



2011 Champions for Children and Youth Summit Media Coverage



CKNW Bill Good
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Bill Good: About 40,000 new immigrants come to BC each year, and when you think about that, one in five are kids. Some newcomers arrive as skilled workers or as investors and entrepreneurs. Others are either international students or sponsored by a family member. So who are the young people? Are they safe and secure in their new surroundings, and are they getting the support they need to be a success in Canada?

This year the Champions for Children and Youth Summit is focusing on hearing the voices of immigrant and refugee youth who are often overlooked in our society. The summit will hear from immigrant youth in an attempt to answer some of these questions. What policy needs to be created that will support all families and children?

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond is representative for children and youth, and she joins me now. I don't know how many people have really given this specific thought, that among the new arrivals to Canada each year, quite a number are kids.

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond: British Columbia welcomes about 40,000 immigrants every year. They come in different categories. About 6,500 of those are children. And if you look at our whole youth population in British Columbia, about 19% are immigrant children. We're a destination in terms of people coming here. Some people come through.... They're economic refugees. Their parents are skilled labourers or they bring a business here. Even still the children are going to have to settle and often learn a new language. And some of them come through the refugee door or are undocumented migrants, and that....

Good: Particularly tough for them?

Turpel-Lafond: Very tough for them. Actually I find what I've learned in partnering with the Vancouver foundation and getting a youth advisory committee of immigrant and refugees working with me closely over the last number of months is children who are coming with families in all categories, the economic and non-economic class of migrant and immigrant kids, they're all struggling, particularly learning English, adjusting to a new environment; even if you're bringing a business here, adjusting to a different business climate than you may have had in your country or origin. And also, for immigrants who are here, like, for instance, the live-in caregiver immigrants who are working for families across Canada and in British Columbia, and

they want to sponsor their own family members to come, some of whom are children, the children come; they face big challenges.

So we're listening. We've got about 80 immigrant and refugee kids representing all countries and all parts of the lower mainland coming together at the Wosk Centre with business leaders and government leaders, and we're partnering to hear are we doing enough, can we do more, what's their experience. We want them to live in British Columbia, to stay here, to help build our economy, build our communities, and what do they think. So this is the first time I think they've ever been brought together and asked those questions.

Good: Interesting. Where do they mostly come from? Are there certain pockets of the world that mostly represent the new arrivals to BC?

Turpel-Lafond: Well, primarily when you look at all immigrant categories it's China, India, Philippines and Korea are the largest categories. But on the refugee side it's Africa; we're seeing more Iranian refugees, Iraqi refugees. People are applying for refugee status from Mexico where there's really significant drug violence, where one of the parents has been murdered, for instance. So we're seeing it from all over, wherever there's war-torn areas, drought-stricken areas, the Tamil migrants that came on the ship in August 2010 and landed out at Ogden Point in Victoria. We're seeing them coming from different places. But the key thing is there are children. There are children. They're coming here. They're ready to be educated and supported and become something new and different in this new territory.

Good: It's pretty different when you think about coming here even from Mexico, to come from.... I hadn't realized that there were refugees coming from Mexico, but there have been quite a lot of workers coming from Mexico the past several years, and more and more there seem to be people who are emigrating from Mexico, people in a business class.

Turpel-Lafond: That's right. I mean, there's the skilled labour class, and they're bringing businesses and starting businesses.

But again, I come back to the key thing, which is how are the kids doing. We also have the issue of unaccompanied minors. We're trying to recruit more international students to come to our schools. We have a big initiative. Those unaccompanied minors come and they live with families often, and often they get into...you know, a lot of issues arise because they don't have all of the supports of their family. Things can go sideways.

Good: Sometimes they have too much money and not enough support.

Turpel-Lafond: Well, it's funny. It's not always about money -- right, Bill? It's about the kind of society we have. Do we work together? Do we help? I mean, young people need to develop [inaudible] social activities. They need to make sure their skills are [growing] and developing. Their parents may have money to move them around, but they may need the support of their families. Sometimes something very bad happens to their parent; they may have a helicopter parent, they call them, or an astronaut parent working somewhere in the Middle East. There's unrest; the parent's suddenly incarcerated. You have an unaccompanied minor in British Columbia. They can't pay the bills. What happens? Very complicated situation. And then I deal with the tough cases where you might have sexual exploitation or sexual trafficking of young people who are being brought to Canada and being involved and sexually exploited.

