



Black Legal Action Centre

Suite 221 – 720 Spadina Avenue • Toronto • Ontario • M5S 2T9

October 11, 2019 / Toronto

FEIGNED OUTRAGE

When images of Prime Minister Trudeau in blackface, appeared several weeks ago, there was tremendous shock, and a frantic public and very political discussion about his racist and offensive behaviour.

Blackface is a very troubling legacy of the slavery that existed in Canada¹ and the United States. Its true purpose, outside of the amusement of its primarily white audiences, is to mock the existence of Black people through stereotypical portrayals of Blackness: it makes fun of slavery and its impact, and like slavery, denigrates and dehumanizes Black people and their bodies.

However, the shock and outrage of seeing our Prime Minister in blackface, stuffed pants and all, has quickly passed. The public, the media, those on social media – on the left and the right – seem to have moved on to other issues. The Black Legal Action Centre (BLAC) is deeply troubled by the fleeting nature of the outrage.

Even the odious comments by MP Judy Sgro – that Black people were flattered by Trudeau’s choosing to dress in blackface – did not cause any lasting stir. We at BLAC point out that while those who are privileged may choose to dress in blackface and believe it to be a harmless act, living with systemic racism and indignity is not a choice – and it is not without harm. This is because the reality of anti-Black racism and its impact is not transient for our community and the people we serve. The impact of slavery and racism is real, lasting and devastating.

In BLAC’s opinion, the reaction to Trudeau was largely superficial and a reflection of the indifference to the realities of anti-Black racism in our country, including from those who hold themselves out as allies of the Black community. Disheartening as well, was the use of the issue to serve political ends. For instance, Andrew Scheer, while unequivocal in his criticism of Trudeau, was absolutely silent regarding a member of his own party, Tamara Jensen. Ms. Jensen participated in a Zwarte Piet² event in 2016, where numerous participants dressed up in complete blackface.³

So, despite the initial uproar and frenzy over the Prime Minister’s behaviour, Black people remain in the same inequitable position in virtually every part of our society; in housing, in health, in education and in employment, to name a few. In an ideal (equitable) world, those who were frantically writing about and fretting over racist

Website: www.blacklegalactioncentre.ca

Email: info@blacklegalactioncentre.ca

Phone: 416-597-5831 • Toll Free: 1-877-736-9406

Facsimile: 416-925-3564 • Toll Free Facsimile: 1-844-302-2694



behaviours would not simply forget about the substantive and systemic issues that impact Black life today and every day.

The righteous indignation exhibited over the Prime Minister's blackface should translate into righteous indignation about the inequities that are a current and *ongoing* reality for so many in our community, including the fact that

- the poverty rate among African Canadians is more than three times the average of white Canadians
- poverty among single-parent, mother-led families stood at 65% for African Canadian families compared to 26% for European Canadian families
- 33% of children of Caribbean heritage and 47% of children of continental African heritage live in poverty, compared to 18% of white Canadian children
- the unemployment rate for African Canadian women is 11% compared to 7% for the general Canadian population
- African Canadian women, when employed, are making 37% less than white men and 15% less than their white female counterparts
- in Toronto, Black children comprise 8% of the population under the age of 18, yet 41.8% of children apprehended by the state
- Black people are the targets of hate crime more than any other community in Canada. In 2013, they comprised 44% of the 585 hate crimes motivated by race and ethnicity in Canada
- African Canadians comprise 3% of the Canadian population, but 9% of the federal prison population.⁴

These inequities were documented in a report to the United Nations Human Rights Council by the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, which detailed the reality of Black life in Canada. The report stated:

Despite Canada's reputation for promoting multiculturalism and diversity and the positive measures taken to address racial discrimination, the Working Group is deeply concerned about the human rights situation of African Canadians. Canada's history of enslavement, racial segregation and marginalization has had a deleterious impact on people of African descent ... Across the country, many people of African descent continue to live in poverty and poor health, have low educational attainment and are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. It is important to underline that the experience of African Canadians is unique because of the particular history of anti-Black racism in Canada, which is traceable to slavery and its legacy, through specific laws and practices enforcing segregation



in education, residential accommodation, employment and other economic opportunities.⁵ [Emphasis added.]

