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The power of voice: how to best serve the under-represented

Bringing Indigenous voices to the **Senate** floor through motions, inquiries, and private members' **bills** is part of counselling our differences.

Isg Senator Mary Jane McCallum

Before I entered residential school at the age of five, I remember when my life was built on my own joyous thoughts, words, and actions, emboldened by the guidance of my parents and relatives. Leaving residential school at 16, all of that was lost, leaving me with the voices of the nuns and priests and the violence those voices carried.

My descent into being groomed to be silent in voice, identity, culture, and spirit began when I was too young to understand what was inflicted on me. This occurred in gradual steps as I was taught to be subordinate, dependent, and hollow while forced into blind obedience.

This institutional "family" that was thrust upon me inflicted much pain upon us children. Acknowledging that I still carry this pain and trauma internally, I recently accepted that I must look to the concept of forgiveness, if not solely to rid myself of the negative energy and violence I have carried with me—violence that succeeded in silencing me, throughout my life.

As a collective people, for the last 150 years, residential school has been the primary root of our loss. It was a moment of massive disruption through genocide of both the individual and the collective. Our voices, self-government and self-determination were stripped as we were mobilized into segregation and marginalization. This aggression was made possible through **legislation** and policies of **federal** and provincial governments.

As First Nations, we have experienced a sustained and relentless oppression, which is a combination of prejudice and institutional power. This took the form of limitations, disadvantages, and marginalization at the hands of different levels of government. When one group is oppressed it follows that another group benefits. The very systems that benefitted the 'dominant culture' are the same that have refused to help the marginalized. What keeps those who have power and voice from acknowledging, stopping and preventing these atrocities? More importantly we must ask ourselves if we, as Parliamentarians, are perpetuating this inaction.

As Senators and MPs, we enjoy power, privilege and influence. How do we wield these? Are we willing to take risks to stand in allyship and solidarity with those who have been continuously oppressed by the very parliamentary system that we work within?

As Senators, we have the opportunity to use the parliamentary tools at our disposal to combat these inequities, inequalities, and injustices that result in oppression. These tools I refer to are timely and sustained motions, inquiries and private members' **bills**. These are undeniably some of the most effective ways that we, as Senators, can give voice to the historical and current forms of systemic violence that continue to plague the under-represented in **Canada**. We have the ability to bring these voices to the **Senate** floor, functioning as mediators between the powerful majority and the oppressed minority. By failing in this responsibility, we also run the serious risk of perpetuating this oppression.

Senators hold a duty to promote the core principles and values of our democratic system, especially given the **Senate's** traditional role in acting on behalf of groups under-represented in the **House of Commons**. The **Supreme Court of Canada** has noted in the reference regarding **Senate Reform 2014**: "Over time, the **Senate** also came to represent various groups that were under-represented in the **House of Commons**. It served as a forum for ethnic, gender, religious, linguistic, and aboriginal groups that did not always have a meaningful opportunity to present their views through the popular democratic process."

Bringing Indigenous voices to the **Senate** floor through motions, inquiries, and private members' **bills** is part of counselling our differences. They are instrumental in building awareness and knowledge while working towards the changes that are needed. We, as Senators, have the ability to transform this knowledge into wisdom and act in a way that promotes and upholds equity and equality, from which would flow greater domestic peace and harmony.

When I was about to give birth to my daughter, I said to my husband, Ron: "Why did we decide to bring children into this world?" He said: "Maybe this will be the child who changes this world." Maybe it is we Parliamentarians, once promise-filled

children ourselves, who are meant to be the catalyst for lasting and transformative change in **Canada** as we walk the path to true conciliation. What are we waiting for?

ISG Senator **Mary Jane McCallum** (Manitoba), who was appointed to the **Senate** in December 2017, is a Cree woman hailing from Barren Lands First Nation in northern Manitoba. She currently sits as a member of the **Independent Senators Group** where she strives to give voice to under-represented groups in **Canada**.

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