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THE HILL TIMES

THIRTY-FIFTH YEAR, NO. 2122

CANADA'S POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT NEWSPAPER

WEDNESDAY, MAY 8, 2024 \$5.00

NEWS

House of Commons chaos a symptom of a past-expiry Parliament, not just Speaker's judgment, say politicians

BY STUART BENSON

The Speaker of the House of Commons is once again facing calls to resign from two parties in the Chamber following a raucous Question Period last week that saw two Conservatives—including the leader of the official opposition—ejected. But political observers say that addressing the real issue at the heart of the increasing erosion of decorum may not require a new Speaker, but an entirely new Parliament.

On April 30, during an unusually contentious Question Period,

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Speaker Greg Fergus enters the House of Commons on Dec. 13, 2023. Fergus is once again facing calls for his resignation over his handling of the April 30 Question Period, which saw the expulsion of Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre and MP Rachael Thomas. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

NEWS

CBSA's access-to-information woes continue with 12,000 requests inaccessible, requestors encouraged to resubmit

BY NEIL MOSS

The federal border agency's compliance with access-to-information law is under the microscope with the department telling thousands of people to resubmit months-old requests, while Parliament's information watchdog is taking aim at the organization's use of the access system for applicants to obtain their immigration files.

In February, the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) revealed that it could not access information it had collected in processing its backlog of 16,000 requests through the Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP) acts after maintenance performed by Shared Services Canada.

It has since been able to recover around 4,000 ATIPs, CBSA said in a May 3 release, leaving 12,000 inaccessible.

CBSA is now telling the requestors behind the sequestered ATIPs to resubmit requests that

were made between September 2021 and November 2023, noting that processing the resubmitted requests would be a "priority," and that the \$5 application fee will be waived.

CBSA spokesperson Rebecca Purdy told *The Hill Times* that legislated timelines would not restart with a resubmitted request, noting that responding to ATIPs will vary based on the request. The Access to Information Act mandates that access is given within 30 days of a request being received, but departments and agencies can extend the time limits for an undefined "reasonable period of time." The Privacy Act also mandates a response in 30 days, with an option of an additional 30-day extension if processing the request in the original timeline would "unreasonably interfere with the operations" of the organization.

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NEWS

The 'jury is still out' on the value of foreign interference inquiry following preliminary report, says national security and intelligence expert Wesley Wark

BY STUART BENSON

With the release of the Foreign Interference Com-

mission's preliminary report last week, national security and intelligence expert Wesley Wark says "the jury is still out"

on whether it was a valuable exercise, or simply a retreat of

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NEWS

Once a strategy, later a framework, Canada now unwilling to define Africa engagement rethink

BY NEIL MOSS

As the wait for Canada's re-imagined approach to African

engagement continues to grow, parliamentarians are becoming increasingly perplexed about how

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Christina Leadlay

Heard On The Hill

CP Style god James McCarten leaves the national wire service after 30 years



After 30 years with the Canadian Press, James McCarten announced May 3 was his last day. He is relocating in Toronto to work for Manulife. Photograph courtesy of LinkedIn

The Canadian Press' interim Ottawa bureau chief and Washington, D.C., correspondent **James McCarten** left the news service late last week.

"It's time (long past time, probably) for me to go and make room for those who are better equipped to confront what the future of journalism holds," McCarten wrote on LinkedIn on May 2, recalling when he first stepped into CP's office in 1994, he was drawn into the "intoxicating world of wonder" of "a downtown Toronto newsroom frantic with action, no matter the hour."

"Of course, that old Toronto newsroom isn't there anymore, both literally and figuratively. The news business has changed, as it always does: It's harder and faster and more demanding than ever."

McCarten confirmed to **Heard on the Hill** that May 3 was his last day at CP. He's been the agency's Washington bureau chief since 2018.

McCarten has also been editor of CP's *Caps and Spelling*, and the *CP Style Guide*, both go-to resources on the desks of most journalists in Canada whenever there's a question about capitalization, whether or not to hyphenate, or to confirm the correct spelling of a word.

"Due to the circumstances of the last few months, I have been helping out in Ottawa on an acting basis and travelling back and forth between D.C. and Ottawa as needed," he said by email, referring to his additional interim role as CP's Ottawa bureau chief following the departure of **Joanna Smith** back in February.

