

THE HONOURABLE PATRICIA BOVEY, FRSA, FCMA
SENATOR – MANITOBA



L'HONORABLE PATRICIA BOVEY, MSRA, MAMC
SÉNATRICE – MANITOBA

SENATE | SÉNAT
CANADA

September 8, 2020

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

With the summer, alas, almost over, and as we all adapt to new realities for the fall of 2020, I have been reflecting on a number of situations that have affected us all in one way or another. The first of course is COVID-19. While none of us know what a second wave may bring, we do know that Canada's cultural sector continues to suffer. I sincerely recommend that you keep abreast of the various government programs, such as the one recently announced for artists who are not eligible for EI, and the extension for emergency funding deadlines for museums, now set at September 11th. You know I remain interested in receiving ideas and needs for the months ahead.

We have all also been changed by the recent Black Lives Matter movement. I am very pleased to let you know that the Senate will be honouring Canada's Black artists in rotating installations over the next few years. The first will be installed before the September 23rd Speech from the Throne. *Stolen Identities*, 2018 by Yisa Akinbolaji and Chantal Gibson's 2014 piece, *Who's Who in Canada 1927* part of her *Altered Book Series*, will be the initial installation. It is slated to run until June 2021. This presentation will be followed in September 2021 with works by Black artists from other parts of Canada. I would like most sincerely to thank my Senate colleagues and staff for their very positive response to this project. It marks the first works by Black artists to be shown in the Senate.

Another concern affecting Canadians is that of public trust and human rights in museums. Over the past decades, museums and galleries in Canada and the United States have consistently been deemed the most trusted institutions in contemporary society because they present and steward the 'real thing'. That trust has been a critically important pillar for all galleries and museums. It was particularly troubling for me to see that trust being eroded this summer. A number of cases have drawn public questions, including the departure of the Director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. I admired her partnership with Montreal's medical community in which doctors prescribed museum visits as a means to improve their patients' mental and physical health. Studies over the past thirty years have shown that engaging with the arts has truly beneficial effects on an individual's health, and had the consequential benefits of reducing the length of hospital stays, lessening lost hours of work, and creating savings in overall health budgets. One hopes this program will continue to be sustained and implemented in other parts of the country.

Another related concern was the sudden, unexplained closure of two of the last three days in August of a major exhibition of prairie art at St. Boniface Hospital's Buhler Gallery. Art has been a positive mainstay for many during COVID. The complaints by those who came to see the exhibit but were denied were concerning. I was pleased the decision was reversed in time for the last day and was told the visitor turnout was substantial.

The really troubling incident was that at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. The realities which came forward are an absolute contradiction of the museum's mandate, making the situation especially concerning. The immediate appointment of a special Board committee on Diversity is to be applauded, as was the action for the independent and immediate investigation of the complaints. The first report of findings and recommended actions was completed, and made public, at the end of July. The second, and longer, phase of the investigation is currently underway, and a deeper analysis and articulation of further actions will be forthcoming. During July, however, initial steps were taken. The CEO stepped down and the Board Chair assumed the interim CEO leadership and met with every staff member. The board accepted the interim report and immediately changed some governance practices. I have been advised that the report's recommendations are now being implemented throughout the museum. They include recommendations that affect the government, the board, and the staff in multiple aspects of the museum's work: its programming, hiring, institutional structure, and engagement with the public. The new CEO, Isha Kahn, has been appointed and has commenced her duties. A human rights lawyer, she comes with a strong and relevant background. I wish her well as she seeks to move the institution to a place where they adhere to their mandate, internally and externally, and regain the public's trust.

The fundamentals of a respectful workplace, unified around the mandate of the museum, is a critical starting point. According to the investigation, this has been a long-term systemic issue and will, therefore, take time to correct fully. The actions delineated, if meaningfully implemented at every level of the organization, will certainly result in a needed paradigm shift. I wholeheartedly recommend that the report be read and its recommendations be implemented by those in all Canadian institutions. The Canadian Museum for Human Rights is not the only Canadian institution facing these concerns.

Reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous people must continue as well. Declaring two Residential Schools as National Historic Sites on September 1st was a very important and encouraging step in the process of recognition and action. Manitoba's Long Plains Residential School in Portage la Prairie will become a museum, library and, Chief Dennis Meeches, hopes a memorial garden as well. Many children were sent there from various parts of the province over many years, including internationally acclaimed artist Jackson Beardy, one of the founders of the Indigenous Group of Seven in 1972. He bore the scars of his time in residential school until his premature death at the age of forty. May this national designation, that of the Shubenacadie site in Nova Scotia, and the declaration of residential schools as a 'national historic event', do much to deepen the awareness of the atrocities to Canada's First Nations, and ensure that society can and will turn that page.

Looking forward, I hope to review the presentation of Indigenous art in the Senate as I want to ensure proper representation from artists across the country. Good work is installed now, but it is always exciting and important to enhance those opportunities.

In the meantime, the Speech from the Throne will start our next Senate sitting and I will continue to be in touch.

With best regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patricia E. Bovey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P'.

Patricia Bovey, FRSA, FCMA
PSG Senator from Manitoba