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OPINION

Why we must address environmental racism

By Carol Eugene Park

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When a federal election is called and Parliament dissolves, all private member's bills "get wiped off the table," said Dr. Ingrid Waldron, a professor in McMaster University's Global Peace and Social Justice Program.

This is what happened to Bill C-230, A National Strategy to Redress Environmental Racism, when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called a snap election this past September. Environmental racism involves disproportionate siting of industries in Indigenous and racialized communities.

Waldron spent years researching the harms and impacts of environmental racism in Indigenous and Black communities in Canada, which became a book and documentary, "There's Something in the Water."

She teamed up with former Nova Scotia Liberal MP Lenore Zann, who wrote a provincial bill on environmental racism in 2015 that was not considered by the House. Using Waldron's extensive research and race-based data, the two redrafted Zann's provincial bill into a federal one.

Bill C-230 was the first of its kind in Canada that aimed to address harms caused by environmental racism and promote environmental justice across the nation.

"I really thought it was going to go far this time. I really felt it was turned into legislation because we were approved at second reading. I was so hopeful," said Waldron.

Waldron said that the reason the bill made it so far in the legislative process was because of the Campaigns Working Group in a coalition she formed called the Canadian Coalition for Environmental and Climate Justice (formerly known as the National Anti-Environmental Racism Coalition).

"I want to thank the Campaigns Working group. I think the reason why the bill got so far this time is because we had a bit of a mini campaign on social media. We wrote letters. We have petitions. And people in that group are members of Equal Justice, David Suzuki Foundation. So of course, we are all not just me, they're all disappointed about the bill."

Since Zann lost her seat this past federal election, Waldron said she'll have to find a new champion, though she's unsure who that will be.

"I might reach out to Lenore and ask her who could be a champion with this bill to reintroduce it."

Before her research and involvement in environmental justice policies, Waldron had never heard of environmental racism. An activist approached her about beginning a research project on it.

"I didn't understand the systemic nature of environmental racism. I didn't understand how the environment could be racist. And it just seemed strange."

Waldron said it was difficult for her to understand the concept and she needed to do a lot of reading to confidently say that environmental racism is a form of racism.

"I can clearly see employment racism in employment. I can see racism in education. I can certainly see anti-Black police violence. Those things are very obvious to me."

And while the term may seem new to some people, Waldron said that over the years, people have been organizing events about environmental racism.

"I've seen that since 2020, specifically where an event is just about that, and these are mostly white student groups. So, something is happening. There could always be more information, but there's only so many presentations I can do, right?"

Now, Waldron's goal is to mentor young people to do the work and lead workshops on environmental racism. She's made it easy for people who want to follow in her footsteps by creating a workshop template to do their own presentations.

"Everybody comes to me because there are not too many people doing it, and that's actually pretty exhausting to me."

As communities continue their efforts to delay the climate crisis, Waldron invites young people to join organizations like her coalition if they want to take part in the fight for environmental justice.

"If people are interested in joining the (coalition) please reach out to me. We are always looking for members who want to be active. We have six working groups: communications, education and training, community capacity building, research and mapping using GIS analysis, and campaigns."

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