

Interview:

Women's Contributions to the Senate

October is Women's History Month, an initiative of Status of Women Canada to foster an appreciation for the past and present contributions of Canadian women and to recognize their achievements as a vital part of our heritage. It is especially appropriate that the Senate be part of this celebration since the month of October was chosen in order to coincide with the annual commemoration of the Persons Case. In October 1929, that case extended the status of "persons" to women, enabling them to be considered for appointment to the Upper House. Shortly thereafter, in February of 1930, Cairine Wilson was appointed to the Senate by Prime Minister King. Since that time, many women have served in the Senate and have made very significant contributions to it.

On October 8, 1993 a panel discussion on "Women's Contributions to the Senate" was organized by the Senate. Panellists were Dr. Lorna Marsden, President and Vice-Chancellor of Wilfrid Laurier University, Professor of Sociology, Senator from 1984 to 1992, and past Chairman of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology; Senator Joan Neiman, who was admitted to the Ontario Bar in 1954, appointed to the Senate in 1972, and was Chairman for eight years of the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs; and Senator Marjory LeBreton, who served with the Progressive Conservative Party for 31 years, was named Deputy Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Mulroney in 1987, and was named to the Senate in 1993. The moderator was Heather Lank of the Committee's Branch of the Senate. The following are extracts from the discussion. ♀

What impact have women Senators made?

Senator Joan Neiman: There have only been 35 of us altogether since 1930. I was number 14 in 1972, so we have not really made a great deal of progress, but it is nice that 15 of us are in the Senate today. That is a beginning. I think it has made a tremendous difference to have women in the Senate, but perhaps we have not made as much of a difference as perhaps we might have wished over the years.

Senator Marjory LeBreton: Women generally approach problems, and the solutions to those problems, in a much different way than men. Parliamentary institutions — indeed, all institutions — would greatly benefit by having more women. For many years — Parliament and politics have been viewed very much as a man's game. Slowly but surely, this perception is changing. It is important for women, when they come into politics and into Parliament, to realize, as I did that they need not be "one of the boys" in order to survive in Parliament and in politics, and that they do not have to be less "female" to take on a leadership role.

Dr. Lorna Marsden: I have looked at this subject in some depth through three case studies. The first was the impact of women senators on divorce reform in Canada.

Divorce was a very major matter because the Senate looked at all the divorce petitions for all too many years. Therefore senators, both men and women, were some of the greatest pioneers for divorce reform in

this country. In fact, there was a joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on divorce reform, and if you follow Muriel Ferguson's interventions, you will find them extraordinarily interesting. She was a member of the Business and Professional Women, the University Women, and various other national councils of women. For years such councils and bodies had been petitioning for divorce reform, to make it fairer. Women still had to prove two grounds for divorce and there were all kinds of complications.

There were hearings on divorce reform and the various associations came forward to testify. We know that many of the senators — and certainly Muriel Ferguson — had the briefs from the women's associations of which they were members. All of the senators asked questions of the witnesses. However, Senator Ferguson asked two very penetrating questions. To the representatives of each association she said, "How many members do you have?", knowing that politicians are very affected by the size of the membership. It transpired that the associations that were opposing divorce reform tended to be organized differently, so while they may have had millions of people actually associated with them, due to the way in which their membership was structured, they had relatively small official memberships. In contrast to that the National Council of Women, which signs up individuals, had a membership of an enormous size. Senator Ferguson asked those ques-

tions to get such things on the record and to make the point count.

At that time, the National Council of Women had a new president who was not too well-informed about such hearings. Senator Ferguson asked if they had written a brief on this issue? The new president said they had." Senator Ferguson then asked, "Could you distribute it?" The new president could not because she did not have copies. "Well," said Senator Ferguson, "As a matter of fact, I have plenty of copies to distribute ..." and she handed them around to the committee and thus got it on the record. The main point was to get such material on the record.

Women senators had this depth of experience with issues that were of particular concern to the lives of women, and these issues came to the attention of Parliament through the efforts of women senators. When you compare what women senators have said with what the women members of the House of Commons have said, you see that there is an extraordinary difference. The women senators are better informed. They are better plugged in. They have far better grounding in that aspect, and there has been a real impact in that sense.

