in eastern Ontario first made national headlines.

And long after the dust has settled from the tome that is the Cornwall inquiry report some will continue to believe in a conspiracy to cover-up the truth, experts and observers say.

Commissioner G. Normand Glaude concluded Tuesday that children were sexually abused by people in positions of authority and that public institutions failed victims by mishandling complaints dating back to the 1960s.

But many were looking to him to lay to rest a more sinister explanation for those events, that it was the work of a pedophile ring and a cover-up that reached all the way to the Attorney General's office was at play.

He did not, saying in his 1600-page report that he would not make an unequivocal statement about the theory either way.

For some, it may not have mattered.

An explanation that to some appears to debunk a conspiracy theory just further confirms others' suspicions, said University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan B. Peterson.

"It's very difficult to disprove a conspiracy theory, because every bit of disproving evidence can be just written off as additional evidence that these conspirators are particularly intelligent and sneaky," he said.

Conspiracy theories are usually started by people who are very untrusting and it gathers steam among others who are somewhat untrusting, Peterson said.

They're psychologically compelling because they neatly tie together troubling facts or assertions, he said. When things go badly there are often many explanations, and an orchestrated conspiracy "should be pretty low on your list of plausible hypotheses," Peterson said.

"A good rule of thumb is: Don't presume malevolence where stupidity is sufficient

explanation," he said.

"Organizations can act badly and things can fall apart without any group of people driving that."

While Glaude made no definitive statements about a ring, he declared there was not a conspiracy by several institutions to cover up the existence of any such operation, rather that agency bungling left that impression.

By now, the majority of Cornwall has dismissed the allegation that once spread like wildfire there, but among a small group of people the theory will never die, said columnist Claude McIntosh with the Cornwall Standard-Freeholder.

When historical allegations of sex abuse started surfacing in the 1990s people were certainly talking about the issue, he said. Then a group of townspeople started a website and posted names of people they named as pedophiles.

They also posted an affidavit from one man detailing the most sensational allegation, that ritual sex abuse was performed by men in robes with candles on weekend retreats. He would later recant that allegation at the inquiry.

"Everybody's running around with a copy of (the affidavit) as if it was gospel," said McIntosh.

"It was a really dangerous situation. People who I know who are fairly level-headed were saying, 'Well, it's on the Internet...It's a legal document. It's got to be right.'"

That the website used the same name as a provincial police investigation caused some people to believe its claims, said Cornwall resident Ken Parker.

"Most people got the news from the website," he said. "(But) we didn't know how much of the website was truth and how much of it was fiction."

The man who led the pedophile ring charge was former city police officer Perry Dunlop, who Glaude said began with good intentions but whose off-hours, unsanctioned investigation ended up interfering with some prosecutions.

Dunlop has said he feels the system is out to get him and spent time in jail for refusing to testify at the inquiry. He maintains there was a pedophile ring, as do a small band of loyal supporters.

Parker and his wife used to be friends of the Dunlops and were among the many people who originally believed Dunlop had uncovered stunning and disturbing evidence of a pedophile ring.

He did a lot of good in uncovering true victims of sex abuse and fighting for the inquiry,

but he also did harm in mixing truth with all sorts of unproven claims and naming innocent people on the website as pedophiles, Parker said.

"Perry, for the first couple of years of the inquiry, remained sort of a close friend, and then when we saw where the truth lay (about) the website, we became very saddened and shocked," Parker said.

"It took us, as I say, a couple of years to realize just how things had gotten off track. We cried about it."