So I see a range of things, but one thing I do see is this great opportunity to sit down with the young people and talk to them.

Good: Do you see support services that we need to provide...? I mean, is there some clarity there, some things that you already know we must do and do a better job of providing?

Turpel-Lafond: Well, as a representative I went out with some of the immigrant resettlement groups a few years back and looked at what are the services like and we sort of did some interviewing and produced a bit of a paper to start to understand this thing and talk to the kids. I think we need to support the families more effectively. But the ESL, English as a second language, is a major concern, whether or not we have enough supports in the schools but also for the parents, because these young people, particularly these youth.... You've got the 12-, 13-year-old young person who really is the English speaker for an entire family, and so they're caregiving for a whole family. So the adult ESL, the kids' ESL is a big area where I think we can make some improvements.

Good: Are most of the kids coming here in need of English as a second language, or do...?

Turpel-Lafond: Yeah. It's one of the biggest issues, the English-as-a-second-language issue. They need it to succeed in school. But where is it going to be delivered? We have various school districts that are trying to support that.

We have a kind of odd funding formulas. You have to get your numbers tallied up and make a pitch to see how much ESL you'll get, but you never know what's going to happen. Suddenly someone comes and moves.... The way we work it is very old-fashioned. I think we want to be a place to live and work and contribute, and we want these young people to reach their full potential. English is a tool that they need even more than the student sitting beside them, and we need to make sure they're getting it. So I think that's an area I'm going to hear a lot about today, because the young people have been talking to me a lot about that concern.

Good: A personal note in our last minute. Your appointment is about up.

Turpel-Lafond: That's right. I mean, I'd like to continue doing this work a bit...for a few more years, but it's up to the Members of the Legislative Assembly to get the person that they want to work with, and they're deliberating about that now.

Good: Have you had any indication from the government whether or not they plan to continue with you in the job?

Turpel-Lafond: Well, they have a committee; there's a process. But I certainly haven't received any clear indication from them if they're going to be reappointing me or interested in that.

Good: You want to stay.

Turpel-Lafond: I'd like to finish the work that I've started, and I think I need a bit more time. But at the same time I fully respect that they need to get someone that they are comfortable with. So I look forward to hearing from them soon, I hope.

Good: Thank you for doing this

**CBC Early Edition
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Kathryn Gretsinger: Diego Cardona was nine years when he came to Canada. He was a refugee, along with his mum and his sister. Now he's 15 years old, and he wants leaders of all kinds to know more about his experience as a refugee. He's helped organize a conference to do that. It's called Fresh Voices From Long Journeys: Insights of Immigrant and Refugee Youth. The forum begins today, and he's got a heavy hitter helping out: BC's representative for children and youth.

Both Diego Cardona and Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond join me in the studio this morning.

Hello to you both.

So, Diego, tell us. What do you remember about those first few years in Canada?

Diego Cardona: I came to Montreal first, so I remember coming to Montreal, coming to a small town called [St Jean] and going to school for the first time and being glad I had my sister back then, so we were, like, always together. We ate lunch together, breaks together, recess together, everything. I mean, it was an interesting process, because I never thought I was going to go to another country where I had to learn another language and I had to, like, integrate to this whole new culture; put it that way. I mean, we got [inaudible] a lot.

Gretsinger: What did they do? What did they say?

Cardona: Some of them would just walk around the whole way, or they see you at recess time and they start calling you all these things that at first you don't understand, but after you learn a little bit of French and actually get comfortable with the language, [you go]: okay, that's what they were telling me. You know, sometimes I got pushed around and got laughed at, but you know, I take it easy. I'm like, oh, okay, maybe that's what new kids get. But I mean, then I understood that's not what new kids should get.

I then moved to Vancouver, and then the process started all over again.

Gretsinger: Did you feel like you were an outsider again once you [inaudible]?

Cardona: Yeah, of course, because then you.... It's like you're in the same country, but you've come to a totally different province, beginning with the fact that they speak English.

Gretsinger: Another language.

Cardona: Yeah, another language to learn, and you begin with that process of having to learn the language again, being excluded for not learning the language. Again, like, my sister was my support, and I was her support. It was like *deja vu*.

Gretsinger: Lots of challenges, then, to try to just find a way to feel confident and [still] in this new place.

