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NORTH VANCOUVER'S MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

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Uncomfortable conversations

Last week, I was part of a “virtual town hall” with young people from across the country to discuss climate change. However, as happened with so many conversations last week, the focus expanded to include race relations.

The deeply disturbing news clips of civil unrest sparked by the death of George Floyd in the U.S., has touched a nerve in Canada that is fueling a wave of national reflection. Plus, police incidents in the last week involving Indigenous Canadians have been reminders we have work to do in our own house.

On the morning after police in Washington used tear gas and concussion grenades to clear a path through peaceful protestors, Prime Minister Trudeau told reporters, “It is a time for us as Canadians to recognize that we too have our challenges, that Black Canadians and racialized Canadians face discrimination as a lived reality every single day.”

The Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission, Marie-Claude Landry, put it this way: “Now is the time for all Canadians to listen, learn and reflect on how white privilege and systemic racism contribute to injustice and inequality in this country. We need to have difficult and uncomfortable conversations.”

Two North Vancouver narratives

The state of race relations in Canada is not a single-story thread. Close to home, as I hold up a mirror to North Vancouver, I see at least two narratives.

One is an uplifting story of a community proud of its rich and growing diversity. My Constituency Director, Cynthia Bunbury, a long-time teacher at Sutherland Secondary, reminds me that students at that school represent more than fifty different cultural groups.

Both my daughters went to public schools in North Vancouver through to Grade 12. Compared with my generation, they and their friends simply do not understand why someone would be treated differently because of the colour of their skin. Perhaps it's because of the diversity that has surrounded them from an early age – and perhaps it's something which could be a source of optimism about the future.

The other narrative is harder to look at.

Incidents of COVID-19 related racist harassment are on the rise, according to the North Shore Multicultural Society. In recent weeks, the group has received several reports of verbal attacks, threats and incidents of intimidation in public spaces and shops – mostly targeting people of Asian descent.

Often, racism is more subtle. I'm indebted to my Outreach Coordinator, Danielle Kyei – who is of African-Canadian descent – for deepening my understanding of the day-to-day presence of “micro-aggression” towards racialized people in every community – including North Vancouver.

Examples of micro-aggression include the professor who compliments an Asian-Canadian student on her English when that is her first language. Or a black man who notices that a white woman flinches and clutches her purse as she sees him in the elevator she's about to enter.

As Danielle explains it, these kinds of remarks or actions are painful because they have to do with a person's membership in a group that's discriminated against or subject to stereotypes. And a key part of what makes them so disturbing is that they happen casually, frequently, and often without any harm intended.

Light in the darkness

We need to have these conversations – and if there is any light from this past dark week, it is that they seem to be happening.

There is plenty of reason for skepticism that when the fury, sadness and guilt sparked by George Floyd's death subsides, nothing will end up being that much different from the last time there was a moment of reckoning about racism in our society.

But my mind goes back to the conviction and determination in the eyes of those young people in that virtual town hall. They reminded me that every time we challenge racism — whether at school, at home, at work — we are one step closer to a more equal society.

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