

37 countries have one, why don't we?

Canada way behind in appointing a commissioner to represent our children

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Who speaks for children? In Jeffrey Baldwin's case, no one did. Not his family, not other adults in his life and not the system designed to protect children like him.

When Jeffrey died, he was not yet 6 years old, weighed a mere 21 pounds and stood just 37 inches tall. Neglect was the killer. And the role his grandparents played in his death? The courts have decided they are guilty. But the fact that Jeffrey's case was flagged within the system and then remained untouched is at the heart of this tragedy.

He lived in a crowded home with his grandparents, placed there because his own young parents could not care for him and his three siblings. His grandparents labelled Jeffrey and one of his sisters "the bad ones," not worth caring for. He was locked in an unheated room with his sister, without food, for long periods of time until he died of starvation. The Catholic Children's Aid Society had a file on Jeffrey and his siblings, but apparently they missed all the signs.

He is the poster child for kids who fall through the cracks.

In March, Norway marked 25 years since it established a national ombudsman for children. The role of this individual? To exclusively promote the interests and welfare of children.

To protect kids like Jeffrey.

Canada needs its own ombudsman for children.

And there's no better example to follow than that of Norway. The Norwegian children's ombudsman works under three directives: children are equal to adults, children are competent individuals and opportunities for children are important.

Appointed by Norway's king, the ombudsman does not enjoy any executive powers but, since 1981, has succeeded in giving children's issues political prominence by creating public debate.

As the fourth and current commissioner in Norway, Reidar Hjermand is busy. He hosts a call-in television show that enables kids to air their grievances. Not only do the children learn about their rights, they also see they have someone speaking on their behalf. Of 2,700 letters and emails he receives each year, one-third come from children.

Another three dozen countries have followed Norway's lead. But Canada isn't among them.

If Canadian children had their own commissioner for children, they would have someone who would stand independently and have the power to name and shame those who stand in the way of children's rights.

Someone who would speak for the Jeffreys of this country. At the very least, a commissioner would be a very public reminder that someone would stand up for this little boy. At the most, any one of the many people who knew about Jeffrey's life could have alerted the children's commissioner to intervene with the assistance of other existing resources.

Using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) — which was introduced to the world in 1989 — as its cornerstone, the commissioner's sole purpose would be to represent and engage young people in the democratic process and educate youth about their rights and responsibilities under the UNCRC and as citizens of Canada. But there is one stipulation: the commissioner must be a youth as defined by the Canadian government — that is, someone under the age of 30.

Why is this important? About 25 per cent of Canada's population is under 18. Yet, more than 7.7 million young Canadians have no formal role to play in the government. There is

no single individual or federal department representing youth and no coherent or meaningful way for the opinions of young people to be heard and respected. With no voice, no vote and little economic clout, young people in Canada are one of the most disenfranchised groups in the country.

But youth have much to say about issues that affect them locally, nationally and internationally. Today, young people have the greatest access and exposure to information than any generation before them. In January, about 450,000 students aged 9 to 18 from across Canada took part in Student Vote 2006, a non-partisan parallel election experience for youth during an official election period.

And yet, youth voter turnout during elections speaks volumes about the fact that youth issues are not covered during campaigning. At the 2004 federal election, voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds was 38 per cent. And in 2000, it was 22.4 per cent among the 18- to 20-year-olds.

Of course children factor in every government's agenda, but in the context of "larger" issues, such as health care, housing or family support. Children's issues and youth portfolios are scattered across numerous government agencies and under different directives. But no single voice speaks for children alone.

A young commissioner would better understand and suitably create opportunities among young people to discuss government policies and ideas and issues of national importance. He or she would represent youth by forwarding to the federal government all recommendations on legislation relevant to youth. The commissioner would also stand for the voices, opinions and interests of the young people of Canada at a national and international level to represent and empower young Canadians across the country.

Over the years, the idea of a children's ombudsman in Canada has been considered, discussed and tabled numerous times. A new government delivered its inaugural Speech from the Throne on April 4, recognizing that youth are "looking to carve out their place and be heard." But youth issues failed to make it on yet another government's agenda. To have done otherwise would have been a bold statement that the federal government is truly committed to listening to and representing the views of the young people of Canada.

It would have been a signal that the government is ready to be held accountable, perhaps by a young commissioner who only serves his or her constituents — children like Jeffrey who, in theory, had many guards on watch but no one to speak out for him.