At the time, McCarten told *The Hill Times* that his assignment in

the U.S. capital "doesn't end until a little bit later this year."

McCarten confirmed to HOH that he's leaving the news industry.

"I start on Monday [May 6] with Manulife as global vice-president of information and analysis in their global government relations department. I'm working with **Mary-scott (Scotty) Greenwood**, formerly of the Canadian American Business Council in D.C." McCarten confirmed, noting his family will now be based in Toronto.

McCarten said he didn't know who would be taking over for him in his various roles at CP, saying that would be up to the news service's senior leadership at head office in Toronto.

EU members host Eurovision watch party in Ottawa May 11

The European Union-member embassies in Ottawa—and the EU Delegation office, of course—have a bunch of events planned this week to mark Europe Day on May 9.

After sunset on May 8, the Ottawa sign in the ByWard Market is among a number of landmarks across Canada—including the CN Tower in Toronto, and Niagara Falls—that will be lit up blue and yellow to mark the eve of Europe Day.

On the big day, May 9, the EU flag will be raised at Ottawa's City Hall, and also at Queen's Park in Toronto. Diplomatic receptions will take place to celebrate Belgium taking over the group's rotat-

ing presidency in Ottawa and in Montreal.

But the showstopper event is on May 11 in Ottawa when the Alliance française, the Embassy of Sweden, and the Ottawa cluster of European Union National Institutes for Culture co-host "the best Eurovision watch party in Ottawa," according to the invitation. The grand finale of the (in)famous Eurovision song contest—hosted by Sweden in 2024, thanks to Swedish singer **Loreen**'s win last year—will be streamed live from 3-6 p.m. The party includes online trivia quizzes, live voting at each table, karaoke contests, and door prizes from EU-member embassies and the EU Delegation. The party will take place at the Maison de la Francophonie d'Ottawa, 2720 Richmond Rd. Limited tickets are available at af.ca.

Europe Day celebrates the Schuman Declaration, named after **Robert Schuman**, the post-Second World War French foreign minister who, in 1950, proposed a visionary idea of European unity and solidarity that marked the beginning of the 27-member union we know today.

Senator Oudar and MP Turnbull update their titles

One Senator and one Liberal MP will be getting some new business cards.



Senator Manuelle Oudar joined the Independent Senators Group on May 2. Photograph courtesy of the Senate of Canada's X account

Quebec Senator **Manuelle Oudar**, who was appointed to the Red Chamber on Feb. 13, joined the Independent Senators Group on May 2.

"Oudar's impressive experience in public governance and accomplishments in the public sector, demonstrated leadership abilities, and knowledge of corporate administration qualify her as an invaluable addition to the Independent Senators Group," said ISG facilitator **Raymonde Saint-Germain**, whose group now totals 42 members.

Meanwhile, over in the House of Commons, Liberal MP **Ryan Turnbull** got his parliamentary secretary assignment quietly adjusted on April 29. The order-in-council that day calls for the Whitby, Ont., MP to henceforth be styled "parliamentary secretary to the deputy prime minister and minister of finance and parliamentary secretary to the minister of innovation, science, and industry." First elected in 2019, Turnbull was initially appointed as PS to Innovation, Science, and Industry Minister **François-Philippe Champagne** this past September.

Stephen Harper to speak in Toronto May 13



Former prime minister Stephen Harper will speak in Toronto on May 13. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Tickets are sold out for former Conservative prime minister **Stephen Harper**'s May 13 address to the C.D. Howe Institute in Toronto.

Harper is scheduled to deliver the 2024 Hugh and Laura MacKinnon Roundtable Luncheon address. This is only the second MacKinnon Luncheon event to take place. The inaugural one was held just a few months ago in November 2023 featuring Conservative Leader **Pierre Poilievre** as the keynote.

Bloc Leader Blanchet to address Montreal Chamber of Commerce on May 14

Bloc Québécois Leader **Yves-François Blanchet** will headline a lunch event at the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal on May 14.

The title of his talk—which he will give in French, naturally—is "A Quebec model of prosperity." Following his remarks, Blanchet will sit down with the Chamber's president and CEO **Michel Leblanc** to discuss issues affecting businesses in Montréal and Quebec.

