

# Canada gives human rights the cold shoulder: Disgraceful response to UN Human Rights Review contains no new commitments <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Voices-Voix Coalition

**Format:** Press release

**Publication Date:** 19 Sep 2013

Excerpts from media release:

In presenting a deeply disappointing report today at the UN Human Rights Council, outlining Canada's response to a review of the country's human rights record carried out in April 2013, the Canadian government has squandered a valuable opportunity to move forward in addressing important national human rights concerns and to demonstrate human rights leadership on the world stage.

Canada was reviewed under the UN's Universal Periodic Review process on April 26 and 30. Other countries, including many of Canada's closest allies, highlighted a wide range of concerns and made recommendations to Canada regarding steps to improve human rights protection in the country.

"Governments raised critical, concrete recommendations touching on numerous human rights shortcomings that are well known to Canadians," said Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada's English Branch. "This included alarming levels of violence against Indigenous women and girls, nationwide poverty and homelessness, and Canada's lagging record of ratifying international human rights treaties. Other areas included the rights of Indigenous peoples, refugee protection, corporate accountability, national security and women's equality."

The response filed at the UN today declines to take up any new measures or action to deal with obvious and acknowledged human rights problems in any of these areas. In effect, Canada has only committed to continue what it is already doing. The report notes that "recommendations that Canada accepts in full or in part are those that [federal, provincial and territorial] governments are already implementing through existing legislative or administrative measures, and are committed to continuing to take steps to achieve."

"Essentially Canada has told the UN that it will do nothing more than maintain the status quo when it comes to protecting human rights in Canada. Advice and recommendations for improvement were ignored," said Béatrice Vaugrante, Director General of Amnesty International Canada's Francophone Branch. "Canada's stance totally undermines the spirit and *raison d'être* of the review process, which is to do more and do better. Canada has instead smugly told other countries that everything is under control; no changes needed."

One common theme in the response is the wholesale rejection of all recommendations that Canada adopt nationwide plans or strategies to tackle serious and complicated human rights challenges such as violence against Indigenous women, poverty, racism, homelessness, food security and implementing the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

"Other governments recognize that some human rights issues are of such complexity that comprehensive plans are needed to make progress. That is doubly the case in a country like Canada with multiple levels of government and multiple levels of responsibility," said Béatrice Vaugrante.

"But Canada has very clearly claimed that there is no need for plans or strategies that are focused on action and are national in scope. Instead, at best Canada remains committed to piecemeal and fragmented approaches that simply do not deliver the goods when it comes to protecting rights."

"Particularly stunning is the government's refusal to develop a comprehensive national action plan dealing with violence against Indigenous women and girls," said Alex Neve. "Seven countries made that specific recommendation; with 18 others calling for meaningful action to address this grave human rights crisis. Canada's unfathomable defiance to do so sends a strong message of callous disinterest."

Many countries called on the government to ratify a growing number of important international human rights treaties that have been ignored by Canada for years dealing with such pressing concerns as enforced disappearances; economic, social and cultural rights; the rights of migrant workers; the rights of persons living with disabilities; and the rights of children.

"Canada blithely informed the United Nations that 'ratification of these instruments is not currently under consideration' without giving any explanation," said Béatrice Vaugrante. "Canada once led the world in taking on international commitments and pressing others to do the same. Now we are a laggard with little credibility when we call on other countries to sign on."

Particularly troubling is the position taken with respect to a treaty focused on preventing torture, the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture. The Optional Protocol was adopted by the UN almost eleven years ago. Canada has made international level

commitments in 2006 and 2009 to consider ratifying this treaty, which is an obvious one for Canada to support and, in fact, champion.

"This time around Canada has told the world that there is no 'current plan' to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture," noted Alex Neve. "That is a climb down from previous pledges to 'consider' ratification and leaves Canada thumbing its nose at a concrete UN treaty that seeks to prevent torture around the world through a system of prison inspections."

#### Background

The Universal Periodic Review process was instituted as part of a UN human rights reform process that was concluded in 2005. At the time the Canadian government was a strong champion of the initiative, which would ensure, for the first time, that the human rights record of every UN member state would be reviewed by other governments on an ongoing basis (once every four years). The review is carried out through the UN Human Rights Council. This is the second time Canada's record has been reviewed. Canada's record was reviewed for the first time in 2009.

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**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** inequality <sup>[3]</sup>  
child rights <sup>[4]</sup>

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**Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/09/canada-gives-human-rights-cold-shoulder-disgraceful-response-un>

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