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# A Parliamentary Poet Laureate

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by Senator Jerahmiel S. Grafstein

*On December 18, 2001 legislation to create the office of Parliamentary Poet Laureate was given Royal Assent. The idea originated in a Senate Bill introduced in November 1999 and re-introduced in January 2001. The following article, by the sponsor of the Bill, is taken from testimony before the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs on March 29, 2000.*



**T**he motivation for this bill is the digital era of media convergence which is pushing some say, crushing us. Senses are swamped by the warp and the woof of this unreal world. Our shared heritage, the canons of the word, are almost drowned out. We fear our children are becoming grammatically illiterate, and worse, culturally ignorant. Just as Parliament is predisposed as a check on state

powers, so poetry can provide a reality check on the confusing image chaos and information fog rampant in our civic society.

In a collectivizing age, we need many more platforms for stronger individual voices. As a modest counterweight to this digital tidal wave, I would argue that we need poetry more than ever before. From this worrying, spinning society, a virtual cycle has suddenly emerged, a surprising revival, a renewed interest in poetry and poetry readings

Poetry boils ideas to their essence. It steps back and re-orientes virtual reality. Poetry exposes the individual aesthetic. It helps us look inwards to ourselves and beyond

our situation more clearly. At times, poetry and virtual reality are like competing entities of truth.

The speed of digital change seems, in itself, disorienting. In turn, malaise, ruthlessness and apathy eat away and displace a country's nurturing common dreams and shared values as societal anchors. Violence erupts when common values we share fragment, erode or implode too quickly. Poetry can ease and soften the impact of these forces of distortion, so overloaded as they are with floods of information that make our modern life so confusing and disorienting. Sometimes one speech can become a prose poem that binds a country and its people together, armed only with the simple phrase or a thoughtful metaphor.

The parliamentary tradition of a poet laureate goes back 400 years. The first one was Ben Jonson, in 17th century England. There is a long and honourable tradition of having a national poet laureate. This applies in the United States since the mid-1930s.

Robert Pinsky, the American poet laureate argues, that in its proper place poetry may bring "harmony from disharmony, understanding from confusion." Poetry and the written word can help us refocus. In this 24 x 7 world, time is the essence. Poetry can freeze experience and then defrost, with a word, a phrase, a line, a paragraph, a verse, a poem, a metaphor.

Walt Whitman argued that the United States was so immense, fragmented, disparate and divided that, if it could only be held together by one thing, it would be by poetry. Untutored forces can work in an unintended way, without our assent, to press us together in crushing conformity. Our society needs other visions, alternate

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*Jerahmiel S. Grafstein was appointed to the Senate on January 13, 1984. He was the sponsor of the Bill that created the Office of Parliamentary Poet Laureate.*

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voices, fresh breathing room, more thinking time, different rhythms.

***Poetry and poets can give us space,  
give us pause to analyze our society  
and our own work in slower motion.***

Now some scoff at poetry. Some argue that poetry has simply no place associated with political power. Parliament can only taint poetry, they say. Poets would be held in bondage by the poet's association with Parliament. There is some force to this argument.

But if you think back, what do you remember about political history? I remember Abraham Lincoln: "A house divided cannot stand alone." That was in a way a poetic metaphor. We remember history through pictures, but we remember history equally strongly through simple phrases or metaphors. Pierre Trudeau's line about the state having no business in the bedrooms of the nation. That was a brilliant piece of poetry. It was prose that reached the heights of poetry.

We need more of that. We need leaders who help us to understand what is happening around us. Poets help. Robert Frost certainly helped John Kennedy to understand what was happening. A poet laureate would help us in Parliament to have a better understanding of what we do.

The great English poet, William Blake, was often quoted in the British House of Commons. The power of poetry is potent. Everything we do here is based on words. Words are the only business of parliamentarians. Some say Parliament works in a cocoon, immune to the realities of life since Parliament can deal mostly in laws that please the largest numbers. The poet laureate can place a mirror before Canadians that refracts different images of life. He can parse our common lexicon in different ways. We need diversity of thought to create a unity of dreams and a unity of visions. Poetry might even add some greater sense and sensibility to the word factory of Canada – to our Parliament. Poetry might bring fresh realities, new light, to the very heart of the Canadian soul, wherever it may reside.

