

**SPEAKING NOTES
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**ON THE OCCASION OF THE UNVEILING OF
A PORTRAIT OF SENATOR CAIRINE WILSON**

**SENATE READING ROOM
16 OCTOBER 2013**

Honourable Senators,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to welcome all of you to the Senate Reading Room, where we are gathered today to unveil a portrait of the honourable Cairine Reay Wilson. In doing so, we pay tribute to an important and inspiring parliamentarian.

Senator Wilson was Canada's first woman senator. Her appointment in 1930, at the age of 45, came only four months after the landmark ruling in the Persons Case, led by the Famous Five, which determined that women were eligible to sit in the Senate.

Both events held great significance for Canada, representing advancements for a young country steadily taking steps toward becoming a mature democracy.

From our modern vantage point, the remarkable courage and aplomb of Ms. Wilson in accepting this appointment might be overlooked. On her first day in the Senate, she would have taken her seat in the Senate Chamber, the lone woman among 95 male colleagues.

Senator Wilson learned about public service and politics at a young age. Her father, Robert Mackay was a successful businessman in Montreal who was summoned to sit in the Senate in 1901, when Ms. Wilson was 16 years old. She

frequently accompanied her father to Ottawa, where they often stayed at the home of their family friend, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, then Prime Minister of Canada.

Public service and politics would later provide Ms. Wilson with the love of her life. I mean this literally. In 1905, on one of her visits to Ottawa, she met Norman Wilson, the Member of Parliament for Russell. They were married in 1909 and together raised a family of eight children.

During her time in the Senate Cairine Wilson was a tireless champion of many issues. She strove to modernize the divorce and immigration laws. Her work with refugee children gained international recognition and she was made a Knight of the Legion of Honour by France in 1950.

Senator Wilson became Canada's first woman delegate to the United Nations General Assembly in 1949. She was the first woman to chair a Standing Senate Committee (Immigration and Labour) and Chair of the Canadian National Committee on Refugees. In 1955, she became the first woman Deputy Speaker of the Senate of Canada.

In addition to her work as a parliamentarian, Senator Wilson contributed extensively to her community. She was active in the Victorian Order of Nurses, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Salvation Army and other groups.

This portrait of Senator Wilson is believed to have been commissioned on the occasion of her appointment to the Senate in 1930. The painter, Mr. George Horne Russell, is acknowledged as a major landscape painter, possessed of a natural talent for portraits. His notable sitters include Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Mr. F.W. Molson, Mr. Donald A. Smith, the first Baron of Strathcona and Mount Royal, and of course, Senator Wilson. Although born in Scotland and raised in Montreal, when his success as an artist permitted him to purchase a summer home, he chose St. Andrews, New Brunswick, my own home province.

As Senators gather together in this Reading Room, this portrait will be a reminder not just of those who came before us, but of one whose accomplishments and contributions helped make our country what it is today. I like to think that Senator Cairine Reay Wilson would appreciate having an oversight role in a room where Senators communicate informally with their colleagues in a relaxed atmosphere. From today forward, they will do so in the esteemed company of Senator Wilson, and will be reminded of her achievements as a parliamentarian, a humanitarian, and a trailblazer.