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## **Ottawa must act now to protect Canada's children and youth**

Nelson Mandela once said, "there can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children." By that measure, Canada would benefit from taking a moment to pause, look inward, and ask: how can we do better for our young people?

The answer lies in a piece of legislation that recently passed first reading in the Senate, Bill S-217: An Act to establish the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Youth in Canada.

This legislation is long overdue.

Back in 1997, former Senator Landon Pearson put forward a recommendation to establish a federal Commissioner for Canada's Children. Since then, the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates, along with parliamentarians of various stripes and international bodies like UNICEF and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, have been calling on the federal government to give our country's young people an independent voice.

In 2012, Liberal MP Marc Garneau introduced bill C-420: An Act to Establish the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young Persons in Canada. The Liberal and New Democrat caucuses of the day both voted unanimously in support of the bill; however, Prime Minister Harper's majority Conservative government defeated it on second reading.

Establishing an independent commissioner came to the forefront again in 2015, as an election campaign pledge by Justin Trudeau. In the five years since, a chorus of children's advocates has called on the Liberal government and Prime Minister Trudeau to stand up for young people and fulfill this crucial promise.

Canada's young people cannot wait any longer. The time to act is now.

As the Child and Youth Advocate for Alberta, I am often frustrated when young people, and adults concerned for their well-being, reach out to my office for help with issues that fall outside the scope of services we can provide under our provincial legislative mandate. Child support and custody arrangements, residency requirements and immigration status, and reforms to child welfare services for Indigenous children are examples of issues that fall under federal jurisdiction.

A national children's commissioner could advocate for young people affected by these issues, and influence federal policy decisions to improve the health, social and economic outcomes for all children and youth across the country.

Ensuring there is a national representative who has the legislated responsibility to address the rights, interests and viewpoints of Canada's children and youth could also elevate the conversation on issues that already have some national momentum, such as child and youth mental health. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people in Canada, and for First Nations youth the suicide rate is disproportionately high. To prevent these tragic outcomes, we need leadership at the federal level to keep the spotlight on this critical issue and advocate for action, such as the implementation of a national youth suicide strategy.

According to UNICEF, Canada is one of the few remaining countries in the industrialized world without an independent national authority to promote the rights and well-being of young people. Other western countries, including England, Sweden, Scotland and New Zealand, have all recognized the importance of their young people having a voice on issues that will affect them now and in the future. Children and youth are some of the heaviest users of public services, and these countries have taken action to ensure their needs are given due consideration in national public policy decisions.

We would be wise to follow suit.

It is also critically important to understand how the absence of a national commissioner has disproportionately affected First Nations, Métis and Inuit young people. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report calls on Canada to close the gaps in health and education outcomes for Indigenous peoples, and address the over-representation of Indigenous young people in the child welfare and youth justice systems.

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' final report is unequivocal in its call for the establishment of a national child and youth commissioner to increase accountability for the rights of Indigenous children in Canada. If Canada is truly committed to advancing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, then calls for a national commissioner cannot continue to go unanswered.

Canada has also endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which guides countries to ensure the rights and needs of Indigenous children receive proper attention. Given that the federal government is primarily responsible for providing services to Indigenous children and youth, particularly those living on reserves, establishing an independent commissioner could be a real step forward in advancing the rights of Indigenous young people.

The well-being of our country's children and youth is an issue that must transcend political ideology and partisanship. We need vocal and unambiguous support for a national children's commissioner from all members of parliament. This is a matter where, with strong government leadership, broad support could be achieved.

We are facing a time of great uncertainty in our country, where questions about how we

reconcile with Indigenous peoples and end systemic injustice and inequality, are at the forefront of the nation's collective consciousness and the public discourse. We must ensure that young people, particularly those who are part of vulnerable groups, have a powerful, independent voice at the federal level.

Bill S-217 is an opportunity to act, and we would be remiss not to take it.