

## Opinion

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond receives an honorary doctorate of laws from Vancouver Island University on Jan. 7, 2008. I, like many, was shocked and disappointed following the news that Turpel-Lafond, previously a well-regarded activist, was not who she purported to be, writes Independent Senator Mary Jane McCallum. Photograph courtesy of Flickr



# Can we stop with the Indigenous identity fraud?

I urge all to raise their voices to decry identity fraud whose sole purpose is to dehumanize and brutalize the very essence and power of all esquiwak (women), writes Independent Senator Mary Jane McCallum.

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Mary Jane  
McCallum

Opinion



The cold, calculated and alarmingly high rates of Indigenous

identity fraud are critical problems that need to be addressed through legal channels. While the headline-grabbing instances are raising awareness of this problem, we are not doing enough to discuss and then meaningfully respond to the effects of these acts on dispossessing body, mind, and spirit of Indigenous esquiwak (women). This unilateral extractive relationship, imposed by pretendians, is predetermined, focused, and malicious. It goes against the seven sacred teachings.

The unspoken impacts to which I refer are the resulting violation and disenfranchisement, once again, of Indigenous peoples, and particularly Indigenous esquiwak. Once again Indigenous esquiwak are left unsafe, violated, and under threat by patriarchal institutions. Do these actions violate the legal and equality rights guaranteed to us under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

I, like many, was shocked and disappointed following the

news that Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, previously a well-regarded activist, was not who she purported to be. Yet by not taking ownership of her deliberate misrepresentation spanning numerous decades, she left credible, professional, strong, and intelligent matriarchs to challenge the very problem she herself created. These women have worked tirelessly to rise above oppression to lessen the colonialism that has sought to define us. It is incomprehensible that they now also have to combat the lateral and gender violence of colonialism that is birthed from the actions of women like Turpel-Lafond, women who have successfully co-opted Indigenous lived experience by taking prominent space in the fabric of our society—space that is not theirs to occupy.

Through her silence, Turpel-Lafond has pitted Indigenous women against the colonial patriarchal systems that exist within Canada's various institutions. These very institutions are

part of the problem as they condone the passive act of self-declaring Indigeneity, be they the Houses of Parliament, academe, corrections, health, education, etc. Yet this problem of colonial patriarchy—which can be perpetrated by women—has not been addressed publicly.

This patriarchy is, unfortunately, also adopted by some of our own in Indigenous territories. Many Indigenous men, including leadership, have come to Turpel-Lafond's defence. By siding with such a pretendian, they silence their own matriarchs, leaving them no recourse to address these abuses of trust—from two fronts. There needs to be protection for the women who do speak up, especially those working at the grassroots level. Why do some continue to give pretendians legitimacy when these pretendians are not legitimate?

Another form of violence occurred when Turpel-Lafond established her identity based on victimhood as if our identities, as esquiwak, were defined through experienced trauma. In reality, what connects us is our truth, strength, courage; our resiliency; our consideration of future generations; our legacy as living ancestors; our sacred responsibility as women; our autonomy and our self-determination.

Growing up, I wanted to be able to claim parts of Canadian history as part of my own story. However, seeing myself as Canadian and as a 'legitimized' person was elusive because the nuns, priests, Indian agents, nurses, and government agencies would not let me claim ownership of any-

thing in my life. This included my body, mind, and spirit and the environments I lived in. Since then, I have kept searching for something no one else could take away again—something that could remove my feelings of disharmony, dispossession, alienation and conflict. But identity fraud, a new form of resource extraction, reared its ugly head. Will these pretendians end up being the new "Indians" in the cabinet and other key positions?

When these fraudsters are invariably found out, it is not only they who suffer. It is the causes they advocated for. It is the people who supported them. And it is the *authentic* Indigenous women whose lives have been thrown into this quagmire without their consent. It is these matriarchs who now have an extra burden added to their list, magnified in this instance because our men won't stand by our side.

I urge all to raise their voices to decry identity fraud whose sole purpose is to dehumanize and brutalize the very essence and power of all esquiwak. We all have a responsibility to end this egregious activity, including the irresponsible practice of self-declaration. In raising our voices, we not only uphold Indigenous women and girls, but also ensure that they claim the spaces that are rightfully theirs. We have endured enough colonialism.

Senator Mary Jane McCallum is a First Nations woman hailing from Barren Lands First Nation in northern Manitoba. She was appointed to the Senate of Canada in December 2017, representing the province of Manitoba.

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