

“I saw no examples of Black corporate leaders talking about systemic racism. So I’m speaking up.”

By Wes Hall

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Over the past two weeks, we’ve seen business, political, and community leaders across Canada take to social media and the airwaves to condemn anti-Black systemic racism and *say* they were prepared to do something about it. The problem is, little has happened.

If anti-Black systemic racism deniers are not held accountable now, they never will be. They are in executive suites, boardrooms and governments across Canada.

They do not necessarily deny the problem exists because they are racist, but because they do not understand the problem.

When I am exercising with my wife and my neighbour asks her if I am her personal trainer, this is anti-Black systemic racism.

When a maintenance worker comes to my house and I answer the door and he tells me to go get Mr. Hall, this is anti-Black systemic racism.

When my biracial 6-year-old comes home from school and says to his white mother, “I don’t want to be Black anymore,” because he was called the N-word, this is anti-Black systemic racism.

When my boys are at the park playing basketball and a neighbour calls the police and the police order them to clean up all the garbage in the entire park and leave, this is anti-Black systemic racism.

When my daughter is called the N-word at an exclusive private school in Toronto, this is anti-Black systemic racism.

These are lived experiences. I can continue, but I believe the point is made.

We've seen it a hundred times, where business and community leaders jump on the bandwagon of a topic du jour promising change but then do nothing as public attention wanes.

Last week, Prime Minister Trudeau took a knee at an anti-racism protest on Parliament Hill. Will he introduce legislation to help Black people across the country?

Stockwell Day resigned from the Telus board of directors after he made out-of-touch comments about racism. Will Day be replaced by a person who looks just like him?

We live in a cancel culture where those who demonstrate in their words that anti-Black systemic racism exists, are removed from their positions, have their shows cancelled, or see other privileges removed — but this does nothing to fix the system. It just provides an escape hatch for those — usually white middle-aged individuals — who oversee the system.

We need permanent change.

I have received quite a few comments about how brave I was to write about my views on anti-Black systemic racism last week in another publication. *Are you not concerned about being “Kaepernicked”?*

Before submitting the piece, I thought about those before me who have spoke up and the consequences — Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Colin Kaepernick, and Martin Luther King Jr. All of those individuals are athletes, and a civil rights leader. I have no examples of Black corporate leaders who spoke up and the consequences. If I was to be the first, at least in Canada, so be it. Let the chips fall where they may.

With so much on the line, I called my good friend Walied Soliman, chairman of law firm Norton Rose Fulbright Canada, to express my concerns. Walied has been a dear friend for many years and is a devout Muslim. His words were simple and direct: “God put you on this earth to do this work.”

After the article ran, I sat anxiously by my phone. Was the system about to seek its revenge and force another “uppity” Black man to the sidelines? The

first email was from a notable business leader requesting to speak as soon as possible. I was nervous. Was this the call to end it all?

When we spoke, the first thing this Bay Street executive said was: “What can I do to help?” This was Victor Dodig, president and chief executive officer of CIBC.

And he wasn’t alone.

Calls and emails from supporters kept coming in from corporate Canada. Leaders who know the system is broken and must be fixed, who want to be part of the solution, but feel helpless and unsure about what to do. Do we tweet more? Do we donate? To whom? What cause?

Earlier this week, I, along with my co-chairs Dodig; Prem Watsa, chairman and chief executive officer of Fairfax Financial Holdings Ltd.; and Rola Dagher, president and CEO, Cisco Canada, announced the launch of the Canadian Council of Business Leaders Against Anti-Black Systemic Racism and the BlackNorth virtual summit on July 20.

Senior leaders from the top 250 TSX companies, more than 100 of the biggest private businesses, major banks, insurance companies, international companies such as General Motors and Microsoft who have a significant presence in Canada, and the largest asset managers and institutional investors received an invitation to be part of a summit to end anti-Black systemic racism.

All companies will be urged to sign a CEO pledge that they will not tolerate anti-Black racism of any kind and will work assiduously to eliminate anti-Black systemic racism.

Corporate Canada and governments have been focused on ESG (Environment, Social and Governance) but they are more focused on the E and G and neglecting the social aspect, the S. The pandemic has exposed this neglect, which is a large part of the reason we are having this discussion now.

Simultaneously, we have been thrust into confronting COVID-19 and deep-rooted social issues — the neglect of our seniors; the neglect of our poor and marginalized; systemic racism; a weak and underfunded health-care system; a

weak education system; weak leaders — the list goes on. It has brought to the forefront how those without keys to the system are treated.

Consider this: In the U.S., 23 per cent of the Americans who have died from COVID-19 deaths were Black, a stark number considering that Black people make up only about 13 per cent of the population. More Black people are getting sick and dying because we have less access to care or are less cared for.

During the pandemic, 44 per cent of African Americans have lost their jobs compared to just 38 per cent of whites — even though Black people are 30 per cent more likely to be employed in industries deemed “essential.” We are helping more yet getting less help.

Why am I quoting American statistics? Because Canada has not tracked race-based pandemic data. Given the persistent disparities in employment and wage levels between Blacks and the rest of the Canadian population, however, we can expect the numbers to be just as sombre.

The fact is poverty and access drive these startling statistics, yet no attention is focused on the Black community.

I have also received comments from those who believe Black people are asking for too much. While I disagree, I do understand where these voices come from. Their ignorance is a byproduct of the system. Black history is not taught in schools here.

So, for those who hold this view, let me break it down in terms they may understand. Let’s say for a moment there are 10 children on a playground and five marbles. There are five Black kids and five white kids. The five white kids have all the marbles. The five Black kids have none. The five marbles represent health care, education, suitable employment, housing and justice.

