



SENATE | SÉNAT  
CANADA

## CANADA'S SENATE

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A Chamber of

**THOUGHT  
AND ACTION**





# ABOUT THE SENATE

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**The Senate is the Upper House in Canada's Parliament. It unites a diverse group of accomplished Canadians in service of their country.**

Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, famously called it a chamber of sober second thought but it is much more than that. It is a source of ideas, inspiration and legislation in its own right.

Parliament's 105 senators shape Canada's future. Senators scrutinize legislation, suggest improvements and fix mistakes. In a two-chamber parliament, the Senate acts as a check on the power of the prime minister and cabinet. Any bill must pass both houses — the Senate and the House of Commons — before it can become law.

Senators also propose their own bills and generate discussion about issues of national importance in the collegial environment of the Senate Chamber, where ideas are debated on their merit.

The Senate was created to ensure Canada's regions were represented in Parliament. Giving each region an equal number of seats was meant to prevent the more populous provinces from overpowering the smaller ones.

Over the years, the role of senators has evolved. In addition to representing their region, they also advocate for underrepresented groups like Indigenous peoples, visible and linguistic minorities, and women.



*There shall be one Parliament for Canada, consisting of the Queen, an Upper House styled the Senate, and the House of Commons.*

*Constitution Act, 1867, section 17*

# HISTORY

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## Canada would not exist were it not for the Senate.

Fear and suspicion haunted even those who were in favour of Confederation in 1867.

Would the French language vanish in a predominantly English-speaking country?

Would the Maritime provinces be ignored by the more populous provinces of Ontario and Quebec?

The Fathers of Confederation believed a system of government based on representation by population made these fears more likely to come true.

The great strength of a country founding itself on democratic principles was proving also to be a great weakness.

A second chamber was essential.

“It must be an independent House,” said Canada’s first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, “but it will never set itself in opposition against the deliberate and understood wishes of the people.”

George Brown, one of the Fathers of Confederation, said the Senate’s existence was crucial to Confederation: “On no other condition could we have advanced a step.”

By convention, the Senate respects the will of the House of Commons. However, senators cannot lose sight of their obligation to represent all Canadians — for that is their purpose in the two-chamber system the architects of Confederation saw fit to adopt.



*It must be an independent House [...] but it will never set itself in opposition against the deliberate and understood wishes of the people.*

— Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada’s first prime minister

# CANADA'S SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

Canada's system of government has three branches: the legislative, the executive and the judicial. Parliament contains elements of the legislative and executive branches, and has three components: the monarch, the Senate and the House of Commons.

## MONARCH

Represented in Canada by the governor general

## Executive

Prime minister and cabinet

## Legislative

### Senate

Senators are appointed by the governor general on the recommendation of the prime minister

### House of Commons

Members are elected

## Judicial

Supreme Court of Canada

Provincial courts

Federal Court

# SENATORS

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Canada's 105 senators are women and men of accomplishment and experience. They are business people and scientists, judges and teachers, athletes, community leaders and senior civil servants who use their expertise to guide Parliament so that it acts in the best interests of Canadians.

Senators come from diverse ethnic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds; they use the wisdom gleaned from their own experience to give all Canadians a strong voice in Parliament.

Free to speak their minds, to act on their principles and to defend the interests of their constituents, senators play an essential role in Canada's parliamentary democracy.

