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Canadians have become well acquainted with the shortcomings of the Senate, filed as it is today with political haiks, failed Conservative candidates, and shameless patronage appointments. So we can forgive for throwing up our arms in exasperation and looking to abolition or abolition as the only sure cure for our senatorial suffering.

But before we follow through with the outpouring of our stoicatisms, it bears mentioning that we've never really had the chance to see the Senate as it could be or, perhaps, as it was envisioned to be.

From the beginning, the red chamber has been imagined as a place where minority voices could be heard, away from the clamour and partisan shenanigans of the House of Commons. Granted, in Sir John A. Macdonald's day, those "minorities" were of a particular breed: rich and landed patriots of early Canada who needed a way to protect themselves from the democratic rabble.

Today, though, those minority and under-represented voices might include women, aboriginals, young people, seniors, experts in medicine, education, the military — the list goes on — indeed, for all of its observed criticism, the Senate already does a better job than the House of Commons at reflecting some unseemly sides of Canada.

More importantly though, the Senate could become a space for a new political prominence: not the power-seeking oratory of the premier's or the constantly critical opposition, not the conflict-seeking press corps or the overtly self-interested lobbyist, but a different kind of person working on a different timescale. The Senate could be the kind of person who would otherwise have no appeal for running in a general election or for climbing the stairs of a political party only to parent taking points once in office.

But how do we get from the Senate we have to the Senate we want and, most importantly for an appointed body, how do we maintain responsibility and nurture legitimacy? As it stands, the process is too simple and, mercifully, does not require a constitutional amendment, we suggest a subtle tweak to the senatorial appointment process — but one that could dramatically raise the Senate's effectiveness and prominence.

The letter of our constitution stipulates that it is the Governor General who summons "qualified Persons" to become Senators, but in practice, it is the prime minister who wields this power. In an effort to elevate the Upper House, we propose democratizing the selection process by returning power to the Governor General, who would appoint Senators according to the advice of a senatorial selection committee.

Such a selection committee could include representation from the government, the Opposition, delegates chosen from the respective provincial legislatures, and perhaps non-partisan citizen-trustees, drawn from the province in question.

Elections can be blunt instruments of democracy and are certainly not the sole source of legitimacy. Indeed, many of the most powerful and respected offices in Ottawa, the Auditor General and the Parliamentary Budget Officer to name but two, are non-political appointments. With 305 elected pillars in the House of Commons, a second chamber to mirror the first would do the Hill no good.

Today's senators are perpetually running scared, always having to apologize for their own existence, for "wasting taxpayer money." But who on earth are they supposed to do any good work when they are pinned in that kind of corner? In order to be effective, representatives require legitimacy of their own.

Our proposal to have senators appointed by the Governor General through a selection committee is not radical — it is the letter of the law. Neither is it unprecedented — a similar process is already in place for the appointment of judges, federal governors and governors general.

If the committees are properly composed, and if it works for some time, the Senate will start to look like a very different body than the hackle-raising chamber we have today. Without fear of reprimand from political party apparatchiks and without the constraints of patronage and self-preservation that electoral cycles demand of elected lawmakers, the Senate could tackle the issues too complex or politically unpalatable for the government of the day.

When Parliament's Centre Block burnt to the ground in 1866 and the Senate was relocated to the areal gallery of the national history museum, the humour was lost on no one. But today, with public tolerance for the Senate's controversies stretched thin and the future of the Upper Chamber uncertain, we have the opportunity to put new muscle on old parliamentary bones. The right people in the right institutional framework could bring an important balance to the Hill and new life to a stagnant body.

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