



OPINION

Time for Canada to step up as a human rights world leader

The time has come for Canada to prove that it can once again be a global leader in human rights, and perhaps inspire some of the world's leaders to do the same.

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The United States inaugurated Donald Trump as its new president on Jan. 20. He will be at the helm of the world's greatest power, dominating economically, militarily and culturally. T

Here at home, our aspiring leaders have a responsibility and an opportunity to ensure that human rights remain at the heart of discussions with the new American administration and others, by putting forward values of fairness, justice and respect in bilateral relations.

All over the world, anti-rights rhetoric—once marginal—is becoming institutionalized, dividing communities and families. Canada is no exception. Yet, human rights have a unique power to bring people together, to unite them around a common goal of humanity for all.

In the coming years, Canada could position itself as a true champion of human rights. Our role is all the more important now given that our neighbour to the south is trying to pass us off as a mere simulacrum of their society, and would like to claim our future annexation. Let us assert our difference loud and clear, and take our place with others as a world leader championing rights.



Justice Minister Arif Virani. Our country can preserve what we have fought for and continue the progress achieved on human rights, write Odette McCarthy and Jean-Sébastien Vallée. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Some would describe this vision as ideal, even naïve. But on the contrary: the aspiration that Canada can play a leadership role is tangible. The reference to international instruments is non-negotiable, and more relevant than ever. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has always been a symbol of hope, and a tool for justice and fairness, despite criticism of its application. It remains an essential framework for universal dialogue from which no state is excluded. Canada has all the tools it needs to once again become a leader in the respect for human rights, and to inspire other powers to follow suit. With our solid institutions and vibrant civil society, we can be an inspiring model on the world stage.

Canada's strength could lie in our ability to bring the world's

leaders to the same table, and to unite them to defuse potential conflicts, to demand an end to hostilities by force of arms, and to reinforce the principles cherished by democracy, including the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, freedom of the media and transparency in public administration.

Even within our own borders, let us be a role model on a number of crucial issues, including women's rights, the rights of LGBTQI people, the right to a healthy environment, and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

Canada can preserve what we have fought for, and continue the progress achieved. We can even ask for more—while physical and mental violence continues to affect women and LGBTQI people, and while pay inequali-

ties persist and women remain under-represented at all levels of decision-making power throughout the world. No country has achieved full gender equality, and in several regions women's rights are deteriorating. In 2023, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said that, if the world continues as it is, equality for women will not be achieved for another 300 years. In this context, public policies that take human rights into account should play an even more important role.

Climate change is—and will continue to be—at the centre of all our global concerns over the coming decades. In 2023, Canada abolished direct subsidies to the fossil fuel industry, deemed "inefficient". Global warming exceeded the 1.5C threshold in 2024. This is dramatic for the planet and all

of humanity, and our country can set an example for the world by continuing to adopt progressive environmental policies.

Canada has recently shown a willingness to commit to concrete actions here at home. During its Universal Periodic Review UPR before the UN Human

Rights Council in 2023, Canada accepted 222 recommendations on a wide range of issues, from social justice to the protection of fundamental rights.

Our nation aspires to consolidate its influence through our candidacy for a seat on the Human Rights Council for

2028-2030. Our presidency of the G7 this year represents a crucial opportunity to promote governance and human rights as global priorities.

The time has come for Canada to move from words to deeds and prove that it can once again be a world leader in human rights,

and perhaps inspire some of the world's leaders to do the same.

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