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B.C. failing its aboriginal children

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The child was just 11 months old when taken from the family home along with two siblings – for a second time.

When separating aboriginal children from their parents, B.C. government policy directs social workers to place them with extended family or within their native community whenever possible. So the baby and its siblings were moved into the home of a relative.

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There were 11 others already living there. With no crib in the home, the baby was put in a bed with an older sibling.

A notation made by a case worker in the ministry of children and family development indicated concerns for the children's safety due to one of the relatives in the house. Pretty soon that would be the least of the ministry's worries.

Four days after arriving, the baby was discovered dead in bed from undetermined causes.

The heartbreaking details of this tragedy are contained in a report released last week by Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, B.C. Representative for Children and Youth. The representative refused to give the sex of the baby in an effort to shield the identity of the family.

Ms. Turpel-Lafond examined the cases of 21 children who died in B.C. before the age of two between 2007 and 2009. Fifteen of the 21 children were aboriginal, which has raised fresh questions about the government's current apprehension and placement policies for members of this community.

About five years ago, the province, under pressure from aboriginal leaders, decided that, all things being equal, it was best to put aboriginal children taken from their parents into the care of relatives or someone else in their community.

While Ms. Turpel-Lafond supports the idea in theory, she concedes that in practice it can often do more harm than good. In some cases, the policy is proving deadly.

“There’s no question that the lives of children are being compromised by leaving them in conditions of abject squalor, where they are not supported by any kind of prevention plan and are not safe,” Ms. Turpel-Lafond said in an interview.

Which is a braver statement than you know. It’s impolitic, you see, to suggest that the current policy might not always be in the best interests of aboriginal children. And that, in fact, they are often being moved to situations as bad, or worse, than the ones from which they’ve been rescued.

While Ms. Turpel-Lafond examined the cases of 15 aboriginal children who died in B.C. over two years, she doesn’t know for certain how many aboriginal infants die year to year because quality data for this group do not exist. However, we know that about eight of every 1,000 status Indian infants die in their first year compared with a rate of about four per 1,000 non-aboriginal British Columbians.

We also know that when aboriginal children are harmed at home, there is a strong chance it will happen again. The official recurrence rate in the province is 20 per cent. Ms. Turpel-Lafond and others believe it’s actually much higher. The audit program that monitors such things for the provincial government has been cut back so far that the statistics it gathers are almost meaningless.

A history of abuse was documented in 10 of the 15 aboriginal families. Previous generations of 12 of the families had a history of substance abuse. Episodes of domestic violence were documented in five.

Aboriginal leaders in B.C. have mostly gone unscathed when it comes to scrutiny of the uncertain, sometimes tragic, fate awaiting at-risk aboriginal children. It’s time they took ownership of the situation.

Ms. Turpel-Lafond said the government effectively blew \$30-million over several years trying to establish “aboriginal authorities” to address issues associated with children being raised in dangerous and unhealthy circumstances.

“There were lots of high-level meetings and governance discussions and there were lots of consultants involved, but it went nowhere,” she said. “And yet I see these situations of such desperation in aboriginal communities.”

The representative said a “false nostalgia” surrounds the notion that aboriginal families love their children so therefore will always give them a better standard of care than a non-aboriginal family.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “The hardscrabble circumstances of these [aboriginal] families, the 16-year-old mom living in a home with 16 other people, herself suffering from drug and alcohol

issues, is just terrible. This romantic notion that somehow everything will be fine if we just leave the child there is a complete falsehood.”

Unless, that is, you have a plan to make the parent’s life better, and the lives of their children too. Right now in B.C., there’s evidence of no such thing.