

Speaking Notes
The Honourable Noël A. Kinsella
Speaker of the Senate

Canadian International School of Beijing

Senate Chamber, Ottawa
3 February 2014

Senator Plett,

Mr. Truong,

Students and staff of the Canadian International School of Beijing,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to welcome all of you this afternoon to this magnificent chamber, which is a source of great pride for all Canadians. I was very pleased to visit the Canadian International School in Beijing in 2011 and I am delighted that you are able to visit Canada and the Senate. Please take a moment to look around and contemplate the splendor of this place, to appreciate it as it rightly deserves to be.

Inside this superb cathedral chamber, your eye is drawn up to the immense black-bronze chandeliers weighing two tons each – perhaps a reminder of the weight and moment of what is transacted here: the nation’s business. Your gaze then sweeps across the coffered ceiling lined with gold and bearing symbols representing Canada, France, England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales.

Circling the room are carvings which include griffons, lions, otters and unicorns – a fabled bestiary contained within the carved oak panels and limestone friezes.

Though contemplation of the carvings is a treat to the senses and an invitation to the imagination, the eight paintings hanging on the walls summon us back to reality. Commissioned by a fellow New Brunswicker, Lord Beaverbrook, they depict scenes of the First World War and serve as reminders to lawmakers of the importance of wise government.

This evokes Canada's history and I would like to take a moment to speak about the history which lies behind the Senate as an institution and about the function of the Senate. For those of you inclined to ask, there may be a quiz at the end.

At the Quebec Conference of 1864, the Fathers of Confederation designed what would become the Parliament of Canada. Inspired by the British model they adapted it to the Canadian context, and gave it the power to make laws for "Peace, Order and Good Government."

Our Parliament consists of 3 elements: the Sovereign; the Senate, whose members are currently appointed; and the House of Commons, whose members are elected.

Today, the Senate has 105 members from various backgrounds who represent all provinces and territories.

The primary role of the Senate is to provide a balancing mechanism for the governing of our federation.

This balancing reflects everything senators do. It can be seen in each of our institution's three primary roles, which are: representation, investigation and legislation.

In its representative role, the Senate reflects the regional and cultural makeup of Canada. Senators represent all regions and provinces of the country, with over half of the Senate seats representing the less populated regions of our land. Canada's three founding peoples – Aboriginal, British and French – are represented in the Senate, along with many of our nation's ethnic communities.

Over 30% of senators are women, 38 at the moment, giving our Senate one of the world's highest representation records in this area. Representation, however, is not strictly limited to such formal constituencies: many senators help give a voice to other groups including veterans, seniors, youth and even prisoners.

The Senate's second role is that of investigation. Many senators are chosen because they demonstrated leadership in their communities. They bring vast knowledge and experience as they explore, promote awareness and seek Canadian views on a wide range of issues. Much of their investigative work takes place within the framework of the Senate committee structure.

Often described as the heart and soul of the Senate, committees turn the spotlight on social, political and economic issues of importance to Canada and its citizens.

They do this by holding hearings to gather information related to an issue, and by arranging for ministers, government officials, experts, organizations and individuals to testify and respond to some tough questioning. There is reason to believe that an appointed Senate has greater freedom, or perhaps just a greater willingness, to delve into some of the more controversial issues, including euthanasia and assisted suicide, than does the elected lower house.

This brings me to the third role of the Senate: legislation.

Recognizing that every system needs checks and balances, Canada's Constitution requires both the Senate and the House of Commons to approve legislation separately. This dual-chamber structure ensures that laws are not passed too quickly and that interested parties have a chance to express their views. The result is that laws passed are generally more effective and longer-lasting. Another factor in its favour is that the Senate is often able to spend the time necessary to conduct more in-depth studies.

In practice, the Senate reviews and sometimes corrects and refines measures put forward by the Commons, thereby fulfilling its intended role as the "house of sober second thought," as Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, phrased it.

Note that the Senate may also initiate changes to the law through the introduction and passage of bills, just as is done by the House of Commons, with the exception that no bill originating in the Senate can require the expenditure of public funds. Naturally, the House of Commons must also pass the bill before it becomes law.

Turning briefly to my own role as Speaker of the Senate, the primary responsibility under the Rules of the Senate is to "preserve order and decorum and to decide points of order subject to an appeal to the Senate."

The Speaker is also called upon to perform many diplomatic duties at home and abroad. Receiving visiting dignitaries, officially welcoming groups and associations, and even occasionally attending functions in place of the Prime Minister or ministers of the Crown are all part of my day. There is a certain amount of travel associated with the position, including responding to formal invitations to lead parliamentary delegations to other countries.

The Senate brings together a talented and diverse group of men and women who have excelled in almost every discipline. It is representative of our nation's fabric, welcoming women, aboriginals, and cultural minorities. It is an institution whose careful analysis, informed debate and reasoned commentary underpin the Canadian body politic.

For my part, I am extremely proud to belong to a legislative assembly possessed of a long and noble tradition of representation and investigation.

Good government allows a society to harness its strengths for the common good. For this reason, it is very important for youth in all countries to learn about their government to help them mature into responsible citizens.

The knowledge and exposure gained from travels such as yours today encourages a better understanding and appreciation of other nations. It also encourages greater community involvement, leadership, and citizenship.

This is why programs such as this one offered by the Canadian International School in Beijing is so important. Through it, participants gain direct experience, including a deeper understanding and appreciation for history, culture, and government institutions. This experience better enables you to contribute to, and perhaps to participate in, your own nation as informed citizens. The ties you develop with other students during the course of this adventure abroad will last a lifetime.

The Senate applauds the organizers for making it a resounding and enduring success. Please accept our best wishes to all participants, past, present, and future as well as our congratulations on your involvement in this program.

We are fortunate to have Senator Donald Plett with us this afternoon and I want to thank him for joining this gathering. He is the co-Chair of the Canada-

China Legislative Association and has kindly agreed to share some thoughts with us, after which there will be an opportunity to pose questions to either of us. Please welcome Senator Plett.