If you look at biographies of the women who have served in the Senate — and in particular the first 13 of them — one of the first things you recognize that they have in common, is that every single one of them lists an affiliation with some aspect of women's organizations or the women's movement; their party's women's association, the Canadian Federation of University Women, their university women's clubs, the Business and Professional Women, or National Action Committee. When you read the men's biographies, interesting though they are, they do not have gender-linked associations because the world of men

and women in this country is organized, institutionally, quite differently.



Does gender play a role independent from party and/or regional affiliations and loyalties in the Senate?

Dr. Lorna Marsden: I think it does, and I do not think that anyone who has watched the Senate in action can have any doubt that gender does play a role quite apart from party, as do many other things. The alliances and the coalitions that form in the Senate very often have nothing to do with party. That is the great genius of the Senate, and that is why we need the Senate, because there are very significant and substantial coalitions through which a lot of things are accomplished. We are all very grateful for the role played by senators from both sides of the chamber on the proposed integration of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council and the Canada Council. Those of us in universities applauded and cheered loudly when that bill did not go through.

The abortion bill was another example of an alliance that had nothing to do with party. It had to do with beliefs and willingness to take action.

I think there is a women's caucus. It is not organized and does not meet at Thursday lunch, for example, but when there is interest, people do caucus. It is a network as opposed to a caucus, but it works across party lines; it works between the House and the Senate. It exists. There is an information flow.

Senator Joan Neiman: Yes, but not to a great extent because there have been so few of us. However,

there are certain significant things I can recall. Certainly, the Constitution debate was extremely important to us with regard to the rights of Indian women. It was the women getting together, and certainly not a party exercise at all, that made it very clear that those changes in the Constitution had to be made in order to protect the rights of Indian women. How successful that exercise has been is another question entirely. It is something that many of us are still interested in working on and trying to correct.

The most important initiative we have had recently is the abortion debate. That was extremely significant for us. It was a question of just insisting on what we believed was the right way to go, regardless of party. It was the women who, as a group, made the difference in that vote. That was a very significant contribution from our point of view.

We have been interested in politics and active in politics for many years. These institutions, as such, are important, but the work that any woman does in her community is far more important, at whatever level you choose to be active.

Senator Spivak and a group of us were trying to get together in an all-party women's caucus, but in the end we did not get anywhere. It fell apart because of time, and we could not do it. I think it is an excellent idea. I like the idea. I was and am still in favour of it.

Senator Marjory LeBreton: It certainly does. It is very important that senators, no matter from which political party they hail, be actively involved in their own party caucus so that they have an understanding of some of the issues, and that they are part of the consensus when a decision is reached. Having said that, there are certain issues, particularly those that concern women and children, and those of particular concern to women, and here I will use

the abortion issue as an example, where even if 99.9 per cent of the members of my party were going one way, I would not support any policy that did not give women the right to choose.

Because I was a young working mother, I am a strong believer in child care and access to it. I plan to bring to bear all of my real-life experiences, not only my personal experiences but also experience gained working in the political backrooms and observing the attitudes towards women that abound in those circumstances. I will not be as regionally motivated as I will be by my own personal beliefs. The fact that I am a woman and have these life experiences will play a large part. I know what it is like to be a secretary; I know what it is like to feel threatened. Every woman who has worked, especially in my era, knows what harassment, or sexual harassment, in the workplace is. I certainly will bring these experiences with me to the Senate.



Do you believe that there should be quotas or other mechanisms to establish a certain minimum number or proportion of women senators?

Dr. Lorna Marsden: I do not believe there should be quotas, nor can I support the 50 per cent proportional representation. I believe that if the Senate were elected, and if the election was held with a proper format, there would be more than 50 per cent of women in the Senate, which would be a great thing for the country and for the Senate. Therefore for this and other reasons I really am opposed to quotas. I am in favour of electoral reform, and certainly of Senate reform in that area.

It remains to be seen whether Senate reform will ever be achieved, but I do think that there is a lot that occurs in the Senate in any event that brings about reform in the way the rules operate, the way in which committees operate and in the way in which information is gathered.

Men and women can be equally good feminists and carry forward the interests and the analysis of the position of women in society. We see lots of evidence of that from senators of both sexes. On the other hand, there are some women senators who are not feminists at all, and who do not share that view or opinion, and that is fair enough. I am interested in the gender question, but I object to being told I have to do things because I am a woman, and for that reason I oppose quotas or labeling on that basis.

