

For Immediate Release

November 1, 2022

A Call to Rescind Honorary Doctorate Degrees Currently Held by Ms. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond

A recent CBC report, “Disputed History” (October 12, 2022), presents evidence that refutes Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond’s claim of being a “Treaty Indian” who grew up in Norway House, Manitoba. The report points to a career that rises to the highest levels of Canadian legal, political, and academic institutions, including a reported eleven honorary doctorates she currently holds. It was a career inextricably linked and founded upon a story of Indigenous identity, marginalization and historic trauma; a story Ms. Turpel-Lafond refuses to verify.

Pretendians engage in colonial violence by stealing Indigenous identity from a place of privilege; they hijack pathways designed to combat systemic barriers facing Indigenous people and take limited space and resources. While many Indigenous students struggle against overwhelming barriers on their journey to higher learning, pretendians do not face these barriers. In a mind-boggling twist, universities in turn, hold pretendians up as role models for Indigenous students to emulate.

The deafening silence from Canadian universities indicates a hesitancy to question, let alone denounce, recent revelations of Indigenous identity theft. One of the primary bedrocks of Universities is academic integrity. Falsely claiming indigeneity and leveraging professional and academic advantages gained from these claims, disregards all ethical norms guiding scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge. The International Centre for Academic Integrity defines academic integrity as “a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage.” We are now calling for directed action to protect and defend these core academic values. Pretendianism is harmful to Indigenous people, it damages university reputations and it cannot co-exist with the spirit of reconciliation. Universities need to seriously consider what “Truth and Reconciliation” requires of them. They cannot claim to be engaged in reconciliation when they hide from the truth.

Honorary doctorates are awarded to individuals in recognition of a lifetime of scholarly achievements and exceptional contributions to the public good. Granting an honorary doctorate to a pretendian advances the colonial notion that a Caucasian person impersonating indigeneity is a worthy and suitable candidate. It also applauds the stolen valour of Indigenous women who have struggled for their achievements and become champions and voices for their people.

In light of Ms. Turpel-Lafond’s ongoing refusal to provide reasonable explanations for refuted claims to indigeneity, we call upon universities to rescind her honorary doctorate degrees, as per their own policies on academic integrity and in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

Reconciliation starts with truth. Indigenous people are tired of listening to platitudes. It is time to start walking the talk.

The Indigenous Women’s Collective includes those who are descendants of women who fought against the harm colonialism has caused for our people. We are mothers, LGBTQ+, grandmothers, daughters, artists, lawyers, administrators, professionals, academics, elected officials, students, and activists. We joined as a collective with one common voice: to protect Indigenous Women Against Colonial Violence.

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