

Black History Month Interview with Greg Fergus

February 12, 2020

Greg Fergus (member of Parliament for Hull-Aylmer) was recently interviewed by CAPE in his capacity as Chair of the Canadian Caucus of Black Parliamentarians. The interview, part CAPE's activities marking Black History Month, was conducted by Dina Epale – Senior Advocacy and Public Affairs Advisor. It is worth noting that Mr. Fergus is also the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board and to the Minister of Digital Government.

Dina Epale: The theme for this year's Black History Month is "Canadians of African descent going forward, guided by the past." As we take a moment to recognize and honour Black culture and Black Canadians and their impact on Canada's growth, prosperity and accomplishments, what message do you have for our members?

Greg Fergus: Well, specifically for your members I would say that what they'd want to do is to take a look at the contributions which Blacks have made to this country and to the building of our Public Service. History is nothing concrete; it always depends on the perspective that you have. So, if you are looking to see the contributions of Black Canadians, you'll find it. And I would argue that what we don't do well enough is talk about our accomplishments and talk about our contributions, and to value that. More and more, the stories are coming out now; more and more, scholarship is pointing out the unrecognized contributions of Black Canadians to the building of our country. And I think we need to value that more and more, and bring those stories forward to change the way that we talk about our community. but rather how others would talk about our community. And for us to take pride in understanding where we've come from.

D. Epale: You are the Chair of the Canadian Caucus of Black Parliamentarians. Can you tell us a bit about this caucus, its mandate and some of the major achievements, obstacles or challenges?

G. Fergus: We were founded in the 42nd Parliament when we elected a record number of Black parliamentarians. There were seven Black parliamentarians and three senators eventually. They changed composition, but three Black senators of African/Caribbean descent. So, we thought this was a time for us to form this caucus. It was really born out of people just coming up to me and coming up to others and saying, "We're so proud of you! My kid now sees that this has opened up a new door, a new horizon for them." And so, I felt—and I think we all felt—that there was a real need for us to form a caucus to start taking and tackling some of the issues which our community faces.

The things that we face are troublesome. Aside from Indigenous peoples, we're the second group that faces the most discrimination, that has faced many obstacles. Whether it's employment, whether it's in scholarship. I mean, you've seen some of the studies which came out of taking a look at the numbers out of the Board of Education of Toronto. Black kids were well more streamed out of enriched classes. More streamed towards vocational classes, they were more likely to receive detentions or to be expelled. But yet every study has shown that Black kids are no more likely to be disruptive or to be troublesome in classes than non-Black kids. So, what's going on? That's the tough questions that we've got to face.

So, Black Caucus, our role is really to help us have those discussions and bring people together who are making those kinds of studies, and then to seek solutions for what we can do at the federal level to move things along. And there have also been times that we expand a little outside of our jurisdiction; we talk about the issues. We just want to value the contributions of Black Canadians.

I think we've done some really interesting things and I'm really proud of what we've done. One of the things we pushed for – our first victory – was getting Viola Desmond on the ten-dollar bill. We brought that story up. I remember having our meeting with the Finance Minister. Most people think that Viola Desmond is Canada's version of Rosa Parks. I keep on saying that she was nine years ahead of her. Rosa Parks is the American version of Viola Desmond.

So, I think her story is a story that needed to be told. So, that was a lovely victory. And then it just moved on from there. We were able to make the case, and the Prime Minister heard us very clearly to recognize, first of all, the UN Decade of People of African Descent, but secondly to recognize the existence of anti-Black racism. He was the first Prime Minister to do so. And that was big.

Then what we saw that flowed from that were some elements in the Budget. So, in Budget 2018 and then followed by Budget 2019, multi-million dollar programming; it's not the money that's most important but what we're trying to accomplish. And it is certainly not sufficient to deal with the problems, but it is a good beginning because it's the first time that, again, in the Federal Budget, there were programs that were directed directly towards the Black community.

Things like disaggregating data. You can't fix what you can't measure. It's really important for Statistics Canada to start disaggregating its data. Black mental health issues, and racism. Racism has an important mental health component: it just gets at you. We need to do that. So, there's some great work that's being done by the Black community, by Black psychologists and researchers on mental health issues faced by the Black community.

D. Epale: Those are great stories, great anecdotes. What are some of the challenges that as a group you have faced?

G. Fergus: I think what we face, and obstacles which we face inside of government is often within the Federal Public Service, often you hear from policy people who don't understand that this is a problem.

Some will say, “Well, we satisfied our diversity targets.” Yes, you have at a certain level of government, but not as you go up higher. And anti-Black discrimination, anti-Black racism, is a real thing. As I quoted those numbers to you before on schools, or let’s say in the justice system, Blacks are no more likely to commit a crime, but we’re four times more likely to be arrested, remanded and jailed. So, we’ve got to ask those tough questions.

D. Epale: Which adds to your point about the desegregation of data: how important and relevant it is.

G. Fergus: Exactly. That the story of Black Canadians can be hidden by the data on diversity.

D. Epale: Despite strong laws, regulations and protections of unions, many Federal Public Service employees continue to grapple with racial discrimination and racism, and numbers now seem to show that Black employees are more at risk. Now you were alluding earlier to data, and just recently the 2019 Public Service Employees Survey was released. It shows a startling number of facts. One of them is that 15% of Black survey respondents reported being the victim of racial discrimination on the job in the last 12 months. This is twice as much as the percentage of Federal Public Service employees who reported being the victim of racial discrimination in the workplace. Of those, 41% reported experiencing discrimination from their co-workers and 76% of respondents reported facing discrimination from individuals with authority over them.