For over a century, those three miserable "isms," – communism, fascism and nazism – all organized to harness the poet's art to the uses of state power; yet our Parliament was created precisely as a popular check on state power. Hence, the model that informs this modest recommendation is that the cabinet, the executive of state power, would have no hand in the selection of the poet laureate.

I tried to blend, several ideas. First of all, the two Speakers in effect make the selection. They are our senior representatives of Parliament. I placed the poet laureate with the Library of Parliament because the Americans have done that and it seems to work well. There would be space there. The poet laureate would be close to books, close to the poetic collection. It is an easy way of dealing with the issue. The Library of Parliament is within the confines of Parliament.

The leaders of our major cultural institutions, the Library of Parliament, the National Archives, the National Library, the Canada Council and the Official Languages Commissioner would biannually propose nominees. Poets, their societies, writers and the public alike would be encouraged to lobby for these selections. Three people would be nominated, and from these, the Speaker of the House and the Speaker of the Senate would take a decision. The poet laureate would serve for only two years. He or she would act freely as a catalyst to bring poetry to the heart of the public dialogue, to heighten public awareness.

It will be left up to the poet laureate to write poetry for occasions of state, if he or she so chooses. However, my requirement, if this bill should succeed, is to allow the poet laureate to do what he or she chooses to do to advance poetry, to give that person a platform in Parliament. The duties of the poet laureate would be minimalist – for example, sponsor poetry readings, give advice, perform such related duties as requested by the Speaker or parliamentarians.

What I foresee is a series of poet laureates who will speak from their view. It is an individual art. Poetry, like painting, is not a collaborative art. Therefore, we would hear one voice, one at a time, in various phases, to give us their vision of the world.

The Library of Congress in the United States has annual poetry readings, and they are widely attended. Some of them are quite magnificent. One of the things that Robert Pinsky did was to foster a millennium project, where a hundred Americans would read their favourite poem. It will go into the National Archives. It is a simple, costless exercise, one that will be a magnificent record of the United States in the year 2000; a record about what a group of 100 Americans believe is their inner vision of what is occurring around them.

### **The Language Issue**

I have given the issue of bilingualism considerable thought. I concluded, after consulting, that what we were looking for in a parliamentary poet laureate was absolutely the best poet in Canada. We have, in this country, a

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grand tradition of translation. In a way, we demean both official languages if we were to conclude that we needed to have two where one would do. I do not think that that person necessarily must be bilingual. We are able to have strong, creative and intelligent translation.

Unlike in England, I proposed that we have a short term for a parliamentary poet laureate. A new person would be selected every two years. We do not have two prime ministers. We do not have two Governors General. We have one to represent the common values. Our power to be able to listen to that person in his or her original tongue or through translations would suffice.

There is also a recent book, called *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problem of Translation*, written by a great literary critic in the United States, William H. Gass. He deals fundamentally with the issue we are discussing. The argument he makes is that it is important to listen to the voice of a poet in that person's language. I would prefer to have a superb francophone, who is a great poet, or an aboriginal, or somebody who speaks Chinese, writing in their language, and select that person as opposed to dealing with the question of trying to accumulate the creative talents into one person. I do not think the idea of official

bilingualism would be hurt by this process. In fact, I think it would be enhanced.

While it is my expectation that the official version of the poet laureate's poems will be in the language of the poet, there will be unofficial versions in both official languages.

Therefore, I do not agree with those who say we need two poets laureate. We have one Canada, one country. I think the ability to alternate quickly would give every region, every sector, part and language in this country an opportunity to have their voice heard.

### Conclusion

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I do not expect that any one person can encapsulate all the dreams, all the visions and all the issues of unity in one poem or one poet. That is an impossibility. That is not the purpose of poetry. The purpose of poetry is to listen to the words of a poet through their singular vision of how they look at the country. I would assume that what we want are many different images of the country, expressed through the eyes and words of different poets. I do not think one poet represents all of Canada because there are too many diverse impulses in the country.

Following adoption of the Bill the first Parliamentary Poet Laureate, George Bowering was appointed on November 12, 2002.