

Resignation not end of reconciliation, senators tell chiefs

Indigenous anger at Wilson- Raybould affair

Brian Platt

Indigenous senators are urging chiefs to remain calm in the wake of the resignation of Jody Wilson-Raybould, saying the loss of the prominent Indigenous cabinet minister is not a threat to reconciliation.

Indigenous groups across Canada have expressed anger about the events leading to Wilson-Raybould's terse exit on Tuesday, a week after the Globe and Mail reported that either Prime Minister Justin Trudeau or his staff pressured the justice minister to drop the prosecution of Quebec engineering giant SNC-Lavalin on corruption and bribery charges.

Trudeau has denied trying to influence the Lavalin case and said he was surprised by Wilson-Raybould's decision to quit. He said she had a responsibility to speak up earlier if she believed there was political interference in the justice system.

"This shows the real attitudes, the real thinking, the government has for Indigenous people," Northern Manitoba's former grand chief Sheila North told the New York Times. "They thought they could just tell Jody Wilson-Raybould what to do and pressure her into compromising her principles. When push comes to shove, this government doesn't care about what Indigenous people care about, say or think."

The Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs demanded Trudeau "publicly condemn the racist and sexist innuendo about Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould that is being spread by unnamed elected officials and staff of your government in media reports." But a joint statement issued by eight Indigenous senators on Thursday took a more measured tone.

"Even though some will see this as a threat to the promise and process of reconciliation, it is not. It is a measure of the distance we have yet to go and the challenges we have yet to overcome. So long as Ms. Wilson-Raybould, and other men and women like her, gain and remain on the national scene and show the integrity we need to persevere on this journey, change will occur," said the statement, sent from Murray Sinclair's office and signed by senators Margaret Dawn Anderson, Yvonne Boyer, Dan Christmas, Lillian Dyck, Brian Francis, Sandra Lovelace-Nicholas and Mary Jane McCallum.

The statement praised Wilson-Raybould's accomplishments and said she will "serve as an inspiration for Indigenous people, women and youth." One name not included on that was Patrick Brazeau, who was appointed as a Conservative senator but now sits as an independent. On Wednesday, Brazeau emailed his Indigenous colleagues urging a tougher stance.

"I'm sure you are disturbed by what is happening to the former minister of justice, Jody Wilson-Raybould," Brazeau said in the email obtained by the National Post. "The fact that she was the highest-ranking Indigenous person in the history of the government of Canada made us all very proud." Brazeau told the senators he is contemplating introducing a motion in the Senate next week "directing the Senate to investigate and use all of its powers possible into looking into allegations on the alleged political interference in the SNC-Lavalin affair and Ms. Jody Raybould's resignation from cabinet." "The House of Commons process is too partisan to have those answers on behalf of all Canadians and I firmly believe we have this right and duty for our country," Brazeau's email said. "I believe we all agree, Ms. Wilson Raybould has not been treated well and that to me is beyond belief and reprehensible." Brazeau did not elaborate when contacted by the Post.

"Unfortunately, I have no comment," he said.

The Conservative caucus will likely make its own move to investigate the Lavalin affair when the Senate returns from winter break on Hiesday.

"If there's ever been a role for the Senate of Canada to serve as an oversight body on the executive branch to make sure that in instances of majority government, tyranny doesn't reign over our society, this is the moment," said Leo Housakos, a Conservative senator appointed in 2008, in an interview following Wilson-Raybould's resignation.

"This is the moment where senators can move a motion compelling the prime minister and the former minister of justice and any other senior staff to come either before the Senate justice committee, or the Senate of the whole, and answer those serious questions." With the number of Conservative caucus senators now down to 31 in a chamber of 105, they will need

support from other senators in order to force an investigation. The chamber now has 49 senators appointed by Trudeau as independents, and a mix of other senators including former Liberals and Conservatives.

National Post bpla.tt@postmedia.com

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