There are three separate issues that often get confused. One is the removal of barriers so that women can gain access into the Senate. Any barriers that exist that discriminate on the basis of sex should be removed. The second thing is: What issues come before the Senate? If you examine the record you will see that the Senate, even in those years when it was almost exclusively male-dominated, has examined issues of concern to women, through special studies and so on, far more often than has the House of Commons. Getting those issues on the agenda, for example the violence issue, was quite important.

The question then arises: Is merely having women in place enough? The answer is no. I would defend the right of women to hold the full range of opinions available in human behaviour. My personal preference is to have feminists or people who share the world view that many of us have — that is, to take the concerns of women into consideration. However, I recognize that there are lots of women

who hold the opposite view. If you look at the vote on abortion, there were many women who voted for the introduction of the bill, but then there were a great many who did not. All too often those three matters, namely, barriers, issues and individual philosophy, get confused under the label "Women."

Senator Joan Neiman: I do not like the idea of quotas, and I do not support them since they simply would not work in an electoral system. I have been working with Dr. Marguerite Ritchie, who is the President of the Human Rights Institute of Canada. That institute has done a lot of useful work in such areas as defending the rights of Indian women as well as in areas of more general concern.

While we have an appointed Senate, and I think that will be the case for some time to come, I see no reason why each and every one of us cannot press to have more women appointed here. Admittedly, it would be a difficult end to accomplish if and when the Senate were to be elected, but while we still have an appointed body it should be quite easy.

The important thing is that Canada's population today consists of 52 per cent woman. Therefore, it would be preferable to have in the Senate a more equitable percentage of women, truly reflective of the reality of today's situation rather than, as we now have, only 15 senators who are women out of a total of 104. I do not think that is good enough. It would be great if we could pressure our government to make an effort to correct that imbalance in some way. It is possible to do so, and it would make a tremendous difference in the Senate, and for women's interests and in women's causes, if we could have that change in appointments to this body. There are many qualified, intelligent and public-spirited women out there, as

there are men, but we have to make an effort to find them and to push their names. The men will not do it. There will always be people who will want to look after themselves or look after a buddy. Therefore it is extremely important for all of us to zero in on good women candidates.

It would make a significant difference if we had a much higher proportion of women than we do today. I should like to see the appointment process, so long as it is there for the next few years, concentrate across Canada on getting more qualified women into the Senate. We can then start to deal with the education process of both men and women with respect to women's issues. Women have a different approach. They are not generally as confrontational; they would rather sit there and work at a problem and work at solutions. That is where the Senate could make a valuable contribution.

Senator Marjory LeBreton: I do not believe in quotas. As a matter of fact, that was one of the big issues in the whole debate on Senate reform in connection with Meech Lake and the Charlottetown Accord, in terms of regional senators and what would happen during an election, for example, if there were quotas; what would happen in a province that was entitled to have six senators, and there were 14 names on the list? What would happen if, after the vote, the six candidates who received the highest number of votes were all women? Theoretically, we could only take three, then we would have to pass over three or four women and take the first three men. For those reasons and others I do not believe in quotas.

The way to get more women involved in politics is to lobby and I certainly tried very hard to involve women when I was working in the Prime Minister's office. We brought in many women, as you will see if you look at the number of women

who are heading up agencies and boards, but that is still not enough. More work has to be done. We have to exert political will as women on our own political parties. We have to lobby. We have to exert incredible pressure.

I know women who are anti-women. You work with your colleagues, men or women, find the ones who support you on your issues, and forget the ones who do not. That is why I do not support quotas. There are some men who are more supportive of women than some women, and vice versa.



Do you have any role models among the women who were pioneers in the Senate?

Senator Joan Neiman: Muriel Ferguson was one of the outstanding senators, as far as I am concerned, and not only among women senators. She was an outstanding person because of the contributions she made in her own area before she was appointed to the Senate. She fought for so many different things. She fought for prison reform when she came here. Just before I arrived, they had been fighting for six or seven years for changes in that area, and Senator Ferguson was a formidable factor in that battle. Even before she came to the Senate, when she was back in New Brunswick, through different groups such as the National Business Women's Association and various organizations like that, she fought for women's issues and continued that all through her time here. To me she was a very special kind of person whose interests went beyond narrow party political interests as such. She was interested in society and fought for changes that she felt were

necessary. I consider her an outstanding person.

