

“A lot of things come down to money”: Race-based affirmative action and the furor over Canadian academic Carrie Bourassa’s native identity claims

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Large sections of Canada’s well-heeled academic establishment have been consumed in recent weeks with the unsavoury professional destruction of Carrie Bourassa, a University of Saskatchewan professor and the scientific director, until she was fired from the post last month, of the federal government-affiliated Institute of Indigenous Peoples’ Health.

Bourassa has been pilloried as an imposter and a fraud for claiming Indigenous identity despite not having “a drop of Indigenous blood in her,” as one of her many critics pointedly remarked. The kick-off and spearhead of this campaign was an extensive forensic inquiry into Bourassa’s genealogy conducted by the state-funded Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

As a result of the furor whipped up by the media and a number of identity politics zealots, Bourassa has been suspended or removed from her various academic posts, despite not having been found guilty of any crime or even appearing before any disciplinary body.

The entire episode is a particularly foul expression of the consequences of race-based affirmative action, which is irreconcilably at odds with the interests of working people and the fight for social equality. Falsely presented by its advocates as “progressive” and a blow for “social justice,” affirmative action leaves the capitalist profit system and its savage exploitation of workers of all races and ethnic backgrounds untouched. It calls for privileges enjoyed only by the richest 5 or 10 percent of the population, such as professorial and high-profile media appointments and positions on corporate boards, to be allocated according to raced-based formula and quotas so as to guarantee a racially “equitable” division of the spoils.

While enriching and empowering a few, this racist agenda serves to further entrench racial divisions. It provides the rationale for an ever-more ruthless application of pseudo-scientific theories of race and racial “purity” that have much in common with far-right and outright fascist ideology.

The racist identity politics behind the attack on Bourassa are fostered and deployed by Canadian imperialism to cultivate a constituency within privileged sections of the upper middle class. The specific form this has taken with regard to the tiny native elite is Indigenous “reconciliation,” which has been official state policy since the Trudeau Liberal government came to power in 2015.

The aim of “reconciliation” is to reconcile the Indigenous population, the vast majority of whom live in poverty and squalor comparable to Third World countries, to Canadian capitalism, by nurturing a small privileged layer of Indigenous petty-bourgeois professionals and entrepreneurs to serve as a buffer against growing anger and social opposition among Indigenous workers and youth.

As exemplified by the recent appointment of Mary Simon, an Inuit and former Canadian diplomat, to the post of Governor-General, this involves the promotion of “native representatives” to high-level positions in government, business and academia, including through the adoption and expansion of affirmative action programs. It also involves the push to expand or create new structures of “native self-government” within the Canadian federal state that can work with Ottawa, the provinces and big business to step up the exploitation of First Nations-controlled territory and its Indigenous inhabitants.

A central feature of the “reconciliation” policy is that the ruling class not only allows, but actively encourages racial divisions. The official narrative—promoted by the entire political establishment apart from the most right-wing Conservatives and Quebec nationalists, and disseminated by the corporate media, and a grasping Indigenous elite—holds “white settler” society and “racism” responsible for the historic crimes committed against, and the ongoing oppression of, the Indigenous people. This racist argument conveniently absolves Canadian capitalism and its state for the abuse and oppression of the native population. Instead, blame and the need for restitution is shifted onto “whites” in general, who, owing to their skin colour, do not and cannot understand the “lived experiences” of the Indigenous population.

The media offensive against Bourassa

It is only in this context that one can account for the ferocity of the attack unleashed against Bourassa by Canada’s purportedly “impartial” public broadcaster and a phalanx of identity politics crusaders. For these privileged layers, much was at stake, including six-figure salaries, lucrative academic appointments and research funding opportunities.

Suspicion around Bourassa’s identity was initially raised from within the thin layer who compete for the few privileges conferred on the basis of Indigenous identity. Raven Sinclair, a professor of social work at the University of Regina and a public critic of Bourassa, inadvertently gave away more than she intended when she blurted out on CBC’s “The Current,” “It has to do with material gain and advantage of position, power, authority and role. A lot of things come down to money.”

