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Senate motion to strip 'Honourable' title could affect at least two former senators

OTTAWA _ At least two former **senators** could be stripped of the title of "Honourable" following a motion the upper chamber passed on Tuesday.

Former **senator Don Meredith**, who is facing criminal charges for sexual assault and harassment, is specifically named in the motion and was the impetus for its introduction.

But the motion also calls for other former **senators** who have been convicted of a crime for which they were indicted to lose the title, which **senators** normally carry for life.

The **Senate's** administration says it doesn't keep tabs on who might fit that profile.

"The **Senate** does not maintain a list of former **senators** who have been convicted of a criminal offence proceeded with by way of indictment," Ross Ryan, a spokesman for **Senate Speaker George Furey**, said in a statement.

It's ultimately up to Gov. Gen. Mary Simon to determine whether anyone does lose the title. "We cannot comment at this time," a Rideau Hall spokeswoman wrote Wednesday.

The motion may apply to Raymond Lavigne, a former Quebec **senator** who served time for fraud and breach of trust.

Lavigne was convicted of defrauding the **Senate** with more than \$10,000 in bogus travel-expense claims in 2011 and sentenced to six months in jail followed by six months of house arrest. He resigned from the **Senate** 10 days after the conviction but only began his jail term in 2013 after losing an appeal.

A judge heard that the former **Liberal senator** had enlisted one of his **Senate** employees to cut down 60 trees on his property near **Ottawa** during paid office hours, and filed mileage-expense claims for rides he did not take.

Lavigne could not immediately be reached for comment Wednesday, and his former lawyer said he lacked the former **senator's** contact information.

Two other convicted former **senators** seem unlikely to be affected by the motion.

Former Sen. Eric Berntson, a **Conservative** who represented Saskatchewan, died in 2018, and the "Honourable" title only applies for the duration of a former **senator's** life. Berntson had resigned from the **Senate** in 2001 after a fraud conviction involving provincial expense allowances during his time as a member of the provincial legislature.

Meanwhile, former Sen. Michel Cogger, a **Conservative** who represented Quebec, was granted an absolute discharge in 2001 of his conviction of influence peddling.

Wednesday's motion follows a nearly three-year effort by **senators** across the partisan spectrum to respond to Meredith's alleged treatment of a teenager and **Senate** staff.

In 2017, the **Senate** ethics officer concluded that Meredith had violated the chamber's code of ethics by engaging in a relationship with a girl when she was 16, and recommended the upper house take the unprecedented step of expelling him.

At the time, Meredith acknowledged the sexual relations outlined in the report but said nothing had taken place until she turned 18.

About two months after the report's release, Meredith resigned from the **Senate** just as **senators** were believed ready to go through with the ouster.

A second **Senate** investigation, released in 2019, found Meredith had repeatedly bullied, threatened and intimidated his staff, as well as touched, kissed and propositioned some of them.

Meredith, an ordained minister, was appointed to the **Senate** on the advice of former prime minister **Stephen Harper** in 2010.

Former **Liberal**-appointed **senator Serge Joyal** first launched an effort to remove Meredith's "Honourable" designation in December 2019, shortly before his retirement.

He handed the baton to Quebec Sen. **Josee Verner**, who tabled a motion in February 2020, less than a month before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic.

The **Conservative**-appointed **senator**, who is now a member of one of the **Senate's** non-partisan groups, said her research suggested **Parliament** had never stripped someone of the title.

"Former **senator** Meredith exhibited the most despicable behaviour possible in the history of this institution," she told the chamber in French.

"He did so with impunity, with utter contempt for ethics rules and against the dignity, well-being and rights of his victims."

The motion died when the **Liberals** prorogued **Parliament** in August 2020, and Verner reintroduced it this October, with the same phrasing, as the **Senate** caught up on business that predated COVID-19.

Her motion cites the two ethics reports and a 2020 statement in the **Senate** that expressed "regrets to the victims of Mr. Meredith's misconduct," all of which predated this fall's news that criminal charges were being formally laid against Meredith.

Shortly before the vote on Tuesday, Manitoba Sen. **Mary Jane McCallum** said the motion is the bare minimum the **Senate** can do to make up for "inadequacies within our workspace" that have left people traumatized.

"We have seen how negative perceptions about a **senator's** conduct can harm public confidence in individual **senators**. Every single one of us in this chamber gets shed in the same harsh light," said the **senator**, who was appointed under the independent process set up early in Prime Minister **Justin Trudeau's** tenure.

Right before the vote, Alberta Sen. **Scott Tannas** amended the motion to include other former **senators** convicted on an indictable offence, a move that followed consultation between the **Senate** groups.

The chamber unanimously passed the motion as amended by Tannas, who was appointed by Harper but now sits in one of the **Senate's** non-partisan groups.

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