One of those Black kids gets up and asks the white kids to share one of their marbles. Someone looking on chastises the Black kid for asking the white kids to share their marbles.

But kids have loving hearts. One of the white child’s marbles broke, so he gets up and hands it to the Black child and said, “here this marble is broken, it’s education you can have it, I’m getting a new one.”

Another one of the white children gets up and also shares his marble, “here this marble is broken, it’s health care you can have it, I’m getting a new one.”

We all know that it’s no fun playing with broken marbles. Black people have been getting broken marbles for more than 400 years on this continent. We are not newcomers. Other than Indigenous people, Black people are the only minority group that can trace their ancestry on this continent for more than 15 generations, and we did not come here voluntarily.

Black people were granted the right to vote with the 15th amendment in 1870 in the United States, yet here we are still fighting for equality. We are not asking for our own marbles. We are simply asking if we can all play together.

We see countless statements from government officials that we do not have anti-Black issues in Canada, or the problem is not as acute as in other countries. It’s like saying we have no cases of COVID-19 yet we do no testing for the virus. It’s a tone-deaf statement that exemplifies why anti-Black systemic racism has been allowed to continue unchecked.

My friend Rohan Salmon was a victim of that system. Rohan was a product of the Toronto Regent Park community when it was built to house poor Black people with its lack of infrastructure, no trendy coffee shops, poorly funded schools and highrise ghettoized buildings.

In our early 20s, we became roommates but over time, our paths diverged. While we remained great friends, I became wealthy and he remained poor — even though he was college-educated with a degree from Carleton University and much smarter than me.

Over 20 years ago, Rohan was in a horrific car accident that left him a quadriplegic. He went to a nursing home and it became his sanctuary, his prison of sorts.

Rohan’s room was a shrine to my accomplishments. Every article and award I had ever received were proudly displayed and he would tell everyone about our friendship. Every anniversary my wife and I celebrated, we would always get a well-articulated email expressing his admiration to us as a couple and his desire to live another year to celebrate with us. After all, he was a part of our wedding 28 years ago.

He didn't leave his room and his care was similar to the stories we hear now about rampant neglect and mistreatment in those facilities.

Rohan's medical condition required 24-hour care and often caused him to be in and out of the hospital. During one of those hospital visits, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, Rohan was left with a horrible infection that was later found to be a result of neglect while in their care.

When he had another emergency, Rohan, in his weakened state, asked the paramedics which hospital he was being taken to. When they told him it was the same hospital that had treated him before, he whispered to the paramedics, "please leave me here to die." The paramedic listened and took him to another hospital.

Before Rohan died, I was by his side holding his hand. He whispered to the caregivers, "thank you for allowing me to die with dignity." As I watched my friend take his last breath, I saw myself in Rohan.

Anyone looking at us would see Rohan holding the hand of another Black man wearing a custom-made blue pinstriped three-piece suit. The same uniform worn by my white colleagues on Bay Street. The only thing that separated my dear friend and me was wealth. After Rohan's death, we went to his room to organize his possessions and found nicely wrapped gifts with the names of each of my children.

Rohan could not help himself, and I was ashamed that I didn't do more to help.

This is anti-Black systemic racism.

Ending anti-Black systemic racism can be done. How do I know? Because we've done it before. Years ago, a diversity movement started to slowly but surely add more women to Canada's boardrooms and executive ranks. In 2019, every company on the TSX Composite Index held their annual election of directors with at least one female nominee.

I find it interesting that when these business leaders celebrate this diversity initiative, they think they are talking about Black people, but they are not. The term diversity has become a catch-all for corporate Canada to suggest

they are doing something to be inclusive, when really they are only doing something for one group.

To those employers, leaders, and politicians who consider their organizations to be diverse, I urge you to look at the makeup of your board, your management team, your supply chain, or your cabinet and tell me how many Black people do you see?

We need to set specific targets and timelines to ensure Black representation in the boardrooms and executive suites across Canada and get companies to sign on to meeting those targets. It is important for Black people to see people like themselves in the boardrooms and on senior executive teams to know that it is possible.

When there is no representation it leads to the conclusion that there are systemic biases. It is not enough to say you have a diversity policy or that you happen to have a Black person in charge of X. In fact, generally, the executive in charge of diversity in a company is not Black because there are no Black people in their ranks to fill that role.

It is also not acceptable to say we can't find a Black person who fits the requirements of a position. Those arguments didn't work to address the gender diversity divide. When companies are mandated or have the desire, they find a solution.

To be clear, this is not an ask for a handout, or even a hand up. It is a call to remove the systemic barriers that keep capable people, who happen to be Black, from contributing.

No doubt some will shy away from participating for fear of controversy or because they continue to deny anti-Black systemic racism exists.

If we are to end the systemic oppression of Black people, we need the courage to step outside of the system. If you do not use the platform you have been given to force change and implement the fixes, then you are just as guilty as those who constructed the system.

Doing nothing now is akin to telling George Floyd to get up when he was powerless. Inaction is what has happened every other time the Black community has cried out.

A system that oppresses Black people is not a problem for Black people to fix, it's for the gatekeepers of the system. And those gatekeepers who fail to act must be moved aside.

It's time for a new and truly inclusive era.

We need to chart a new course where the need for voices like mine is obsolete. Where there is no need for our youth to march in the streets to demand our attention.

Together, we need to keep our efforts to fix the system going until we get it right, then keep it going so we can no longer get it wrong.