

Senator Raoul Dandurand: Champion of an Independent Senate

As the number of independent, non-partisan senators has grown, Canadian parliamentary observers have been increasingly mentioning the name Raoul Dandurand in conversations. The author of this article suggests the legacy of Senator Dandurand, who long ago advocated for an independent Senate that was more of a dispassionate reviewing body than a replica of the partisan House of Commons, is particularly relevant to the Senate's contemporary discussions and debates on its procedures and practices.

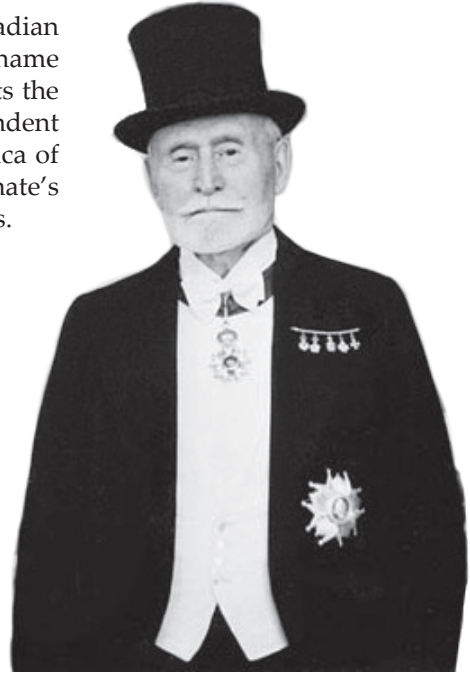
Peter Price

After Mackenzie King's Liberals formed government following the 1921 election, the new Government Leader in the Senate was wary of changing his seat in the chamber. To Raoul Dandurand, the electoral reconfiguration of the House of Commons and the formation of a new government had little bearing on the work of the Senate. "I disliked the idea of crossing the floor," he said in his first speech as Government Leader. "What did that action purport? Its meaning was there were in this Chamber victors and vanquished."¹ This made little sense for a legislative chamber that he understood to be more of a dispassionate reviewing body than a replication of the partisan politics of the House of Commons.

The principle of the Senate's independence and its functioning as a non-partisan chamber were hallmarks of Senator Dandurand's approach to the upper chamber. Appointed to the Senate in 1898 by Wilfrid Laurier, he served in the upper chamber for 44 years, including two decades as either Government Leader or Opposition Leader in the Senate and one term as Speaker between 1905 and 1909.

Dandurand often expressed concern that the Senate had become something different than originally imagined, shaped increasingly over time in the image of the partisan environment of the House of Commons.

