



# DEBATES OF THE SENATE

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## **THE SENATE**

**MOTION TO URGE GOVERNMENT TO ESTABLISH  
A NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY—DEBATE CONTINUED**

Speech by:

The Honourable Patricia Bovey

Thursday, February 9, 2017

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#### MOTION TO URGE GOVERNMENT TO ESTABLISH A NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY— DEBATE CONTINUED

**Hon. Patricia Bovey:** Honourable senators, I rise to support a national portrait gallery in Ottawa as a lasting legacy marking this important one hundred and fiftieth anniversary in Canada's history, recognizing Canadians' contributions to our country.

I recently spoke about the impact of the arts throughout society. What would a national portrait gallery add? Portraits do, and a national portrait gallery will, enhance knowledge of our history and contemporary society, honouring accomplishments of well-known individuals and lives of lesser known, ordinary Canadians. A national portrait gallery becomes the portrait of a nation, its collective multi-dimensions, passages and diversities. Portrait galleries build national pride.

[*Translation*]

Why now and why Ottawa? The Portrait Gallery of Canada has been decades in the planning. During that time, different ideas for locations were discussed, but only one of them was seriously considered: the former American embassy, a Beaux Arts style heritage building, which was built in 1932 and is located right across the street from the Parliament Buildings. All Canadians want to visit our nation's capital.

[*English*]

Portrait gallery exhibitions were once held in Ottawa's market. Much discussion led to the 2001 formal announcement for a national portrait gallery to open in 2005 in the U.S. Embassy. Feasibility study in hand and under the auspices of the National Archives, mandated to exhibit their works, plans were developed renovating the Wellington Street site. A modern addition was also designed for future expansion by Teeple Architecture of Toronto and Dixon Jones of London, U.K. I saw those plans years ago as President of the Canadian Art Museums Directors Organization.

Excavation was about to begin for the addition and demolition of the current building was complete when, in 2006, the government halted it, opening bids from other Canadian cities. A total of \$11 million had been spent. Site selection terminated in November 2008, when the minister said "none of the proposals received is acceptable to the government . . . the process failed to meet the best interests of both the portrait gallery and the taxpayers."

Support remained high and the processes continued. Charlotte Gray wrote in December 2008, in the *Literary Review of Canada*: ". . . audiences from coast to coast have underlined its importance, with support for its being in the National Capital." Public consultations held this past summer delighted many and Friends of the National Portrait Gallery remain energetically engaged.

People love people, relate to people; our history is about people.

[*Translation*]

Canadians want to admire representations of heroes, leaders, celebrities and little-known figures, friends and colleagues.

[*English*]

So, what is a national portrait gallery? Like every public gallery, it has four key mandates: to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret, with responsibility and accountability to the public, artists and all stakeholders. Its vision and projected social, and economic benefits need to be confirmed, as do the educational programming, exhibition sources and tours ensuring national scope, potential program and financial partners, and means of sharing collections, research, publications and digital resources.

One hopes the gallery's scope will be work by Canadian artists, of Canadians, and for Canadians and visitors to Canada. National Archives' works should be its base, but the gallery should be much more — vibrant, living, not just of the past but of the present. It must reflect women as well as men; indigenous peoples and those of all cultures; well-known and ordinary Canadians. It needs to present Canadian activities, such as that of our military abroad and at home with works like Steve Gouthro's Shilo Series. Women and indigenous artists must be included.

Supporting pillars are already in place, including the biennial \$20,000 Kingston Prize, started in 2005 and run by an independent organization. In 2015, this national competition received 414 entries from artists in all 10 provinces and 1 territory. That, honourable senators, represents interest. Promoting excellence in contemporary portraiture and raising public understanding and appreciation of the work of Canadian artists, each of its touring exhibitions becomes "a fascinating snapshot of a cross-section of Canadian life."

Julian Brown, competition founder and organizer, stressed that a portrait gallery "is not elitist, but open to all, and an active ongoing participant in the life of a nation through its programs and activities, projecting today for tomorrow."

I can attest that the quality of Canadian artists' work is high — four Kingston Prize finalists have also been finalists in the U.K.'s international BP Portrait Award.

[*Translation*]

The portrait is a popular art form. Who does not have family photo albums or digital photos? Portraits depict a time, place, person and state of mind. They capture actions or expressions frozen in time. The portrait is a powerful form of representation. It captures much more than what a subject looks like. It also captures a mood, a personality. The subject may be happy or troubled, at work or somewhere else.

The portrait is a physical expression of the artist's study and vision of the individual. It establishes a direct connection with the person's identity, and that relationship between the artist and

the model determines the final product. This gift is then presented to the public of today and to future generations. Portrait galleries collect, examine, preserve, and display these treasures.

[*English*]

Andrew Valko, author of many official portraits in Canada, has a vision of a dynamic national portrait gallery, engaging visitors with rich and meaningful programming building on the past, of today, and for tomorrow.

