

## **Panel Discussion on “Too Asian”?**

This International Human Rights Day, the Urban Alliance on Race Relations and partner organizations teamed up with social justice groups in British Columbia to spread awareness of the recent Macleans’ article “Too Asian”? through public forums in Toronto and Vancouver. Since being published in the November 2010 issue of the magazine, the article has been condemned by activists, academics, politicians, and members of the public for its biased and inflammatory depiction of the Asian community. The UARR-sponsored forum was one in a series of events forming a growing national campaign to bring public awareness to the article.

The forum profiled a panel discussion featuring four activists who have played an integral role in the response to the publication: Pat Case from the University of Guelph; Danielle Sandhu from the Canadian Federation of Students; Florence Li from the Chinese Canadian National Council, Toronto Chapter; and Cheuk Kwan from the W5 Ad Hoc Committee. The panelists were joined by guest speaker Barbara Hall, the Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Audience members were also invited to contribute to the dialogue.

The debate was a testament both to how far the cause of racial equality has come, and the ongoing manifestation of racism in Canadian society. Although minority groups have equal rights inscribed in law, these do not extend to the symbolic realm of the media, in which freedom of speech provides a space for racist attitudes to be perpetuated. Cultural elitism in the media is a product of the domination of mainstream media by a narrow cross-section of society, which has a vested interest in the status quo. Far too often, people of colour are underrepresented in the media, being profiled only on issues directly pertaining to race. This barrier perpetuates the belief that people who are not part of the racial and cultural majority “are not Canadian until proven otherwise.”

As the panelists noted, there are currently no legal mechanisms by which to challenge stereotypical representations of people of colour in the media. It was suggested that in order to tackle entrenched racist attitudes, the jurisdiction of human rights commissions must be expanded. However, as one panel member pointed out, trying to hold a company like Macleans accountable through the established judicial system is not a realistic option for social justice groups who lack the resources to wage sustained legal battles. Rather, the strength of grassroots organizations lies in their ability to wage “relentless counter-dialogues” through the coordinated efforts of like-minded organizations and tools such as social media.

Commissioner Hall expressed a firm belief in the power of this strategy. As she noted, the Ontario Human Rights Code does not cover freedom of speech or expression in the media. However, community activists have effectively used social media in the aftermath of the Maclean’s article to organize support from diverse groups across the country, and she urged those assembled to continue this strategy.

Overall there was a sense that by continuing to work together with allied groups to bring awareness to the ongoing issue of racism, a more just and equitable society was possible. As

one panelist reminded us: “Our rights inform the law, the law does not inform our rights.”

- Kelly Pritchard, December 14, 2010