


INTRODUCING THE MINISTER — OF — SENIORS

Filomena Tassi is Canada's first federal seniors advocate, but the push for a national seniors strategy continues

TONY ATHERTON AND EMILY KENNEDY





Seniors care has been on Filomena Tassi's mind for some time now.

"My mother now is 89 years old, I've been dealing with [issues of seniors care] personally for the last two years," she explains.

The newly appointed Minister of Seniors is only a couple of weeks into the job at the time of publication, but she's personally a couple of years into some of the same issues she'll tackle professionally.

One of those is home care. "It's important that if seniors want to stay in their homes that we try and make that possible for them, because if that's where they're comfortable we want to make those investments to ensure that they can be in the place they wish to be," she says.

The MP for Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas comes from a proud Italian heritage of compassion and caring for aging family members.

"My grandmother used to have a room in the back of her home where there was a table that was set up so that anyone that came by that was hungry, the pasta was always on the stove... and she even had some tokens for them to take the transportation they needed. But the door was always open and that's the background I was raised in and the values that I am so very proud of."

Tassi remembers when her parents took in her grandparents when they became ill. "[They] converted the main floor of their home into essentially a hospital and looked after both of my grandparents during their whole illnesses," she says. "I'm Italian proud, because that importance of taking care of family and ensuring that our loved ones are getting the best possible aging experience is a top priority in my culture and I know in many other cultures."

Tassi has a long career of serving others. First as a lawyer, and then as a chaplain for a high school. "Service to people is the reason that I'm in this position right now. I went into chaplaincy with the same goal, and that was really to serve. And in my role as a chaplain I was honoured to be able to walk with people as they journeyed through some very difficult situations. So the service part is the reason that I'm here," she says.

Now that she's here, the need for a national seniors strategy seems even more pronounced. "At this point we're looking at the possibility of this national seniors strategy and we're at the information-gathering stage." Tassi stresses she wants to "get it right."

The appointment of a Minister of Seniors is a welcome step for many Canadians, but with only a year until the next federal election, it's unclear how quickly a unifying federal seniors policy will be developed.

Until Tassi's appointment in July, Canada's de facto dean of seniors' advocacy was Isobel Mackenzie, appointed in 2014 as British Columbia's Senior's Advocate — the first in Canada.

Ask Mackenzie whether Canada needs a national seniors strategy and she'll tell you the story of two octogenarians.

Two 85-year-old women — one living in P.E.I., the other in British Columbia. Both contributed the same amount to the Canada Pension Plan during their working years, and both rely solely on CPP, Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement to make ends meet.

"Their income, for the most part, is controlled by the federal government," says Mackenzie. "Whether you live in Charlottetown or Vancouver, the federal government is going to give you the same income — same OAS, same CPP and same formula for applying GIS, if you need it."

But the retiree living in Charlottetown spends \$600 on her rent and has regular home support provided by the province free of charge, says Mackenzie. In Vancouver, our fictional 85-year-old pays \$1,500 for similar accommodations and \$4,000 a year for the same level of home care.

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As far as Mackenzie is concerned, home care, residential care, assisted living, or any of the other services available under widely varying circumstances across the country, is "health care" if you are a senior with restricted ability to make your meals, clean your apartment or get to your medical appointments.

The Canada Health Act requires that all provinces and territories provide free access to medical necessities, like doctors and hospital care. For some elderly "getting someone to cook," says Mackenzie, "or tidy up a room is a medical necessity.

"But for seniors, the residential care, the home care, transportations issues, they're all under provincial jurisdiction and they all look different in every province."

While programs for seniors, their standards and their cost to users vary across jurisdictions, the needs of seniors who require assistance are pretty much the same everywhere, Mackenzie notes. "We know there is not much difference in the people who are living in long-term care facilities. The profile of people in B.C., Saskatchewan and Ontario all look very similar."

A carefully planned national strategy for seniors could standardize costs and norms of care, with nationally accepted formulae for providing free services for those who cannot afford even the subsidized costs.

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Photo by Chaeel Hippolito

Seniors Advocate for British Columbia, Isobel Mackenzie, in her office in Victoria, B.C.

The interplay of provincial and federal governments comes in clear on Tassi's radar. "Collaboration is extremely important on this file," she says. "It's important we get this right for [seniors], and to do that we absolutely have to collaborate... with our provincial and territorial partners, we also have to collaborate with the experts so that we get the information that they have obtained, and we also need to be chatting with our seniors."

What Mackenzie objects to in discussions of seniors policy is the notion that Canada's seniors (about 16 per cent of the overall population and expected to grow to 25 per cent by 2036), are "a problem to be solved" or a "cost curve to be bent." In an op-ed piece in the *Vancouver Sun* in June, Mackenzie wrote that, in B.C., "less than five per cent of seniors and only 15 per cent of those aged 85 and older use publicly subsidized, long-term care and, even then, we take 80 per cent of their net income to offset the cost."