This will be Blanchet's first talk at the Chamber, according to the event listing on its website.



Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet will address the Montreal Chamber of Commerce on May 14. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

The presentation will take place at Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth, 900 René-Lévesque Blvd. W., in Montreal.

The 20th Century Boys back on stage May 9

The 20th Century Boys, a band featuring a rotating cast of current and former Ottawa media and political types including CPAC personality **Glen McInnis**, will perform a fundraising concert on May 9 at the Rainbow Bistro.

According to *Hill Times*' social butterfly **Stuart Benson**—a.k.a. **Party Central**—the Boys' show he attended back in December was standing-room only as loyal fans came out to hear former CPAC anchor **Peter Van Dusen** and the band crank out hits from The Rolling Stones, **Amy Winehouse**, The Temptations, and **Neil Diamond**, just to name a few.

Thursday's show is a fundraiser for PAL Ottawa which supports senior artists and arts workers. There will also be raffle prizes including a pair of Bronze Passes to this summer's Ottawa Jazz Festival.

The show starts at 8 p.m. on May 9 at the Rainbow Bistro, 76 Murray St: therainbow.ca.

NAWL receives Women, Peace, and Security award

The National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) received the government's 2023 Women, Peace, and Security Civil Society Leadership Award in a virtual ceremony on May 2, which Foreign Affairs Minister **Mélanie Joly** tuned in for.

In her remarks as she presented the award, parliamentary secretary for women and gender equality and youth **Lisa Hepfner** highlighted the work of a strong feminist sector to helping end gender-based violence, and advancing equality for women.

NAWL's executive director **Tiffany Butler** thanked the group's partners, including PolySeSouvenir and the #Women4GunControl coalition, "who worked tirelessly alongside NAWL to make a safer Canada free from gun violence," she said in a press release.

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Minister Holland

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News

House of Commons chaos a symptom of a past-expiry Parliament, not just Speaker's judgment, say politicians

Whether or not Speaker Fergus' difficulties in presiding over the House of Commons are entirely his fault, 'Parliament has to function, and if it can't, that's what an election is for,' says Conservative pundit Jordan Paquet.

Continued from page 1

Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) was named by Speaker Greg Fergus (Hull-Aylmer, Que.) after refusing to only withdraw his comments calling Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) a "wacko," rather instead attempting to withdraw and replace that word with "radical" and "extremist."

The Speaker gave Poilievre four opportunities to "simply withdraw" his comments before naming him and ordering his departure from the Chamber for the rest of the day.

Bloc Québécois House leader Alain Thérien says the House Speaker should resign because of his inability to manage the Chamber. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*



The tension had quickly ratcheted up during that day's Question Period, with Trudeau taking early shots at Poilievre over his impromptu pit stop to meet with anti-carbon tax protesters on the New Brunswick-Nova Scotia border, and accusing Poilievre of "shameful, spineless leadership," and shaking hands with "white nationalists" to court their support.

Following Poilievre's removal, the entire Conservative caucus left their seats and followed Poilievre out of the Chamber. Many tweeted their dissatisfaction immediately from the lobby, focusing their attacks on drug decriminalization in British Columbia.

While the Conservatives have previously mounted fundraising campaigns following the expulsion of caucus members from the House, including MP Raquel Dancho (Kildonan-St. Paul, Man.) in December 2022, this time the Liberals also got in on the action.

That evening, Parker Lund, the Liberal Party's director of communication, posted to X that the party's fundraising email following Poilievre's ejection had become that month's single best fundraising effort "in just over an hour."

In an emailed response to *The Hill Times* on May 3, Lund said that while the party doesn't disclose internal fundraising figures, the fundraising email was "the best of 2024 so far."

On May 1, both the Conservatives and Bloc Québécois called for Speaker Fergus to resign. The Conservatives argued that Fergus

had behaved in a partisan and biased way by ordering Poilievre to be removed, but allowing unparliamentary language from Trudeau.

While Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet (Beloeil-Chambly, Que.) had commended Fergus for using "common sense" following Poilievre's removal, the next day, Bloc House Leader Alain Thérien (La Prairie, Que.) said Fergus should resign because of his inability to manage the House.