When I was appointed, I became the seventh woman senator at that time. Some had already retired before I got here. Senator Renaude Lapointe was another woman who was a tremendous influence. She had been extremely active. She was an outstanding journalist. She had been very active in her community and had a broad range of interests.

Let us face it, probably some of those early women were, in a sense, token appointments. King appointed Cairine Wilson. Bennett made one appointment, a Mrs. Iva Fallis, and that is all. Mr. St. Laurent made four appointments, and Mr. Diefenbaker made two. Mr. Pearson appointed only one woman senator in the time he was here. Sometimes that depended on the number of vacancies that occurred. It might have been at a time when there were not that many vacancies.

However, there were not that many women appointed until we got into the Trudeau era, and I would think that some of those were appointed because they were expected to appoint a woman. Even at that, women were not expected to do very much in those days. They were to be here to be part of the background, and to show how progressive our Prime Ministers were.

Then there were some wonderful women such as Madame Casgrain who was an outstanding woman, and Florence Bird, who was appointed not long after I was. In the last 10 or 15 years the women in the Senate have become more and more active. More and more, the women who have been appointed to the Senate are here because they want to take part in what is going on here, so I think there has been a very positive change over the last several years. As a woman, you are now a member of a committee, you are a member of a group, and you act that

way. Women do have their own particular influences when they want to join forces in a particular cause, but apart from that I think they are contributing on an equal basis with the men.

Dr. Lorna Marsden: By the time I got here I was benefiting from the pioneer work that had been done by everybody from Cairine Wilson forward, although if she were here, Florence Bird could tell us about the washroom on the sixth floor, and how she liberated it from male domination.

In the very first few days after I took my seat as a senator, Senator Inman was here. Many of you will remember Senator Inman. She was about to retire. She was then 90-something. She was not particularly mobile, so she would come into the Senate in a wheelchair from time to time. She said to me in the lobby during one of those very first few days, "It is so nice to have another feminist here." I thought that was wonderful.

Many of the women who influenced me when I first came to the Senate were women I had already known in the women's movement; Thérèse Casgrain and Florence Bird. But also Yvette Rousseau, who was a great labour leader in Quebec. I had known her in the National Action Committee and in various other aspects of the women's movement. There was Martha Bielish from Alberta, who had done an enormous amount of work with the Country

Women of the World, with farm women and with native women in this country. There was Mira Spivak, whom I had known previously. Our paths had crossed on these kinds of issues in Winnipeg. And there was Joan Neiman, whom I had known for many, many years as a colleague in the Liberal Party, but also as someone who had worked on legal reform as it related to women. One of the important aspects of being a woman senator is building those connections between what you have worked with before and what you can do to be a conduit back and forth in the Senate.



On what issues in the next Parliament do you see women joining together across party lines?

Senator Marjory LeBreton: Health care. If there is one thing Canadians hold near and dear, and we only have to watch what is going on in the United States, it is our system of health care. That is not to say that improvements cannot be made, but if there is to be a fractured Parliament, I can see health care being at issue. It will certainly be an issue that I will participate in.

Senator Joan Neiman: One issue that should return is the Indian women's rights, namely, the effect of Bill C-31, what it has and what it

has not accomplished. It is an issue in which none of the men are particularly interested, including the native men in particular. They do not want to see it. It is something that women of all parties should press for and try to achieve. Certainly, the issue of violence against women and within the family generally, and the judicial process with respect to that problem would be a wonderful topic on which to move.

The question was raised about health care and this question came up indirectly in our family. It was in relation to medical research and how much money is devoted to diseases, specifically breast cancer, for example, and women's diseases as compared to some of the men's diseases. These are areas that we should investigate. These are areas where we could make a difference and bring pressure to bear.

Dr. Lorna Marsden: I agree with respect to all the issues that have been raised, but I do not think health care will divide along gender lines. It may, but I doubt it. I will put two more issues on the table. One is child care. There will be another go at child care. If the government is smart, on that issue it will consult the Senate before it brings in the legislation. There is also electoral reform. There is bound to be electoral reform following on the Royal Commission, and there will be a gender view of electoral reform that will transcend party lines.