

Wanted: Our Missing Senators

Problems: eighteen empty Senate seats, and far too few women in Parliament. Next step: appoint eighteen women senators.

How?

Since the last election, it's become possible to improve the Senate and at the same time enlarge the role in government of the female half of the population that is [everyone agrees] underrepresented there. Prime Minister Harper is talking about appointing senators to support the Government's legislative program. And certainly it's about time to fill the senate vacancies that have been piling up since 2006. Across the country, eighteen senate seats are empty: one seat in Newfoundland and Labrador, another two in New Brunswick, three in Nova Scotia, one in Prince Edward Island, four in Quebec, two in Ontario, one in Yukon, one in Saskatchewan, and three in British Columbia. That's a lot out of 105.

In Nova Scotia we are particularly concerned about our missing senators. Nova Scotia is constitutionally entitled to ten Senate seats in the Parliament of Canada. For more than two years now, we've had only seven senators [and six of them men.] The situation is urgent because the Senate, among other things, is the House of regional representation. The number and quality of our senators matter more to Nova Scotia than to other larger provinces, which are amply represented in the House of Commons. With only eleven elected Members, our ten senators are important. Team Nova Scotia needs its three missing players to have an effective game.

Far too many Canadians have been willing to let those Senate seats go vacant, perhaps hoping that the Senate will fall from disrepute into outright abeyance. The Red Chamber could become a vestigial chamber all too easily, a sort of appendix – not good if we value the federation. If we're serious about the Senate, and seriously want it to continue as an important institution of the federation, it's time to consider two important questions: what can the Senate do for women? And what can women do for the Senate?

Yes, the Senate is the House where proportionally more women sit - pushing a third. There are more women in the Senate because the Senate was always intended to be representative of Canada's diversity – first and foremost, our English and French diversity, but also our ethnic and religious diversity. And gender diversity too. Women have benefited by the traditional method by which prime ministers appoint at their own discretion. Prime Minister Chrétien came close to achieving gender parity during his time in office; thirty-three women and forty-two men. Prime Minister Martin appointed a total of seventeen Senators, of whom six were women. As a result, currently, thirty of 105 Senators are women - 28.5%. By comparison, 22% of parliamentarians in the House of Commons are female.

Any move to appoint women to the Senate is an orphan just now. The voices on the political left that typically argue for gender equity in Parliament are stricken mute by this issue. The NDP still wants to abolish the Senate altogether. As a result, the NDP won't even permit Senator Lillian Dyck to join its parliamentary caucus, on the grounds that

she shouldn't be there in the first place. Many Liberals are equally hostile to the whole idea of a senate, though possibly they would be less so if a Liberal PM were there to make appointments. The Bloc balks at the Senate *tout court*, because it opposes any implication that parliamentarians could speak for Quebec other than at its behest.

And the Conservative women -who should be speaking up for their own appointment - are ideologically impaired from doing so. Conservative principle means that Conservative women can argue for their representation in terms of merit, or region, or possibly ethnicity, but heaven forbid that they ever make an argument for gender equity in Parliament. Furthermore, since the Conservative Party abolished the old Progressive Conservative Women's Associations, women in the new merged party have no organizational voice to speak collectively for their own interests.

If Mr Harper were to appoint women to all eighteen current vacancies, the full Senate would then have forty-eight women members - 46%, far higher than any other Canadian legislative body and a credit to the PM and to Canada.

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The country needs the public service of more women like the first woman senator, Cairine Wilson, one of the few to attempt to help those fleeing from the Nazis, and Therese Casgrain, leader of the struggle for women's rights in Quebec. Prime Minister Harper could do worse than to follow – or improve - the example of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Mulroney appointed fifty-seven senators, of whom thirteen were women. They included former Minister of Natural Trade and Trade Minister Pat Carney for British Columbia, his former Deputy Chief of Staff, Marjorie LeBreton, for Ontario, judge and diplomat Raynell Andreychuk for Saskatchewan, and social justice activist Erminie Cohen for New Brunswick. These are outstandingly competent, capable, accomplished women.

Surely Mr Harper could find at least eighteen more women of their calibre at the grassroots of the current Conservative Party. If he could be persuaded to look.

So we ask: how can we get the Senate to full strength and effectiveness? How can we get the sort of capable, effective leadership that Canada and smaller provinces like Nova Scotia need in the Senate? And, how can we get more women into the government?

Easy.

We say, Prime Minister, appoint eighteen of your good women to the Senate. Do it now.

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