In an interview with *The Hill Times*, Conservative pundit Jordan Paquet, a senior consultant with BlueSky Strategy Group, said it was less a question of whether Fergus could still manage the House, and more an issue of a Parliament well past its best-before date.

Paquet, a former principal secretary to then-Conservative interim leader Rona Ambrose, said that in previous instances of a Parliament as dysfunctional as this one, the remedy would be to call an election and create a new one.

However, as a matter of "political survival," neither the Liberal government nor the New

Democrats supporting them with the supply-and-confidence agreement could afford to call an election now.

Unfortunately, whether an election is called tomorrow or in October 2025, all parties are already on a pre-election footing, Paquet said, adding he expects the Chamber to be increasingly "raucous" until the House is finally dissolved.

While Paquet said the Speaker is not entirely to blame for the difficulty of presiding over this House of Commons, he said Fergus had not done himself any favours with his handling of the April 30 Question Period, particularly given the previous issues that have arisen since he took up the chair.

"I think people were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, but [Fergus] is somebody who was serving as parliamentary secretary, so it was tough for people to see him as non-partisan, even if he entered with good intentions," Paquet explained.

However, Paquet said that the benefit of the doubt was quickly strained, initially when Fergus delayed a Question Period early in his tenure as Speaker attempting to deliver a speech on decorum, and then again last December following the controversy regarding a video he filmed that was used during an Ontario Liberal convention.

In the video filmed in his office, Fergus appeared in his Speaker's robes, thanking outgoing Ontario Liberal interim leader John Fraser for his friendship, and reminiscing about their time working together for the party to elect former Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty.

On Dec. 4, 2023, Fergus apologized to the House of Commons, telling MPs that he had been told the message would be "non-political" and intended for an "intimate gathering," and was not aware it would be shown at the convention.

However, that apology was not enough for either the Bloc Québécois or the Conservative Party, which both called for Fergus to resign as Speaker. Following a brief study, the Procedure and House Affairs Committee recommended Fergus issue another apology and pay a fine.

On Feb. 29, MPs on the Board of Internal Economy unanimously agreed to fine Fergus \$1,500 for using House of Commons resources to make the video.

Paquet said that while it was the Speaker's job to respond to issues of decorum and disrespect during proceedings, in the context of a chair who did not enjoy the confidence of nearly half the House of Commons, it would be incredibly difficult for his decisions to be seen as legitimate.

Paquet also said there was a perception of inequity in the way Fergus dealt with Poilievre's comments and those of Trudeau.

If Fergus had allowed Poilievre to reframe his comments as he had offered Trudeau the chance to do with his "spineless leadership" comment, Paquet said he believes "we wouldn't still be talking about it today."

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BlueSky Strategy Group's Jordan Paquet says Speaker Fergus 'didn't do himself any favours' by not allowing Poilievre to reframe his comments as he had offered to Trudeau. *The Hill Times photograph by Stuart Benson*

Continued from page 4

“I think he may have already been irked because someone else had just challenged him,” Paquet said. Prior to Poilievre’s removal on April 30, Conservative MP Rachael Thomas (Lethbridge, Alta.) was also named and asked to leave the House after calling Fergus’ handling of the day’s proceedings “disgraceful” following Trudeau’s “spineless” comment.

On May 1, Thomas challenged Fergus’ decision, arguing that her privileges as an MP had been violated since she had been removed despite withdrawing her comments. Thomas pointed to the unofficial transcript from the previous day, which indicated that she had withdrawn her comment before being removed. However, the official Hansard transcript did not include her withdrawal.

In response, Fergus asked Thomas to “share all information that she would like to have the speakership evaluate,” and that it would do so with “extreme importance.”

While his handling of Thomas’ removal and the subsequent removal of Poilievre can simply be attributed to human error, “it didn’t do Fergus any favours” in improving his legitimacy as an “independent referee” in the eyes of the Conservative caucus.

“He has to be extra careful going forward,” Paquet said, adding that even an unimpeachable performance from Fergus from now on may not be enough to remedy the underlying malady afflicting the functioning of Parliament.

“At the end of the day, Parliament has to function, and if it can’t, that’s what an election is for,” Paquet said. “I don’t think there will be one anytime soon, but it seems like that may be the only thing that could fix most of this.”