## Examples of the varied backgrounds of Canada's 105 senators



ARTS AND CULTURE



BUSINESS



EDUCATION



LEGAL



SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

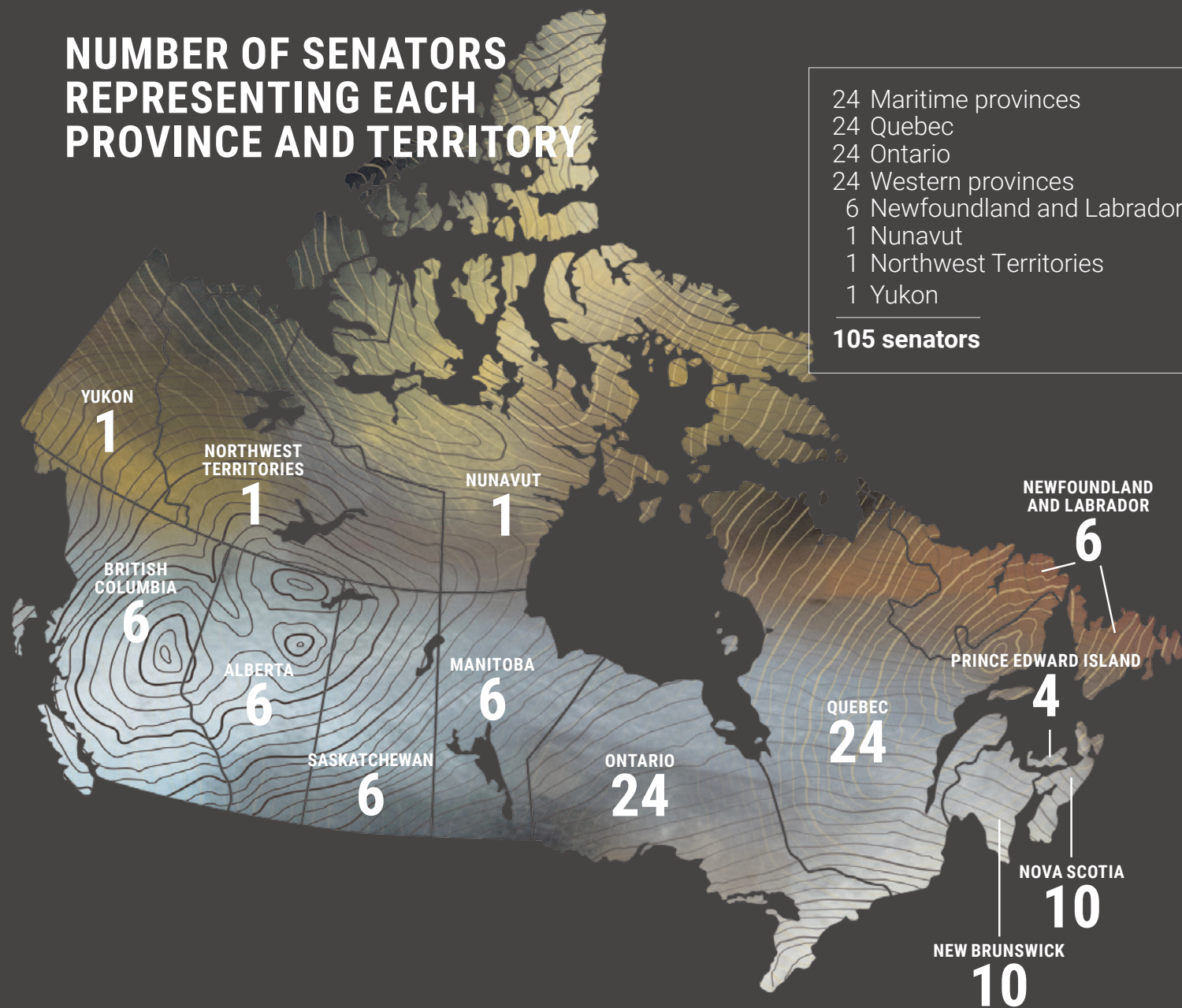


TRADES

# NUMBER OF SENATORS REPRESENTING EACH PROVINCE AND TERRITORY

- 24 Maritime provinces
- 24 Quebec
- 24 Ontario
- 24 Western provinces
- 6 Newfoundland and Labrador
- 1 Nunavut
- 1 Northwest Territories
- 1 Yukon

**105 senators**



# SENATORS ARE LAWMAKERS

Senators scrutinize bills passed in the House of Commons and propose their own laws. They have four key responsibilities: to legislate, represent, investigate and deliberate.

## LEGISLATE

In addition to proposing their own bills, senators review legislation passed by the House of Commons. Senators have often caught mistakes in House legislation, fixing those errors before they become law and Canadians suffer the consequences.

## REPRESENT

The Senate was created to ensure a balance in Parliament among Canada's varied regional interests. Senators also use their position to give a powerful voice to underrepresented groups including women, people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and visible and linguistic minorities.

## INVESTIGATE

Senators investigate issues of importance to Canadians. Senate committees are especially highly regarded for their tenacity and diligence. For example, a comprehensive study on mental health helped bring mental illness out of the shadows, while an examination of digital currency showed how senators anticipate the issues of tomorrow.

## DELIBERATE

After investigating and gathering evidence, senators draw on their diverse experience to consider the best course of action. Through the Senate website ([sencanada.ca](http://sencanada.ca)) Canadians can watch the passionate debates that take place in the Senate. Transcripts of debates are also posted online.



# WOMEN IN THE SENATE

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The term “glass ceiling” had yet to be coined in 1929, but five women pushed through a barrier that had kept Canadian women out of public office since the country’s creation more than 60 years earlier.

The women who would become known as the Famous Five — Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Emily Murphy and Irene Parlby — won the so-called Persons Case, a successful challenge to a part of the Constitution that had prevented women from being appointed to the Senate.

