A DECADE TO ERADICATE DISCRIMINATION AND THE SCOURGE OF RACISM

NATIONAL BLACK CANADIANS SUMMITS TAKE ON THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY

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This article provides an overview of the mobilization and efforts undertaken by the National Black Canadians Summit organized by the Michaëlle Jean Foundation towards the eradication of racial discrimination and the objectives of the International Decade for People of African Descent, proclaimed by the United Nations.

The *International Decade for People of African Descent: Recognition, Justice and Development* proclaimed by the United Nations in 2015 is a call to all Member States to initiate, by 2024, public policies that effectively address the harmful and devastating impacts of racial discrimination, with effects that continue to afflict people of African descent throughout the world, through centuries and from one generation to the next. The unprecedented wave of mobilization for the eradication of all forms of racism this call has generated is also sweeping across Canada, as part of a national effort to ensure that Canada enters resolutely into an era of full enjoyment of all human rights by all, in keeping with its founding values. Because everywhere, constant vigilance is in order.

Racism against Blacks, a source of exclusion and an expression of hatred and violence, is the persistent and odious remnant of centuries of colonial conquest and exploitation, during which millions were abducted, men, women and children assaulted and captured in Africa. Deprived of everything – of their status as human beings, their dignity, their freedom, their names, their property, their lands, their ties, their languages, their history, their civilizational traits – these unfortunate souls were deported to Europe and the Americas to be cruelly reduced to slavery.

The ideology so widely and abominably put into practice by the predatory empires that dominated the world – the claimed supremacy of the white race over others – is far from extinct. Its shards and reverberations can still be felt today through persistent mentalities and prejudices.

Racism remains a scourge with immeasurable consequences. It continues to poison our societies, to damage lives and undermine social stability and balance, essential as they are.

Racism ostracizes, inexorably widens social gaps and produces nothing but a huge deficit. A deficit of opportunities, perspectives, energies, ideas, vision and democracy. A deficit of humanism, of full recognition of the other, of justice and therefore, of development. Are not the requirements of sustainable development that it be responsible, shared, humane and inclusive above all?

Racism is not just the deplorable attitudes or behaviour of some people towards others because of their "ethnic," "racial" or "cultural" differences. History shows us that racism is not trivial or innocuous, that it can be systemic, induced and supported by institutionalized policies and practices.

Racism can involve, and be sanctioned by, coercive con-

straints, meaning that people and communities are racialized[1], discriminated against, marginalized, despised, stripped of their rights and declared undesirable in various circles, places, forums and activities, in public or professional spaces. That should ring a bell, given how blatant the absence is.

Segregationist, slave-owning regimes have allowed and still allow the trade and exploitation of human beings as beasts of burden, disposable after a lifetime of abuse, including mutilation, rape and torture. This barbarity and denial of humanity places millions of people of African descent among the poorest of the poor, on the bottom rungs of many countries.

Recognition implies a duty to remember. Many prefer to avoid the subject, in history books as in the classroom. Yet it should be remembered that the vast majority of the people who laid the foundations of the modern Americas were of African descent. Of the 6.5 million people who crossed the Atlantic between 1500 and 1800, only one million came from Europe. In the first 300 years of the modern Americas as we know them, 5.5 million people came from Africa, chained, forcibly embarked, crammed into the holds of thousands of slave ships that crisscrossed the oceans, in an incessant traffic across the European, African and American continents. The well-oiled machinery of the infamous "Atlantic triangular slave trade" dumped in the Americas millions of souls taken from the African continent, to work plantations as far as the eye could see, settled on land stolen from the people who had been living there for millennia, in another appalling genocide. Europe found its fortune while it doomed to damnation the people of Africa and the first peoples of the Americas, north to south.

In order to take the full measure of the tragedy, it should also be said that behind the figures of this abominable trade in human lives lie even more frightening losses. For every one survivor, it is estimated that dozens more perished in the raids and attacks carried out to capture them. Multitudes would fall from exhaustion and the cruelty inflicted during forced marches to the fortresses built by European settlers along the African coast. The months of captivity before deportation weren't any more forgiving. Further, the mortality rate associated with the harrowing and equally deadly conditions of the journey is estimated at 13%. The infernal crossing dubbed "the middle passage" was an unimaginable ordeal. With hundreds of thousands of bodies thrown overboard, the Atlantic Ocean turned into a marine mass grave.