Olivier Cullen, a senior adviser with Summa Strategies and former chief of staff to Indigenous Services Minister Patty Hajdu (Thunder Bay–Superior North, Ont.), said that while he had the “utmost respect” for Fergus, it was undeniable that the Speaker had lost control.

“When the heckling is aimed at the Speaker rather than through him, he’s lost control,” Cullen said.

However, Cullen challenged the idea that Fergus had been given a completely good-faith reception. He said that despite Fergus’ legitimate errors in judgement early on, he doesn’t believe those mistakes



Summa Strategies’ Olivier Cullen says that while he agrees Speaker Fergus has lost control of the house, the list of willing volunteers who could replace him is very short. Photograph courtesy of X

potential, willing replacements would be sparse.

“If I’m sitting as a Liberal backbencher, I wouldn’t be interested in that because you know exactly what will happen,” Cullen explained. “They’ll put you under a microscope, and watch your every single move and word you say. And as soon as there’s one slip, well, that’s the third Speaker down.”

While Cullen said he doesn’t believe there is a way to go back to the days before quick social media soundbites and controversy-fuelled fundraising efforts, he agreed with Paquet that there is a way forward after an election. However, much of that depends on who is elected to that new Parliament, and what kind of politicians they want to be.

“The only way forward is if there’s some concerted effort by people who want to change this behaviour to put their hand up to run because we’re not going backwards,” Cullen said.

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were grave enough to warrant the Conservatives’ “collective distrust.”

“He has lost confidence in the House, but the loss of confidence is based on

partisan jabs; it’s not based on reality,” Cullen explained, noting that if Fergus were to become the second Speaker to resign in less than a year, the list of

Making the biggest impacts
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Conservative MP Rachael Thomas arrives in the House of Commons foyer before Question Period on May 1, 2024. The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

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Comment

Poilievre's clarion call to corporate Canada

While business has generally been complacent in political marketing, others have filled the void and taken greater control of the agenda.

Tim Powers

Plain Speak



Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre is delivering a valuable message to the Canadian business community: if you want to move the policy needle, get more into the public selling and politicking of key agenda items, writes Tim Powers. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

More fascinating than the exchange of venom between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition was seeing the Conservative Party leader write an old-school op-ed in a "lamestream media"—his description—paper. In a direct and surly manner, he screamed to corporate Canada that they should fire their lobbyists, and make the case for their policies with the public.

A couple of disclaimers at this point: yes, I am an owner of a government relations/lobbying firm. So some may say I have some blatant self-interest here. Second, while we haven't put up the "for sale" sign yet—and aren't going to—I'd say to move past the headline and dig into the substance of the opinion piece, as there is some instructive guidance in there.

Beyond Pierre Poilievre's usual snarling and aggressive posturing, he is delivering a valuable message to the Canadian business community. If you want to move the policy needle, you need to do what labour unions, environment groups, and some civil society groups have been doing for years: get more into the public selling and politicking of key agenda items. Where you can get the public on board, do it. Don't assume it will happen as some kind of incidental contact.

For many of us, this is not a new message or foreign advice. The political marketing of a corporation's pursuit seems to be a strange concept for many in our business community. Yet many of those same companies spend millions upon millions of dollars selling their products to people assuming that direct product marketing is the same as political marketing, which it most often is not.

Justin Trudeau came to power in 2015 in part by benefiting from the able political marketing of environmental and labour groups. These various bodies helped create a climate where a politician talking about investing in climate change and playing on the aspirations of people in the middle class and those helping to join it could succeed. And succeed Trudeau did.

Even in this day and age, the Canadian business community still tends to be more conservative in public disposition—better to not make noise, and use civil con-

versations established through relationships to make their case to policymakers. While that still is important (read: self-interest here), now more than ever, we live in a show-me-the-money/polling-data world. Politicians—particularly federal Conservative ones—want to see if you have thought beyond your nose and have done the political modelling of a policy you are pursuing. Socio-economic modelling is nice, but the showing of money comes with the political viability of the proposal being proffered.

It can be argued that the Canadian business community hasn't really leaned into a public persuasion campaign since the 1988 free-trade election. Back then, they had to work hard to make the case in concert with the then-Progressive Conservative Mulroney government that free trade was a winner for all Canadians, not just those working in the private sector. That was 36 years ago.

