



## **Black Community Coalition Slams Lack of Provincial Election Focus on Addressing Poverty, Equity and Racism**

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**June 1st, 2014, Toronto, Ontario**

A coalition of prominent African Canadian organizations and community members has expressed deep dismay and alarm at the complete lack of attention to issues related to the most marginalised in our society—women, the working class, poor people, racialized and Aboriginal communities and youth—in the upcoming provincial and municipal elections.

The community coalition supports the building of a diverse, inclusive, equitable Ontario where human rights, equity and social justice are actively promoted; structural barriers are identified and appropriately addressed through strong policies and action; where specific social and economic initiatives are developed to increase equal opportunities and advance a fair, sustainable standard of living.

According to the community coalition, “It is particularly troubling that in a province where most large urban cities are extremely diverse and multi-racial, and where increasing social and income disparities are causing deep social problems, none of the political parties in the current provincial election campaign offers any specifics to address these issues. Human rights, social justice and equity are nowhere on any party’s platform”. In building awareness and engagement, the coalition is mobilising members of the community to engage in discussions and ask critical questions of all candidates about the important social justice and equity issues confronting us.

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## Some Quick Facts and Questions to Ask:

### Poverty and Unemployment

#### Facts

- Members of racialized groups in Ontario face significant labour market discrimination and exclusion and higher poverty rates than non-racialized Ontarians. This discrimination is reflected in both employment incomes and unemployment rates.
- One example: Statistics Canada found that Canadian-born African Canadians face a wage gap of about 10 to 15 per cent compared to non-racialized groups. The gap persists even though the results were controlled for education and residential location, and the statistics only include people born in Canada.
- The African Canadian community experiences some of the highest levels of poverty and unemployment in Canada, with some segments of the community having unemployment levels as high as 80%.
- African Canadian youth are 3 times more likely to be unemployed than other youth.

#### Key Questions

- How are all three political parties specifically supporting the *Ontario Poverty Reduction Act*, to which all three major parties were signatories? Are they prepared to advocate for the recognition of the significant and exacerbated risk of poverty amongst racialized groups immigrants, and Aboriginal people as mentioned in the Act?
- Will they support an anti-poverty strategy that addresses racism-based determinants of poverty for members of racialized communities?
- Will they support the need for improved and more rigorous government policies and accountability mechanisms to address the impacts of discrimination on racialized workers in Ontario and to remove barriers in the workplace?
- What is their commitment to raising the minimum wage to a decent level, ensuring sustainable and long-term housing support to alleviate the current housing crisis, supporting a reasonable raise in social assistance rates and addressing all of this in the context of a highly stratified society where racial discrimination and racialized economic disparities are major growing challenges?
- Will you push for the collection of disaggregated data to ensure the effective monitoring of progress in this area?

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## **Child Protection Facts**

Child protection services in Ontario, especially the GTA have a disproportionate number of African Canadian children in care. Research has identified poverty, class and racial bias as significant contributing factors.

- While Toronto's African Canadian community constitutes 8.5% of the population, referrals to child protection services for the African Canadian community is close to 22%. Most referrals are from the police and schools.
- The African Canadian community constitutes the highest rate of representation at all service stages (Referrals, investigations and transfer to on-going services).

## **Key Questions**

- Are the three parties prepared to initiate a process to focus on equitable and anti-racist policy development and oversight of the child protection services in the province to address racism, systemic and structural barriers, more culturally aligned service delivery at every stage and to ensure better accountability for service outcomes and transparency of reporting and engagement with the African Canadian community?
- Given the seriousness of the current crisis are you prepared to call for an enquiry into the crisis in child protection services in relation to the African Canadian community?

## **Anti Racism and Human Rights**

### **Facts**

- Based on reported hate crimes related to race or ethnicity, African Canadians are still the most frequently victimized group (21% of hate crimes of all types).
- Of the three most common grounds of discrimination in Ontario –disability, race, and gender – only the ground of race lacks a dedicated government body, or program of action, designed specifically to address issues arising on this ground. There is a Disability Office in the Ontario Public Service (Accessibility Program Design and Delivery Branch) that assists specifically with implementation of legislatively required accessibility standards (AODA) and barrier review and consultation processes (ODA), as well as a Women's Directorate that exists specifically to promote women's equality. The most recent Ontario Governments, however, have failed to create an Anti-Racism Secretariat, despite promises to bring this office into being in Section 31.3 of the Ontario *Human Rights Code*.
- There is no coordinated, coherent mandate for government related services to collect and analyse data with race being addressed specifically.

