

Systemic racial discrimination of indigenous children in Canadian public policy ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

“What if 165,000 children were told by a government that they were going to get less education, less health, less child welfare, and less [access to] clean water [...] because of their race?” Dr. Cindy Blackstock, of the Gitksan First Nation, asked in her keynote address at the third annual McGill Nurses for Global Health Conference on Indigenous Health on Feb. 10. “How many of you would be out marching in the streets against [...] racial discrimination against children? It’s happening right now by the Canadian government. It has been going on since confederation, and [...] we have been trained our entire lives to look away.”

Blackstock, a social worker with 25 years of experience in child protection and indigenous children’s rights, has spent her career fighting for culturally-based equity for the indigenous peoples of Canada and holding the government accountable for racial discrimination. She joined McGill as a professor in the School of Social Work in August 2016. She advocated for a call to action among academics and the general public in the audience.

“I believed if we documented the inequalities, if we documented the harms to kids, that we could work with the government to create evidence-based and economically-tested solutions, and the government of Canada would do the right thing,” Blackstock said. “We did that in 2000 [when] we found the shortfall in social welfare to be 78 cents on the dollar. So if you’re a First Nations child, even if you have higher needs because of the residential schools, you’re getting less funding to stay safely in your families [...] We provided 17 recommendations for reform and Canada acted on none of them.”

With little apparent action from the federal government despite numerous reports since the early 2000s, the Assembly of First Nations and the Family Caring Society, for which Blackstock serves as the Executive Director, filed a human rights case against the Canadian government in 2007.

“We alleged that Canada’s refusal to provide equitable child welfare care and its refusal to ensure that First Nations children can access public services on the same grounds that other children can, amounts to racial discrimination,” Blackstock said.

Over the next eight years, the Canadian government tried to get the case dismissed on legal technicalities, Blackstock explained. Finally, the case went to trial in front of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in 2013.

“The tribunal [issued] a decision in January of last year, finding Canada is racially discriminating against 165,000 children and ordered it to stop immediately [...] And what did the Canadian government do? Not very much,” Blackstock said. “It has been since subject to two failure to comply orders by the tribunal and there is another set of hearings on failing to comply in March.”

In just one example of the inequities faced by indigenous peoples in the health care system, Blackstock described that Ontario pays for mental health services for at-risk children. However, this funding is not provided to indigenous children, meaning the children most at-risk are denied this service.

“So when the tribunal’s ruling came down in January, [the Canadian government officials] were to immediately provide that service if they complied with the order,” Blackstock said. “But, they didn’t.”

Despite her evident frustration with the Canadian government’s continual lack of meaningful action towards such a devastating issue, Blackstock expressed her optimism for the future.

“My biggest hope is with the country’s children,” Blackstock said. “In the tribunal, [...] the first group to come was actually a group of high school students [...] They stayed the whole two days, and then they come back to the next set of hearings with other friends [...] By 2012, there are so many kids coming to the case that we had to book them in shifts. So, please join me in giving this country the best 150th birthday present we can give it: A generation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children who never have to recover from their childhoods. And a generation of non-Aboriginal kids who never have to say they’re sorry.”

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Region: Canada ^[3]

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