Cairine Wilson became the first woman appointed to the Senate in 1930. She became the first female committee chair and the first female Canadian delegate to the United Nations over the course of her 32 years of service.

Her tenure overlapped with that of Muriel McQueen Fergusson, who became the first female Speaker of the Senate in 1972 after she was appointed in 1953.

Now, women play key roles in guiding the deliberations of the Senate. The Red Chamber remains a forum for senators to fulfil the vow Muriel McQueen Fergusson made when she first took her place in the Chamber: “If I can be of help to women in getting justice, I will.”

**The “*Women are Persons!*” monument**



# WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SENATE CHAMBER?

In the Chamber, senators debate important issues with wit and wisdom. Senators propose and consider their own bills and meticulously scrutinize legislation that originates in the House of Commons. During daily question period, senators ask federal cabinet ministers and the Leader of the Government in the Senate (Government Representative) detailed policy questions that are in the public interest.

Debates in the Senate are generally less partisan and focus more closely on the issues than debates in the House of Commons. Senators speak with passion and rely on facts and evidence to make their points.

Each Senate sitting begins with Senators' Statements, where senators speak for three minutes about people or events from their region. They can also call attention to issues that may not be widely discussed elsewhere.

## The Red Chamber

The Senate Chamber, or the “Red Chamber” as it is sometimes called, is where senators from Canada’s provinces and territories meet to debate legislation and issues of importance to Canadians.

Decorated in royal red, the Senate Chamber is where the monarch — or his or her representative, the governor general — addresses Parliament and gives Royal Assent to bills destined to become law.

The Chamber is normally in the eastern wing of Centre Block — the building on Parliament Hill dominated by the Peace Tower. However, rehabilitation work has forced Centre Block to temporarily close; in February 2019, the Chamber moved to Ottawa’s former central train station, a historic 1912 property now called the Senate of Canada Building.



# THE SPEAKER

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The Speaker of the Senate presides over the Red Chamber, enforces the rules and ensures proceedings run smoothly.

Appointed by the governor general on the advice of the prime minister, Senate speakers are impartial in fulfilling their responsibilities.

Unlike the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Speaker of the Senate is permitted to participate in debates. Should the Speaker wish to do so, another senator temporarily assumes the Speaker's role.

Another difference: in the House of Commons, the Speaker votes only to break a tie. In the Senate, the Speaker may vote on any issue. However, if the Speaker votes, he or she must do so first. In the event of a tie in the Senate, the nays carry the vote.

The Speaker also plays an important role outside of the Senate. Ranking fourth in the Table of Precedence for Canada — behind only the governor general, the prime minister and the chief justice of the Supreme Court — he or she is often called upon to represent Canada across the country and internationally.



# SENATE COMMITTEES

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Muriel McQueen Fergusson, the first female Speaker of the Senate, described committee work as the “heart and soul” of the Senate.

Senators serving on committees provide crucial oversight of proposed legislation and investigate matters of importance to Canadians. They listen to witnesses from across the country who offer expert testimony that senators include in their deliberations.

Senate committee reports have offered frank and unflinching assessments of Canada’s legal, health-care and defence policies, to name just a few areas of study.

The scope and range of these reports are unrivalled; their ability to spark change and foster understanding has been demonstrated time and again.

The Supreme Court of Canada regularly refers to the work of Senate committees in its judgments.

While committees exist in the House of Commons as well, Senate committees are renowned for their members’ ability to put politics aside and consider ideas on their merit. Committee members will often seek out witnesses who were not called to testify before House committees — senators are interested in hearing all relevant evidence about a bill or an issue.

The evidence senators gather in committee can lead to amendments that improve bills, or to recommendations that strengthen policy.

Committee work is where the diversity and expertise of individual senators are used to full advantage. It is yet another way the Senate ensures that every Canadian is heard in Parliament.

# COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP



Most Senate committees have between 12 and 18 members

## SENATE COMMITTEES HAVE THREE KEY FUNCTIONS:

1. Study proposed legislation
2. Investigate policies that affect Canadians in their daily lives
3. Examine the government's spending proposals, also known as the Estimates



# STANDING SENATE COMMITTEES

## FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE #AEFA

Founded on the eve of the Second World War, this committee has a broad mandate to examine Canada's relationships with the international community. Aspects that fall under this committee's responsibility include trade policy and foreign aid, which have wide-reaching effects on Canadians and the world.

## AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY #AGFO

Innovation in forestry, the plight of bees and a widely read report on soil erosion are just some of the topics this committee has analyzed as part of its mandate to investigate a wide range of topics that extends from the protection of endangered species to the export of forest products. The committee's report on a controversial growth hormone injected into dairy cattle exposed close links between big corporations and government regulators.

