



# DEBATES OF THE SENATE

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## BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

Motion to Change Commencement Time  
on Wednesdays and Thursdays and  
to Effect Wednesday Adjournments—  
Debate Adjourned

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, November 6, 2013

## THE SENATE

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[Translation]

### BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

#### MOTION TO CHANGE COMMENCEMENT TIME ON WEDNESDAYS AND THURSDAYS AND TO EFFECT WEDNESDAY ADJOURNMENTS— DEBATE ADJOURNED

**Hon. Claudette Tardif:** Honourable senators, I rise today to oppose this motion, and I will focus on a few points in my speech.

For a long time, this chamber has unanimously supported the parts of this motion that would allow the Senate to sit a half-hour earlier, as usual, on Wednesdays and Thursdays, which would mean that the Senate would adjourn at 4 p.m. on Wednesdays.

What worries me is that in the last session, something was added to say that every Wednesday, the Senate will continue to sit until Government Business is exhausted, regardless of the circumstances, and without regard for the senators who will be forced to choose between their responsibilities in the Senate and their responsibilities in committee. This provision clearly suggests that Government Business is more important than other Senate business. While it is true that Government Business takes priority in determining the order of our work, it is not stated anywhere in the *Rules of the Senate* that Government Business is more important than other Senate business. There is no reason to say that one aspect of our work is more important than all of the others. That is why, when we sit, we go through all of the items on the *Order Paper and Notice Paper* unless the Senate decides otherwise under special circumstances.

Furthermore, it has been a long-standing practice that committees do not sit at the same time as the Senate, except in exceptional circumstances. This allows the Senate committees to make more definite plans for their Wednesday afternoon business. This also reaffirms an important principle that differentiates the Senate from the other place. Senators should not have to choose between attending a committee meeting and participating in Senate debates.

I said this last session and I will say it again today: forcing us to make such a choice is unfair and is not in the best interests of the legislative process. Canadians expect the Senate to be the chamber of objective sober second thought. They do not expect the Senate to simply rubber stamp measures.

During the last session, this chamber voted in favour of a motion similar to the one before us today. The senators in the Liberal minority said that they were prepared to discuss an exception to the rule with the government on a case-by-case basis in order to allow the Senate to sit on Wednesdays until the end of Government Business, even if it meant sitting past 4 p.m. The senators on the other side of the chamber decided that it was necessary to establish a general rule for the entire session. Senators Carignan and Comeau indicated that the motion in question did not set any new permanent rules since the change would apply only until the end of the session and that things would return to normal when a new session began.

Honourable senators, a new session has begun and we are once again faced with this same motion. This chamber has every right to adopt such a motion under the *Rules of the Senate*. However, if this exception to the rule is adopted session after session, over time it will become difficult to continue calling it an exception. The exception will become the norm and will represent a significant change in the Senate's existing order of business, which in my opinion undermines the important principle that senators should not have to choose between attending committee meetings and being present in the Senate.

The motion before us today undermines another well-established practice of this chamber. Changes to the existing order of business usually require the unanimous consent of senators. In fact, since the 1990s, when the Liberals held a majority in this chamber, changes or adjustments to the Senate's normal sitting schedule have always been made in a spirit of cooperation. In every case, there was one constant: changes to our sitting schedule were unanimously approved by all senators. Unfortunately, however, that is no longer the case. Unanimous consent is no longer required.

This schedule is particularly unfair for the minority in the Senate because of the decrease in its membership. As I argued earlier, I believe that this schedule is a matter of concern for all honourable senators, who attribute as much importance to the legislative work of the Senate as they do to that of committees.

• (1520)

Senators will no doubt agree that Parliament benefits greatly from the work of senators in the Senate and in the committees. Therefore, I oppose the motion.