

Statement by the Parliamentary Black Caucus

The Parliamentary Black Caucus, established in 2015, is composed of parliamentarians from the Senate and the House of Commons who are either Black Canadians or allies of Black Canadians. We meet regularly to bring forward, discuss, and advocate issues that are of importance to Black communities across Canada. It is only fitting that this caucus was formed during the United Nations Decade of People of African Descent.

Several brutal acts of racism, caught on video, came to light in the past few weeks for everyone to witness. They represent only a very thin slice of the racism that Black Canadians experience in their daily lives. From daily micro-aggressions to the rarer, but tragically fatal, hate-filled acts, as seen in those videos, many non-Black Canadians are becoming conscious of the systemic and insidious nature of racism in our country. Recent public demonstrations across Canada as well as on-line campaigns have illustrated a rapidly developing attempt to understand the causes and manifestations of this pernicious and widespread phenomenon.

The members of the Parliamentary Black Caucus are heartened to see so many of their fellow citizens taking to the streets to peacefully express their desire for Canadian society to stamp out racism. However, to rid our society of racism will require concrete actions by all levels of government to begin to make a difference.

We applaud various governments for their efforts to date to improve the lives of Black Canadians. Nova Scotia has long led and remains a leader on this file. Ontario and Quebec should restore their economic and social programs that were directed toward their Black communities. The federal government made historic investments for Black Canadians in the previous two budgets. Yet, more must be done.

We urge all governments to act immediately. This is not a time for further discussion—the Afro-Canadian community has spoken for many years and is no longer interested in continued consultation or study. Extensive reports and serious proposals already exist. What is needed is the implementation of these proposals and the dedication of adequate financial resources to do so effectively. The reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic proves that governments can act quickly and ably in crisis. Black Canadians are in a state of crisis: it is time to act. Words and symbolic gestures, while important, are not enough.

Executive summary

To minimize the consequences of systemic racism, the Parliamentary Black Caucus calls on all levels of government in Canada to:

1. Measure the pervasiveness of systemic discrimination through the collection of race-based data;
2. Assist Black Canadians in providing economic prosperity to all through measures to support Black-owned/run businesses;
3. Eliminate the barriers to access to justice and public security for Black Canadians and Indigenous people;
4. Make our public administration more effective and resilient by ensuring it actually reflects the diversity of the public it serves; and
5. Recognize and support the artistic and economic contributions of Black Canadian culture and heritage.

Although there are many important areas for Black communities that are not mentioned in this declaration, such as housing, education, and health, we call upon governments to act immediately on the following proposals:

Disaggregated Data

It is hard to change what one cannot measure. For too long, the socio-economic realities faced by Black communities are invisible because of a comprehensive lack of data. Yet limited academic studies regarding Black Canadians point to a similar trend that is more clearly apparent in studies from the United Kingdom and the United States – jurisdictions that collect disaggregated race-based data. In 2018, the federal government began a more serious effort to do so, but there is a consensus that its efforts must move faster and go much further.

- The federal government must immediately lead in the collection and stewardship of disaggregated data.

This is a priority for the Parliamentary Black Caucus. This data can shape social and economic policies more efficiently. In addition:

- Disaggregated data should also include other intersecting identity factors, such as gender and ability.
- Collect disaggregated data within public sector workplaces as well as in the federally regulated private sector.
- Collect race-based data on police interventions.
- Statistics Canada should be the repository for disaggregated data given its legal mandate to ensure that this data is publicly available for study and analysis.
- Strengthen and enforce employment equity legislation by all governments.
- All governments must collect and analyze data on the racialization of poverty.

Economic Tools

There are evident links between economic prosperity, social status and advancement. Although Black Canadians today enjoy equal legal access to all the economic tools available to all Canadians, this was not always the case. Canadians would be shocked to learn of the legal and practical barriers imposed on Black Canadians or Black communities to access these necessary tools existed well into the second half of the 20th century. These barriers stunted the economic advancement of Black Canadians as a whole; in addition, they have, by impeding economic advancement, perpetuated unconscious bias towards Black Canadian entrepreneurs and effectively limited the scope of career options available to Black Canadian workers. To make matters worse, according to surveys from Black Canadian business associations, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately devastated our businesses. This must be addressed immediately.

- The Parliamentary Black Caucus calls upon all levels of governments to target measures to assist businesses owned/operated by Black Canadians.
- The federal government must seek out and support proposals from Black business associations to spur economic development.

- The federal government must increase the number of government procurement contracts for Black-owned/operated business to a level commensurate to the demographic weight of the Black population in Canada. The federal government must assist these businesses in meeting government procurement standards.
- Use e-procurement solutions to collect race-based data to track progress on the government procurement process.

Justice/Public Safety Reforms

Studies have all shown that Black Canadians and Indigenous peoples are no more likely to commit a crime than the general population. Yet the over-policing and over-incarceration of Black Canadians (and Indigenous peoples) are well documented. The hard edge of systemic discrimination is perhaps felt most acutely in the justice and public safety realms. The Parliamentary Black Caucus is looking for the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to reform the justice and public safety systems to weed out anti-Black racism, systemic bias, and make the administration of justice and public security more reflective of and sensitive to the diversity of our country. A number of legitimate, well-conceived programs and proposals exist in this sphere, but they rarely receive adequate funding in current budgetary processes. This must change immediately. We call on the federal government to do the following:

- Implement a Black Canadian justice strategy, working with Black Canadians with experience and expertise on criminal justice issues.

