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MANITOBA'S ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY

INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Speech by:
The Honourable Patricia Bovey

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

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Hon. Patricia Bovey: Honourable senators, I start by saying happy one hundred fiftieth to all my fellow Manitobans and congratulations on the many accomplishments in so many fields, from medicine to agriculture, education to business, engineering to architecture, aeronautics to athletics and so many more. I have certainly had an eventful, rewarding career in the arts and academia in Manitoba, the province of my birth and where I have returned twice over the decades to be part of our boomerang club. I thank Senator Plett for initiating this inquiry and for his and Senator Gagné's excellent historical summary of our strong and resilient Manitobans.

You're not going to be surprised that tonight I will pick up on the creative side of Manitobans and focus on the exciting and important arts hub that my province has been for hundreds of years — far more than the 150 we are celebrating this year. You all know I call my office “mini-Manitoba,” and you all have the publication *Celebrating Manitoban Art* about the work I have installed in my office.

First, let me say how proud I am to be the first Canadian-born member of my family and how lucky I am that Manitoba was that place. My family, like so many, has lived and worked in the province with dedication and pride. My father was a fur trade historian and edited the 1770s journals of Samuel Hearne, which included the explorer's time in Churchill, the gathering point for the Inuit, Cree and Dene peoples.

Both my deceased husbands are on the roster of Memorable Manitobans and served the province with pride and love of place. One, John Bovey, was a provincial archivist who brought the Hudson's Bay Archives from the U.K. to Winnipeg, a significant historical holding that became the first UNESCO-designated archival collection globally. The other, John Harvard, after his award-winning journalism career, served Manitoba in the House of Commons for four terms and then as Manitoba Lieutenant-Governor. He always championed ordinary Manitobans from every corner of the province, celebrating their many strengths and faces.

In 1970, Manitoba's centennial, I returned to Manitoba as a very young, inexperienced curator at the Winnipeg Art Gallery to work with a major centennial exhibition, heralding visual expressions by itinerant, early-resident and, later, long-time professional artists. From the early work of Indigenous peoples, including the exemplary beadwork of the Métis and the intricate birch bark biting of First Nations creators, to the arrival of the first explorers who witnessed a landscape, light and customs they have never seen before and the 1821 arrival in Hudson's Bay of the first trained artist to be resident in Western Canada, Peter Rindisbacher, a 15-year-old Swiss boy. His family and that group thought they were arriving in New Orleans — what a surprise!

They moved to Red River where they lived until 1826, and Rindisbacher's new surroundings and its fauna fascinated him, and his work changed in response. He painted many portraits of Indigenous people engaged in traditional activities and ceremonial treaty signings, the interior of Hudson's Bay buildings, and he also recorded Europeans in the region. The respect, sensitivity and ability with which he portrayed his subjects is captivating, as are his landscapes, such fresh depictions of the light in Manitoba's vast spaces.

Early depictions by European artists included an engraving after a sketch by Samuel Hearne, *Fort Prince of Wales*, dated 1769; a watercolour by H.J. Robertson at Fort Gibraltar in 1804; and an 1817 engraving after a sketch by Lord Selkirk at Fort Douglas. Most early itinerant artists passed through the region as members of various exploration parties.

Our province has been a Canadian creative hub ever since, and the many leading innovative accomplishments were, I believe, enabled in part by our geographic isolation and severe winter climates. The rich discussions, cross-disciplinary experiments and the lively evenings in studios and galleries made it Winnipeg. Bruce Head, R.C.A., who spent his entire career in Winnipeg never felt isolated, and he stated about the scene:

Here you can find out what is happening in the art world. You can get active but you can also be left alone if you want.

In 1870, when the province joined Confederation, it was dubbed the “Gateway to the West,” and Winnipeg was seen as “Chicago of the North.” We've talked about the derivation of the name of Manitoba and that one of its Indigenous meanings was the “place where God lives,” the title Sandy Bay-born artist Robert Houle named one of his major paintings.

The name “Winnipeg” comes from the Cree, meaning “murky or muddy water,” an apt description, I fear, of the colour of the river waters. I love skating the rivers and taking children out to the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers where the ice is of different colours, and I point out that this is the place where the economy of Western Canada was born. The 1905 painting, *The Dakota Boat*, by W. Frank Lynn, depicts with clarity that early trade and contemporary life, the forts, the Hudson's Bay Upper Fort Garry, the Indigenous and Hudson's Bay Company leaders in the centre of the work, and it shows the river and the evocative sunset.

Manitoba is a cradle of so many firsts in Canadian arts and culture. Red River, for instance, was the site of the first oil paintings done outdoors in Canada by William Hind in 1862, more than 40 years before the founding of the Group of Seven, and eight years before we joined Confederation.

Artistic hubs require a number of factors to succeed, including political leadership, as we have heard, economic stability, a population of sufficient size and artists who are keen to push boundaries. Manitoba had all these convergences.

The influential Winnipeg branch of the Women's Art Association of Canada was founded in 1894 by a group of determined and dedicated women, and their innovations and goals spelled the solid foundations the arts of the province still build on. The Winnipeg Women's Art Association and the Virden Agricultural Fair both contributed substantially to the young province's flowering art scene, and their leadership spawned a number of organizations in Winnipeg and across the province. Indeed, the 1893 Virden fair's fine arts section was so successful, subsequent agricultural fairs in the province became the major visual arts exhibition venues.

The first civic art gallery in Canada was the Winnipeg Art Gallery, which opened in December 1912. Following the lead of the Winnipeg Women's Art Association in the 1890s, the gallery presented Indigenous art of the region at its inception, and now its new Inuit arts centre will be opening in February as part of the province's one hundred and fiftieth anniversary celebrations. The Winnipeg Art Gallery will be pioneering education and awareness programs to the Arctic, sharing their important Inuit collections and research virtually — programs which will, however, be dependent on increased bandwidth in the North.