Cardona: Yes, definitely. I mean, I think that the teachers.... They don't know very much to work, I think, with newcomers, which I think is a challenge for both them and us. Sadly, I think there wasn't enough support in our school in terms of a counselling system or some kind of social working system to help newcomers integrate to the school, so there was definitely a huge challenge with the students who did not include me because of obvious reasons and then the school who didn't know how to help me to integrate too. There was, like, a problem, a challenge, with my peers and a challenge with the system.

Gretsinger: So you decided it's time to start telling your story.

Cardona: Yeah, it's time to start telling the story. What better way to change it than having immigrants and refugees themselves telling the stories to all these policymakers?

Gretsinger: Ms Turpel-Lafond, how do you take the stories that you hear from people like Diego and weave that into what you are trying to do to help children and families in the province?

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond: Well, that's why we're having the summit today, and thanks to Diego and a group of immigrant and refugee youth that have been working with me to partner and organize this, we'll have more than 80 immigrant and refugee youth gathering today, and we'll have decision-makers and leaders from business, from government, federal-provincial-municipal government and others, come together and really listen to the young people, to bring out that they have a voice. The one thing that struck me as representative over the last number of years is their voices are very soft, but here they are contributing and learning, often translating and navigating this whole province for their parents, who don't speak English as well. They're often very stressed, and they're so keen to learn, to contribute, to be the future of British Columbia. You know, almost 20% of the youth in this province are immigrant youth, and have we heard enough from them?

So today we're going to begin this new journey of really listening, and thanks to Diego and other immigrant and refugee youth that are gathering from every country, almost, you know, we're going to marshal in a change, and I'm really proud of Diego, and I'm really grateful he stepped forward.

Gretsinger: Diego, what's it like for you to have a game-changer like Ms Turpel-Lafond on your side here?

Cardona: It's awesome. I think it's a great opportunity. You know, we compromise in the large communities, and we don't have this voice, and we don't have this position, and I think having Mary Ellen on our side.... She's always been on our side, but now, like....

Gretsinger: She's kind of pushing you forward here.

Cardona: She showed the initiative, like, to actually say let's make a conference based on our experiences. It's a huge support. I mean, now we're going to be in a conference where we're going to be at the same level, sitting at the same table, within the same chairs as all these policymakers, all these leaders. It's a huge opportunity. I mean, when do we ever get to do that? It's a historic event.

Gretsinger: What do you want to do? Is there specific change that you're trying to...?

Turpel-Lafond: I'd like to see, first of all, that we partner with immigrant and refugee youth, that we change. We still have embedded in our province and our country certain attitudes. You know, I saw that when the Tamil refugees came in August 2010. Some of those young people will join us today. I got a chance to visit them when their mums were incarcerated. I was really happy about how British Columbians opened their hearts to them as refugees, but I could see the pain and difficulty that they experienced in terms of coming and really being supported. I mean, they came to jails. Their dads were in one jail. Their mums were somewhere else. I just don't think it reflected our values as British Columbians of reaching out, learning from each other, building together. You know, I want to see our schools and our health care system and all of our systems to really understand and support these young people and their families.

Gretsinger: Diego, what would help the most?

Cardona: I think what would help.... Well, this is a huge step. Like, helping the most, I think, for me before was, like, getting to sit down, sit down with these people and talk to them, and let's create a dialogue, and let's create a partnership. But I think what will help the most after this conference is I want to see some action being taken. I want to see those recommendations come out, and I want to see all these policymakers and all these [inaudible] compromise towards making a change in our system, compromise making a change in our ESL system, doing some kind of reform with the integration system for families. We need some huge changes in the way the Ministry of Social Development works, and there's huge things in the way the ministry of housing works.

I want to see all those changes happening, and we're going to start great today with that great dialogue and those great recommendations, but definitely, those actions will help the most.

Gretsinger: Great to have both of you in this morning. Good luck with the conference.



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Facing Challenges: Young Newcomers to BC

By Katie Hyslop

With close to 40,000 immigrants arriving in British Columbia each year, newcomers to Canada are one of the fastest growing populations in our province. But although government encourages this growth, resettling here isn't smooth sailing, particularly for the youth who represent about 6,500 of the annual newcomers, and face everything from sexual exploitation, to racism, to ineffective academic counselling.

The Office of the Representative for Children and Youth wants to see that change. Their solution began last week with a two-day conference run by refugee and immigrant youth from the Lower Mainland, giving kids the opportunity to have their say in front of policy-makers and politicians about the issues they face as newcomers to B.C.

"In British Columbia, we do not have a lot of opportunities to listen to young people, we haven't built it into our systems very well," **Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond**, representative for children and youth, told The Tyee.

