

Trudeau refocuses cabinet to tackle tough social issues

August 28, 2017: OTTAWA – Today’s larger-than-anticipated cabinet shuffle sets the stage for major health and social policy reforms ahead of a make-or-break legislative period for this Parliament. The retirement of long-time Liberal MP Judy Foote meant that the government had to appoint a new Minister from Newfoundland and Labrador and bring in new faces in order to maintain gender parity in cabinet. Today’s moves achieved both of those goals, while reinforcing tough files with key ministers who have proven their mettle.

Jane Philpott is seen by many as the most effective minister out of the Class of 2015. In a surprise move, Minister Philpott now takes on the formidable task of reforming Indigenous health care and education as the new Minister of Indigenous Services. The splitting of Indigenous and Northern Affairs was a long time coming, with many in the government feeling that the institution was long overdue for a shakeup. With Ottawa’s renewed focus on improving the health, economic and educational outcomes in Indigenous communities, putting a minister in charge of service delivery makes sense. Problems of governance, capacity and simple logistics have made service delivery in Indigenous communities one of the biggest challenges the federal government faces. Splitting the ministry into two and assigning one of their most effective ministers to this file indicates that they are redoubling efforts in this space after making historic investments in Budget 2016.

Carolyn Bennett remains within the restructured INAC as Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, with responsibility for treaty issues and Canada’s new nation-to-nation relationship with self-governing Indigenous communities.

The promotion of Delta BC’s **Carla Qualtrough** to the position of Minister of Public Works bolsters west coast representation in cabinet, and elevates someone who has executed her junior portfolio with a quiet competence. She takes on the considerable task of fixing the Phoenix pay system fiasco, which has left thousands of public servants without pay. With this move, Minister **Jim Carr** can refocus his attention on Natural Resources after taking on double-duty during Minister Foote’s leave of absence.

Cabinet newcomer **Ginette Pettipas Taylor** of New Brunswick brings an impressive background as a social worker with experience in victim services and mental health care to her new role as Health Minister. Philpott’s tenure at Health knocked many items off their to-do list, leaving Pettipas Taylor with two big tasks: coping with the ongoing opioid overdose crisis gripping many communities, and prescription drug reform. With the government’s proposed drug reforms viewed by many as a precursor to a long-sought-after national pharmacare plan, this work is likely to seize Minister Pettipas Taylor’s office until the next election. The new Health minister has her work cut out for her.

Seamus O’Regan’s eventual promotion to cabinet was predictable, given his excellent communication skills, strong public profile and close relationship with the Prime Minister. The Veterans Affairs file is fraught with perpetual controversy, so his media skills and proximity to the centre could prove useful for

that department. O'Regan is well-liked and could soften the edges on a perennially difficult portfolio. He was also named Associate Minister of National Defense.

Calgary Centre MP **Kent Hehr** makes the move from Veterans to Qualtrough's former portfolio of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, where he will build on his long track record of advocacy on accessibility issues. Interestingly, his hometown of Calgary is also considering a renewed bid for the 2026 Winter Olympics and Paralympics.

When the House of Commons returns in the third week of September, the refreshed Ministry will have a lot on its plate. The Health Committee will be hearing from witnesses on **C-45, the Cannabis legalization bill**. The government hopes to have that law passed by Christmas, but the opposition in both the House and Senate may have other ideas. Before the Transport Committee is **C-49, the transportation modernization bill**, which contains a new air passenger bill of rights and changes to foreign ownership requirements for domestic airlines, in addition to major rail safety reforms. The government will hope to pass this legislation in advance of a possible prorogation and Throne Speech early in the new year, to set the political agenda in the lead-up to the 2019 election.

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