

Bill would bring artist-in-residence to Parliament

By: Dylan Robertson

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Adrian Wyld / The Canadian Press

Senate Committee on Transport and Communications deputy chair Senator Patricia Bovey.

OTTAWA — Two Manitobans are behind a bill that would give Parliament an artist-in-residence in charge of sculpting, painting and filming pieces that commemorate national moments and everyday life.

"The visual arts are one of the world's international languages," said Sen. Patricia Bovey, who helped Bill S-234 pass in the Senate earlier this month. "I think (this) will help connect the work of the Hill to people of all ages and all backgrounds, whether or not they speak English or French."

The legislation would create a visual artist laureate, who would be given two years and a budget to create works of art that capture and comment on historical events on the Hill as well as societal issues. The artist would also help curate the art owned and acquired by the Library of Parliament.

The parliamentary precinct is dotted with statues and sculptures, and the walls of buildings such as Centre Block are full of paintings, stain-glass art, plaques and Indigenous sculptures.

Bovey said the artist could create some of those pieces, or have them tour Canada and even make online videos. "I think all options for presentation of the work are on the table, which makes it all really exciting," she said.

She recently got Liberal MP Dan Vandal to sponsor the bill, meaning the Winnipeg MP will be asking his colleagues to pass the bill into law.

"Art and culture is one of the most powerful tools we have for making social change," said Vandal. "It's also an opportunity for a regional artist to obtain a national-level stage in Ottawa, and I see that as nothing but a good thing."

The position is modelled on the parliamentary poet laureate, who is chosen by a committee for two years, each of which has a \$56,500 budget.

The laureate's annual stipend is \$20,000, and they can use up to \$13,000 for travel, \$20,000 for programming, \$1,000 for administrative costs, as well as a translation/interpretation budget of \$5,000 for the entire two-year term.

Vandal said that's not much money compared with the potential impact of a visual artist. "I think it's important to strike a balance," he said. "Great societies are judged, in large part, on their arts and cultural scene,

Bovey pointed to studies that show a financial return on investments made in the arts, and said the position can help communicate the values of Canada to immigrants and

refugees.

The visual artist laureate would be selected by the Speakers of the House and Senate, from a shortlist of three choices from a committee including the national archivist and librarian, languages commissioner, as well as the heads of the Canada Council for the Arts and Society of Canadian Artists.

Former Sen. Wilfred Moore tabled the bill in December 2016, and asked Bovey to shepherd it a year later when he retired. Bovey is former director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and she founded the St. Boniface Hospital gallery.

States like New York, South Dakota and New Hampshire have visual artist laureates. Australia and Britain both have a children laureate, who uses visual arts and music to communicate with kids. In Canada, there's an Indigenous art laureate in Ontario and a photographic art laureate in Toronto.

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"You're seeing a momentum that's growing," Bovey said.

During a committee study of Bill S-234 last December, Ontario Sen. Ratna Omidvar said she was interested in the legislation, but concerned about putting different fields of arts in silos, by constraining the position to visual arts instead of song or dance.

Omidvar, who supports the bill, was also surprised at what she deemed a low stipend existing poet laureate. "Now that I know it, I would be a little worried that we are further exploiting our artists, as we tend to do, because they are mission-driven and values-based and committed to their art," she said.

Bovey responded that the idea is to find an artist later in their career, who might already have a stable income, as opposed to someone younger.

The Trudeau government's representative, Sen. Peter Harder, spoke in favour of the bill, which suggests it might be one of the few private member's bills that become law.

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