Political discussion about seniors often veers uncomfortably towards "apocalyptic demography," says Dr. Samir Sinha, director of geriatrics at Mount Sinai and the University Health Network Hospitals in Toronto. Such discussion raises alarms about the increased demands on health and social services from an aging population, without recognizing the opportunities, he says.

Dr. Sinha says the fear reflects a long-held economic theory called the "dependency ratio," which counts children under 15 and people over 64 as economic dependents.

"We forget that older adults are the bulk of caregivers in our society; they provide the bulk of childcare in our society; they disproportionately represent the volunteer workforce in society." Not to mention that seniors still buy goods and services and pay taxes, he says.

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A national seniors strategy could help Canada adapt what we do to better meet the needs of an aging population while identifying new opportunities for economic growth and development, says Sinha. As the National Association of Federal Retirees (Federal Retirees) pointed out last year in its brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skill and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA), a national seniors strategy with "measures to support businesses in gearing activities, products and services to the seniors demographic will help us all reap the rewards — financial and otherwise — and drive the economy."

Dr. Sinha has been at the forefront of the push for a national seniors strategy since it became a cohesive movement in 2014. That year, a number of national organizations, including Federal Retirees, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) and the Canadian Nurses Association, started a dialogue. That led to funding for Dr. Sinha and a team of researchers to come up with an evidence-informed outline of what a national seniors strategy would have to address.

Since then, support for a national seniors strategy has steadily grown. A few years ago, a CMA public opinion poll found that 93 per cent of Canadians thought a pan-Canadian seniors strategy

was a good idea. This year, delegates at the Liberal 2018 National Convention approved a motion to include a national seniors strategy as part of Liberal policy going into the next election. And the HUMA Committee's report on *Advancing Inclusion and Quality of Life for Seniors*, released this spring, urged the government to devote resources to developing a national seniors strategy.

Until Minister Tassi's appointment, the government's response had been mixed. It has taken steps to respond to specific issues identified by supporters of a national seniors strategy. A dedicated minister of seniors is important, but not without committing to an over-arching seniors policy for that minister to manage.

In the government's June response to the HUMA committee report, Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, promised only to refer the recommendation for a national seniors strategy to the National Seniors Council, a federally appointed advisory board.

However, since Federal Retirees and its partners began advancing the idea of a national seniors strategy, the government has announced enhancements to CPP, lowered the OAS qualification age back to 65 and doubled the GIS top-up for the lowest income seniors, says Sinha. It has committed \$201 million over two years for affordable housing for low-income seniors, \$6 billion for home care, and expanded and simplified the tax credit for caregivers. The actions all respond to issues identified in national seniors strategy research.

Sinha says these successes came, in part, because "two federal ministers stepped forward to sponsor the activities that were aligned with the concept of a national seniors strategy," Duclos and then Health Minister Jane Philpott.

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They had been meeting with experts “to really talk about how we move forward with the concepts of a national seniors strategy.”

In a cabinet shuffle last fall, however, Philpott was replaced with Ginette Petipas Taylor and, says Sinha, “those conversations haven’t continued.” In fact, in an interview with *The Hill Times* in April, Petipas Taylor rejected outright the notion of a seniors ministry.

In government, Sinha points out, “things change all the time, attention shifts to other issues, and unless you have a key strategy that’s articulated... monitored and measured, and you have someone who’s absolutely in charge of ensuring that strategy gets implemented, it’s easy to start losing focus on what was committed to and what needs to get done.”

Enter Minister Tassi. “My appointment is evidence of how seriously we take this file, but I think it’s also important to recognize the work that we have done today,” she says of the same points Sinha references.

She says she’s proud of the commitment the National Seniors Council has provided to the file and will be strongly considering the advice and direction that they’ll be providing to her ministry.

“We want to see seniors age gracefully and well, and so my appointment is just going to build on the work that we’ve done in the past,” says Tassi. Work, which for experts like Sinha, needs to have an overarching national strategy to guide it.

Federal Retirees president Jean-Guy Soulière agrees. Federal Retirees believe that the first priority on the new Minister’s to-do list should be the development of a national seniors strategy. “Such a complex and important strategy requires co-ordination and oversight to ensure swift and effective implementation,” says Soulière.

In 2013, the G8 countries (now G7) committed to establishing national strategies on dementia as part of a concerted effort to find a cure. But after Canada agreed to the commitment, it dragged its feet. Now, it is the only G7 country without a national dementia strategy, says Sinha, although a private member’s bill has forced the government to begin working towards one.

But, Sinha says, those efforts may be misplaced. “Should we be focusing on a dementia strategy or should we be focusing on a national seniors strategy of which dementia is one part?” Instead of lagging behind the rest of the developed world, as it did with the

dementia strategy, Canada could lead the way by developing a national seniors strategy.

“I can’t say that I can look to any other country right now and say they have a national seniors strategy or a national seniors plan,” says Sinha. “There are various countries creating... healthy seniors policies... but I wouldn’t say that country X or Y has an overt national seniors strategy.”