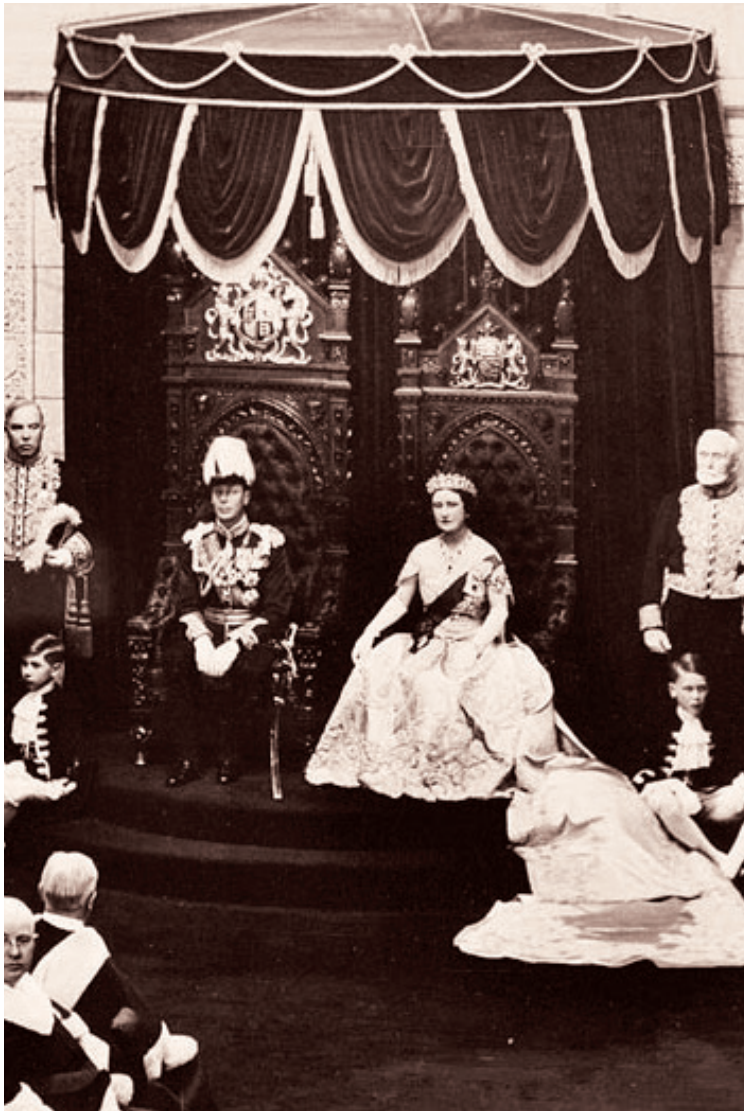
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Raoul Dandurand, 1861-1942

The solution that he proposed was to eliminate the conduits of partisanship in the Senate altogether. He envisioned a chamber without party cleavages and without official government and opposition sides. In its place, he proposed that the Senate be run by a "floor managing committee," consisting of around 15 senators that would oversee the carriage of legislation through the chamber. For government bills, ministers would select senators to sponsor the legislation in the Senate, ensuring that responsibility was diffused in the Senate rather than concentrated in the hands of a Government Leader.

He was never successful in convincing Prime Minister Mackenzie King to support his ideas for Senate reform. King had his own ideas for reform, including introducing a retirement age and a suspensory veto, which were equally rebuffed by Dandurand. For him, it was critical to maintain the independence and autonomy of the upper chamber, rather than diminish its constitutional role in favor of the elected chamber. He saw his proposals less as a dramatic overhaul of the Senate's operation than as a restoration of its intended purpose.



King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in the Senate Chamber, flanked by Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Senator Dandurand, giving Royal Assent to Bills in 1939.

The irony of his insistence on non-partisanship in the Senate was that Dandurand was a thoroughly political man. He had long been an influential figure in the Liberal Party in Quebec, and Mackenzie King often relied on his advice about political matters there, especially seeking his counsel when deciding on cabinet ministers and judicial appointments. Beyond his career in the Senate, Dandurand was intimately involved in the League of Nations, acting as a Canadian delegate and serving as President of the Assembly in 1925. As his extensive correspondence reveals, he was a very well-connected figure who was especially preoccupied with francophone language rights in Canada and guarding peace in Europe in the aftermath of the First World War.

Senator Dandurand died on March 11, 1942, while still serving as Government Leader in the Senate. In their tributes to him, senators recalled his commitment to an independent Senate,

with some adding that he influenced their decision to not attend party caucuses. It was not surprising then that when a group of senators later formed an independent block to rebel against party discipline in the Senate in 1980, they adopted the moniker “Dandurand Group.”² Though his name has gradually faded in the Senate, his legacy remains especially relevant today at a critical juncture in the institution’s history. As the Senate debates ways to change its procedures and practices to reflect the increasing number of independent senators, it is worth remembering that today’s suggestions regarding Senate “modernization” echo in many ways Senator Dandurand’s vision of an independent, non-partisan chamber from nearly a century ago.



Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King and Senator Raoul Dandurand

Notes

- 1 *Debates of the Senate*, 14th Parliament, 1st Session, March 14, 1922, p. 16.
- 2 Senator Daniel Lang, “The Senate Should not be a Carbon Copy of the House,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1984, p. 26.