These are not flattering statistics. What are your thoughts on the findings of this important survey that goes out widely in the Public Service, and which is available to Canadians?

G. Fergus: The short answer is that we have to do better. And we have to do better by having these kinds of conversations. We have to have a lot more sensitivity training talking about anti-Black racism and how to address it. This is something that I know that the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer is seized with. These are not numbers that we’re proud of. We have to do better. And I’ve been very fortunate that the Prime Minister had invited me to serve as Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board. And I’m very pleased that the President of the Treasury Board is seized with this and wants me to dig deep and to carry this forward so that Blacks can find their rightful place at all levels of the Public Service and that they don’t have that kind of discrimination.

And we all know it, right? There’s a Black manager, hires one other Black person into the shop, all of a sudden, the person gets a reputation that they only hire Blacks. Whereas you could walk into many other shops and you could see a homogenous group and there’s not any issue.

We’re not doing this for any great moral reasons, although I think there are great moral reasons to seek this out, but I think if you want a resilient Public Service then you got to make sure that it’s representative of all of Canada at all levels of its decision-making. Let’s think of the contrary. We would never think of having a Public Service that was only directed by men to create policies for all Canadians. It would be ridiculous. We wouldn’t want to think of just having anglophones to make decisions for all Canadians. That would be ridiculous. You want a truly diverse Public Service so that it can propose policies that are resilient and that are important and will stand the test of time.

I grew up in a neighbourhood where I was one of very few Blacks, but funnily enough I grew up in a Jewish neighbourhood in Montreal. Anglophone within a francophone city and province. So, I always appreciated the things that most people would be blind to when they make statements. When you're a minority, you get to see—you have a bilingualism of the mind, right? You see something that the majority sees but you also appreciate the differences. Things that they're blind to. With that kind of sensitivity, you can make proposals that would appeal to everyone or that would respond to the needs of everyone. And through no fault of their own, policies that would only appeal to the mindset of the people who form the majority.

Dina Epale: **As the third largest Public Service labour union, CAPE represents many of these employees you talk about, or you refer to, or are in the Public Service Employee Survey. What do you think needs to be done to address the ongoing problem of anti-Black racism and discrimination, especially considering the results of the recent Public Service Employee Survey?**

G. Fergus: Right off the top, conversations. We have to have conversations about what's going on, about examples of this anti-Black racism and discrimination. And then larger conversations as to how to change your mindset so that you are not perpetuating these things. I think those are the first two things that you have to do.

Let me put it this way—again, I always like to engage in contrary thinking—if you don't do it, how are you going to change things? It's not going to fall from the sky. So, we got to deal with it.

D. Epale: **Do you think other elected officials fully grasp the seriousness of these issues?**

G. Fergus: I think more and more. It takes time for people to change but I do feel that my colleagues over the past four years have more and more understood the importance of why you want to disaggregate the diversity file and start taking a look at it. So, I do feel that elected officials are more sensitive to this on all sides of the party.

D. Epale: **From when you first got elected, what changes have you seen?**

G. Fergus: Well the number of things I've pointed to in the last mandate. I've also seen a much greater participation of my colleagues in Black History Month events, which then brings them into contact with the Black community which makes them more sensitive to the needs of the community.

D. Epale: **Do you think you're getting the necessary support to help you address these serious problems?**

G. Fergus: Yes. Now the proof of the pudding of this will be what actions will bring forward to try to directly address this at Public Service. The only thing I would ask is for people who are a part of your union to give me some time, because I'm working on it now. There should be something that we will announce soon enough, and I hope what will fall from that action will be some very concrete steps.



D. Epale: All right. You made reference to the anti-racism strategy. As you know, June 2019, the Government of Canada unveiled this strategy and allocated \$45M in last year's budget. This was a strategy which includes the establishment of an anti-Black racism secretariat to address, amongst other things that you talked about, systemic racism and discrimination within government. In what ways do you think the anti-racism strategy can help address some of the challenges reported in the recent Public Service Employee Survey, especially related to racial discrimination and anti-Black racism?

G. Fergus: Again, that was a really good first step by setting up the secretariat. Now we're getting into the weeds in terms of laying out a process for it, as I was talking about earlier. I'm hoping that what will result from that report or ongoing work will be to concrete changes in the Public Service and greater sensitivity and, frankly, just a more resilient and a better prepared Public Service.

D. Epale: What would be your final word?

G. Fergus: I'm really pleased that your union has decided that this is an important enough issue to do an interview on, and I really do appreciate it. I appreciate the sensitivity which you've taken to it. You and I have worked outside of this context under different hats on advancing the needs of this community. I feel it's real. I would hope by the end of my temporary time that I'm in politics, and I bet you feel the same way in your time in the Public Service, when we look back we could have said, "You know what? We carried this ball forward and we took it along. We did something."

D. Epale: Thank you very much for your time.