

# Canada pledges to overhaul broken welfare program for indigenous children <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Canada's federal government has pledged to overhaul its broken First Nation child welfare program after a human rights body found it was racially discriminating against aboriginal youth by underfunding the system.

Tuesday's ruling by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal is being called one of the most important rights decisions related to the country's First Nations in a decade, and it is one that will have a profound and costly impact.

The tribunal found the government's program denied services to First Nations children and families living on reserves, did not adequately address their needs, and through shortfalls made it far more likely for First Nations children to be removed from their families.

It also found Ottawa failed to act despite being aware of the adverse affects of the flawed system for years and has ordered the government "cease its discriminatory practices and reform (the program)".

It is weighing compensation for the thousands of children affected by the funding inequity.

Cindy Blackstock, who launched the rights challenge with the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) advocacy group nine years ago, called the ruling "a complete victory for children".

"It strips away any sensibility that First Nations children are being treated fairly by the government of Canada today," said Blackstock, who serves as executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society.

Federal indigenous affairs minister Carolyn Bennett said she welcomed the ruling and pledged to significantly increase funds available to the program.

"We have to start at making sure that First Nations, Inuit and Métis children in this country get the same start in life as all other Canadian children," she said.

The government pegs the actual funding shortfall for on-reserve child welfare services at between 22% to 34%, compared to funding provided by provinces and territories to non-aboriginal children.

Blackstock said she estimates the system needs an additional \$200m added to the \$600m currently earmarked annually for child welfare services.

In Canada, 48% of children in foster care are aboriginal even though aboriginal youth make up just 7% of the population.

The recent Truth and Reconciliation report – the result of a six-year investigation into the legacy of Canada's residential school system for indigenous children – also flagged the problem and called for reforms to the child welfare system in its 94 recommendations for reconciliation.

AFN national chief Perry Bellegarde called Tuesday's ruling an opportunity to act of that recommendation.

"In this great country, there is no room for discrimination or racism," he said.

"Canada has an obligation to First Nations people to rectify the wrong and remedy the situation."

Justin Trudeau, the liberal prime minister who took office in November, has made repairing the relationship with aboriginal people in Canada one of his government's top priorities.

Aboriginal groups now say they will be looking to the next federal budget – expected either in late February or in March – for the funds to back up those commitments.

Federal justice minister Jody Wilson-Raybould, who was a regional chief with the AFN as the rights complaint was working its way through

the courts, said Tuesday the government would be sitting down with Blackstock and other advocates to discuss how to close the gaps in the current system.

Asked about the potential costs of reforms, she said: "It's difficult to put a price tag on not providing indigenous children with the opportunity to be able to succeed."

-reprinted from The Guardian

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** aboriginal <sup>[4]</sup>

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