

The Diversity Forum

WINS

Diversity is Strength



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and comments for the
next issue!
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Welcome to the second instalment of The Diversity Forum, a newsletter on issues relating to workplace diversity and equity sponsored by WINS Toronto. In this instalment we take on the issue of racism. Our feature article, by WINS Founder Dr. Hitu Sood, deals with lessons that can be learned from that icon of the anti-racism movement, Nelson Mandela. As in our inaugural issue, we have canvassed public figures and asked them a key question: “In your opinion, what is the one key step Canada can take to reduce systemic racism, and why?” In ‘Showcasing Community Voices’, you’ll see their responses.

Take Off the Race-Coloured Glasses Mandela’s Way - Dr. Hitu Sood

When we look back on all the changes of the past year, we will find it impossible to ignore the long-overdue reckoning of racism that has occurred. The term ‘systemic racism’ has been around since the 1960s. Since then its popularity has grown as a way to encapsulate how racism affects all facets of society—not just politics and the economy, but culture and social attitudes as well.

Awareness of racial issues has deepened due to a set of tragic incidents. The murder of George Floyd was a pivotal event south of the border. Here in Canada, revelations of previously unaccounted historical atrocities at residential schools have played a transformative role. With such events has come a vocal debate over how deeply racism is embedded in our society.

I must confess that as a person of color who has faced racism first hand, I find the toxic nature of this debate painful. Why are there so many in our society who wilfully ignore what to me and so many others appears utterly self-evident? How can those of us who are committed to racial equity change minds and influence attitudes?

Standing up for what I believe in is crucial, of course, which is one reason I started WINS. But I also believe there are other ways those of us committed to racial equity can spark change. Besides trying to unravel the unconscious bias of others, we must resolve to look at the biases that lurk within ourselves.

All of us have some innate biases, which means there is value in us searching the dark corners of our own minds where these prejudices and biases exist. Not only can this awareness bring about internal change that is long-lasting and powerful, facing our own biases in an honest and unrelenting fashion will make it easier for us to understand what causes the biases of others.

I call this approach Mandela’s way. When referring to his political opponents, Mandela once said, “You don’t address their brains; you address their hearts.” During his imprisonment, for example, he learned the language of his oppressors. His knowledge of Afrikaans then helped him forge relationships with those on the other side of the anti-apartheid struggle: his jailers, the white leaders he negotiated with, and ordinary Afrikaners he dealt during his years as South Africa’s president.

What was Mandela’s secret? In his book *Mandela’s Way*, biographer Richard Stengel notes: “Over the years, he developed a radar and a deep sympathy for human frailty.”¹ By accepting not just the frailties of others, but also his own, Mandela was able turn empathy into a powerful instrument. Can we do the same? We must. Accepting human frailty wherever we find it, including in ourselves, can help us open the hearts of those who see the world through race-coloured glasses.



¹ Mandela’s statement and Stengel’s comment are both quoted in John Blake, “We need Nelson Mandela’s example more than ever today. How the South African leader’s radical empathy can help the US today,” CNN, July 18, 2021.

Showcasing Community Voices



Dr. Angela Lee is an Assistant Professor at the Lincoln Alexander School of Law at Ryerson University.

Although initiatives like gathering data to better understand and identify the challenges posed by systemic racism is undoubtedly useful, this kind of evidence, on its own, is not necessarily enough to spur change, especially if it goes against the entrenched status quo and already powerful interests and actors. In addition to continued efforts at increasing diversity, inclusion, and representation in meaningful ways and at every level, one of the key steps that Canada can take to reduce systemic racism, in my opinion, is to support people in meeting core needs in areas like housing, food, clean water, and education—deficiencies which often detrimentally impact the most marginalized in our society in significant ways and that perpetuate negative cycles.

Dr. Anver Saloojee is a university professor and administrator.

In 2005-8 he served as a Special Adviser in the Presidency of Thabo Mbeki of South Africa.

