



Presentation of Canada's 6<sup>th</sup> Periodic Report under the ICESCR to the  
United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)  
February 24-25, 2016  
Opening Statement

## Introduction

Mr. Chair and members of the Committee, Canada is here today to present its sixth periodic report under the *International Covenant on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.

My name is Rachel Wernick. I am an Assistant Deputy Minister at the Department of Canadian Heritage. I am joined today **by Ambassador Rosemary McCarney from our Permanent Mission to the UN** as well as colleagues from various federal departments and from several provincial governments, including:

From Employment and Social Development, **Mr. Doug Murphy**;

From Indigenous and Northern Affairs, **Mr. François Weldon**;

From Justice, **Ms. Josée Filion**;

From Health, **Mr. Alexander Campbell**;

From Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, **Mr. Bruce Scofield**;

Representing the Government of Quebec, **Mr. Éric Thérault**;

Representing the Government of Ontario, **Mr. Abiodun Lewis**;

Representing the Government of British Columbia, **Mr. Kurt Sandstrom**.

In 2017, Canada will mark the 150th anniversary of Confederation. The approach of this important milestone provides an opportunity to reflect on Canada's long-standing commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights. For Canada, this commitment is grounded in three essential characteristics: a pluralistic, inclusive society, inclusive and accountable governance—with co-operation across all orders of government—and the vital role of civil society and Indigenous peoples.

Respect for diversity is Canada's strength, and a driving force behind Canada's achievements – culturally, politically, and economically. Canada's experience with peaceful pluralism has taught us to accept and respect diverse views and to understand that the strength of our society depends on the full participation of all its citizens. This commitment was reaffirmed in the recent appointment of the new federal Cabinet, in which 50% of new Ministers are women and 17% are visible minorities.

Canada is a multicultural society of 35 million people, with two official languages, English and French, and over 200 different ethnic origins represented in our population.

The Indigenous peoples of Canada – comprising First Nations, Inuit and Métis – make up a total population of about 1.4 million people and include more than 600 First Nations communities, representing some 50 cultural groups.

As the Committee is aware, Canada is a federal state. There is a federal government, 10 provincial governments and 3 territorial governments. Each of these governments has its respective sphere of constitutional jurisdiction. All orders of government take seriously their obligations under the Covenant and share a strong commitment to work together to protect and advance human rights in Canada. Canada's co-operative approach to implementation allows provincial and territorial governments to find local solutions to local concerns, and, when combined with federal policies and commitments, create a strong foundation for the realization of rights under the Covenant.

All governments consult with civil society, community groups, Indigenous organizations and other stakeholders on specific policies and programs that serve to implement human rights. Their views were crucial in informing both Canada's response to the Committee's List of Issues, and in highlighting the important human rights issues facing Canada leading up to this presentation.

This open and co-operative approach is further strengthened by features of Canada's legal system, such as our Constitution and independent judicial system, which ensure that Canadians across the country have a common base of human rights protections. Within Canada, the Covenant is primarily implemented through a multitude of laws, policies and programs across all orders of government. Jurisdictions often work together to address challenges in areas such as health, social services, housing and homelessness, family justice, and issues affecting Indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities. Where Canadians consider themselves to be subject to a violation of their rights, their avenues to advocate, challenge and seek redress are accessible and well-established.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which is part of our constitution, guarantees equality and non-discrimination: Canadians are able to access their rights without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, religion, disability, age, sex, or sexual orientation. The Charter guarantees civil and political rights, and protects several Covenant rights, in particular: the right to form and join trade unions; the right to strike; the right to take up residence and pursue a livelihood in any province or territory; official languages rights; and minority official language educational rights.

In addition, many provinces also have their own human rights legislation, assuring further protection for Covenant rights within more localized contexts.

Finally, Canada's Constitution recognizes and affirms the existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

With this context in mind, I would now like to turn to some key developments and new commitments in Canada since the submission of our Report in 2006. Canada has instituted a number of programs and measures that further the progressive realization of

the rights under the Covenant, thereby improving the lives of Canadians. Specifically, I would like to discuss three areas: Canada's renewed relationship with Indigenous peoples, Canada's social protection framework, and the protection of migrants and refugees.

## **OUR RENEWED RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

For many Indigenous Peoples in Canada, the Canadian reality has not been—and is not today—easy, equitable or fair. Canada is committed to a renewed nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples, built on a foundation of recognition, rights, respect, cooperation and partnership based on the spirit of reconciliation.

In Canada, reconciliation starts with recognizing and respecting Aboriginal title and rights in accordance with Canada's Constitution, international treaties and other key instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Canada plans to implement.

Canada has five cross-cutting priorities for the future of its relationship with Indigenous peoples: 1) moving forward with rights and reconciliation; 2) putting children and youth first; 3) supporting stronger Indigenous communities; 4) improving the quality of life for Métis individuals and communities; and 5) fostering a strong, inclusive and vibrant North.