In the intervening period, while business has generally been complacent in political marketing, others have filled the void and taken greater control of the agenda. What is that old saying? You snooze, you lose.

Poilievre has just set the alarm clock. Time to wake up to the reality of the political communications environment in which we live.

Tim Powers is chairman of Summa Strategies and managing director of Abacus Data. He is a former adviser to Conservative political leaders.

The Hill Times

The right to protest doesn't come without consequences

In previous acts of civil disobedience, it was acknowledged breaking the law meant consequences, with going to jail held as a badge of honour for many.

Andrew Caddell

With All Due Respect



KAMOURASKA, QUE.—The concept of civil disobedience is as old as time itself. The early Greek philosophers grappled with it. In the nascent stages of democracy, the question was: should the authority of the majority always be respected?

In the 19th century, Henry David Thoreau coined the phrase

in his essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* in refusing to pay his taxes for wars and slavery. Mahatma Gandhi undertook unlawful activities against the British in India many times. Martin Luther King Jr. led civil rights protesters in marches that broke the law. And Saul Alinsky counselled leftists on how to develop strategies that defied the authorities.

But in each of these actions, it was acknowledged breaking the law meant consequences. Indeed for many, going to jail was a badge of honour. As protests and occupations have taken over Canadian streets and university campuses of late, this is pertinent to issues of free speech and the right to protest.

University of Waterloo professor Emmett Macfarlane is seen to be the constitutional expert heir to Eugene Forsey and Peter Hogg. In an April 30 blog, he sent out his thoughts on the "encampments" at American and Canadian universities: "They are technically trespassing. But so long as protesters are not otherwise committing crimes or interfering with the university's ability to get

on with its business, the quick reaction to call for police enforcement is repressive and contrary to the basic rights of free expression and peaceful assembly."

Subsequently, I read journalist Justin Ling, whose reports on the convoy occupation in Ottawa were the "go-to" source of information. In a piece titled "Leave those kids alone," he described what he saw at Columbia University. "There has been, however, lots of speech that makes people uncomfortable. ... You agree or disagree with any or all of that—some of it, you almost certainly should—but it ought to be protected speech. It may provoke emotional debates and arguments, but it is not violent."

Ling drew parallels with the protests in 1968 against the Vietnam War on the same Columbia campus, which involved a lengthy occupation and police intervention, but resulted in social change: "We look back at those protests, now, with some degree of nostalgia."

I responded to both Macfarlane and Ling directly. To Macfarlane's point, I noted the language and the comportment of

the protesters had been aggressive: there were clear examples of vandalism, intimidation, and "technical" trespass—many of the demonstrators camped out at McGill University are not McGill students by their own admission, but rather hailing from Concordia University—and therefore, police intervention should be considered.

I pointed out to Ling that the protests in the 1960s were often financed by the Soviet Union as a means of disrupting American society. By the same token, the funds and organization behind the encampments and anti-Israel disinformation on social media, come from Russia and Iran. Samidoun, a Canadian not-for-profit organization leading many demonstrations, is said to be a front for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a terrorist group. Samidoun has actively praised the Hamas terrorist attacks on Oct. 7, 2023.

So, none of this should be taken lightly. That said, free speech is not always benign. In 1977, in the predominantly Jewish town of Skokie, Ill., the American Civil Liberties Union supported the

right of Nazis to parade. It caused enormous angst, but was within the bounds of the American First Amendment.

In Canada, our Constitution sets out guarantees for rights subject to "reasonable limits prescribed by law...in a free and democratic society." So, we uphold the rights of even those we consider despicable, with limitations. And while it concerns me that antisemitic harangues could spark violence, at this juncture, both public and protesters are acting peacefully.

Last week, Quebec Premier François Legault called for the police to step in at McGill. Conversely, Quebec judge Chantal Masse rejected an injunction by two McGill students who felt "threatened" by the protesters. She wrote "freedom of expression and to gather peacefully would be affected significantly" if the injunction were granted.

If there is violence or clear hate speech on university campuses, the authorities would be justified in stepping in. And like Gandhi, King, and Alinsky, these protesters should accept the consequences of their actions. For the time being, calmer heads should prevail.

