

Alberta senators back Trudeau's Senate changes

Alexandra Zabjek, Edmonton Journal

Alberta's two formerly Liberal senators may no longer face direct pressure to toe the party line in the upper chamber, but on Wednesday they stood firmly behind Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau's message about sweeping Senate changes.

"I myself feel very positively about the decision Mr. Trudeau has made. It makes it easier for the Senate to go back to its original roots in the sense ... we have a chamber of sober second thought that is independent," said Sen. Claudette Tardif.

"I felt it, Canadians felt it, and Mr. Trudeau heard it and felt it as well - this building concern among Canadians of partisanship of the Senate and his decision to ask us to be removed from the national Liberal caucus is a direct, strong, substantive response to that issue," said Sen. Grant Mitchell.

Tardif worked at the University of Alberta for 30 years, was appointed as a senator in 2005, and chose to sit as a Liberal. Mitchell served as a Liberal MLA in Alberta in the 1980s and 1990s and was also appointed to the Senate in 2005. Both were appointed by then-Governor General Adrienne Clarkson on the advice of then-Liberal prime minister Paul Martin.

While Trudeau stated in a morning press conference: "There are no more Liberal senators," the formerly Liberal senators stated they will remain part of a Liberal Senate caucus - without the requirement of conforming to the party's wishes.

"I'm no longer in the national Liberal caucus, but I'm still a Liberal. I carry the card and it is what I am," Mitchell said. "Let's say there's 100,000 members in the National Liberal Party; 99.99 per cent of them don't sit in the national caucus either. I'm still a Liberal and I sit in another caucus, the Liberal Senate caucus, and that's been a productive, powerful caucus."

He said it remains to be seen exactly what kinds of changes will result from the announcement, now that the Liberal Senate caucus will not be meeting directly with MPs.

"It opens all kinds of possibilities. It will have a different impact on the way I think and the way I see the world probably. We'll see. But it certainly opens up greater possibilities simply because it opens up the credibility in the institution."

Former Sen. Douglas Roche, who sat as a Conservative MP and an Independent senator appointed by former prime minister Jean Chretien, said Trudeau's announcement will have a "profound effect on the legislative process in Canada."

"I have seen the effect of political pressure on members, whether members of the House of Commons or the Senate ... in respect to their voting on matters that made them either uncomfortable or violated their own, if not integrity, their own powers of analysis."

He said Trudeau's changes will finally allow for "'sober second thought' instead of partisan advantage in the great issues that come before Parliament."

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