

Top court to hear Senate arguments

The Canadian Press

OTTAWA — A Supreme Court hearing on what it would take to reform or abolish Canada’s Senate is coming in the nick of time for the much-maligned upper house.

The arguments advanced by the provinces will be music to senators’ ears, which have been ringing for months with accusations of fraudulent expenses and corruption by four of their own.

Long derided as an unelected, unaccountable retirement home for party hacks, flacks and bagmen, the still-raging expenses scandal has prompted even longtime champions of Senate reform, such as Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall, to join the campaign to do away with the red chamber entirely.

Against that backdrop, the top court’s three-day hearing, which begins today, will serve as a history lesson, reminding Canadians why the Senate exists and the importance of the role it plays in the country’s federation.

The factums filed by the provinces do not address the merits of abolition or Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s modest reform proposals, which would impose term limits on senators and create a process for electing them.

But the vast majority make the case that the Senate is too fundamental to the functioning of the federation to allow reform without significant provincial approval, or abolition without their unanimous consent.

The contention that the Senate was an essential part of the “Confederation bargain” – designed to give equal clout to the small Atlantic provinces and Quebec (Lower Canada) in counterbalance to the dominance of Ontario (Upper Canada) in the elected House of Commons – is a repeated refrain in the provincial factums.

“The Senate is an important part of Canada’s federal system and was a key element of the Confederation bargain,” Ontario argues. “It was designed to play a significant role in reflecting regional interests and protecting minority interests.”

“The Senate is a constitutionally entrenched national institution which was born out of the essential compact that gave rise to Confederation,” echoes Newfoundland and Labrador.

“This was the bargain struck at Confederation,” concurs British Columbia.

Indeed, several provinces argue that Canada itself might not have come into being had the Fathers of Confederation not agreed to the creation of a Senate.

Ontario, New Brunswick and Newfoundland cite one of the founders of Confederation, George Brown: “Our Lower Canada friends have agreed to give us representation by population in the Lower House, on the express condition that they shall have equality in the Upper House. On no other condition could we have advanced a step.”

Flaherty may give more upbeat economic outlook

The Canadian Press

OTTAWA — After one of the more disappointing years in the current recovery cycle, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty is expected to offer some positive news for a change when he issues the government’s fall economic update

this afternoon.

Unlike last year’s update which went down like a spoonful of cod-liver oil – tastes awful, but good for you – Flaherty has signalled he expects to report a better-than-projected deficit this fiscal year and a bigger surplus in 2015.

As it turned out, last year’s doom and

gloom update, with its warning of a \$6 billion hole in revenue intake and elevated global risks, never did pan out. Last month the government reported that it had beat its low bar for a \$25.9 billion deficit by a tidy \$7 billion – mostly because of government cost-cutting and stable revenues.

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