## ABORIGINAL PEOPLES #APPA

This committee advocates for First Nations, Inuit and Métis people, and gives them a powerful voice in Parliament. Created following a motion by Indigenous Senator Len Marchand in 1990 — who then became its first chair — this committee's work has brought awareness of substandard housing on reserves and in Canada's North, land claims, and the safety of drinking water on First Nations lands.

## BANKING, TRADE AND COMMERCE #BANC

Responsible for investigating corporate affairs, taxation and financial crimes — among other topics — this committee pays close attention to Canada's financial health. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led to heightened security at international borders, this committee recommended ways to facilitate cross-border trade with the United States.

## INTERNAL ECONOMY, BUDGETS AND ADMINISTRATION #CIBA

This committee is responsible for the administration of the Senate, including authorizing budgets and expenditures, and setting policy for travel, office, staffing and research expenses. It demands the highest standards of accountability to ensure taxpayers' money is used efficiently and transparently.

## ETHICS AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST FOR SENATORS #CONF

This committee was established in conjunction with the Senate's implementation of its robust *Ethics and Conflict of Interest Code* and the independent Office of the Senate Ethics Officer. The committee is responsible for all matters relating to the code, which is among the toughest in the Commonwealth.

## ENERGY, THE ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES #ENEV

Striking a balance between protecting the environment and developing Canada's abundant natural resources is just one aspect of this committee's mandate. Members' ability to conduct long-term studies provides reliable evidence that is of enormous value to policy makers.

## LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS #LCJC

Both houses of Parliament benefit from the expertise of this committee's members, who conduct rigorous analyses of complex pieces of legislation. This committee is among the Senate's busiest, with a mandate that includes studying the criminal justice system, the judiciary, electoral matters, federal-provincial affairs and law reform. The committee's review of the national DNA database is still cited in courtrooms.

## NATIONAL FINANCE

#NFFN

This committee studies how the federal government spends and collects Canadians' money, and demands transparency from the government. It also addresses complex issues like equalization payments and financial security for seniors.

## OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

#OLLO

Defender and promoter of English and French throughout Canada, this committee works to enhance the vitality of the country's two official languages. It is a particularly effective champion for English and French linguistic minority communities; members also spend time studying the application and modernization of the *Official Languages Act*.

## FISHERIES AND OCEANS

#POFO

Promoting thriving and prosperous fisheries and maximizing the safety of Canadian waterways are among the core mandates of this committee. Members have investigated topics like the economic benefits of aquaculture, the need for staffed lighthouses and the recovery of fish stocks.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

#RIDR

This committee exemplifies the Senate's mandate to speak up for minorities. Through its examination of how Canada's human rights obligations are being met, the committee has advocated for stronger protection for children. Members also conducted a thorough assessment of the plan to welcome thousands of Syrian war refugees to Canada in 2016.

## RULES, PROCEDURES AND THE RIGHTS OF PARLIAMENT

#RPRD

This committee was the very first to be formed when the Senate had its initial meeting on November 7, 1867. It examines the Senate's own rules and the conduct of the Red Chamber's parliamentary business.

## NATIONAL SECURITY AND DEFENCE

#SECD

Created in 2001, this committee sheds light on the shadowy world of national defence and security issues. The country's top military officers, police officers and intelligence officials regularly appear before members of this committee, which studies issues ranging from military readiness and ballistic-missile defence to benefits for veterans and Canada's defence policy.

## SELECTION COMMITTEE

#SELE

Senators on this committee determine who among them will serve on the other Senate committees. Members are also responsible for nominating the Speaker *pro tempore*, or acting Speaker.

## SOCIAL AFFAIRS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

#SOCI

This committee has one of the broadest mandates. Members' work has brought public attention to the obesity crisis, homelessness and poverty in Canada's cities, and the increasing rate of dementia. The committee's most famous report brought mental illness out of the shadows and led directly to the creation of the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

## TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

#TRCM

From pipelines to broadcasting, this committee studies anything that affects the shipment of goods or the transmission of information. Members have stood up for greater Indigenous representation on the National Energy Board, and the committee scrutinized the CBC's *raison d'être* after it lost the rights to broadcast National Hockey League games.



From its historic role of providing legislative oversight and regional balance to Canada's Parliament, the Senate has become a strong voice for minorities, freedom of expression and respect for democracy.

Beholden to Canadians and not to government, the Senate fulfils critical roles as a chamber of sober second thought and as a catalyst for action.

[sencanada.ca](http://sencanada.ca)