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## Key Questions

- How will parties support and promote the development of an overarching priority like a **Provincial Anti-racism Secretariat**, as called for in existing legislation? Such a body could develop a broad, integrated, coordinated provincial Anti-Racism and Inclusion strategy to provide coherent policy and accountability leadership in addressing a variety of systemic issues that plague the community—e.g. racial discrimination in criminal justice, health care and mental health, housing; persistently high drop-out and failure rates in the educational system; community and state violence; persistent police targeting, profiling and carding of African Canadians, etc.
- Explain what plans they intend to address the alarming increase in racism across Ontario and what will be done (including at the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario) to monitor anti-Black racism specifically.
- Will they push for the collection, analysis, and public reporting of disaggregated race-based data in government regulated services (e.g. education, health care, justice system etc.) and employment to identify potential barriers facing our communities, and informed and effective strategies to address these?

## Criminal Justice

### Facts

- The African Canadian community constitutes one of the youngest and most rapidly growing demographic across the province.
- African Canadians in correctional facilities are disproportionately represented and suffer greater discrimination and harsher disciplinary actions. With an 85% increase in incarceration rates since 2003/2004, African Canadians bear a significant carceral burden.
- The proportion of African Canadian youth in the correctional system is 4 times higher than all other youth population.
- Serious structural inequalities, including racism have long been established through research as major factors. Additionally the mental health status of African Canadian inmates has worsened significantly.

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## Key Questions

Is your party prepared to explore emergency options for addressing the current crisis in criminal justice including:

- Strategies and directives to more effectively monitor and address known inequities in arrests, sentencing outcomes and treatment of African Canadians (especially youth) in the criminal justice system, for example, more community diversion programs and *Gladue* type courts?
- What is being proposed in the way of expanded and meaningfully resourced preventative, rehabilitation-and-resiliency focused approaches to fighting crime and delinquency?

## Education

### Facts

According to Toronto District School Board data for the 2012 school year, African Canadian students

- Have the lowest graduation rate (65%)
- Highest absenteeism rate (19.5%)
- Highest suspension rate across all grade levels
- Self identified as being most at risk (29%)
- Have the highest number of students with less than 8 credits at grade 9 completion (29%)

### Key Questions

- What provincial strategies and policy changes does your party propose to urgently address the structural issues related to African Canadian youth disengagement from our educational systems and the alarmingly and grossly disproportionate drop out, suspension and expulsion rates?
- For example, will your party support a commitment to: eliminating streaming; reviewing special education placements; end school to prison pipeline; reform curriculum to reflect culturally responsive, anti-racist and relevant teaching approach.

## Conclusions

According to coalition members, “Across almost every indicator, the African Canadian community continues to be one of the most vulnerable and marginalised in this Ontario which prides itself as being a beacon of pluralistic, cosmopolitan opportunity for all. We need urgent and focussed action. The implications of non action are numerous”.

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## Two Implications

Ontario's increasing income inequality has disproportionately negatively impacts on racialized communities and women. Neighborhood and population growth is resulting in a widening gap and spatial separation of rich and poor and could likely lead to US-style gated communities for those in the higher income and educational strata.

Additionally, the prevalence of high crime rates in working class and immigrant neighbourhoods will likely persist and deepen as long as we remain wedded to existing "tough-on-crime" approaches versus addressing the root causes of anti-social behaviour and crime. Low-income neighborhoods are also often overwhelmingly racialized and immigrant in nature.

As well, issues like child poverty, cultural ignorance, racist practices at the police and school levels and agency services that are not equitable and anti-oppressive all combine to create a deep, on-going crisis as manifested in children protective services, across the various kinds of agencies for the African Canadian community. Continued differential treatment, surveillance, control, poor diagnostic tools, family fragmentation, poor educational outcomes all have negative implications for the African Canadian community. The alarming growth in Ontario in the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots", including along racialized lines, moreover, bodes ill for all Ontarians, as research has consistently shown that all people suffer the consequences, and are ultimately less happy, in highly stratified, unequal societies, where there is less social integration and trust between citizens, and no safety net to catch us if we fall.

Ontario's diverse African Canadian community has a long history of achievement, resourcefulness and dynamism. African Canadians have long contributed to the economic, social, political and cultural development of this province and will continue to do so. Numerous community organizations and initiatives continue to work and contribute to building a strong, vibrant community. "However the government must play a more meaningful and deliberate role in addressing these deep structural challenges. The current political leadership has failed us", according to coalition members.

**Supporting Organizations** Global Afrikan Congress, Midaynta Community Services African Canadian Coalition of Community Organizations, (ACCO) African Canadian Heritage Association, (ACHA) Harriet Tubman Community Organization (HTCO), Dejinta Beesha, Tabono Institute, Zero Gun Violence, Redemption Reintegration Services, (RRS) Adinkra Farm, Jamaican Canadian Association, All-African People's Revolutionary Party (A-ARP), African Heritage Educator's Network, (AHEN) Caribana Art's Group , Alexander Park CRC. Pan Afrikan Solidarity Network, Heritage Skills Development Centre.

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