

**Children's advocate pulls no punches; Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond says
B.C. is weak in addressing the needs of its most vulnerable children
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Walk into Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond's office in Victoria and, after the Barack Obama poster on the door, the first thing you'll see is a small wooden conference table proudly decorated with all the artifacts of parenthood.

A scrawled note from Turpel-Lafond's daughter at summer camp, a handful of scattered pictures and plenty of colour from the lives of her four children comprise a cheery collage pressed under the table's glass top, bearing a striking resemblance to most family refrigerator doors.

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The publications — the results of her work as an official advocate for the province's children, but also as a watchdog over the ministry of children and family development — tell of a six-year-old child murdered by his father and of a 14-year-old frightened out of her house by her mother's abusive boyfriend.

They look into the stories of children who have died while in care, and of those that have been critically injured.

Taken together, the reports probe the province's ability to care for its most vulnerable children.

"It's proven very important to me that there be public accountability around those cases," Turpel-Lafond said in an interview, adding that she has yet to do an investigation in which her work "wasn't a crucial function to get to the bottom of what happened."

A judge on a five-year leave from Saskatchewan Provincial Court, Turpel-Lafond says she's careful to remain staunchly non-partisan, and to be cautious about when to go public with her concerns and when to work behind the scenes.

But in an interview this week, on the eve of Friday's 20th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Rights of the Child, Turpel-Lafond pulled no punches. "I would say British Columbia, particularly around the child-welfare and the child-serving side, would be in the mid-to-low rank," she said when asked about how well British Columbia protects vulnerable children. "I'm not even sure it's a system," she added. "I think it's weak. It's still weak."

In a wide-ranging interview, Turpel-Lafond did highlight progress in some areas, including a recent move to monitor more closely the progress of vulnerable children in the school system.

She was highly complimentary of front-line workers who she said often come to her with concerns and ideas about how to make things better.

But when addressing how well the system deals with children, she consistently returned to the same answer: more needs to be done.

"Government has challenges to speak with confidence about the outcomes it achieves for some of the most vulnerable children," she said, "because in fact they're not graduating. A lot of kids in British Columbia live in poverty.

"I'm not confident we are doing everything we can."

ARRIVED AFTER A CRISIS

When Turpel-Lafond came to British Columbia in late 2006, she was filling a role conceived in the aftermath of crisis.

In 2002, Sherry Charlie, a 19-month-old aboriginal girl, was killed in Port Alberni after being placed in the care of a violent uncle.

Facing intense public pressure over the case in 2005, the B.C. Liberal government called on Ted Hughes, a former judge and B.C. conflict-of-interest commissioner, to conduct a full review of the child welfare system.

The result was a scathing report that offered 62 recommendations, including one calling for the creation of an independent watchdog, the representative for children and youth.

Turpel-Lafond was appointed by a unanimous vote of the legislature, with virtually everyone touting her as a perfect fit for the job.

The youngest of four girls, she was born on a Manitoba reserve to a Cree father and a Scottish mother. She saw her alcoholic father beat her mother, and at times endured harsh physical mistreatment herself.

Pouring her efforts into education, Turpel-Lafond earned notable distinctions, including a doctorate from Harvard, a master's from Cambridge, a law degree from Osgoode Hall, and a bachelor of arts degree from Carleton.

When she first came to B.C., she told a newspaper reporter she hoped her past would help her keep other children from a similar fate.

"A message I will bring is that children can emerge from family breakdown and difficult traumatic experiences to be strong and whole contributors to society," she told the Province newspaper at the time.

"I want specific better outcomes for kids," she told another reporter. "That is really important to understand about me."

Time magazine has twice recognized Turpel-Lafond, naming her one of the "100 global leaders of tomorrow" in 1994, and one of the "top 20 Canadian leaders for the 21st Century" in 1999.

"She's terrific," said the New Democratic Party critic for children and family development, Maurine Karagianis.

"She is carrying out her mandate, I believe, with excellence," Karagianis added, calling the representative's role both "pivotal and essential."

Hughes, reflecting on his 2006 report this week, called it "one of the most significant things I've ever done."

"The government acted immediately on that recommendation [to appoint an advocate for children]," he said.

"I think it has had a marked improvement in availability of service to the population that it was intended to benefit."

He said he thinks Turpel-Lafond has the chops to do what needs to be done.

"She's certainly been forceful in her approach to the job," he said, adding that she has a tough job that often puts her at odds with the ministry.

Turpel-Lafond agreed, but said she realized and accepted that before agreeing to take the job.

"You have to touch on some very emotional and significant issues that governments are nervous about. So sometimes the response you get can be a challenging one," she said.

"If you were thin-skinned in this job you probably wouldn't survive very long."

But, she pointed out, she's independent of the government and does not report to politicians.

"I'm reporting through the legislature to the people," she said. "So I've got to be honest and accurate, and British Columbians deserve that."

Minister of Children and Family Development Mary Polak said the relationship between Turpel-Lafond and her ministry is an "evolving" one.

