

# ALBERTA CAUCUS OF SENATORS-ELECT

## MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT ELECTING SENATORS

Submission to  
the **Special Committee on Senate Elections** of the Manitoba Legislature  
by Betty Unger and Link Byfield, Alberta senators-elect (2004 – 2010).

February 21, 2009

Madam chair, members of this very worthwhile committee:

My fellow senator-elect Betty Unger and I appreciate the chance to address your committee. The consequence of what you are considering here goes far beyond the borders of this my native province. What you decide to do about electing senators in Manitoba affects all of Canada. You have a chance to move this country ahead.

As you know, Senate reform has for the past generation been a high priority in Alberta among all of us who are eager to enhance the national role of smaller provinces like yours and ours. Some say they would like to abolish the Senate. We say that would simply throw away the one chance our region has for federal equality with the voting majorities of Ontario and Quebec.

Fortunately, there is almost zero chance the Upper House will be constitutionally abolished. Alberta and Saskatchewan, and probably others, would deny any such initiative the unanimity required for abolition.

The far greater danger is that you may do nothing. We hope you do something. Manitoba has it within its power now to support the sturdy principle – still strangely resisted by some – that all your representatives in the Parliament of Canada should be chosen by Manitobans.

Now if you do pursue this course, be forewarned. You will probably hear the small but persistent Greek chorus of criticism -- long on sarcasm and short on fact -- that has accompanied all three Alberta Senate elections.

Senator-elect Unger and I want to supply you with the reassuring facts of Alberta's Senate election experience. You'll find it bears little resemblance to much of what the Alberta news media have said.

Critics in Alberta have always made three main claims against electing senators.

First, they say the elections are scandalously expensive.

Alberta's most recent Senate election, in 2004, cost 81 cents per eligible voter. 81 cents.

The cost of the concurrent provincial general election (that is, excluding the Senate component) was \$3.42 cents per eligible voter. So giving Albertans a second ballot for the Senate runoff added 23% to the cost of the 2004 provincial election.

We should caution that our two previous Senate elections – in 1998 and 1989 -- were both held in conjunction with municipal elections, and were somewhat more costly – mainly because the government paid the municipalities well to manage them. Even so, you can see in the material we sent ahead, the cost per voter remained modest.

Frankly, the cost is trivial. It is certainly democratically defensible. For 81 cents, you can give every Manitoban a real say in electing their representatives in Parliament.

And let's appreciate that senators are -- quite literally -- "members of Parliament." They are legislators like you. Surely you agree that the people have a right and duty to choose the legislators they want.

There are emerging democracies in this troubled world where people risk bullets for the right to vote. Surely it's worth 81 cents.

Second point. You will also hear ill-informed critics say that Albertans do not take Senate elections seriously.

Again, the facts show otherwise.

The turnout in the 2004 provincial general election was 44.7% of eligible voters. The percentage of eligible voters who cast Senate ballots was 44.2%.

Simply put, among those Albertans who still vote at all, almost all vote in a Senate election if given a ballot.

It's true that about a tenth of those who did vote spoiled their Senate ballot or cast a blank. I should explain why.

Sad to say, our two main opposition parties fielded no Senate candidates and urged their supporters to boycott the Senate race.

Shame on them.

As it turned out their boycott made remarkably little difference. At the risk of sounding partisan, I gently suggest their boycott may even help explain why in Alberta they remain *opposition* parties.

Bert Brown – the leading candidate among the 10 of us who ran – received over 312,000 votes. I want you to stop and appreciate that astonishing number.

Singlehandedly he drew more votes than the entire Liberal Party of Alberta in the general election, and more than the entire New Democratic Party. My colleague here today Betty Unger can say the same. I myself, coming fourth among the ten candidates, drew more votes as an independent than the entire New Democratic Party and almost as many as the all the Liberal candidates in Alberta combined.

So if you hear Albertans of a particular leaning say that voters think Senate elections like a joke, ask them what that says about their own caucus.

Ask too what it says about those three senators Paul Martin later appointed to represent us in Parliament. They got zero Senate votes. They have no moral authority to represent our province in Parliament, and to their credit they don't even pretend to try. They represent their federal party – even though Section 22 of the Constitution Act specifically requires them to represent their province. In other words *us*. Senator Bert Brown speaks for us. They can't.

Which brings us to the last point. I mentioned a boycott by opposition parties on the left, who branded the election a right-wing gimmick. This was a misapprehension on their part. There is nothing inherently “left-wing” or “right wing” about electing senators. Democracy is democracy, pure and simple.