The first abstract painter in Canada, Bertram Brooker, had worked in the theatre in Neepawa before doing his 1927-28 abstractions. The photo engraving firm Brigdens of Winnipeg, founded in the provincial capital in 1914, became the largest employer of artists in the West for years. They had the contract to produce Eaton's mail-order catalogue.

The "Painter of *The Prairie*," Winnipeg's Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald, was the only western member of the Group of Seven in the early 1930s, and three decades later, in 1968, the grand Western Canadian Screen Shop was founded in Winnipeg. They connected with print-making studios in Quebec and Newfoundland. Their gatherings poured out into the street and were legendary.

The organization's fiftieth anniversary had shared celebrations in Regina and Winnipeg, and we are anticipating the catalogue shortly. It is clear that from 1950 forward, individual artists, organizations, the Winnipeg School of Art, arts collectives and more, together created the phenomenon dubbed "the Winnipeg effect" — an impact felt across Canada.

Not surprisingly, new media brought new revolutions in art-making — computer generated work, digital imaging, memes of participatory audience engagement in work, sound, and interdisciplinary creation proliferated.

Reva Stone, recipient of the Governor General's award in visual arts is one who pushed those boundaries substantially, with works like *Carnevale*, a groundbreaking piece that uses new media to engage viewers. It is a life-sized double aluminum cut-out of a young girl who moves robotically around the gallery space, interacting with visitors, taking their pictures and then displaying them on the wall. It's compelling.

In her work, Reva Stone is now exploring artificial intelligence, surveillance studies and privacy concerns. That connection between arts and science and the studios and labs in our province are significant and extend internationally with the work of people like Aganetha Dyck with her decades of long, visual studies of bees. She shared concerns with global scientists and worked with them on international residencies on many occasions as they all tried to save the bee species.

I spoke last week in this chamber of some of our arts organizations and several marked Canadian firsts. For instance, the first English-speaking regional theatre in Canada was the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, founded in 1958 by John Hirsch and Tom Hendry. It was an amalgamation of the Winnipeg Little Theatre and Theatre 77. Early theatre in Winnipeg was born in Winnipeg's living rooms, like that of Claude Sinclair and his wife's, which I got to know well, decades later.

The spirit of collaboration between writers, dancers, actors, composers, musicians and visual artists in the early performances was inspiring as is evident from biographies and programs, and it is still obvious when attending performances today, and John Hirsch's Winnipeg role is legendary.

Manitoba also spawned the country's first contemporary dance company and Canada's largest continuously running modern dance company, Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers, founded in 1964 by Rachel Browne. They have presented works across Canada and the United States. Dance is key in Winnipeg's arts constellation. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet is Canada's oldest ballet company, founded as a club in 1938 and company in 1941, and is the longest continuously operating ballet company in North America. Their commissioned choreography is groundbreaking and stunning, whether *Going Home Star — Truth and Reconciliation* or the more traditional *Nutcracker*, that has a unique Winnipeg twist and setting. For almost 80 years, their ballet school has been a fixture, and how I remember my unsuccessful foray as a ballet student.

I could go on about the productions and work of all our organizations, but time precludes that. Let me turn to the richness, creativity, inspiration and energy of individual creators of whom we are so proud.

Of course, Manitoba's writers have been and are very strong. Miriam Toews, known as the novelist extraordinaire; Carol Shields, dubbed Winnipeg's fiction queen; Gabrielle Roy, a franco-Canadian star scribe; and, of course, Margaret Laurence, who was and is the pride of Neepawa; poet Dorothy Livesay was celebrated from coast to coast; and there are many more.

Our performers, musicians and filmmakers are also wonderful, and if you think I am bragging, I am. The world famous violinist Brandon-born and trained James Ehnes, the Guess Who, the Weakerthans, composers Glenn Buhr, Sid Robinovitch, Sierra Noble, Rémi Bouchard and jazz musician Ron Paley, filmmakers like Guy Maddin and visual artists and ceramists. Their work is collected, seen, published and toured globally. Indigenous artists too are more than worthy of celebration. Composer Andrew Balfour, writer Ian Ross and visual artist KC Adams are only three.

Manitoba's creativity and traditions have spread far and wide. For instance, our National Arts Centre long-time director Peter Herrndorf is Manitoban. He grew up not far from my childhood home.

The first university in Western Canada, the Manitoba Agricultural College, founded in 1877, is now the University of Manitoba and celebrated its one hundred and fortieth anniversary in 2017.

The Winnipeg School of Art, founded in 1913, formally joined the university in 1951 and it is still going strong in training artists in a variety of disciplines with conviction and substance.

So too is the music faculty. Arts students have been recipients of the Sobey Art Award, and a number of their professors and other senior artists have received the Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts.

At the first hospital in Western Canada, l'Hôpital St-Boniface, the arts have played an important role in healing for decades — actually, since its inception.

I could go on. But you get the sense of the hive of creative activity Manitoba has witnessed. It is truly a pioneering province and one that has welcomed immigrants from the outset — the Icelanders making it a larger Icelandic population than Iceland itself; the Scots, who founded the Red River Settlement; the Filipinos, who have contributed immeasurably to the fabric of our province. Indeed, I believe there is no country in the world that is not represented in Manitoba's citizenry.

Colleagues, I'm obviously a proud Manitoban. I invite you all to come and take part in any of our festivals, concerts, indoor or outdoor theatre, exhibitions or studio tours. It would be my honour to host you in our special and dynamic creative hub. Thank you.