We who descend from the survivors of this hecatomb number more than 200 million in the Americas alone, scattered from the tip of Canada to the cone of Argentina. Indisputably, communities of African descent are still struggling to recover from the atrocity, to rebuild and be fully reborn to themselves. The obstacles are formidable; the challenges, innumerable. Unshackled, emancipated, we certainly take pride in having overcome this struggle and we honour our ancestors. But we still have to fight incessantly against alienation, latent racism and the injustices that plague us, the deep inequalities, divisions and situations that undermine us.

The objectives of the *International Decade for People of African Descent: Responsibility, Justice and Development* speak to us and summon us far and wide. In Canada, the impetus comes from the field, pushing for decisions and actions, for real change towards a Canadian Anti-Racism Strategy, to ensure implementation of much needed programs and responses in the many domains where discrimination persists, insidious and rampant. Being black continues to be, here as elsewhere, a struggle. Offensive comments, insults, harassment and smears are among the "microaggressions" that upset our daily lives. Racial profiling, difficulties in getting access to employment, certain professional bodies, business financing, services, decision-making bodies and property are all disturbing inequities that undermine our prospects and opportunities. The resurgence of populist ideologies and groups promoting white supremacy, including certain portions of the electorate, social media and the mass media, does not spare Canada and calls on us to be extremely vigilant.

THE NATIONAL BLACK CANADIANS SUMMIT

Young people from black communities share testimonies and concerns that are particularly disturbing and cannot leave us feeling indifferent. They urge us to act and seize upon the *International Decade for People of African Descent: Responsibility, Justice and Development* to make their voices heard and to demand robust initiatives to eradicate, and no less, racial discrimination. The Michaëlle Jean Foundation, acting in close proximity to young people in situations of exclusion, insecurity and vulnerability across Canada alongside their communities, launched the National Black Canadians Summit in 2016, a series of gatherings aimed at bottom-up mobilization, with broad and inclusive participation from the grassroots to the highest levels of decision-making. Based on the concerns, realities and perspectives of African-Canadian populations, their experiences, initiatives and expertise, the National Black Canadians Summit strategically invites the participation and solidarity of numerous partners from the public and private sectors, national and international institutions and organizations, and broader civil society groups. The

1 A 'racialized community' is a group of people who have been given an oppressive racial identity by dominant white society. The phrase 'racialized communities' refers to similar groups of people as do the labels 'visible minority' or 'people of colour', but with a greater emphasis on the fact that 'race' is not a biological reality, and that imposing racial identities has resulted in inequality and oppression.

THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

Proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations, the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024) is a historic opportunity to address and redress the remaining legacy of centuries of the abhorrent slave trade, and the ongoing systematic discrimination and barriers that stand in the way of recognition, justice and development for Afro-descendants.

With the overall objective of promoting respect, protection and fulfillment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Decade for People of African Descent aims more specifically:

- To strengthen national and global action for the full enjoyment of all human rights, and full and equal participation of all Afro-descendants, in all aspects of society;
- To promote greater knowledge of, and respect for, the diverse heritage, culture and contribution of Afro-descendants to the development of societies;
- To reinforce legal frameworks in accordance with the Durban Declaration and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and to ensure their full and effective implementation.

The International Decade for People of African Descent calls for the implementation of concrete, coordinated and multisectoral action plans to end the chronic and systemic discrimination that affects black communities everywhere. Through a duty to bring recognition, justice and development to Afro-descendants, the International Decade for People of African Descent is an opportunity to remember, to bring justice, and to change what can and must be changed.

fight against racism and racial discrimination, in all its forms, must be the concern of all, a truly shared responsibility.

The first two editions of the National Black Canadians Summit, in Toronto in 2017 and in Ottawa in 2019, enabled thousands of participants from across the country to examine the main challenges to be met as well as some ongoing initiatives, to launch a national dialogue on ways to combat discrimination factors, strengthen social cohesion and promote conditions for fully inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. From the outset, the focus was put on targeted issues, clear objectives to be achieved and the development of a strategic plan (2017–2024) for all of Canada. The 2019 gathering in Ottawa provided an opportunity for honest, direct encounters and sessions with elected officials and decision makers in the National Capital. In meetings with ministers, young people had an opportunity not only to plead their case with aplomb, with powerful and specific testimonies, but also to propose concrete solutions.