Painted, drawn, printed, photographed, videoed and sculpted, portraiture includes commissions, personal depictions, self-portraits and portrayals of everyday life. All provide insights into self, place and time. All are part of the fabric of Canada past and present. Stewarding society's fabric through portraits, a national portrait gallery is an important place for research and knowledge-sharing, of biographical, cultural and human history, the development of art forms, media, iconography and modes of expression.

Portraits are both subjective and objective, allowing artists to explore new ways of creating. Celebrated artist Carole Sabiston used her invented unique textile assemblage language to memorialize Canadian author Carol Shields. Layers of reflective, transparent and opaque textiles, including Shields' jean skirt and vest and antique French silk threads, evoked the effervescent spark of that Canadian literary genius.

Ivan Eyre, Canada's first artist to have a solo exhibition in Germany, has done many influential self-portraits, which are pioneering contributions to Canadian art.

Sculptors convey the sitter's three-dimensionality. Internationally acclaimed Eva Stubbs, working in clay, builds, scrapes, cuts and constantly assesses sitters' reactions, movements and expressions.

Portraits of Senate and House of Commons' leaders are throughout this building, including that of Senate Speaker, the Honourable Gildas Molgat, by Winnipeg artist Mary Valentine. This posthumous portrait, done from photographs and taped interviews, is a three-quarter-length portrait, showing both his personal warmth and the importance of his position. Valentine depicted Molgat smiling, his hand outstretched in an inviting pose, with his native expansive prairie sky and patterned Manitoba fields behind him.

A national portrait gallery will show works like these, and will correct a frequent omission in many presentations of commissioned portraits — that of giving credit to the artist. Canada's Copyright Act enshrines artists' moral rights of presentation and their intellectual property. Status of the artist legislation likewise recognizes their rights. Omitting that credit is a disservice to the artist, the audience and the sitter. As one artist told me: "By elevating the artist, we are elevating the work."

The tremendously popular portrait galleries in Washington, Canberra and London are collegial and significant international comparators. In London and Washington, for instance, young people make up the majority of attendees: in London, 41.5 per cent are under the age of 35; in Washington, 34.6 per cent. In both, almost 70 per cent are under the age of 55.

I met with Dr. Nicholas Cullinan, Director of the U.K.'s National Portrait Gallery and his senior staff last month. Established in 1856, that gallery has long been a mecca for Britons and global tourists. Its collections and exhibitions provide a 360-degree history of Britain — social, political, literary, arts, sports and who's who. Located behind the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, last year it welcomed 2,145,486 visitors, surpassing the two million mark consistently since 2012. Their 2014-15 annual report noted 36 per cent were first-time visitors, 16 per cent were students and lower socio-economic groups and 38 were overseas visitors. That year's retail services were the highest sales ever, at £2.48 million; facility rentals and catering revenues were also large. Grants represented 24 per cent of the total income and self-generated revenues represented 76 per cent.

[*Translation*]

It will be important for us to establish a diversified funding model and come up with various sources of revenues. These objectives can only be reached if the exhibitions and the museum's location are exceptional and if the grants celebrate excellence.

[*English*]

The London collection includes over 200,000 works in all media. Some are bequeathed, others commissioned and many are purchased through the National Art Collections Fund. Since 1969, the collection includes portraits by and of living people. They have one work by one Canadian artist: Myfanwy Pavelic's official portrait of celebrated violinist and conductor Sir Yehudi Menuhin. Pavelic also painted the official portrait hanging on Parliament Hill of former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

That gallery pioneered school education, setting global benchmarks with their first school visit, in 1921. Thus began a long tradition of excellent international gallery and museum educational programs, augmenting curriculum at all levels in multiple subject areas.

Our national portrait gallery will do the same for Canadian students of all ages. Youngsters particularly will be inspired by the truth presented through these original works of art, core to the understanding of our nation.

Dr. Cullinan invited me to attend the 2018 meeting of international portrait galleries, an invitation to be extended to our director of Canada's national portrait gallery, if the position is filled. In working towards Canada's portrait gallery, we have been welcomed onto the international stage and our colleagues were in very close contact through all the years of development. In my recent conversations with many Canadian artists, it has also become clear that many were promised work in this new gallery. That is a promise I hope can be kept.

[*Translation*]

In closing, Canada's national treasures deserve to be admired by as many people as possible. Our history is important, and portraits are crucial to telling our story. A national portrait gallery in Ottawa would help stimulate the economy and tourism,

things I talked about back in December. I am confident that supporting this museum would be a smart investment for Canada in many ways.

*[English]*

Honourable senators, I know that with the founding of a national portrait gallery, major art donations will come. Andrew Valko had already offered when I spoke to him just about a month ago.

I urge you, too, to vote in favour of the motion for a national portrait gallery in the former U.S. Embassy as a Canada 150 legacy, supporting Canadian artists, enhancing public knowledge and enshrining all aspects of portraiture. These works must not be lost to Canadians in vaults or closets in artists' studios. They deserve to be accessible to audiences of today and the future, generating pride, knowledge and debate. People go to a portrait gallery because it's really exciting. Let us create that national excitement, honouring artists and citizens alike.

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