

Even independent senators shying away from Quebec election campaign

BY JORDAN PRESS, POSTMEDIA NEWS MARCH 11, 2014



James Cowan, surrounded by other newly declared independent Senators, speaks on Parliament Hill this week.

Photograph by: Sean Kilpatrick/The Canadian Press, Postmedia News

OTTAWA — When Justin Trudeau removed all 32 Liberal senators from his party caucus earlier this year, some spoke of gaining more freedom to act as their consciences dictated.

But with a Quebec election that has swiftly unleashed the spectre of separatism, there are few signs these newly independent senators plan to get actively involved helping their provincial counterparts in the campaign.

Of Quebec senators from both federal parties who spoke with the Ottawa Citizen this week, the majority said they didn't plan to speak out during the Quebec election. Among Liberal senators in the province, two said they weren't going to get involved, three said they would without providing detail, and one declined comment.

MPs and senators don't usually get actively involved in provincial campaigns in Quebec. NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair said recently he plans to stay neutral in the campaign; several cabinet ministers have said the same. MPs normally follow their leader on such matters.

It's frustrating for Brent Tyler, a member of the Special Committee for Canadian Unity, a group advocating for federal involvement in the Quebec election. "They (the federal government) don't meddle in provincial elections. They have a hands-off policy."

But given election talk about Quebec's secession — amid other issues such as the economy, education and the Quebec Charter of Values — Tyler argues federal representatives can't "stand on the sidelines."

Senators, who are unelected, have more independence than MPs to act on their own, and the Liberal "independent" senators presumably have more freedom still.

Three of the seven Liberal senators in the province suggested they may be involved on the sidelines campaigning against the Parti Quebecois. Spurring that call were comments this week by PQ star candidate and media baron Pierre Karl Peladeau, who said he wanted a country his children could be proud of: an independent Quebec.

"The issue of Canada transcends political parties at the federal level. When you sit in the federal Parliament ... the binding that we have, beyond being Tory or NDP or Liberal, is the fact that we're committed to maintaining Canada. And for us in Quebec, it's an additional responsibility," said Sen. Serge Joyal, who once served as vice-president of the Quebec wing of the federal Liberal party.

He did not say how he might get involved, but added, "We know that the fate of Canada is always part of our commitment to public life."

Sen. Celine Hervieux-Payette, a one-time aide to former Quebec premier Robert Bourassa, said the threat of secession in the form of a PQ majority was a reason to get involved: "We cannot afford to pay that price for supposedly being independent (senators) when in fact we are all interdependent." She didn't indicate how she might become involved either.

"That's the part where I don't know how far I will be involved," added independent Senate Liberal Dennis Dawson, a former Quebec MP.

"I'll do the local campaigning, but it will be a different scenario than it was in the past."

Federal politicians sometimes do work quietly, behind the scenes in local ridings, giving advice to candidates.

"If there is one issue that we've been putting on the back-burner in Ottawa for years it's the sovereignty issue," Dawson said. "I was hoping I would never have to go through this again."

Among senators who are not commenting on Quebec so far are Conservative Senate leader Claude Carignan, who was a founding member and former candidate of the now dissolved Action democratique du Quebec (ADQ) party; and deputy opposition leader Joan Fraser, who chaired the

special Senate committee reviewing the Clarity Act — federal legislation that outlines the wording of any referendum question on Quebec's secession. Senate Liberal Charlie Watt, who has been in the upper chamber for 30 years, also declined comment.

Senators haven't stayed out of all provincial elections. Most recently, Nova Scotia Liberals received open support from their senators, including Senate opposition leader James Cowan; in the late 2013 vote, the Liberals won a majority government.

Quebec voters go to the polls on April 7.

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What they said:

Independent Liberal Sen. Celine Hervieux-Payette: "I won't impose myself, but if they're willing and happy to have me supporting them .. I will accept. I think we should not take the lead, but give support."

Conservative Sen. Judith Seidman: "I will not be participating in the Québec election campaign. I have great faith in the democratic process so let the people of Québec speak on April 7. And, I do believe that we will all work with the government of the day on common interests: namely the economy and job creation."

Independent Liberal Sen. Paul Massicotte: "At this point, I do not intend to get involved. But certainly would if ever there was a referendum."

Conservative Sen. Leo Housakos: "I have no time and no inclination. ... I will exercise my right to vote."

Independent Liberal Sen. Serge Joyal: "We have some kind of moral obligation to express to them (Liberals) that we support them ... It's the time to show up."

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