

WITH SENATE IN HIS GRIP, PM DRIVES CRIME AGENDA

Conservatives pave way for agenda with five senators heralded for being tough on crime, committed to Red Chamber reform

Gloria Galloway and Daniel Leblanc

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The appointment of five new Conservative senators who promise to expedite their party's "tough on crime" agenda marks a realignment of political influence that will reverberate through Canada's Parliament for years to come.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has placed what could become a long-term lock on the upper house with a third straight round of Conservative appointments to a Senate that he has accused of being deliberately obstructionist – particularly on justice bills.

The Liberals have enjoyed a Senate majority since 1997 but, after Friday's appointments, hold just 49 seats in the 105-seat chamber compared to the Conservatives' 51. There are five other senators who are not aligned with either party.

While Mr. Harper does not yet have more than half of the Senate in his grip, he has gained a plurality. And he could appoint his way to an absolute majority by the end of this year with the retirement of three more senators: a Conservative and two Liberals.

Because Parliament has been prorogued, Senate committees can be reconstituted to reflect the new make-up of the Red Chamber, and Conservatives are looking forward to a new era in which they are in control.

The new appointees include Pierre-Hugues Boisvenu, the Quebec head of a victims' rights group, and Bob Runciman, a Progressive Conservative member of the Ontario Legislature who has been outspoken in his defence of tougher sentences.

"These five new senators are firmly committed to our agenda," Justice Minister Rob Nicholson told a new conference Friday where he shared the table with Mr. Boisvenu and Mr. Runciman.

"These gentlemen have great records, standing up for victims and law-abiding Canadians. ... I say a minority Parliament is no excuse not to stand up for victims and law-abiding Canadians."

1:

The current Senate

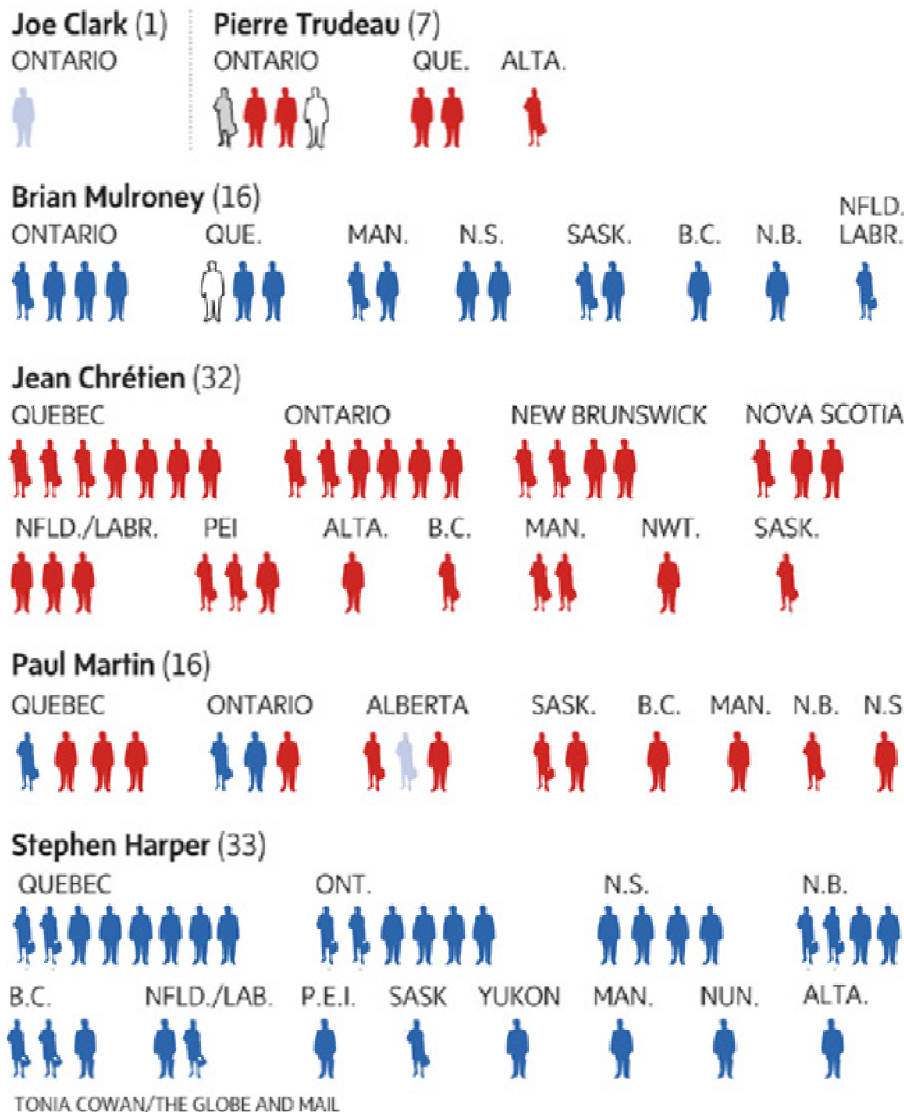
Six prime ministers appointed the current 105 senators, with Harper now up to 33 of those.

