THE ERADICATION OF DISCRIMINATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR UNIVERSAL HUMANISTIC VALUES

FROM COMMON HISTORY TO SHARED HUMANITY

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In the previous issue of *Canadian Diversity*, under the title *A Decade to Eradicate Discrimination and the Scourge of Racism: National Black Canadians Summits Take on the Legacy of Slavery*, I set out to reflect on the unprecedented mobilization of Afro-descendant communities across Canada. The opportunity to be seized comes with the International Decade of People of African Descent: Recognition, Justice and Development (2015-2024) proclaimed by the United Nations, which calls on all Member States to act against the systemic racism faced by Blacks in all sectors of our societies.

Black communities hold that, in terms of the realities they face, nothing – policies or action plans – should be designed or implemented without their involvement. Such is the raison d'être of the National Black Canadians Summit, an inclusive space that brings together a multiplicity of voices and perspectives for exchange and debate, the identification of issues, the involvement of actors from different sectors, the development of conversations and proposals. The objective is also to ensure that Canada, from the federal government on to provincial and municipal governments, actors in institutional and private sectors take the full measure of the problem and commit themselves to concrete action, in keeping with the spirit of the call issued by the United Nations. Organized by the Michaëlle Jean Foundation, with a first edition in Toronto in 2017 and a second one in Ottawa in 2019, bringing together each time hundreds of citizens from Black communities with strong participation from youth and the inclusion of decision makers from all sectors, public and private with political leaders, the third edition of the Summit, scheduled for March 20-21-22, 2020 in Halifax, had to be postponed to March 19-20-21, 2021, due to the lockdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, we keep a wary eye. It has not escaped our notice how the most vulnerable communities, Black communities in this instance, are more strongly impacted by the crisis and its collateral damage.

Increasing the alarm, we see how much hatred and rejection add to the scourge everywhere, a global phenomenon regularly deplored by the United Nations. The whole world has witnessed the violent and inhuman police intervention against George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American suf-

focated to death in Minneapolis, and how the resulting outrage led to mass demonstrations and riots in many US cities. "This is the latest in a long line of killings of unarmed African Americans by US police officers and members of the public," said the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, my friend Michelle Bachelet, in a strong statement calling for justice. "We all watch in horror and consternation what's going on in the United States," said the Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Honourable Justin Trudeau. "It is a time for us as Canadians to recognize that we, too, have our challenges. That Black Canadians and racialized Canadians face discrimination as a lived reality every single day. There is systemic discrimination in Canada, which means our systems treat Canadians of colour, Canadians who are racialized differently than they do others."

As evidence, look to the thousands of Canadians, young people of all origins and shades of colour especially, who have since taken to the streets in many cities across Canada and around the world, chanting: "Black Lives Matter! Our lives matter too! All lives matter!", along with George Floyd's last words, "I can't breathe!" because indeed, the air has become unbreathable with hatred of the other.

So what should we make of Canada's history of racism? Two compelling yet little known threads compete to define Canadian history. One reminds us that Canada's past is rooted in ethnic and racial conflicts that remain highly oppressive and destructive, and just as blatantly and brutally obvious. Another thread projects the uplifting vision of a post-racial society, one that heralds Canada as a haven of peace, a land of perfect social harmony through diversity, where conflict and bias have been overcome.

Compared to other areas of the world where ethnic hatred and racial violence are raging, clearly Canada might be hailed as a global example of community building and intercultural living. Yet to this day, our country is not immune to extreme xenophobic movements whose voices find sympathetic resonance, including within certain political parties. Neither are we exempt from rabid racism, venomous hatred and insidious prejudice pervasively coiled up in all sectors of society, including governments, institutions and businesses that systematically marginalize and exclude. This calls for the utmost vigilance and requires us to act and transcend a weighty legacy, starting with greater awareness.

From the eastern tip westward and northward, Canadian history was in fact forged in the fire and fury of colonial conquest largely propelled by the ideological belief in the supremacy of a *White race* and the odious practice of mass enslavement over centuries, a radical domination enterprise decreed by European metropolises and monarchies that demanded the swift and bloody takeover and exploitation, in their name, of already inhabited territories and continents. In the face of the injustices and racist violence that sully our past, it would serve us well to remember that one of the main foundational dynamics of Canada is also that of fierce resistance, of protracted struggles for the intrinsic dignity of all human beings and genuine equality among all peoples.

It is out of such resistance and struggle that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was born, a fundamental covenant in which equality rights are clearly stated, to ensure that everyone is "treated with the same respect, dignity and consideration (i.e., without discrimination), regardless of personal characteristics such as race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, marital status or citizenship."

Based on this pact, Canada established itself as a land of refuge par excellence, where diversity does not describe the other, but the whole, a society that defines itself as intercultural and multiracial. Statistics Canada reports over one in five people (22%) categorized as "visible minorities" in 2016, while more than one in four (27%) young Canadians aged 15–34 self-identified as a member of a racial group or fully acknowledged their ethnic origin.

Black Canadians or Canadians of African descent form the third-largest visible minority group in Canada, after South Asian and Chinese Canadians. Based on the 2016 Census, Canada's Black population totalled nearly 1.2 million people, encompassing 3.5 percent of the total population.

A recent social research project by the Environics Institute for Survey Research and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation,[1] the first of its kind to cover race relations across the country, found that racism, as the Canadian Prime Minister has recognized, is still very much a reality in Canada, where one in five Canadians report experiencing discrimination regularly or from time to time due to their race, while another three in ten have experienced discrimination, albeit very rarely. While a full half of Canadians have a personal experience of discrimination, the same study found a large majority acknowledge the existence of racial discrimination. Nearly three out of four Canadians believe that Indigenous Peoples, Black people, and South Asians are prime targets to experience discrimination often or occasionally. By comparison, only a sliver of Canadians (5%) believe that racialized communities never experience discrimination in Canada. As a result, it could be surmised that strength in numbers is on the side of a propensity to recognize racial discrimination in Canada, hopefully with an attendant willingness to eradicate it.