Andrew Caddell is retired from Global Affairs Canada, where he was a senior policy adviser. He previously worked as an adviser to Liberal governments. He is a town councillor in Kamouraska, Que. He can be reached at pipson52@hotmail.com.

The Hill Times



A CALL TO CANADIAN POLICYMAKERS: ENSURE EQUITABLE PUBLIC ACCESS FOR MEDICATIONS FOR MENTAL ILLNESSES

In Canada, a country celebrated for its fair and universal healthcare system, a significant disparity exists around the accessibility of medicines to treat mental illness. This inequity not only underscores a critical gap in our healthcare model but also highlights the urgent need for a tailored mental health approach to the review and reimbursement of medications for mental illnesses. It is imperative that Canadian policymakers prioritize the needs of individuals living with mental illness, a demographic historically marginalized and stigmatized who have not had the opportunities to advocate for themselves effectively.

Pathways to Equity: Two key actions to improve outcomes for Canadians living with mental illness:

- Creation of a reimbursement Mental Health Committee with representation of clinical psychiatrists and the patient community.
- Invest in a holistic approach to mental health that includes counseling, therapy, and support services to ensure that medication is part of a broader, more effective treatment plan.

One in five Canadians experience a mental illness each year.¹ By the age of 40 years, 50% of Canadians will have or have had a mental health concern.² Despite the prevalence and the severe impact mental illness can have on individuals' lives, access to necessary medications remains a substantial challenge for

many. This obstacle is largely due to the variations in drug coverage across provincial health authorities and between those with and without private coverage, creating a patchwork of access that leaves many Canadians without the essential treatments they need. The inconsistency in drug access exacerbates the challenges faced by those living with mental illness, contributing to prolonged suffering and, in many cases, preventing recovery.

"As a co-author of Canadian treatment guidelines for mood and anxiety disorders and a consultant specializing in the treatment of patients who have not responded to prior treatments, I'm deeply troubled by Canada's inadequate, inequitable access to medications for mental illness," says Dr. Pierre Blier, MD, PhD; Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Cellular/Molecular Medicines, University of Ottawa. "In a country that prides itself on its public healthcare, it is unacceptable that access to vital medications for mental illnesses is deficient and remains inconsistent."

In 2023, Mood Disorders Society of Canada (MDSC) examined Canada's public reimbursement review process for psychiatric medications approved by Health Canada between 2012 and 2022. The resulting report "System Broken: How Public Drug Coverage is Failing Canadians with Mental Illness" (www.accessmedication.mdsc.ca) revealed substantial delays, a significantly higher rate of negative reimbursement recommendations for medications for mental illness compared to medications for other non-oncology medical disorders, and an inequality of publicly funded medications across Canada's most populated provinces.

"When mental illness strikes, all Canadians deserve to have swift and equal access to the medications they may need to recover their wellness," says Ken Porter, National Sustainability Director, MDSC. "We need to work with our government decision makers, health ministers, and all stakeholders to reduce the long administrative delays and other roadblocks to medication access for people living with all types of mental illnesses today." MDSC hosted a roundtable, Pathways to Equity, on May 7, 2024 to collaboratively look at solutions with a cross-section of health system stakeholders including people with lived/living experience, caregivers, patient organizations, government, HTA bodies,

Dr. Pierre Blier, MD, PhD; Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Cellular/Molecular Medicines, University of Ottawa

academics, policy experts, industry, and psychiatrists.

"For those that need them, medications to treat mental illness are imperative," says Dr. Pierre Blier. "They enable Canadians living with mental illnesses to lead productive, fulfilling lives. Importantly, access to newer medications provides critical benefits, such as enhanced effectiveness,

improved tolerability, easier administration, and/or less side effects."