69 male Senate appointments 36 female Senate appointments

TOTAL BY PARTY



BY APPOINTING PRIME MINISTER



2:

The other appointees are Vim Kochhar, the head of a Toronto-based group for the physically disabled; Elizabeth Marshall, a Newfoundland politician who was that

province's auditor-general; and Rose-May Poirier, a member of New Brunswick's Conservative opposition.

The federal Conservatives have repeatedly blamed the Liberals for stalling criminal justice legislation in the upper house. Again Friday, Mr. Nicholson labelled the Official Opposition Liberals and Leader Michael Ignatieff "soft on crime."

In fact, of the 17 crime bills introduced by the federal Conservative government in the last session, only two were held up in the Senate for more than six months. Most died on the order paper when Mr. Harper prorogued Parliament in late December.

But the Conservatives, who have introduced a large slate of controversial policies that lean more toward punishment than toward rehabilitation, believe they can gain a political advantage by framing the Liberals as defenders of criminals and themselves as the champions of victims.

"Prime Minister Harper is sending a clear message by appointing me senator to Canadians and Quebeckers that the Conservative government defends victims rights as opposed to those of criminals," said Mr. Boisvenu, who promised to donate his senator's salary to the Murdered or Missing Persons' Families' Association which he founded.

"Our government is serious about getting tough on crime," Mr. Harper said in a statement. "Since we were first elected, we have made it one of our highest priorities. The Liberals have abused their Senate majority by obstructing and eviscerating law and order measures that are urgently needed and strongly supported by Canadians."

The new senators, he continued, "are committed to community safety and justice for the victims of crime. I look forward to working with each towards making our communities safer and protecting families from crime."

Although senators can hold their seats until they turn 75, all of the new appointees have promised to support Conservative legislation that would limit their terms to eight years.

But, if the Conservatives were to lose the government in a future election, their saturation of the Senate could create continuing legislative obstacles for an incoming prime minister of another stripe.

Mr. Harper was a staunch critic of partisan nominations to the Senate when he was in opposition, and now it is Mr. Ignatieff's turn to promise to refrain from engaging in dispensing patronage plums.

3:

Mr. Ignatieff said Friday that if he becomes prime minister, he will have a deal with the provinces on Senate reform before he makes his own appointments. In particular, Mr. Ignatieff said he agrees with a plan for term limits for senators.

“I’m committed to Senate reform. Let’s get a proposition on Senate reform that we can take to the provinces, get buy-in, and then we’ll look at how we nominate and choose our senators,” Mr. Ignatieff said at a news conference.

While past Liberal governments never shied from stacking the Senate with party hacks, organizers, bagmen and supporters, Mr. Ignatieff said Canadians have to remember that the Conservatives had promised to act differently.

“It’s hypocritical to say, ‘I won’t do what the Liberals did,’ and then appoint a whole bunch of people who are basically Conservative loyalists,” Mr. Ignatieff said. “On the Senate score, [Mr. Harper] has broken his promises to Canadians.”