In late October, the CBC published a lengthy investigative report by journalist Geoff Leo calling into question long-standing claims of Bourassa to Métis and Indigenous heritage. Bourassa, who has written extensively on native health issues and was till recently a recognized

authority on the subject, has in the past claimed Métis, Anishinaabe and Tlingit heritage.

It should be noted that Bourassa's own success appears to a considerable degree to have been facilitated by the same sort of identity politics that are now being weaponized against her. An avid proponent of the affirmative action programs promoted by Indigenous leaders and the Liberal government, she took full advantage of both funding and professional opportunities explicitly allocated on the basis of Indigenous identity.

The CBC reported that it had received a six-page open letter in September signed by 30 people, including members of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the federal government agency with which Bourassa, as a director of the Institute of Indigenous Peoples' Health, was professionally affiliated. The letter stated, "CIHR strongly supports Dr. Carrie Bourassa in refuting any claims doubting her Indigenous identity." That apparently was taken by the CBC as a greenlight to launch their genealogical investigation.

Citing accusations by some of her colleagues that her claims are false, Leo examined Bourassa's family history as a police investigator would a murder suspect. After poring over "birth certificates, ship passenger manifests, census records, probate files, newspaper clippings and local family histories," Leo concluded in his article, "CBC has traced all of her ancestry lines back to Europe. CBC was unable to locate any Indigenous ancestor."

The story of an Indigenous "imposter" was subsequently picked up and sensationalized by media outlets around the world.

Though it may well be the case that Bourassa has been less than truthful in her claims, the assertion of blood ancestry as a necessary qualification for a teaching post or any position for that matter has no progressive aspect and must be firmly opposed. One need not support Bourassa's actions or her politics to reject the basis on which she has been targeted.

Among Bourassa's more vocal accusers is Winona Wheeler, associate professor of Indigenous studies at the University of Saskatchewan, who asserted to APTN National News, "What we found is that Dr. Carrie Bourassa doesn't have a drop of Indigenous blood in her and that she has been faking her identity for at least 20 years."

Janet Smylie, a Métis professor at the University of Toronto whose book on Indigenous parenting was co-edited by Bourassa, was similarly harsh, stating, "It makes you feel a bit sick to have an imposter who is speaking on behalf of Métis and Indigenous people to the country about literally what it means to be Métis ... that's very disturbing and upsetting and harmful."

Bourassa subsequently revised her previous claims that she grew up Métis, saying instead that she became Métis in her 20s when she was adopted into the community by a Métis friend of her grandfather, Clifford Laroque, who has since died. A video has circulated of her describing a naming ceremony during which she received the spirit name Morning Star Bear, which she says she took as confirmation of her native identity.

Bourassa's sister, Jody Burnett, says that they both received financial assistance for their education from funding provided to native people. However, Burnett told the CBC she has not claimed to be Métis since 2014, when her husband completed a family tree that threw into doubt any Indigenous heritage. Though she says Bourassa received thousands of dollars in Métis scholarships, Burnett supports her sister's claim that she was led to believe she had Métis relations by a Métis leader.

Bourassa was previously celebrated as an important advocate for Indigenous health and culture within the same circles now savaging her. Earlier this year, she was named by a leading NGO to be among the top 100 most powerful women in Canada. She was widely credited for highlighting the dire health conditions facing Indigenous people, and particularly their impact on women. This makes her persecution over her heritage all the more hypocritical.

Bourassa has been relatively muted in her own defence, issuing a media release that states, "Dr. Bourassa's employment is not determined by nationhood and she is not in an Indigenous designated role within" the University of Saskatchewan. The statement indicated her support for allotting academic appointments based on "native identity" but objected to making genealogy the determinant of that identity. Referring to federal legislation and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Canada as "legal coverage," the statement warns that the campaign to determine who has the "right" to claim Indigenous identity based on family ancestry is leading to racial blood "quantum criteria" that "challenges the traditional (Indigenous) right to claim and adopt."

Demands for more vigorous, race-based selections

The proposition that only those of a particular racial or ethnic background can understand, study, and write about issues concerning their "own" group or community mirrors positions that can be traced to far-right assertions of race as primary in society. Whatever the basis for the designation of these groups, whether it be "self-identification" or a blood quotient, the premise is itself reactionary and must be decisively rejected by all workers and progressive-minded professionals and artists.

