



*The Honourable Leo Housakos, Speaker of the Senate*

## **A SENATE FOR ALL CANADIANS**

**Ottawa, December 3, 2015** - More than ever, today's politicians must listen to the voice of the people and abide by the will of the majority. However, in a country as diverse as Canada, the reflex among some of today's politicians to be strictly and uniquely populist runs the risk of marginalizing our minorities, overlooking our diversity, and undervaluing our multiculturalism.

One of the safeguards that has always and will always protect minorities and others at risk of being marginalized in Canada is the Upper Chamber of our Parliament - the Senate.

As many historians and political experts have noted the Senate was an integral element of the British North American Act that created Canada, guaranteeing, among other things, a strong voice for French Canadians in the governance of the country. Nearly 150 years later, the Senate continues to listen to the voice of minorities and represent geographic regions that reflect our country's diversity thereby reinforcing our nation's identity.

This Thursday, the Senate will host all parliamentarians when the House of Commons will be instructed to elect its Speaker. The next day - in the very same chamber - the Governor General will tell Canadians about the new government's legislative plans for the new session in a Speech from the Throne.

While these events certainly represent important traditions in our

democracy, we should remember that the Senate is more than just a ceremonial red chamber. It's a part of our heritage, it's uniquely Canadian, and it was one of the cornerstones of the agreement that led to the creation of Canada in 1867.

“It must be an independent House, having a free action of its own,” stated Sir John A. Macdonald, our first prime minister, in describing the Senate. “For it is only valuable as being a regulating body, calmly considering the legislation initiated by the popular branch, and preventing any hasty or ill-considered legislation which may come from that body, but it will never set itself in opposition against the deliberate and understood wishes of the people.”

Despite what is often reported, the Senate is an autonomous and independent body. Senators understand their role in the national Parliament and strive to contribute to the country’s well-being while respecting the trust invested in them.

What some consider most controversial about the Senate is that its members are appointed. Yet, ironically, this is precisely why senators do a great deal of good work. We don't always get bogged down by the partisan soundbites often heard from the House of Commons where members are seeking public attention to ensure re-election.

Furthermore, the appointment process for the Senate ensures diversity and attracts candidates who would not necessarily enter politics, but can provide invaluable contributions. For instance, while a record 25 per cent of the Members of Parliament elected in our recent election are women, Canadians may be surprised to know that 37 per cent of Senators are women.

Moreover, we often overlook the fact that other critical posts in government are appointments. For example, Justices from the Supreme Court and Superior Court are also appointed by the prime minister. They are, of course, every bit as legitimate as the women and men appointed to the Senate.

Having a stable term in office allows senators to accumulate more knowledge and experience for the complex task of reviewing national laws and public policies. Senators are also generally appointed later in their

careers, ensuring a wide range of expertise, allowing them to bring a different, long-term perspective to their work.

Legislative bodies should be judged on their merits and our Senate has passed this test. It has actively contributed to the prosperous and stable democracy that Canada has enjoyed for almost 150 years.

As Canada has evolved, so too has the role of the Senate while remaining as relevant as ever. The Senate improves, suggests, and advises legislation, but understands the critical importance of representative democracy in a modern society.

With the 42nd session of Parliament upon us, our senators will demonstrate why they continue to be a critical voice and balance in our democracy. In the meantime, the Prime Minister has been abundantly clear that he is serious about allowing Parliament to function freely and effectively. And with both chambers of Parliament working together, Canada boasts a strong legislature.

As senators, we respect that Canadians will always ask how we can make our parliamentary system better - that is one of the great things about this country. We also recognize we have a duty to explain the role of the Senate and, ultimately, how it contributes to our nation's welfare.

Senators look forward to constructively engaging with Canadians about delivering even better results in the future.

**For more information:**

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