The choice of Halifax, Nova Scotia, for the third edition of the National Black Canadians Summit, March 20-21-22, 2020, is as intentional as it is historic. As a maritime province of Canada, it offers a contrasted history highly emblematic of that found in the rest of the continent: dual colonial conquest and coexistence in diversity. Between the first peoples whose unceded territory, Mi'kma'ki, was seized and colonized by the French and the English; the Acadians and their resistance to English conquest; and the establishment of the oldest black community in Canada more than 400 years ago, dating back to the days of the transatlantic slave trade; Halifax is also a port of entry, passage way, transit hub and anchorage for thousands of exiles, immigrants and refugees, many fleeing extreme circumstances, mostly from Europe and now from the Middle East and Africa.

Dating back to the 16th century, the unique perspective of African Nova Scotians provides a rare overview of the state of race relations in Canada. Listening to the voices of this community helps us understand and see solutions to the barriers faced not only by people of African descent, but by anyone facing discrimination.

With some fifty African Nova Scotian communities throughout Nova Scotia, the hope is to draw from their long-standing knowledge and practices. Nova Scotia is the only province in Canada with a department mandated to focus on black Canadians. The provincial government has created a dedi-

THE MICHAËLLE JEAN FOUNDATION

The Michaëlle Jean Foundation is the legacy project of Canada's 27th Governor General. Established in 2010, its mission is to mobilize and support, through programs and activities, young Canadians aged 15 to 30, particularly those who, faced with difficult circumstances, find themselves in situations of exclusion, insecurity and vulnerability, anywhere in Canada.

The Michaëlle Jean Foundation supports young people in strengthening their civic engagement, their capacities, the success of their social and entrepreneurial initiatives, and their willingness to act collectively for the common good. Believing that young people are genuine agents of change, it ensures that their voices and concerns are heard, and that their leadership and invaluable contributions are taken into account.

Through its actions, the Foundation emphasizes the power of the arts and culture to open up new spaces for dialogue, to empower and to bring together young people and decision makers. The Michaëlle Jean Foundation also highlights the power of education, vocational training, vital knowledge towards integrated work lives, as well as creativity, the power of innovation, hallmark of the younger generation.

cated Department of African Nova Scotian Affairs that works cross-sectionally on issues, policies and programs affecting African Nova Scotians and society as a whole.

On October 17, 2019, the Legislative Assembly of Nova Scotia unanimously adopted a resolution in support of the objectives of the 2020 National Black Canadians Summit. With it, the historical intent of the Summit stands recorded in the annals of Province House, home to the Nova Scotia Legislature, Canada's bicentennial and oldest legislative building, serving as the seat of Nova Scotia's colonial government since long before Confederation.

In March 2020, in Halifax, the third edition of the Summit comes at the halfway point of the *International Decade of People of African Descent: Recognition, Justice and Development*, a time to assess where its objectives stand, and give them new impetus. In the presence of senior representatives of the United Nations and the international community, the third edition of the Summit will provide an opportunity to advance a global reflection, to summon up urgent action as we face a world of uncertainties where humanistic values are being shattered, extremism and populism flourish, and the frequency of hate speech and hate crimes is on the rise. Along with the Michaëlle Jean Foundation, the United Nations seeks to bring together young people who confront, with great imagination, such perils. Young Afro-descendants and their communities see the wounds and devastating impacts of racism. They want to rid the world of those, and want to feel that they are not alone in this, that their voices carry. That is why the Summit purposefully coincides with the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, on March 21st. On that day, the Summit will launch the Halifax Declaration for the Eradication of All Forms of Discrimination, a landmark call to cross the finish line with the goals we have set for this decade.

How phenomenal it is to see how, in the lead-up to the Summit, community groups and civil society organizations, women, men and youth, activists, researchers, artists and creators, educators and trainers, programmers and entrepreneurs, parliamentarians, lawyers, bankers, professionals from every sector, all deeply engaged across Canada, are not only preparing to raise important issues, but also working hard on recommendations for devising innovative strategies and deploying concrete actions to address a wide range of socio-cultural, economic, political and structural needs. Much attention is now being paid to issues of justice, the very real health impacts of discrimination, professional and economic integration, concerted action against all forms of exclusion, investment in training, innovation and cultural social entrepreneurship, evaluation of integration policies, over-representation of black and indigenous youth within the prison system, and urban planning that needs to be rethought with a humanistic focus. Close collaboration between actors from a wide diversity of sectors will feed the conversations, never to lose touch with pragmatism, the practical and applicable value of the strategies, policies and programs to be implemented, and the skills to be brought together. Corporations will also be asked to testify to the impact of their accountability policies and action plans in promoting inclusion and diversity within their work teams, departments and wider human resources.

It all will be about recognition, justice and development.