To realize these priorities, the Government of Canada will be entering into discussions with leaders of First Nations, Métis Nation, Inuit, provincial and territorial governments, parties to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, and other key partners, to design an engagement strategy for developing a national reconciliation framework informed by the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Similarly, a key component of the realization of these priorities has been the creation of a national public inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada.

Through cooperation across all orders of government, a renewed relationship, and a nation-to-nation approach, Indigenous Peoples in Canada will be better able to enjoy their economic, social, and cultural rights.

## **SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND PROTECTION**

Mr. Chair, Canada has a comprehensive social protection and assistance framework and an enviable record of human development and social mobility. We are better educated, living longer, and more prosperous than at any point in Canadian history.

Nonetheless, Canada is continuing to strengthen its social assistance and protection programs, and advance social innovation so that all individuals and communities can better realize their economic, social, and cultural rights. To do so, it is crucial to have access to the most up-to-date and accurate data possible. To this end, and to support

the availability of accurate and reliable data going forward, Canada will restore its long-form census.

Canada is committed to strengthening the middle class and lifting more Canadians – including children and seniors – out of poverty. The federal government is currently in the development stages of creating a National Poverty Reduction Strategy that aligns with those already existing in provincial and territorial jurisdictions, as well as those in municipalities.

Similarly, the Canadian government has committed to developing a strategy to re-establish federal leadership in supporting affordable housing. As part of this commitment, the federal government will support Housing First initiatives that help homeless Canadians find stable housing.

Several new initiatives, including a new Early Learning and Child Care Framework, are being developed in partnership with the provincial and territorial governments to deliver affordable, high-quality, flexible, and fully inclusive child care for Canadian families. Additionally, Canada will introduce proposals in its budget to create a new Canada Child Benefit – a simple, tax-free, and generous benefit targeted to families who need it most.

Through support for education and skills training, governments across Canada can help foster a new generation of workers with the right skills. To facilitate this, the Government of Canada has committed to make post-secondary education more affordable for students from low- and middle-income families. Through provincial and territorial governments, this goal is supported by the provision of tuition-free primary and secondary education. At the post-secondary education level, student loans, bursary programs, and tax-assisted and government-assisted savings plans provide further opportunities for all Canadians. Recently, for example, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador eliminated provincial student loans in favor of needs-based grants to support access to post-secondary education.

Mr. Chair, Canada's publicly-funded universal health care system is a source of pride for Canadians. Through a collaborative approach, Canada is negotiating a new multi-year Health Accord with provincial and territorial governments to ensure that our health care system can meet current needs and adapt to new challenges.

It is critical for our society and economy that all Canadians, including vulnerable and underrepresented groups, have the support they need to help them find gainful employment and live active and healthy lives. To help realize this, the Employment Insurance system will be strengthened to make sure that it best serves both the Canadian economy and all Canadians who need it. Among the changes, the federal government has committed to the removal of the long-standing New Entrant and Re-Entrant provisions that disproportionately affect recent immigrants and younger workers. This will ensure members of these more vulnerable groups receive the support they need.

In the workplace, the federal *Employment Equity Act* is designed to remove barriers to the employment and upward mobility facing four designated groups: women, Aboriginal Peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of visible minorities. Combined, these groups are a majority – at least 60% – of the Canadian workforce.

Taken together, federal, provincial, and territorial policies, programs, and decisions such as these promote the dismantling of barriers to the realization of rights, including those of vulnerable or underrepresented groups.

### **PROTECTION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**

Canada has long been a destination of choice for immigrants and remains among the world's major immigrant-receiving countries. Canada recognizes that its communities are strengthened when governments and society come together to welcome newcomers who want to build a better Canada.

In November 2015, the federal government committed to increasing the resettlement of refugees from Syria, over and above our current commitment to refugees from other parts of the world, setting an initial goal of admitting 25,000 Syrians by the end of February 2016. As of February 16, 2016, more than 20,000 Syrian refugees have been resettled across more than 100 communities across Canada.

In addition, Canada is taking steps to ensure that Canada's immigration and refugee policies remain open, accepting, and generous, reflecting our belief that a pluralistic society strengthens Canada and Canadians. To this end, we are currently developing initiatives to help ensure that those immigrating to Canada are able to reunite with their families, including doubling, in 2016, the number of places for parents and grandparents of immigrants. Canada has also fully restored the Interim Federal Health Program that provides limited and temporary health benefits to resettled refugees and asylum claimants.

### **CONCLUSION**

Mr. Chair and members of the Committee, Canada is proud of its continued progress in realising Covenant rights. While challenges remain, we are committed to addressing them with a renewed spirit of cooperation across all orders of government, and a belief that these challenges are best addressed through an inclusive, open, and transparent approach that leverages the strength of the diverse viewpoints across Canada.

In a highly dynamic and evolving context, Canadian governments, and Canadian citizens, recognize that we need to continue to improve. Our progress is strengthened by embracing opportunities for constructive dialogue on these important issues that are fundamental to a strong, pluralistic Canadian society. We look forward to responding to your questions and to hearing the Committee's views.

Thank you.