

# Senate groups scramble for members ahead of committee selection, ex-member calls out ISG ‘groupthink’

By PETER MAZEREEUW NOVEMBER 18, 2019

<https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/11/18/senate-groups-scramble-for-members-ahead-of-committee-selection-ex-members-call-out-isg-group-think/224831>

The Senate leaders will negotiate how to split committee seats and chairs between four Senate groups in the new Parliament, and numbers will matter.

*Editor's note: this story has been updated online to reflect Senator Jean-Guy Dagenais' and Senator Percy Downe's decisions to join the Canadian Senators Group on Monday.*

The now five-group Senate is in flux just a few weeks before Parliament reconvenes, with each group working to court new members, hold onto their own, or both, ahead of the selection process that will determine how many seats each gets on Senate committees.

Senators began swapping allegiances rapidly over the past two weeks, on the eve of the first session of the 43rd Parliament. Ten Senators left the Independent Senators Group (ISG) and Conservative caucus to form the Canadian Senators Group (CSG), and were joined by Sen. David Richards (New Brunswick), previously non-affiliated.

The independent Senate Liberal caucus members shed their remaining Liberal ties and formed a new group, the Progressive Senate Group (PSG), to try to attract new members from the ISG, and maintain their status as a group. Senator Percy Downe (Charlottetown, P.E.I.) left the PSG to join the CSG Monday morning, dropping the PSG below the minimum threshold of nine members required to form a recognized Senate group, and receive extra funding and status as a result. PSG interim leader Sen. Joseph Day (Saint John-Kennebecasis, N.B.) will also retire in January, and Sen. Serge Joyal (Kennebec, Que.) will retire in February, further depleting the group's membership.

Sen. Diane Bellemare (Alma, Que.) also left the government representative team to join the ISG, and as of late last week her replacement had not yet been announced. Senator Jean-Guy Dagenais (Victoria, Que.) also left the Conservative Senate Caucus to join the Canadian Senators Group Monday morning.

One of the first acts of the Senate following the Dec. 5 Throne Speech will be to form a Senate Selection Committee, which will determine how many seats each Senate group gets on each committee, and who chairs those committees. The Selection Committee formalizes the outcome of behind-the-scenes negotiations by the Senate group leaders.

Senate convention now dictates that committee seats be doled out in proportion to each group's share of the seats in the Senate as a whole. The ISG occupied 51 seats (roughly 49 per cent of the total), the Conservatives 24 seats (23 per cent), the CSG 13 seats (13 per cent), and the PSG eight seats (eight per cent), while non-affiliated Senators, including the two remaining government representatives, occupied four seats, and another five were vacant.

There are 17 regular Senate committees. The Rules of the Senate dictate that the Internal Economy and Rules committees have 15 seats each; the Official Languages, Human Rights, and Defence committees have nine seats each; the Ethics Committee has five seats; and other committees have 12 seats.

If the seats on a 15-member committee were doled out in strict proportion to seats in the Senate Chamber—depending on how the numbers are rounded—the ISG would now be in line for seven-and-a-half seats, the Conservatives three-and-a-half seats, the CSG two seats, and the PSG one seat, leaving one seat to spare. On a 12-member committee, the ISG would be in line for five-and-a-half or six seats, the Conservatives two-and-a-half or three seats, the CSG one-and-a-half seats, and PSG one or zero seats, leaving one or more to spare.

Since seats cannot be split in half, the Senate leaders will have to negotiate over which groups get bumped up or down, and how the remaining seat on committees is awarded. However, it's not yet clear how the PSG's loss of recognized group status following Sen. Downe's departure

will affect the negotiations over committee seats. The Rules of the Senate say the seats on the the Selection Committee should be divided up to Senators who are members of recognized groups, proportional to their standing in the Senate. The Rules also include provisions for Senators who are not part of recognized groups, however, and do not bar Senators who are not part of recognized groups from sitting on regular standing committees.

Groups in the Senate that add an extra member or two before those negotiations take place could be in a better position during those discussions. Any changes in group numbers could make a difference in terms of how many seats each group gets—particularly the smaller groups—and how power on the committees is balanced between the groups.

In the last Parliament, the Senate leaders agreed to temporarily expand the size of some committees to better balance their membership, an option that could be on the table again in this Parliament.

## **PSG invites Senators to cross floor**

The new PSG is openly trying to recruit Senators from the ISG.

