Let us embark on a step-by-step approach to Senate reform in Canada, Obhrai tells Parliament

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Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC) :

Mr. Speaker, it is indeed a pleasure for me to rise and speak on this very important bill.

Before I start I would like to say that I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission.

When we talk about the Senate it brings a lot of emotions out in Canadians. That is because the Senate is becoming a dinosaur institution on the Canadian democratic scene.

It is not because of the individuals who are in the Senate. They are very fine individuals, individuals who are dedicated and committed to public life for the betterment of Canada.

We are talking about an institution that shackles these individuals and these individuals using their full potential to contribute to the public life in Canada. That is because over the period of time the way the institution has been managed has been manipulated, has slowly become to the point where today Canadians do not wish to have this institution.

We are seeing right across the country debate about abolishing the Senate. We are seeing right across the country they do not want the Senate or they want to reform the Senate.

When I was campaigning in 1997 in Calgary and I talked about the Senate there was immediately Canadian anger coming out, that this institution did not represent their point of view, did not represent what normally people would feel and that they have an elected representative in the Parliament of Canada, and what they had was not an elected representative. What they had was somebody who was in the Parliament of Canada but who was not speaking for them.

That is something that Canadians, and anyone who has a democratic institution understands and says it is not acceptable. As a matter of fact even today Tony Blair is trying to bring reform there because he knows that these institutions have outlived their usefulness and our institution here in Canada is the same. I want to make sure that we understand that we are not talking of putting down senators now.

Both the Liberal Party and I just heard our colleague from the Bloc saying that the bill does not bring reform and the Liberals are saying, “Let's do a full reform”.

Yes, we all agree there is a need for reform. That we know and they know is not going to happen because of the way our Constitution is set up, but we need to have incremental steps taken toward achieving that goal.

Canadians want and are demanding that something be done about this institution. This institution regretfully is I would say a blight on democracy in Canada because of the way it is set up. Again, I want to say this. It has nothing to do with individuals there.

Canada has a very stellar reputation of democracy around the world. We go, including myself have gone, many times out preaching democracy.
The foreign affairs committee is doing a major study on democratic party and how Canada should go ahead and promote democracy around the world. This is one the very strong values we have when we go out. CIDA does it and everyone else does. It is a strength that Canada has and people around the world respect Canada for this institution, for what we do in the promotion of democracy.

I have had on many occasions the opportunity to speak members of the opposition who have come to Canada to see how Canadian democracy works. What is amazing in many of the times when I have gone overseas and talked to other parliamentarians in other parts of the world, they really do not know how our Senate works.

They think our Senate is an elected Senate. They think our Senate is something very powerful, like the American Senate.

I have gone on visits with senators and I have seen where they laid the red carpet outside for the senators, so they think the Senate is the most important institution in Canada, and rightfully.

When I told them, "Let me just tell you, there is something wrong in our democracy. Here is an institution that is not elected by Canadians". That is the first shock they get. The second shock is that it is a job for life. Where would anyone get a job for life, currently? They have nothing to fear, nothing to worry about, and that is another shock that they get. They say, "Are you telling us that the senators are there for life? They do not have to go out to be re-elected?" and I tell them they do not. They are there for life.

Who appoints them? The Prime Minister. What is the criteria to be in the Senate? A buddy of the Prime Minister or what? There is no criteria on who will be in the Senate.

When they hear about this, it is the first time they actually start shaking their heads and saying, "You guys must be kidding. You must be joking". I tell them no. It is a shock to them that in Canada, a land that promotes democracy, we have an institution that is absolutely undemocratic, totally undemocratic and it has become undemocratic over the period of time because of the way it was manipulated, the way it has been done. Today, Canadians have absolutely no confidence in that institution.

What do we do? Do we close our eyes and say that we have an institution with which there is nothing we can do because we want complete reform on it. That is a cop. The Liberal Party would like to leave the Senate as it is because it is an institution

that has benefited them the most. Now they say that we must have complete reform.

I just heard my colleague from British Columbia saying that British Columbia is unrepresented in the Senate. They are all angry with the Senate. We just heard the member from Quebec talk about why the Senate is irrelevant as far as he is concerned.

We have to do something. We just cannot carry on. We just cannot carry on with our eyes closed and say here we have an institution that is not responsive and we cannot do anything about it. It will never happen. We know the Canadian political scene. It will never happen. The differences between provinces demanding all these things, where will we get this unanimity between provinces? How many provinces will get what seats? Who will do? Will it be an elected Senate? Instead, do we close our eyes and let that institution carry on and be a burden on the taxpayers who are getting nothing out of it? No.

Even better, the individuals who are serving as senators, who are excellent people, we need their expertise. We need to give them legitimacy. We need to understand when they are saying something, people are listening to them. Right now, nobody listens to them because of the way it is set up.

They, themselves are shackled. They are very fine individuals who have served Canada very well. They need to be heard. If they cannot be heard with this kind of institution, then they are muzzled, they are silenced, because nobody will listen to them.

Do we want an institution like that? No. We need to do an incremental step. The bill may not address many of the concerns that everybody has that I have just outlined about the amount of representation from where. All these things are a big flaw in this institution. We will not be able to do it. This may not go all the way, but it is a step in the direction of what Canadians want. They want a voice in who will be sitting in the chamber. The bill provides them that voice and we have to be cognizant of the fact and provide them with that without changing the constitution. Believe me, changing the constitution will not happen.

We have seen this happening in the past. We have seen these things going out there. There is too much diversity out here. There is too much difference of opinion to have unanimity on what to do.

Mr. Speaker, I urge the members, and I know in the House that everybody knows we need to make a change, so I am urging everyone, let us go with this small, incremental step.

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