In the Justice mandate:

- Eliminate mandatory minimum sentencing measures.
- Revisit restrictions on conditional sentencing.
- Establish community justice centers across the country as an alternative for imprisonment.
- Fund community-based sentencing diversion programs (e.g., gang diversion programming, drug treatment courts).
- Invest in restorative justice programs and other community-grounded initiatives. Implement pre-sentencing reports for Black, Brown, and other racialized Canadians similar to Gladue reports for Indigenous persons. Review on an annual basis the effectiveness of these pre-sentencing reports, making adjustments where necessary.
- Implement the recommendations from previous parliamentary committees regarding efforts to counter online hate, heighten public safety, and make sure that social media platforms are responsible for removing hateful and extremist content.
- Address the lack of representation of Black Canadians and Indigenous people in the administration of justice (e.g., judges, prosecutors, justices of the peace).
- Provide supplemental legal aid for individuals from communities that are over-represented in our prisons.

In the Public Safety mandate:

- Fundamentally reform police, public security, border security, corrections, and military forces. Focus on effective policing with an emphasis on de-escalation techniques and mental health programming.
- Many Black voices are calling for the defunding and demilitarization of the police. This is a call for the complete reimagining of the roles and responsibilities of policing and, accordingly, the reallocation of budgets. These reallocations should be directed toward social service and mental health care experts trained in nonviolent intervention and de-escalation. It is expected that these non-police experts would work in close collaboration with police services.
- Re-evaluate the presence of police units in public schools, colleges, and universities.
- Prioritize reinvestments into the social determinants of health for Indigenous and Black communities.
- Immediately require full and real-time public transparency with regard to police misconduct financial settlements. Also require these financial settlements to be funded from existing police force budgets.
- Move immediately to ban carding and racial profiling by federal law enforcement. Work with local partners across Canada to end this practice in all jurisdictions.
- Investigate and report on how carding information was shared between the RCMP and other police forces and government agencies.
- In order to address over-representation of Black Canadians and Indigenous people in the federal prison population, implement the recommendations from numerous existing studies on this issue.
- Immediately release from correctional institutions individuals who do not pose a risk to society with adequate support in the community and in consultation with affected communities, if applicable.
- Address the lack of representation of Black Canadians and Indigenous people in the administration of public security (e.g., parole board members, senior prison administration, post-release administration).
- Require body cameras for all on-duty police officers in contact with the public. Prioritize these expenditures from within existing budgets.
- All police boards should be accountable to civilian oversight boards. These boards must be reflective of the communities they serve.

Transforming the Public Sector

Systemic discrimination and unconscious bias exist everywhere, including in our renowned public service. It is becoming more apparent that despite wide public support for anti-Black racism measures, the lack of diversity in the senior ranks of the public service is proving to be a significant barrier to creating and implementing measures in a timely fashion. Our public service has successfully met similar challenges in the past with regard to the place of women and francophones; it is currently in the middle of engaging with Indigenous peoples. The moment is overdue for a proper engagement with Black Canadians and other racialized Canadians. A thoroughly diverse senior public service that looks like Canada is a more resilient and effective public service. We call on government to do the following:

- Ensure that there is Black Canadian representation up to the senior ranks of the public sector.
- Ensure that Black Canadian youth are recruited into the public sector.
- Strengthen labour laws and ensure diverse and equitable hiring within the federal public service, and in federally regulated industries.
- Ensure that jobs and training for underrepresented groups will be a core part of federal infrastructure plans.
- Implement effective anti-bias training and evaluation programs throughout the public service.
- Establish an independent champion for Black federal employees through the creation of a national public service institute.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of the existing employment equity regime to help close the racialized wage and opportunity gaps by all governments.
- Ensure diversity in federal departments and federally regulated workplaces through the strengthening of labour laws.

Capital Investments in Culture and the Arts

The first recorded arrival of Blacks on the shores of what was to become Canada occurred in 1604. Successive waves of free, enslaved, native-born and immigrating Blacks have contributed to the cultural and artistic fabric of Canada. Recognizing and celebrating Black Canadian culture enriches all Canadians, spiritually and economically.

Federal contributions to these important cultural activities are most often limited to operational funding. This model forces Black cultural, heritage, and artistic groups every year to distort their activities in order to chase down programming dollars. The most stable and successful cultural organizations in our communities are those which own the buildings where their activities are housed. We call on the government to do the following:

- Make capital investments in Black Canadian culture and heritage organizations in order to safeguard their long-term survival.
- Make pluriannual operating investments in these organizations in order to reduce paperwork and focus more on the delivery of these activities.
- Create a toolbox of resources for communities, families, and educators to celebrate the contributions of Canada's diverse cultures to our mosaic.
- Recognize that Black Canadian cultural, heritage, and artistic initiatives are a significant economic activity.

Conclusion

While Canada is a great country, for many Black Canadians it has yet to achieve its full potential. For more than 400 years, Black Canadians contributed to what all Canadians enjoy today, in spite of the legal, social, and economic barriers. In order for Canada to fully realize its potential, we must work to eradicate the consequences of systemic discrimination faced by Black Canadians.

There is no shortage of work to do to. Although the Parliamentary Black Caucus is a willing partner for governments of all levels to advance the needs and interests of Canada's Black communities, formal mechanisms are needed to track Canada's progress.

We recommend that the federal government and Parliament create oversight bodies to continue tracking the progress of these efforts and to continually identify new, more effective avenues to eliminate anti-Black racism and systemic discrimination.

- Establish an anti-Black racism directorate at the Privy Council Office to monitor programming and coordinate inter-departmental efforts.
- Parliament should create a new standing committee dedicated to the elimination of discrimination with the mandate to oversee all federal (including crown bodies) actions, programs, and initiatives to combat discrimination.

Together, let's build a better Canada.

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