

Government should capitalize on skill and experience of ex-prime ministers: experts

By Mark Kennedy, Postmedia News December 2, 2012



24 Sussex Drive. Prime Minister's residence, Stephen Harper.

Photograph by: MIKE CARROCCETTO, The Ottawa Citizen , Postmedia News

OTTAWA — The federal government is being urged to stop squandering the talent of Canada's former prime ministers and instead rely on the expertise and international connections they can offer the nation.

The calls, from experts at national think tanks, a historical group and a Tory senator, come in the wake of a special Postmedia series on all six of Canada's living former prime ministers.

The experts say the country needs to end its long tradition of turning its back on retired prime ministers and put their skills to good use.

A range of proposals is on the table. They include: using former prime ministers as international emissaries on key issues; appointing them as non-voting members to the Senate to give them a perch from which they can speak publicly on national issues; and even creating a new Prime Minister's Council where they can meet regularly.

There's also talk of designating a single date — perhaps Sir. John A. Macdonald's birthday, Jan. 11 — as a day on which all former prime ministers could be honoured each year for their contributions to Canada.

David Mitchell, president of the Public Policy Forum, has been in the forefront of advocating for a new approach.

His organization held a tribute dinner last spring for former prime ministers, and he said Postmedia's recent series of interviews with the former prime ministers illustrated how much the retired politicians can contribute to public policy discussion.

"It seems that our experience in Canada has been to give the former prime ministers the bum's rush, if I can put it crudely," Mitchell said in an interview.

"Once they leave office, it's goodbye, good luck and all too often, good riddance. And I think that's deeply, deeply unfortunate because we're not taking advantage of their experience and their collective wisdom."

Mitchell says Canada's record compares poorly to that of many other countries.

The most obvious example is the United States, where former presidents have libraries built in their honour. More importantly, they continue to play a role for the country. Examples include George W. Bush's request to his father and Bill Clinton to lead relief efforts for victims of the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. Similarly, President Barack Obama turned to his predecessor, Bush, and to Clinton, to lead fundraising for the reconstruction of hurricane-ravaged Haiti.

In Australia, former prime ministers are occasionally called upon as "special witnesses or in performing elder statesmen-type duties," said Mitchell.

"It crosses partisan lines in a very impressive way. I'd like to think that in Canada, at our best, we might be able to find a way imaginatively to take advantage of that wisdom and experience."

Mitchell proposes each former prime minister be offered a Senate seat. In his vision, they could not vote, but they would have a place from which to occasionally speak out on important topics.

Sen. Hugh Segal, a veteran Conservative who was once chief of staff to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, said in an interview that because Canadian prime ministers are not heads of state, they're not afforded the same status other countries give their ex-leaders.

"My view is that, at the very least, it's a wasted resource," said Segal.

"Think of all the money we have spent. Somebody becomes prime minister. He is then afforded what he needs to do his job, and 24 Sussex, and his staff, and the support of the Privy Council Office, the protection of the RCMP.

"He has flown around the world, doing all these important things at international meetings and when he's gone, he's gone. And all the benefit of that, and the depth of relationship, and the linkages are just gone."

Segal said former prime ministers aren't given an office, beyond temporary space at the National Archives, if necessary.

He suggests a Prime Ministers Council, with a "modest" staff, which retired leaders could choose to join.

“Every prime minister could use it how he deemed appropriate. But they would meet regularly. They could probably engage around issues like philanthropic leadership.”

Moreover, Segal believes the government could appoint them as emissaries — noting that Paul Martin has strong economic credentials while Joe Clark is well regarded on the electoral process.

Brian Lee Crowley, managing director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, said former prime ministers have valuable experience that is respected by their international peers.

“Even if they are no longer in the hot seat, they know what it’s like and I think the opportunity they present to get the ear of decision-makers who matter internationally is too good an opportunity to pass up.”

For instance, Crowley said Mulroney developed a strong reputation in the United States when he negotiated the free trade deal.

Just imagine how the doors “would open for him” if he were appointed by a current Canadian prime minister to represent Canada on a certain issue, he said.

“That doesn’t mean he would get everything we wanted. But I just think the prestige, and the history and the relationships that people like this can bring to the table are so valuable for Canada. And it’s terrible to allow petty political disputes and ambition to come between Canada and this important resource.”

Anthony Wilson-Smith, president of the Historica-Dominion Institute, said there has been evidence from former prime ministers of “a desire to serve.”

He said Canada needs to move towards what has happened in the U.S. with ex-presidents — where “once you leave office you’re not non-partisan, but you’re serving the greater good, the whole of the country.”

It’s up to government to first reach out to former prime ministers for help, he said, despite fears that the offer might be rebuffed. He noted that some people have suggested a day to honour the “service” of all of the country’s prime ministers, dating back to Confederation.

“We have to get out of this trap that’s been created for everybody where everything is looked at through the prism of partisan politics,” said Wilson-Smith.

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