Which means Canada “could be cutting edge,” Sinha says.

There is mounting evidence of international interest in a model that combines a dementia strategy with a broader seniors strategy. The province of Ontario has adopted such an approach with Sinha acting as advisor. Because of his involvement, Sinha has been invited to give a keynote address on the strategy to a conference this fall hosted by the World Health Organization and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The benefits of having a national seniors strategy administered by a federal minister of seniors extend beyond health care, say supporters of the policy. Patrick Imbeau, advocacy and policy officer for Federal Retirees, suggests the presence of a national minister might have assured more consultation before the tabling of controversial target benefit plan legislation this year. Bill C-27, now withdrawn, would have allowed Crown corporations such as Canada Post and Via Rail, to switch their defined benefit plans to target benefit plans, potentially reducing the payout to current retirees.

If Canada had at the time a federal minister of seniors, someone who “understands the needs and wants of seniors and the issues that would impact seniors,” the legislation, as

worded, might never have been introduced, says Imbeau.

Minister Tassi will hopefully be in a position to recognize effective models for seniors care and take steps to implement them more broadly, according to Federal Retirees. The association has noted, for instance, that all seniors would benefit from a care delivery program as innovative as that which the federal government currently offers veterans.

“The Veterans Independence Program provides funding for veterans and their survivors to meet certain home care and support needs,” the Association wrote in a brief to the HUMA Committee last year. The Association again touted the program as a model for care in its response to the government’s 2018 budget, while, at the time, lamenting that the budget again did not include plans to develop a ministry of seniors.

Marie-Andrée Malette, one of the founders of the Caregivers’ Brigade, hopes the new ministry of seniors will be “a one-stop pit stop that can actually see and ask the proper questions” related to a broad spectrum of seniors issues now managed by multiple federal departments.

Malette knows how important it is to have one body dedicated to understanding the issues of the people they serve. The Caregivers’ Brigade helps families of ill and injured soldiers and veterans navigate the often-confusing system of supports available to them and the complicated bureaucracy required to access them.

“Aging and geriatrics is an entity in itself,” says Malette. “It requires... a different way of thinking and different ways of doing things.” She hopes Canada’s seniors’ ministry will ensure a proper focus for seniors’ issues.

Since 2016, there are more Canadians over 65 than under 15. *(Source, 2016 Census)*

In 2017, 16 per cent of Canadians were over 65. By 2036, it is estimated that up to 25 per cent of Canadians will be over 65. *(Source, Statistics Canada report, 2018)*

At 16 per cent of the population, seniors account for almost half of Canada’s health-care spending. *(Source, Canadian Institute for Health Spending)*

The ratio of seniors varies widely across the country, up to nearly 20 per cent in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Maritime provinces, and Quebec, and much lower in Alberta and the territories. Nunavut is the lowest at 3.8 per cent. *(Source, 2016 Census)*

The employment rate for seniors has more than doubled since 1988, from 6.7 per cent to 13.2 per cent. *(Source, Maclean’s, September 2014)*

More than one in three seniors volunteer, and on average put in almost twice the number of volunteer hours as younger Canadians. *(Statistics Canada report, 2010)*

As many as one in five seniors admitted to residential care might have been able to remain at home with appropriate support. *(Source, 2017 Study by Canadian Institute for Health Spending)*

In a 2014 poll, 60 per cent of respondents said that if their party did not support the principles of a national seniors policy, they might consider switching their vote. *(Source CMA poll, 2014)*

As a regional director for a company managing seniors’ homes, Malette knows some seniors are not able to navigate the welter of seniors’ programs offered by various government agencies. She has elderly veterans in her residences who didn’t know they were entitled to a pension, and others that didn’t know they qualified for a disability tax credit. She has acted as an advocate on their behalf, but perhaps wouldn’t have to if there was a dedicated seniors ministry overseeing the range of programs, she says.

The purpose of a seniors’ ministry goes beyond advocacy, Malette says. A governing body responsible specifically for seniors can help educate society about the realities of aging, or create policy to deal with elder abuse, or act any number of other issues related to seniors, she says.

Dr. Sinha says a national seniors strategy would “provide focus and direction, and a core overall vision that allows us to... inspire other actions,” And, says Sinha, it could ensure that all seniors’ initiatives “are being co-ordinated in a coherent approach.”

“Without a national seniors strategy,” he says, “it’s hard to talk about [seniors issues] as an important narrative overall that needs to be moved forward.”

Until the time a national seniors strategy is in place, Sinha, Federal Retirees and others will continue to push for its creation. Although a sense of urgency is felt with the election in a year’s time, Tassi appears measured in her approach. “Really it’s about moving forward and getting this right,” she says. “In terms of timelines, I don’t want to speculate on that right now. The important thing for me is we take all of the information that we have and we get this right for seniors.” ■