Mental illness has long been stigmatized, and those suffering from it have been relegated to the shadows of healthcare policy discussions. When the needs of people living with mental illness are overlooked or minimized, it perpetuates a cycle of suffering as well as economic loss. Untreated mental illnesses lead to increased societal and healthcare costs, including workplace losses due to absenteeism, presenteeism, short and long-term disability, as well as decreased productivity. In fact, mental illnesses are the leading cause of workplace disability – and the fastest growing claim type.³ Coupled with these costs is the significant toll mental illness levies on the individual and their caregivers, family,

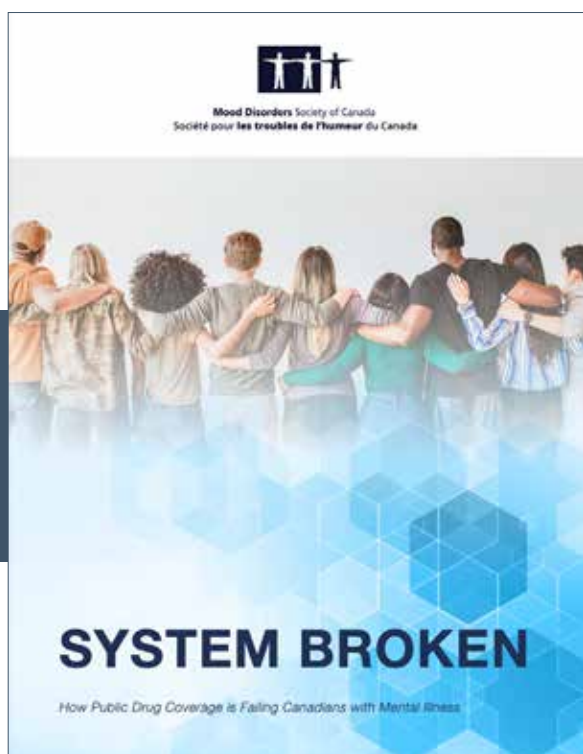
Report highlights:

- **More than 50% negative:** more than half of the reimbursement recommendations for new medications for mental illness made by Canada's assessment bodies were negative (Quebec via INESSS: 62%, Rest of Canada via CDA: 54%⁴). This compared to only 17% negative recommendations for new medications for other non-oncology disorders during the same 10-year period in Canada (via CDA - NOTE: data not available for INESSS/Quebec).
- **Time delays:** average time from Health Canada approval to public reimbursement was 949 days or just over 2.5 years.
- **Provincial disparity:** the vast majority of new medications assessed for this report are not equitably accessible through public drug plans across the country (British Columbia: 54% of medications not publicly reimbursed, Alberta: 54%, Ontario: 46%, Quebec: 62%), or are not accessible at all.

friends, and co-workers.

It is time to change the paradigm by acknowledging mental health as integral to every single Canadian's overall health, which will also help to reduce hospitalizations, emergency room visits, and the need for more intensive, costly interventions down the line. It is time to rewrite the narrative, affirming mental illness' rightful place in the forefront of healthcare, fostering resilience, and building a brighter, more inclusive tomorrow.

Mood Disorders Society of Canada is committed to ensuring that the viewpoints of People with Lived/Living Experience and caregivers, patient advocacy groups, physicians, government, esteemed academics and policy experts, and industry representatives are all represented in decisions. By bringing together a broad spectrum of perspectives, we seek to develop solutions-based recommendations that align with government priorities and address the identified access challenges effectively. www.mdsc.ca



¹<https://www.cihi.ca/en/taking-the-pulse-a-snapshot-of-canadian-health-care-2023/canadians-short-on-access-to-care-for>
²<https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/what-we-do/anti-stigma/#:-:text=1%20in%205%20people%20experience,disease%20or%20type%20%20diabetes>
³<https://www.sunlife.ca/workplace/en/group-benefits/workplace-health-resources/health-insights/bright-paper-reports/changing-times/#:-:text=Mental%20disorders%20are%20the%20leading,Sun%20Life%20block%20oP%20business>
⁴"System Broken: How Public Drug Coverage is Failing Canadians with Mental Illness" report: MDSC engaged EVERSANA to prepare the analysis, which includes only original brand-name medications approved by Health Canada that underwent an initial or subsequent Health Technology Assessment between 2012 and 2022 in Canada by the CDA (Canadian Drug Agency, formerly the Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health (CADTH)) and/or Institut national d'excellence en santé et en services sociaux (INESSS). The analysis evaluated reimbursement status and timelines for patient access to medications for mental illness that met the above parameters in four Canadian jurisdictions: British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec, as these four provinces account for more than 85 percent of the country's population. To access the full report, please visit accessmedication.mdsc.ca.