That said, the scrutiny of "blood lines"—which can and invariably will lead to disputes over whose genealogy is Indigenous "enough"—is especially odious.

In their push for greater access to privilege, Indigenous identity politics activists and their supporters within the capitalist establishment are resorting to definitions akin to those developed by the Fathers of Confederation as they realized the program of Canada's emerging capitalist elite to dispossess and subjugate the Native people of western Canada, thereby destroying their communal forms of property and opening their lands for capitalist exploitation.

The 1876 Indian Act declared an Indigenous person to be "any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band." This designation of Indigenous people on the basis of "Indian blood" was subsequently used to enforce a system of state discrimination and other horrific crimes against the Native people, including denying them basic citizenship rights, such as the right to vote until 1960, and prohibiting them from moving freely off-reserve under a "pass law" regime that served as a model for South Africa's apartheid laws.

Aside from the exclusion of women, those advocating the use of genealogical investigations to police Indigenous affirmative action programs would have no trouble signing on to the reactionary race-based categorization of society and culture contained in the 1876 Indian Act.

The squabble over Bourassa's Indigenous identity is being used to justify the development of an even more stringent form of race-based selection at Canadian institutions.

At Queen's University, questions were raised over the Indigenous credentials of several faculty members last June. This resulted in an open letter from Indigenous leaders pointing to the material interests at stake, noting that there is "a financial and legal incentive for universities to over report on First Nations, Inuit and Métis (FNIM) faculty... to meet pre-established equity targets."

In November, Queen's announced that it was adopting a process of consultations with Indigenous leaders on "key aspects of verification of indigeneity" in hiring. Similar measures have been adopted at several American universities.

At Ryerson University, an "Indigenous faculty committee" is being tasked with developing "criteria they will use to confirm who they consider to be Indigenous." According to a November 15 statement from

the university, “In Canada, we live within a history and the ongoing practices of colonialism. ‘Stepping outside’ of colonialism, particularly in institutional settings, is impossible. Therefore, all communication and conversation related to Indigenous identity and community unfolds within a context of colonialism and white institutional norms.”

The increasing pressure for universities to implement rigorous race-based selection, the logic of which leads to blood quotients, has nothing whatsoever to do with “white norms,” whatever that may mean. It is rather the product of Canadian capitalism and the policies pursued by the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal government. Recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, ostensibly formed to redress the historic crimes of the residential school system, included a funding formula for academic positions and resources based on Indigenous identity.

The overwhelming majority of the Indigenous population, meanwhile, continues to suffer far higher unemployment, poverty, disease, drug and alcohol addiction, suicide and incarceration rates than the general population. COVID-19 infection rates and opioid deaths are respectively four times and double the national average.

Just over half of Indigenous students finish high school, and only one-quarter gain a university degree, compared to around half of the general population. Dozens of First Nations reserves continue to lack access to clean drinking water more than six years after Trudeau came to power pledging to do away with boiled water advisories.

The deepening crisis of capitalist rule, coupled with an upsurge of social opposition from the working class and other oppressed sections of society, is driving the ruling class and its backers to intensify their efforts to incite divisions among workers along racial, cultural and gender lines. They are determined to set workers against each other and block a unified workers’ movement against class oppression. But in this they will fail. The rapidly deteriorating conditions of life for the broad masses of the population, the Indigenous population included, is driving working people into struggle. This finds its clearest expression in the growth of strikes among workers across North America in the face of the disastrous conditions produced by the pandemic. The overwhelmingly young and impoverished Native population has repeatedly shown its determination to oppose capitalist oppression over recent years, from the Idle No More protests to the nationwide rail blockades in support of the Wet’suwet’en.

The promotion of identity politics serves to advance the material ambitions of a small number of people in order to defend the retrograde principle of class privilege. Working people, whether they are English- or French-speaking, Indigenous or immigrants, must decisively reject all forms of identity politics and fight for an end to the oppression of the native population as part of the struggle for socialism.



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