
A Distinguished Service Award for Former Parliamentarians

by Aideen Nicholson

The Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians presented its first Distinguished Service Award on June 10, 1999 to John Matheson, former member of Parliament from 1961 to 1968, who played a key role in the adoption of a national flag in 1964. This article outlines the selection process for this award and the contribution of the first recipient.

The origins of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians go back to a recommendation in the Final Report of the 1985 Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons. (McGrath Report). On May 29, 1996, the Parliament of Canada adopted Bill C-275 establishing the Association with the following objectives.

- to put the knowledge and experience of its members at the service of parliamentary democracy in Canada and elsewhere;
- to serve the public interest by providing non-partisan support for the parliamentary system of government in Canada
- to foster good relations between members of the Senate and House of Commons of Canada and former parliamentarians

The law also requires that: "the Association shall not pursue its objectives for any partisan political purpose".

The Association is managed by an elected national Board of Directors with an Executive Committee. All former Members of the Senate and the House of Commons are eligible for membership. In accordance with

section 7(e) of the Act establishing the Association, a Distinguished Service Award was initiated to:

...(e) give recognition, by such means as it deems appropriate, for outstanding contributions to the promotion and understanding of Canada's parliamentary system of government.

At least three months before the Annual General Meeting, each member in good standing is asked to nominate one candidate with a description of the contribution that



John Matheson receiving the Distinguished Service Award from Senate Speaker Gildas Molgat (left) and House of Commons Speaker, Gilbert Parent. (Photo by Andy Shott)

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he or she has made. The selection of the winner is made by a Committee composed of the Association Chair and five members appointed by the Chair, one each from British Columbia, the Prairie provinces, Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic provinces. The nominee must have been a former Member of the Senate or the House of Commons.

Mitchell Sharp, John Fraser, Bob Rae and myself formed a committee to develop criteria and a process for the selection of recipients. The criteria were approved by the Association's Board in 1998 and later circulated to the membership with requests for nominations for 1999. It is hoped that an award, based on the same criteria and process, can be made each year.

The criteria focused mainly on parliamentary performance but there is also an expectation of ongoing involvement in upholding democratic values and striving for social betterment since the end of public life should not mean the end of public service.

The first winner of the Distinguished Service Award was John Matheson. The ceremony honouring Mr. Matheson took place in Senate. The presentation was made by Barry Turner, Chairman, of the Association and the Speakers of the Senate and the House of Commons who are honorary members and co-chairpersons of the Association.

During the ceremony it was noted that Canada's official flag after 1867 had been Britain's Union Flag, although the Red Ensign with the Canadian badge was regularly flown for qualified purposes. In 1925, Prime Minister Mackenzie King appointed an Armed Services Committee to investigate possible designs for a Canadian flag but the committee did not report. In 1946 a joint committee of the Senate and House of Commons presented a design but it was not adopted. The late Lester B.

Pearson, as leader of the Opposition in 1960 and as Prime Minister in 1963 raised the issue again. He believed that a distinctive national flag would contribute to national unity, a belief shared by John Matheson.

The flag debate was bitter and prolonged. John Matheson chaired a parliamentary committee that tried to come up with a compromise and his parliamentary skills played an important part in eventually bringing about a conclusion. Whether negotiating with opposition members, participating in committee deliberations, or speaking passionately in the House of Commons. John Matheson was patient and persistent in his quest for a Canadian flag.

"I plead, I beg of you to understand what this means for the country we love."

Following his parliamentary career, John Matheson was appointed to the bench and served until his retirement at the age of seventy-five in 1992. He continued to be active in a number of organizations representing a broad spectrum of human endeavour. In 1975, he published *Canada's Flag* and has also written *Heraldry: Emblems of Canada*.

In his acceptance speech on June 10, 1999, John Matheson's patriotism and commitment to social betterment showed clearly. He said, in part:

"Parliament is more than a talking place. It is the listening post with respect to the hurting within the land. In these hallowed halls there are no unimportant tears. No cry for help must go unheard.

All those who make the sacrifice to come here love this precious homeland – vast, rugged, serene. In different ways, all seek to lay their very best gifts upon Canada's altar. And more beautiful, even than Canada's wondrous lakes and rivers and mountains and plains are her people, in all their diversity.

It is this extraordinary diversity that allows us to actually create in this country mankind's first experiment in brotherhood. The surest way for us to stand on guard for Canada, and to contribute as well to the betterment of the human race, the only race, is to prove that we respect and love one another. Who, in 1867, could have predicted that with our differences we could make it together? But faith has proved greater than doubt and love stronger than hate. From inside Parliament and from without, we must resolve to continue in the search for a better country."



The presentation took place in the Senate Chamber

(Photo by Andy Shott)