

Faith groups press for passage of Indigenous rights bill

Canada's Catholic bishops are backing ecumenical efforts to encourage prompt passage of a bill in support of Indigenous rights before Parliament rises for the summer.

Bill C-262 would bring Canada in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). It is being stalled in the Senate by Conservative senators, according to the ecumenical organization KAIROS, which also claims the bill "is in trouble."

KAIROS has launched an e-mail campaign that accuses Conservative senators of "filibuster" and using procedural delays to prevent NDP MP Romeo Saganash's private member's bill from returning to the House of Commons to be passed before the October election.

A statement from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops says the CCCB is monitoring the progress of the bill "and maintains its support of the joint ecumenical letter published in May 2018."

CCCB president Bishop Lionel Gendron signed an ecumenical letter May 1, 2018 urging the House of Commons to pass the bill at third reading.

"We agree with the (Truth and Reconciliation) Commissioners' (TRC) conclusion that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the framework for reconciliation, and we are in the process of implementing it within our own institutions," said the letter.

The letter was also signed by representatives of the Anglican Church of Canada, Christian Reformed Church in North America, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, Mennonite Church Canada, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and the United Church of Canada.

Conservative MP Cathy McLeod, the shadow minister of indigenous and northern affairs, said if the Liberal government was committed to passing the legislation it would have made it a government bill rather than let it be introduced as a private member's bill.

"The Trudeau Liberals have a majority in both Houses," she said. "The responsibility for getting bills through ultimately rests with them."

Both the TRC and the recent report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls said human rights declarations like UNDRIP are important, said Ed Bianchi, KAIROS programs manager.

"This proposed legislation is something that will help harmonize Canadian policies and laws towards that declaration. It would be a very big step backwards if it didn't get through the Senate and died on the order paper."

Senator Don Plett, the Conservative Whip, denied he is stalling the bill.

"I am doing no such thing," he said. "We have a caucus of 30 senators out of 104. The government-appointed senators hold the majority in the Chamber."

Platt said KAIROS "doesn't seem to understand" that government business in the Senate takes precedence over private member's bills.

"Summer is approaching and the government has a whole bunch of legislation it wants passed before we rise," he said.

Conservative Senators believe the bill should be "thoroughly studied in committee," said Platt.

"Its impact is potentially sweeping and needs to be understood before being passed," he said. "No one knows what it means to bring Canadian laws in line with UNDRIP, or how Parliament would go about obtaining free, prior and informed consent as required by the declaration."