"When I looked broadly at the issues, around about 20 per cent of our youth population in British Columbia is immigrant youth, and I really got to thinking about how can I be involved with and partner with them, and bring some decision makers and leaders in business and government to work with them."

Speak up, speak out

Turpel-Lafond's office partnered with The Vancouver Foundation, a local philanthropic organization, to create a panel of 16 Lower Mainland immigrant and refugee youth and four youth workers that would plan a youth-led conference.

After countless weekly meetings this past summer, the Fresh Voices from Long Journeys: Insights of Immigrant and Refugee Youth conference was held Oct. 13-14 at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue in downtown Vancouver.

Approximately 80 youth from 50-60 different countries participated, taking part in panel discussions about school inclusion, equity for women and girls, sexuality and identity, youth programs and services, family expectations, and English as a second language (ESL) and academic experiences, among other issues.

The conference also featured a keynote address from hip-hop artist and refugee K'naan, who came to Canada from Mogadishu, Somalia, as a teenager, and speeches from prominent local immigrants such as Ujjal Dosanjh and Shashi Assanand.

Tiba Al-Humaimidi came to Vancouver by way of Dubai a year and a half ago, though she's originally from Iraq. At 14 years old, she was one of the youngest participants in the conference and on the youth committee. The issue she's most keen on addressing is the school experience.

"The (academic) counsellors are not really that good: they don't tell you what's count, what's not count, they just give you a bunch of (subjects). Or they choose for you, they don't ask you, they just pick the subjects," she told The Tyee.

"And for people who have ESL, counsellors always give them the electives, they don't give them the academic subjects, so when they have to graduate, they realize they have to take a lot of academics they didn't take. They're way late."

Josiane Hougbo-Anthony also had problems with school when she came to Vancouver three years ago from Togo. But it wasn't so much the academics she had issues with as it was fitting in with her Canadian-born peers.

"As a refugee youth and black, we don't have equal rights both in the school system and socializing, and everything," she says.

Now 20 years old, she wants to use opportunities like this conference to help other youth like her facing discrimination.

"It's a great opportunity for me to be able to work on this and bring my other peers into this and feel comfortable and speak out to stop bullying, racism against young immigrants and refugee kids."

Young people teach us a lot: Turpel-Lafond

Not every youth involved in this conference, however, was an immigrant.

"Some kids are Canadian born, and there (are) a handful of kids that either haven't had an immigration experience themselves, or their parents may not have, they're just young people that are just interested in supporting a conversation of how to make communities a more welcoming and inclusive place for immigrant kids," explains Mark Gifford, director of grants and community initiatives at The Vancouver Foundation.

Nor was everyone a youth. Sixty politicians, policy-makers, and youth workers were also invited to attend. But instead of telling kids how they would do better or how they would improve the systems designed to support immigrant and refugee youth in B.C., they were there to listen.

"I think that they'll be quite moved by what they learn and they'll see the potential to get some very good feedback in terms of how we can improve systems," says Turpel-Lafond.

"These young people can teach us a lot about how do you work together across really large differences, in terms of their culture, their origins, their experiences, but still, they're here working together. And I think we need to tap into that and really understand how we're building communities in British Columbia."

Hougbo-Anthony wants the adults to do more than just listen.

"All the adults, they do listen, but by the time they get out of the door, they don't have no clue what those people have just said. So I'm hoping, personally, that they don't really come only to listen today, but to try to make a next step to that," she says.

Federal-level trauma

Turpel-Lafond says this conference isn't a one-time thing, and hopes the youth engagement process will expand beyond the Lower Mainland, and even British Columbia.

Many elements of the immigration process fall under federal jurisdiction, and Turpel-Lafond wants to work with government on improving those systems, particularly in regards to how refugees are treated.

"I saw this especially when the Tamil migrant families came and I visited them in the youth jail and was very concerned about what happened there. The individuals working with them there were very supportive, but basically they were met at gunpoint and incarcerated and separated from their parents," she says.

"I could see the grief that caused to families, and I could see how many of the young people here have experienced that, and I'm not sure how, but I would very much like to support the federal government and federal officials to spend more time talking to young people."

And the interest from youth is there. Gifford told The Tye before the conference that they had to turn away many youth from outside the Lower Mainland who wanted to take part.

With a population growing by the thousands each year, interest in the rights and needs of immigrant and refugee youth will only continue to rise.