Parliament should unanimously approve the following resolution: “Present day Canada remains a settler colony. It was not founded by the British and the French. It was colonized by both.” This acknowledgment would help dispel the myths that Canada was founded by Europeans and is a bicultural/binational country. This acknowledgement would recognize that prior to the arrival of the colonizers, and subsequently all newcomers, multiple nations resided on this land which was “stolen” from them by numbered treaties, purchase treaties and treaty violations. This acknowledgment would also require the full and rapid implementation of all the resolutions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. An anti-racism approach that includes Critical Race Theory must also begin from this premise. Anything less means that Canada will continue to reproduce historic injustices, systemic racism and discrimination.



Adwoa K. Buahene, CEO TRIEC.

Unfortunately reducing systemic racism will require more than one key step. However, there must be two conditions in place for any steps to work: firstly, the voices of racialized people must be at the forefront of any action taken. I believe in the adage “nothing about us without us.” Secondly, non-racialized people need to take responsibility for changing their behavior, including speaking out against racism when they see it in others - both as individuals and within the institutions they represent.

Dr. Mehmet Komurcu, Lawyer Gowling WLG, General Counsel of International Business University

Diversity programs serve a vital role in promoting inclusion of traditionally non-dominant communities, but equal rights on paper are not enough. While individuals may be consciously or unconsciously racist, systemic racism is a conscious choice of a given society – a choice that comes with all of the society’s historical, cultural and social aspects as hard-wired in its institutions. Combatting systemic racism therefore requires understanding these complex causes. Using such insight, we can transform institutions in society as a whole through collaborative action. Only through such transformative institutional change can everyone gain an equal opportunity to reach their true full potential.



Brian Sankarsingh is a Trinidadian-born Canadian and the author of two books in 2020 and 2021.

The existence of systemic racism in Canada is unarguable. Evidence can be found in finance, healthcare, housing, employment, justice, and education. While its impact may be the same on Black people and People of Colour, dismantling systemic racism will be a complex and daunting exercise. Although many of Canada’s corporations claim to understand the far-reaching and manifestly negative consequences of systemic racism, it is often ignored unless it threatens corporate profits or can adversely affect its reputation. To wit, given this level of complexity, the Government of Canada must incentivize corporations who address it proactively and penalize those who don’t.

Shalini Konanur is the Executive Director and Senior Lawyer at the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario (SALCO). Her legal work focuses on the impact of systemic racism on the life outcomes of racialized communities.

The solution to combatting systemic racism must start with employment equity. Racialized people do not have equitable access to decent work, pushing them into deeper poverty and an inability to grow generational wealth. We must strengthen employment equity legislation across all federal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions, and include employment equity obligations in all financial transfers and projects from the federal government. Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms was founded on a promise of justice and equality.

To make that a reality we must address the systemic racism that racialized communities face at all levels in our labour market.



From the Newsstand:

Canadians show a spectrum of attitudes towards racism

As our commentators in this issue have noted, racism in Canada has complex causes. These complexities are highlighted in a recent Angus Reid Institute survey on Canadian attitudes towards racial issues.² The survey's results are fascinating. The large majority of respondents agree that multiculturalism makes Canada a better nation. Yet one in three believe that Canada is a racist country, with visible minority women under the age of 35 most commonly expressing this view. A fifth of Canadians feel like outsiders in this country, Sadly, for visible minority and Indigenous respondents, this proportion is much higher – in the range of 30 percent for each.



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An advertisement for HITU HR SOLUTIONS. It features a large green arrow graphic pointing to the right. The text "PROBLEM NEEDS SOLVING?" is written in white inside the arrow. To the right of the arrow, there is a small text line: "Reach out to us for HR Solutions at hs@hituhrsolutions.com". Below this is the HITU HR SOLUTIONS logo, which consists of a stylized red and white circular icon followed by the text "HITU HR SOLUTIONS".

² "Diversity and Racism in Canada: Competing views deeply divide country along gender, generational lines," June 21, 2021, <https://angusreid.org/diversity-racism-canada/>.