While BLAC is offended and disappointed by the conduct of the Prime Minister, we are more concerned about the systemic discrimination and inequities that deny our community the human right to live with dignity each and every day. The conduct of the Prime Minister, while problematic, is not the problem. It is merely a symptom. Systemic anti-Black racism and discrimination are the problem.⁶

Where is the outrage about a provincial system that allows for the killings of over 70 Black people⁷ and yet enables those responsible to consistently be exonerated of any crime?

Where is the outrage about the fact that Black families are being destroyed by state apprehension of Black children at an alarming rate?

Where is the outrage about the failure of the education system to provide a safe and equitable learning environment for our children?

Where is the outrage about an education system that targets and disciplines Black students at disproportionate rates to their white counterparts and streams them into non-academic programs?⁸

Justin Trudeau's repeated use of blackface is offensive and outrageous. It was not acceptable in the 1990s and it certainly is not acceptable now. However, true outrage must include outrage about the appalling inequities that we have outlined above and that remain the lived reality for many Black people across this country.

Sincerely,

BLACK LEGAL ACTION CENTRE

BLAC is a non-profit community legal clinic that provides free legal services for low or no income Black residents of Ontario.

¹ Slavery existed in Canada from the 1600s to the 1800s. See Statement by the Black Legal Action Centre on Emancipation Day (August 1, 2019) at <https://www.blacklegalactioncentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Statement-by-The-Black-Legal-Action-Centre-on-Emancipation-Day.pdf>

² For an understanding of Zwarte Piet, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zwarte_Piet

³ See <https://www.citynews1130.com/2019/09/19/conservative-candidate-langley-reportedly-pictured-blackface/>

⁴ Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on its mission to Canada, Human Rights Council, Thirty-sixth session 11-29 September 2017, A/HRC/36/60/Add.1, at para. 33. Retrieved from: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/36/60/Add.1>. [UN Report].

⁵ *UN Report*, at paras. 45, 49, 54, 57, 68.

⁶ See the Colour of Poverty Campaign – Colour of Change 2019 Racial Justice Report Card, released October 10, 2019 at <https://colourofpoverty.ca/2019/10/09/2019-racial-justice-report-card/>

⁷ Since 1970, in Ontario alone, 70 African Canadians have been killed at the hands of police. They include: Andrew “Buddy” Evans (1978); Albert Johnson (1979); Michael Sargeant (1979); Leander Savoury (1985); Anthony Griffins (1987); Lester Donaldson (1988); Michael Wade Lawson (1988); Marlon Neal (1990); Raymond Lawrence (1992); Ian Clifford Coley (1993); Albert Moses (1994); Andrew Bramwell (1996); Tommy Anthony Barnett (1996); Hugh Dawson (1997); Henry Musaka (2000); Chevranna Abdi (2003); O’Brien Christopher-Reid (2004); Courtney Peters (2004); Jerry Knight (2004); Sugston Brookes (2004); Adeyeri Robinson (2005); Duane Christian (2006); Shelton McKenzie (2006); Alwy Nadhir (2007); Eric Osawe (2010); Reyal Jardine-Douglas (2010); Junior Alexander Manon (2010); Keith Prescod (2011); Anthony Murray (2011); Corey Armstrong (2011); Michael Eligon (2012); Frank Berry (2012); Ian Pryce (2013); Malcolm Jackman (2013); Donald Thompson (2013); Daniel Clause (2014); Jermaine Carby (2014); Marc Ekamba-Boekwa (2015); Kwasi Skene-Peters (2015); Andrew Loku (2015); Abdurahman Abdi (2016); Alexander Wetlaufer (2016); Ozama Shaw (2017); Raymond Alliman (2017); See Marcoux, J., & Nicolson, K. (2018). *Deadly Force: Fatal encounters with police in Canada: 2000- 2017*. CBC News. Retrieved from: <https://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/longform-custom/deadly-force>; Nangwaya, A. (2011). Factsheet on police containment of and violence in the African Community. Toronto Media Co-op. Retrieved from: <http://toronto.mediacoop.ca/blog/ajamu-nangwaya/6183>; Ontario Human Rights Commission, *A Collective Impact: Interim report on the inquiry into racial profiling and racial discrimination of Black persons by the Toronto Police Service* (Government of Ontario: November 2018).

⁸ We, at BLAC, believe that this contributes to a school to prison pipeline that results in intergenerational poverty and further exclusion from society; *UN Report*, at para. 55.