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Trudeau government must end foot-dragging on promises to indigenous people: Editorial

The delay in vital mental health funding is the latest example of egregious missteps from a government that was elected with a promise of positive change for Canada's indigenous people.



Jolynn Winter, 12, took her own life in January. (SUPPLIED PHOTO)

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It should never have come to this. Moved by the suicides of two young girls in early January, a private donor has offered the Wapekeka First Nations \$380,000 for youth mental health workers — money that Health Canada refused to provide.

As the Star's Tanya Talaga reports, Wapekeka Chief Brennan Sainnawap wrote to Health Canada last July, begging for funding to thwart a feared youth suicide pact in the northern Ontario community. Health Canada refused. On Jan. 8, 12-year-old Jolynn Winter committed suicide and her best friend, Chantell Fox, also 12, took her life two days later.

It matters little that Health Canada swung into action after the suicides of the two girls and ordered the money be sent immediately to Wapekeka. This delay in vital mental health funding is just the latest example of egregious missteps from a government that was elected with a promise of positive change for Canada's indigenous peoples. The string of youth suicides across Canada is among the most alarming outcomes of First Nations suffering.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government must use this tragic experience as an opportunity to recalibrate its original goals for First Nations people with a focus on positive, decisive action.

In recent days there has been a series of fresh examples of a government that is dragging its heels when it comes to indigenous rights. These should serve as an embarrassment to a government that [promised](#) what was regarded as the most comprehensive and ambitious First Nations agenda ever proposed by a party in power.

A confidential Privy Council report card on the accomplishments of the civil service gave the indigenous and northern affairs department an incomplete mark, citing bureaucratic lethargy, according to a report in the National Post. The department has the long-standing and unfortunate reputation of being incapable of creating improvements, either within its own ranks or for the indigenous people it is supposed to serve. However challenging, Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett must create cultural change.

Another example of bungled policy generating unnecessary delays was highlighted in a Quebec judge's decision to give the government extra time to change parts of the Indian Act that were deemed to be discriminatory.

The government's own proposals to fix the act were considered so inadequate that the Senate aboriginal peoples committee told Bennett that the changes would do little to stop discrimination. Already given 18 months to improve the act, this latest delay now sets legislative change back another six months, to July 3. Will the bureaucrats get the job done? History would suggest otherwise.

All of this comes shortly after the anniversary of a [landmark ruling](#) by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. It found that the federal government discriminated against children on reserves in its funding of child welfare services. Wapekeka's request for extra funding last summer shows that the discrimination continues.

Certainly, there has been no shortage of warnings. Last November, Auditor General Michael Ferguson cited "decades worth of audits" showing that the government's treatment of First Nations people was "beyond unacceptable." He rightly [criticized](#) the ongoing lack of leadership.

"Until a problem-solving mindset is brought to these issues to develop solutions built around people instead of defaulting to litigation, arguments about money, and process roadblocks, this country will continue to squander the potential and lives of much of its Indigenous population," Ferguson said.

Which brings us back to the suicides of two girls, in a community that asked for help but did not get it until an anonymous private donor offered to fill the void.

Jolynn Winter and Chantell Fox did not make it out of childhood. Canada's leaders must remember their names and stop making promises that no one ever fulfils.

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