Polak acknowledged there were challenges in the early days, especially developing lines of communication between Turpel-Lafond's office and the ministry, but said that has since changed.

"There's been some major progress in terms of the way the ministry interrelates with her office," Polak said.

Asked about Turpel-Lafond's criticisms of her ministry, Polak said she respects the opinion, but disagrees with the assessment.

She agreed the ministry has gone through near-constant upheavals, but said key staff members are now in place and the situation is stable.

She said the "Strong, Safe and Supported" policy, released by the ministry in April 2008, provides a blueprint for steady progress.

"What we've seen is the ability now to begin a process of change that, in my view, is exactly where it ought to be," Polak said.

"Mary Ellen naturally is charged with looking at what the data sets are, what the outcomes are and what the formal reporting is," she said, adding that is likely why she reaches different conclusions than the government does.

"I'm looking at the plan that we have in place through Strong, Safe and Supported. I'm looking at where we are in that plan and I'm seeing nothing that concerns me about getting to the end of that plan. We're exactly where I think we should be."

B.C. CHILD POVERTY 'A SURPRISE'

Before coming to British Columbia, Turpel-Lafond had carefully studied the Hughes report and was well versed in the issues facing children. But, she said, over the past three years she has been surprised at just how prevalent child poverty is in B.C., and how it turns out to be an underlying issue in so many of the cases she investigates.

"I thought I was moving to one of the wealthiest provinces in Canada that had significant investment in kids," she said.

"I was really surprised to learn through the work to date how vulnerable those children are in British Columbia and how the systems do not meet their needs.

"A lot of these kids are in grinding poverty and really, what is there for them is limited."

Earlier this year, Turpel-Lafond approached Premier Gordon Campbell asking for a meeting with him and New Democratic Party leader Carole James to discuss child poverty, especially in light of the declining economic situation.

"If everybody owns the problem that means one side doesn't point the finger at the other side and say you did this to kids," she said, highlighting the importance of reaching bipartisan solutions.

"The NDP doesn't have a child poverty plan. The Liberals don't have a child poverty plan. We need a B.C. child poverty plan," she added.

Government statistics show the number of two-parent families on welfare jumped 81 per cent in the year after September 2008. The number of single-parent families on the rolls increased 40 per cent.

In June, Campbell rejected Turpel-Lafond's call for a meeting, saying she should instead take her concerns to the committee of the legislature through which she reports.

"I think the whole point is not to politicize these things," Campbell told reporters at the time.

"We are the political leaders. I think there is a legislative committee that the child rep reports to, and I think it's appropriate for her to do that."

But after its first meeting this week, the select standing committee on children and youth showed few signs of immediate action on the issue.

"By circumstance, and an election, the committee didn't meet for a year, so we're sort of in catch-up mode," committee chairwoman and Liberal MLA Joan McIntyre said this week, explaining why there was little time to discuss Turpel-Lafond's specific concerns over child poverty.

"All these issues come back to dealing with children at risk and vulnerable children, so I imagine we'll touch on it in one way or another," McIntyre said, adding that it is premature to say exactly what the committee will address.

Despite the apparent delay, Turpel-Lafond has received attention on the issue in other places.

In October, municipal leaders at the annual Union of B.C. Municipalities conference passed a motion proposing that Turpel-Lafond "bring forward a child poverty plan, similar to the Province of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Plan, that will include the implementation of a comprehensive cross-ministry strategy to address child poverty."

"That was a big step," Turpel-Lafond said this week, adding that she will continue talking with Campbell, James, the committee and as many other people will be necessary to help to push the issue forward.

"To me, I've got to be talking to everyone," she said.

"I'm not necessarily telling them something they want to hear, but at the same time I'm not saying it to them in a way that's backing them into a corner and saying you've got to do this and this," she added.

"I'm just saying let's get on it. Let's get into this work."

FINDING A WORK-HOME BALANCE

Turning her attention back to the pictures of her children, 46-year-old Turpel-Lafond said one of the challenges of the job has been balancing her busy home life with the rigours of being the advocate for children across B.C.

"There are times when you are so busy taking care of everyone else's children you forget about yours," she said.

"I could work harder and longer than I do, but I also need to preserve my own family and keep them going, which so far I've managed to do."

Turpel-Lafond pointed out that the job has other challenges as well, especially meeting with families when children have died or been critically injured.

But she said she finds her work as an advocate rewarding, and is inspired by the successes she has helped to bring about so far.

"You only can keep doing it if you remain hopeful that change can happen," she said earnestly.

When asked if she'll want to stay past her five-year appointment, Turpel-Lafond said she has not yet thought that far ahead.

"I pretty much live my life moment to moment. I was happy to get the kids to school today," she said.

When the time comes for her to decide, she said the real question will be whether she is still the best person for the job.

"It's about who would do the job effectively. Anybody who is worried about getting something later is not going to do a good job today," she said.

"At some point I'll have to decide if I'm going to stay in British Columbia or go back to Saskatchewan.

"But that's something I try not to think about, and that I'm too busy to have to worry about."