We hope that all parties in Manitoba have the good sense to see that Senate elections are popular among Canadians in poll after poll, decade after decade, not because they are right-wing or left-wing. They are wingless. They are borne aloft on the warm wind of democracy itself – on the sound and sacred precept of government by consent of the governed.

So ignore the naysayers. Please urge your elected assembly to give Manitobans the right to choose their own representatives in Parliament.

Thank you for hearing us.

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# Alberta's Senate Election Experience

## The factual background

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We provide the following factual information as background to our testimony to the Special Committee. The text of our address will be provided at the hearing.

The reality of Alberta's experiment in Senate democracy has often been obscured by partisan rhetoric and media error.

Except where noted, this information comes from Elections Alberta.

## Results of the 2004 Senate election

Under Alberta's *Senatorial Selection Act*, candidates who are personally qualified to sit as senators may be elected to stand for six years as "senators-elect," also called "senators-in-waiting." To date, there have been three such elections, producing seven elected

Senate nominees. Two have been summoned to the Senate. If they are summoned, they are honour-bound to step down within six years of their appointment, but may run for office again.

In the provincial election of 22 November, 2004, Alberta voters were offered a separate Senate ballot, along with the regular MLA election ballot, allowing them to choose any four of the 10 registered Senate candidates. Three of Alberta's six Senate seats were vacant at the time.

The results in rank order of votes were:

Elected:

Bert Brown (PC) -- **312,041** (Appointed July, 2007)

Betty Unger (PC) – **311,964**

Cliff Breitzkreuz (PC) – **241,306**

Link Byfield (Ind) – **238,751**

Others:

Jim Silye (PC) – **217,857**

David Usherwood (PC) – **193,056**

Michael Roth, (Alberta Alliance) – **176,339**

Vance Gough (AA) – **167,770**

Tom Sindlinger (Ind) – **161,082**

Gary Horan (AA) – **156,175**

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For purposes of comparison, the province-wide number of votes (total of all candidates) in the concurrent 2004 general election were:

Progressive Conservative – **417,000**

Liberal – **262,000**

New Democratic Party – **91,000**

Alberta Alliance – **77,000**

## Cost of Alberta's three Senate elections

The below amounts were the additional costs of a Senate selection; they exclude the cost of the concurrent provincial or municipal election.

2004 (with provincial general election) -- **\$1.6 million**

1998 (with municipal elections) -- **\$3.5 million**

1989 (with municipal elections) -- **\$2.8 million**

NOTE: The provincial government in 1989 and 1998 paid these sums to municipalities for supervising the provincial Senate election. In 2004 Elections Alberta supervised the Senate election directly. Of the total 2004 cost, 76% went to extra training and tabulation time of returning officers.

Note also, that the 2004 general election, exclusive of the Senate race, cost Albertans **\$6.8 million**.

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## Public Participation

Alberta's experience is that in a general provincial election, almost all residents who vote for MLA will choose senators as well. When held on a municipal election day, more people will vote for senators than for local councilors.

### **Latest election, 2004**

In 2004, voters could choose up to four names from 10 candidates. There were then three vacant Alberta seats. The four with the most votes were declared the winners, and their names and vote results forwarded to the Office of the Governor in Council in Ottawa.

Eligible voters – **2 million** (actual 2,001, 287)

Ballots cast for MLAs – **891,000**

Total ballots cast for Senators – **885,000**

Valid Senate ballots (i.e. individual voters) **715,000**

Valid Senate votes (average 3 votes per ballot) **2.2 million**

### **Second Election, 1998**

In 1998, the Senate election was held in conjunction with municipal elections to fill two Senate seats then vacant. The numbers of eligible and active voters is not available on the Elections Alberta Website. The number of valid votes cast (maximum of two per voter) was **892,000**.

### **First election, 1989**

In 1989 there was only one vacant Senate seat, and only one vote per ballot. The runoff coincided with municipal elections.

Eligible voters **1.55 million**

Actual Senate voters **622,000**

Percent average turnout for 1989 municipal election **30%\***

Percent turnout for concurrent Senate election **40%\***

\*Source: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Infoparl/english/issue.htm?param=138&art=906>

“At the outset, the [1989] election did not attract the voters' interest. The first all-candidates forum attracted only 20 members of the public. But subsequent forums drew larger numbers, and voter interest in the election campaign increased steadily. On election day 621,616 of a possible 1.6 million ballots were cast. This represented a respectable 40% turnout, which was 10% higher than the average turnout for municipal elections.”

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