

Black History Month - Interview with Annamie Paul, Leader of the Green Party of Canada

1) According to the 2019 Public Service Employee Survey, “more than 15% of Black public service employees experienced racial discrimination in the workplace.” What do you think needs to be done to address anti-Black racism in the workplace in the federal public service?

Annamie Paul: I think it has to start at the top. When we see Black, Indigenous and racialized people, as well as people from all religions, serving in the highest ranks of our government and other powerful institutions, that will begin to be reflected in all workplaces. It is also critical to have diverse representation at all levels of decision making because that provides us with a variety of points of view, interests and values.

We must recognize that systemic racism exists at the core of many of our public institutions including those of education, health and public safety. Once we acknowledge this, then we can begin to address the issue within each branch of public service. The public service must track outcomes for Black employees and develop systems with greater accountability. Another important piece is the need for disaggregated data to be able to identify trends, and better data collection overall to understand the pervasiveness of racism and the ways in which it is experienced – only then can we measure whether any real progress is being made.

2) The President of the Treasury Board’s Supplementary Mandate Letter released on January 15th, 2021 tasks him, amongst other things, “to develop and implement an action plan to increase the representation of women, Black and racialized Canadians, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and LGBTQ2 Canadians in hiring, appointments and leadership development within the Public Service.” Why is this important and how can it be done efficiently?

A. Paul: Society is best served by public managers, policy makers, and community leaders who represent diverse backgrounds and perspectives as it produces better public policy outcomes. We need more diverse representation at all levels and in all areas of public service, and it will be important to follow this plan’s progress to ensure that proper implementation occurs. Ensuring that the process of developing the proposed action plan is led by the equity-seeking groups for which it is intended will be key to ensuring its success; consultations are no substitute for active collaboration. The mandate to create an action plan provides a reason for cautious optimism. However, Mandate Letters demonstrate a level of commitment, but implementation is not always

guaranteed. As we know, a change of government, changing priorities or a lack of political will can divert the course of best laid plans.

3) What is the meaning to you of this year's Black History Month theme "The Future is Now"?

A. Paul: "The Future is Now" speaks to the fact that we are at a crossroads. It signals an understanding that we are at a moment in time when our actions have the power to create transformative change for years to come. So much has happened in the last year that has put a spotlight on the continuing issues of racism, inequality, repression and violence perpetrated against Black people, people of colour and racialized communities. I think that the urgency of the situation is becoming more apparent. However, while there are some indications of increased societal awareness, racism and intolerance unfortunately persist.

Many of us look at what's happening in the United States and say "well that would never happen in Canada". But the truth is that Canada is not immune or exempt from racism and discrimination. It can be painful to recognize this fact, because it doesn't correspond to the image that many people in Canada have, but we can still love this place while accepting and understanding that it has flaws. In fact, that is the first step in order to create a better Canada.

Our national candidate recruitment campaign, Time to Run, is a nationwide call for us to work together to build a Parliament as diverse as the Canadians it represents. We want to encourage Black Canadians and those from racialized communities to play an integral role in reshaping the narrative. Let's continue to fight for a future we can be proud of.

4) What does it mean for you to be the first Black leader of any federal political party and what inspired you to get into politics?

A. Paul: Being the first Black person to lead a major federal party in Canada is without a doubt an historic achievement to be celebrated. The Green Party was ready for a change, and the work is just beginning. While I don't believe that it is the responsibility of those of us who find ourselves in communities that are discriminated against to reshape the narrative of representation on our own, I think that both my lived experience and my professional experience make me well-equipped to bring diversity to the forefront of what we do.

My mother and grandmother's activism and care for community inspired me to public service. I have had a full career as a community activist, diplomat and social entrepreneur before going

into politics. Those experiences taught me that there are many ways to have a meaningful impact, but I ultimately decided that I wanted to be part of the collective action we need to lead us through these challenging times. Government has a big role to play in tackling the challenges and seizing the opportunities of our time. I wanted to be a problem solver by being part of the conversations about building a better future, and politics was the best place for me to do so.

5) As a Black Jewish woman, what were some of the challenges you faced when you ran for leadership and what advice do you have for the younger Black generation that would like to pursue a career in politics or leadership positions?

A. Paul: When I ran in the leadership race, I experienced first-hand the ways in which politics can be hostile to people from certain communities. I am only the second Jewish person and the first Black person to ever be elected to lead a major federal party in Canada, and I have spoken publicly about the fact that, unfortunately, racism and anti-Semitism are far from a thing of the past in Canada. I was exposed to online vitriol throughout the race at a level that a person does not get used to. It also became clear to me during the race that silence emboldens hate. My belief is that I should always try to educate first and actively resist when necessary – we all come to issues from different perspectives and different levels of understanding. I try to approach those discussions not assuming that the person has perfect knowledge of the issues, and it's important to know how to respectfully disagree.

My advice for young, Black people who are interested in pursuing a career in politics or leadership positions is first and foremost to put yourself out there, and to really understand what your values, life goals, strengths, or weaknesses are in order to choose the right place to engage. There are the very visible roles like being a politician, but not all of us want to be involved as a public-facing member – there are so many opportunities to get engaged in politics or leadership roles, so finding the right fit and not being deterred is key. I also believe in starting where you are – consider volunteering for a political campaign to understand what the atmosphere is and make connections while gaining valuable experience. Above all, I tell them that their voice is needed and their leadership is valued.

6) The goal of the Canadian Centre for Political Leadership (CCPL) which you founded, is to “increase the representation of women, racial minorities and aboriginal peoples” to run for public office. Why was it important to you to start the CCPL?

A. Paul: Canada continues to waste its intellectual capital by maintaining barriers to the full participation of diverse peoples in public life. It was important to me to found the CCPL because of the many challenges that marginalized communities face not only in Canadian politics, but



also in obtaining senior roles in the civil service. We still keep brilliant people with excellent ideas out of these fields. Diversity matters not only because it is an equity issue, but because when we do not have diverse representation at all levels of government (including the highest levels), we are not accessing the best policy ideas. In addition to its home-grown talent, Canada attracts talent from all over the world – why would we limit the brain power available to us, especially given the urgent crises we face? Diversity in politics leads to better public policy.

I am also always looking towards a time when there are fewer and fewer “firsts” for Black Canadians, so we can be seen as a non-monolithic community with a variety of points of view and interests and values. The more diversity we have on the political spectrum and across different levels of government, the better.

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