1 *Race Relations in Canada 2019 Survey* by the Environics Institute for Survey Research and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, Toronto, December 10, 2019.

ERADICATING DISCRIMINATION

> "We must see racism for what it is. It is a myth of the superior and the inferior race. It is the false and tragic notion that one particular group, one particular race is responsible for all of the progress, all of the insights in the total flow of history. And the theory that another group or another race is totally depraved, innately impure, and innately inferior. In the final analysis, racism is evil because its ultimate logic is genocide."
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> – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Other America*, April 1967

What if universal humanistic values and the integral enjoyment of all human rights by all was the greatest legacy of a history whose horrors and crimes are at last recognized, their false rationale repudiated, their indignities finally overcome and transcended through recognition, justice and development?

The International Decade for People of African Descent serves to celebrate our existence, our resistance, and our contribution to the betterment of humanity as a whole, the value of struggles for emancipation, the quest for justice as a condition for development at a time when the lethal impacts of climate change, terror and hate, transnational criminality, isolation within traditional and national identities, the proliferation of chemical and nuclear weapons, the widening and deepening chasms of inequality increasingly threaten our very existence. Meanwhile, various forms of collective resistance are emerging. Voices are being raised, women, men and young people in their thousands, of all races and origins, take to the streets, determined to act against all forms of latent and recurrent exclusion. Racism has provided an age-old template for other forms of oppression. Consequentially, the fight against racism and discrimination – and the fatal inequities they produce – is also a fight against generic oppression, a way to make humanity more human.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all Member States of the UN in 2015, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on which the Agenda is based, aim to achieve critical progress in improving living conditions and advancing rights around the world. The same spirit moves the International Decade for People of African Descent as an urgent appeal and an opportunity to commit fully to uprooting the barbaric heritage that feeds racism and ensure that no one is left behind. Needless to say, exclusion is counterproductive and generates an abysmal deficit of participation, resources, ideas, solutions, justice, citizenship, and as a consequence, of shared growth, responsible and sustainable development. All sectors of society must be appropriately involved. This is the vision embraced and advocated by the Michaëlle Jean Foundation; that the experience, condition, perspectives and aspirations of Black communities may also espouse those of Aboriginal peoples, other racialized communities, women, LGBTQ2 people, other marginalized and excluded people of Canada. Our hope is to chart a new model of leadership for the common good that is truly inclusive and highly transformative. Such a social vision must be built pragmatically, through concrete actions, mass mobilization and a firm commitment by key decision makers and legislators to listen and stand together with our populations, all those who can no longer wait on the sidelines of the human family.

How is it possible to imagine all forms racism and discrimination eradicated for good? History has the answer.

In the early 19th century, the elimination of chattel slavery would have been considered impossible. This abhorrent yet highly profitable practice, was it not the main driving force behind the world's greatest economic powers for 400 years at the time? European slaveholding regimes dominated the world, capturing colossal wealth through systems of exploitation of unspeakable cruelty and the plunder of resources in the colonies. Yet, by century's end, inspiring, enlightened ideas for the advent of universal humanistic values, the audacity of revolutionary abolitionist movements, decades of valiant acts of resistance and revolt by slaves who had become self-aware and self-reliant in the belief that only they could secure their own freedom won the day and forced human trafficking and slavery to be outlawed.

Beginning in 1791, incessant slave uprisings led to the dismantling of the highly profitable French colony of Saint-Domingue, a struggle that culminated in the 1804 proclamation of the Republic of Haiti. The first free Black republic in the world was born, an unprecedented feat, previously unimaginable. France, together with the rest of the slaveholding allied powers, kingdoms and colonial empires, undertook to do everything to impede and make sure the enterprise of these rebellious Blacks would fail, starting with a total economic embargo. Undeterred, the young Republic of Haiti, with its meagre resources, was bold enough to finance Simon Bolivar's expeditions for the independence of the Latin American colonies, on the explicit condition that he abolish slavery across the continent. Inspired by the example of the Haitian revolution, the impossible dream then spread among the oppressed of the earth. It would outlast the century until the whole African continent was decolonized.

Who would have thought that in 2009, a Black woman of Haitian origin acting as Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada would welcome a man, also of African descent, Barack Hussein Obama, recently elected President and Commander-in-Chief of the United States of America? We walked together with resolve, carried by an immense joy, well aware of the weight of history, our foremothers and forefathers in struggle very much on our minds, all those who had pulled everything they had together to overcome and make an improbable day like this a reality.

Our struggle is a long, winding path, never totally cleared. Nothing is ever a given. The comings and goings of history can take everything away if we are not careful.

Putting a black man to death, a forceful knee on his neck until he suffocates, ignoring his pleas is violence from another time, but it is also very much violence of this day and age. To shut out, to ostracize, to shame, to abuse the other, to pronounce a verdict of inferiority, of undesirability because of skin colour remains an all too common experience. Here lies the motivation behind the National Black Canadians Summit, the Michaëlle Jean Foundation and the many allies who dare think about, and call for, a national plan aimed eradicating racial discrimination, a remnant of slavery, at the intersection of other inequalities based on gender, age, religion, handicap, sexual orientation.

In these uncertain and inward-looking times, when hate speech and hate crimes are on the rise around the world, often with impunity, we face a duty to take action. Let us not be unnerved by hardship, contempt or indifference. Universal humanistic values are a daily struggle, a fervent aspiration we aim to see triumph.