“We are sharing our shared vision with all Senators who we think might be interested in joining a progressive Senate group. And I’m hopeful that we might see something happen fairly quickly, but I can’t say that we have any full commitment at this stage,” Sen. Day told *The Hill Times* last week.

Sen. Day said last week that his group dropped the “Liberal” moniker in part to attract members of the ISG, some of whom, after being appointed as non-partisan Independents, were put off by the group sharing a name with the Liberal Party, despite the fact that the Senate Liberals did not have any formal ties to the Liberal government or caucus in the House.

“There were some in the recent past who have been appointed to the Senate who we have talked to about joining our group, and they were somewhat reluctant, because even though we

assured them that we were completely independent, there's always a question. And so, now there won't be a question, so that will be behind us," said Sen. Day.

He said the group also reformed with the name "progressive" as part of an effort to balance out the Conservative caucus and CSG, which he described as a right-of-centre group.

The PSG, still led by Sen. Day until January, has named defending the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Indigenous rights as its top priorities, said Sen. Day. Equality of official languages, regional representation, and defending minority rights are also "driving factors" for the group, he said.

"Those Senators who are interested in those areas, in assessing legislation from a policy-oriented point of view, should be looking at our group."

The vacancy on Sen. Peter Harder's government representative team will also have to be filled by a Senator from another group, unless it remains vacant until Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) appoints a new Senator who is willing to fill the role.

## **Ex-ISG Senators say 'groupthink,' loyalty to Trudeau a factor for some Independents**

The CSG has capped its membership at 25 Senators, potentially allowing the group to add another 14 members. CSG interim leader Scott Tannas (Alberta) did not respond to an interview request last week. CSG member Sen. Pamela Wallin (Saskatchewan) told *The Hill Times* last week that the group is not "recruiting" other members, strictly speaking, but is open to others joining the group.

"This is about the work we do, it's not having a bigger group than the other guy," she said.

Sen. Wallin said she joined the fledgling CSG so she could join with like-minded Senators and focus on regional representation, and improving government legislation. She suggested that

was more difficult for Senators who were under pressure to take the interests of a political party, or the prime minister who appointed them, into consideration.

Some members of ISG, she said, “really felt it was their obligation to pass the prime minister’s legislation as it arrived [in the Senate]. That’s not our job.”

Sen. Wallin left the ISG when the CSG was formed earlier this month. She joined the ISG in 2016, after sitting as an independent, and before that, a member of the Conservative Senate caucus, after being appointed to the Senate by prime minister Stephen Harper.

ISG Senators often put forward and voted to pass amendments to government bills in the last Parliament.

Sen. Woo, the ISG leader, was not available for an interview last week. ISG Senator Frances Lankin (Ontario) told *The Hill Times* that she had been approached by another group in the Senate that wished for her to join. She said she was not planning to leave the ISG, but said she supported the formation of new groups in the Senate.

CSG Sen. Richards said that he joined the group in part because of a call from Sen. Wallin, whom he has known for years. He also said he joined because being part of a group would give him a chance to sit on committees, and because the CSG would allow him to continue to vote however he pleased, and represent the interests of New Brunswick.

Sen. Elaine McCoy (Alberta) also left the ISG to join the fledgling CSG earlier this month. She was the founding leader of the ISG in 2016. Sen. McCoy said she left the group in part because she and other Senators were at times put under pressure not to speak on legislation by others in the group. She said the ISG had too much of a “concentration of power.”

She said she was motivated to join the CSG because of “the quality of the people who were in the group, and whether they could in fact stand on their own and make their own independent decisions, and not need to be spoon fed, and therefore, basically [have] group-think happening.”

Sen. McCoy was appointed to the Senate by prime minister Paul Martin, and sat as an independent Progressive Conservative between 2013 and 2016.

ISG Sen. Paul Massicotte (De Lanaudière, Que.), who previously sat as a Liberal Senator, told *The Hill Times* last week that the ISG has to be careful about “group-think,” where people in the group think alike, or make decisions to avoid conflict with others in the group.

“I think we’ve got to make a better effort to make sure we have a variety of views, and there is no undue pressure, or equal pressure [from] different views.”

Sen. Massicotte declined to comment on whether he had been approached to join another group in the Senate.

“Bottom line is, I stayed with the current [ISG] group, because I think that’s the place for me, certainly at this point in time,” he said.