INTERVIEW WITH AYMAN AL-YASSINI

Ayman Al-Yassini

Ayman Al-Yassini is the Executive Director of the Canadian Race-Relations Foundation, a Crown Corporation mandated to facilitate throughout Canada the development, sharing and application of knowledge and expertise in order to contribute to the elimination of racism and all forms of racial discrimination in Canadian society.

The Canadian Race Relations Foundation's (CRRF) responds to questions posed by the Association for Canadian Studies exploring the current situation of race relations, racism and multiculturalism in Canada. Response to the five questions are drawn from a number of sources which inform the CRRF's work, including findings from some of the research funded by the CRRF, outputs from the various policy dialogues and various other activities through which the CRRF has engaged with Canadians. The responses provided are by no means exhaustive, but reflect the current state of knowledge that is being produced across the country.

What are the best approaches to improve our understanding of the phenomenon of racism in Canada?

In general, the best approaches to improving our understanding of racism are those approaches that place race and racism at the centre of analysis and focus. Some of these approaches are:

- Understanding the relationship between race and racism. This means understanding that race is a social construct, and that racism is an individual, systemic and institutional phenomenon that informs and influences human interactions and outcomes;
- Being self-reflective of how race affects ones advantage or disadvantage in life;
- Applying an anti-racism analytical framework (race lens) to better understand the multi-faceted and complex ways in which racism is manifested and experienced;
- Being able to critically examine the relationship between law (rule of law, application and interpretation of law) and racial power, in order to change it;
- Letting the experiences of victims form our understandings of racism; and
- Understanding the role that race and racism play in the context of Canadian history and society.

What are the new forms of racism, racial discrimination and what can be done to combat them?

The post 9/11 environment has brought about a shift in the construct of race and racism to engender a new focus of who is seen as "the other". This environment reconstructs "the other" based on a combination of race, religion and national background.

- Due to their religious and ethnic backgrounds, Muslims are subjected to racism;
- Welfare racism: the enforcement and surveillance policies and practices of governments to control spending on welfare assistance and to "end welfare fraud". These have had a racialized impact on people of colour;
- Under the tenets of safety and security, there is a convergence in the shifts in policies and practices that are being developed and implemented by governments, public institutions, and private sector, which centralizes race and racism to identify "the other", who is a threat to safety and security. The networking of security strategies and measures that are comprehensively applied ensures that the identity of "the other" is consistent across sectors;
- Although the debate about Canadian identity (and who is a Canadian) is not new, the post 9/11 climate has generated a wider discussion about Canadian multiculturalism, identity, and loyalty to the country;
- Other measures to combat racism: acknowledge that racism does in fact exist; ensure that policies are in place to address racism and discrimination; adopt a creative and simplified approach to the implementation of the Employment Equity Act; enhance work place equity and anti-racism training; and develop and implement public awareness campaigns.

What is the cost of racism and racial discrimination in the community and the workplace, such as at federal institutions (e.g. indicators to monitor racism and racial discrimination in the community and the workplace?

Some of the indicators to monitor racism and racial discrimination in the community and the workplace include:

- Under-employment and unemployment rates among and within racialized communities;

- The extent of established and sustainable institutions and support systems within racialized communities;
- The number and ratio (both between White and racialized students and among racialized students) of racialized students successfully completing high school;
- The number and ratio (both between White and racialized students and among racialized students) of racialized students entering and successfully completing post-secondary education;
- The representation of racialized students in the respective education disciplines – "hard sciences" vis-à-vis "soft sciences";
- The under-representation, and at times, absence of respective racialized groups in academia teaching and research;
- The number and ratio (both between White and racialized families and among racialized families) of racialized families living in poverty and the intersection of gender, age, marital status, etc.;
- The extent and prevalence of social unrest and instability within and among racialized communities (e.g. incidence of violence, crime, etc.);
- The incidence of illnesses and diseases, particularly stress related diseases, mental health illnesses, within and among racialized communities;
- Racial disparities in the provision of and access to health care, and the undertaking of race-based research (health) for Aboriginal peoples and racialized peoples; and
- Participation of racialized groups in the political system/structure.

Workplace

- Under-representation of racialized groups in certain employment sectors such as healthcare, public service, and in leadership and senior management positions;
- Overrepresentation of racialized groups in certain employment sectors (e.g. service sector, entry level positions);
- Incidence of illness and absenteeism among racialized employees; and
- Prevalence of race-based complaints and grievances;

Do you think that we have made progress as a society in fighting racism in Canada?

Canada is internationally recognized for its commitment to human rights and for its fight against all forms of discrimination, including racism. Multiculturalism, diversity and inclusiveness are some of the main characteristics of Canadian identity. A number of key legislative and legal instruments such as the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Official Languages Act*, the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, the *Employment Equity Act*, and the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, offer a glimpse of Canada's commitment to human rights and the protection of fundamental freedoms of all. However, despite these legislative and legal instruments, some racist incidents continue to occur. It is against this reality that the CRRF is seeking to eradicate racism in Canada, and to build on our accomplishments to date.

Over the years, we witnessed more openness to respond to and address direct forms of racism. Our challenge is to make more progress in addressing systemic and institutional racism. We note the incremental steps the Federal Government has taken to acknowledge the historical racism that was practiced against some racialized groups, including the recent apology made to Chinese-Canadians.

However, there is a need to aggressively tackle the problems of racism in the country, in particular the problems faced by Aboriginal peoples and the communities of African and Caribbean origin. As noted in the Report of Doudou Diene, Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, Canada is still deeply affected by racism. The country is influenced by a legacy of racial discrimination embedded in the history of trans-Atlantic slavery and of Western colonialism. (Diene, 2004:68).

In what way does multiculturalism impact the fight against racism?

- A number of responses to multiculturalism, both as ideology and as public policy, emerged prior to and following the adoption of the Canadian *Multiculturalism Act* in 1988. Some Canadians felt that multiculturalism constitutes a threat to their own construct and perception of Canadian identity – an identity shaped by the French-English duality;
- We believe that multiculturalism is consistent with Canada's liberal democratic values, and that it has been a positive factor in strengthening Canada – economically, politically, socially and internationally;
- Multiculturalism, whether at the federal, provincial or municipal levels, protects individual and group rights against racism and racial discrimination;
- There is a need to vigorously implement the federal government's National Action Plan Against Racism, including the Racism-Free Workplace Strategy, if we are to remove the barriers that affect the hiring and career advancement of racialized communities.