

## 2017 U of T Women in House Reflection

- **Name:** Ana Komparic
- **Program:** Massey College (PhD candidate, Faculty of Pharmacy)
- **Year:** 4
- **Parliamentary Host:**  
Mrs. Hélène Laverdière

I had the honour of shadowing Mrs. Hélène Laverdière, the NDP MP for Laurier- Sainte-Marie in Montréal. Prior to being elected in 2011, she completed a PhD in sociology, briefly worked in academia, and then served as a diplomat with the Ministry of Foreign of Affairs in Dakar, Senegal, Washington D.C., and Santiago, Chile.

On our first day, we were treated to an engaging and inspiring discussion with Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Abella. Afterwards, we attended a reception with several MPs participating in the program who shared their experiences and aspirations in politics. I was struck not only by their eloquence, but also by the ample use of humour. I noticed that humour was invoked frequently throughout the two days, perhaps because of its ability to both disarm or unite and to critique, thus rendering otherwise challenging situations in politics manageable or surmountable.

My day with Mrs. Laverdière started with attending a meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (FAAE). Mrs. Laverdière is the Vice Chair and only female member of FAAE. The day's agenda was dedicated to the ongoing hearings on the "Situation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia 25 Years after the End of the Cold War." The Committee heard from relevant witnesses, including Mr. Edgars Rinkevics, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, who is meeting with officials in Canada and the U.S.A. as NATO prepares to deploy troops to Latvia in response to ongoing tensions with Russia. Later, Mrs. Laverdière spoke of her experience as being the only woman on FAAE, and noted the importance of female representation for drawing attention to overlooked issues, such as when she proposed and lead the Committee's hearings and report on "Canada and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda."

We continued to another committee meeting, which was interrupted by an unplanned vote. We proceeded to the opposition Lobby, a room which is normally closed to the public and is directly adjacent to the House of Commons Chamber—the "behind the scenes" of the Chamber, so to speak. Prior to entering the Chamber, MPs from the opposition parties gathered over lunch to discuss the vote. Mrs. Laverdière introduced me to a number of her NDP colleagues with whom I had discussed my research on pharmacare and pharmaceutical regulation. NDP House Leader Murray Rankin even went to his office to share a relevant article he had recently come across, which was yet another example of Mrs. Laverdière's and her colleagues' openness and generosity.

Afterwards, we toured parliament. As a PhD student, I was interested to learn that Mrs. Laverdière had found the transition to politics from diplomacy easier than to diplomacy from academia, since politics and diplomacy share a similar immediacy and need for adaptability. Indeed, the need to be responsive was evident even in our limited interactions. Her life is both very public, with people recognizing her, media stopping her for questions, etc., and requires keeping abreast of new developments— from reacting to the newly released budget to being aware of breaking news in Ukraine to be able to ask relevant questions in Committee.

Finally, we attended the NDP question period preparation before heading to question period. As the budget had been announced the day before, question period was especially spirited, although one wonders whether the vigorous heckling is productive to the Chamber's proceedings. Immediately following question period, Mrs. Laverdière left for Washington D.C. to attend a meeting of the Trilateral Commission. I was impressed how effortlessly she passed from meeting-to-meeting, space-to-space, and topic-to-topic without pause—whether it was meeting with me, strategizing with colleagues, advocating for her constituents, or meeting with international leaders.

Thank you to Mrs. Laverdière, her staff, Anne and Roxane, and her colleagues for their generosity in sharing their time, insight, and advice. Furthermore, thank you to Massey College's Master Hugh Segal for supporting the Massey Junior Fellows in attending Women in House 2017. And, last but not least, thank you to Tina Park for organizing the program.



## 2017 U of T Women in House Reflection

- **Name:** Judy Grant
- **Program:** Massey College (Adult Education and Community Development)
- **Year:** 1
- **Parliamentary Host:**  
Ms. Caesar-Chavannes

What does it mean to enter into a National House and feel that you are welcomed and included? What does it mean for young racialized women to enter into a National space, one presumed to be safe and inclusive only to be reminded that there is no escape from the micro-aggressions imposed upon your body? These questions are some of the many that I was forced to ponder as I remember my time at Canada's Parliament.

Upon reflection, my experience attending Parliament Hill as part of the 2017- Women's in House program –University of Toronto, I was confronted with the reality that the Nation's house was not one that is reflective of or welcoming to racialized women. I had an experience with a security officer, who felt that it was okay to touch and "check" my hair without my explicit consent. This almost ruined my trip. However, my host, MP Celina Caesar-Chavannes, was incredible.

Lahoma Thomas and I had the privilege and honour of shadowing Ms. Caesar-Chavannes and we both learned a lot from her. She shared her experiences, including those of being a Black woman, and how she negotiates the contours of her being in relation to her workplace and public office. Ms. Caesar-Chavannes was very friendly and open and made us feel as though we belonged in a space where there was hardly anyone who looked like us. The lack of racial diversity was quite prominent at Parliament Hill. I learned from Ms. Caesar-Chavannes the importance of being an active agent of change, particularly when challenges arise and one is in a position to influence action. We had the opportunity to sit in meetings as Ms. Caesar-Chavannes engaged with citizens regarding important issues. She was very attentive to the needs of Canadians. We also had the honour of sitting in the House of Commons, listened to representatives discuss various issues and witnessed the passing of the Anti- Islamophobia Bill. This was one of the highlights of the trip. In addition, I had the opportunity to engage with my previous Chief of Police Minister Bill Blair and I also met some wonderful individuals who are all working to make Canada a better place.

Over all, my experience was very positive. Although there was a challenging incident (which is being addressed), the support of my peers and my parliamentary host Ms. Celina Caesar-Chavannes made it worthwhile and memorable. I am happy that I attended this event.

Respectfully Submitted,

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## 2017 U of T Women in House Reflection

- **Name:** Trinh Theresa Do (“Theresa”)
- **Program:** Massey College (Master of Global Affairs)
- **Year:** 2
- **Parliamentary Host:**  
Dr. Hedy Fry

Capturing the significance of spending time with two powerful Canadian women who are institutions unto themselves — Justice Rosalie Abella and MP Hedy Fry — in just one page is a tall order, but I’ll do my best.

Each woman distilled the wisdom of her personal and professional experiences into about a memorable hour. The group of U of T women visited Justice Abella at the Supreme Court on our first day, and I was pleasantly surprised by the informal nature of our discussion. Justice Abella strolled into the courtroom where we were all waiting, perched on a desk, and proceeded to share anecdotes and stories from her career in law. One of the biggest takeaways for me was her assertion that although we are growing up in an age when it’s never been easier to be a woman, in many ways, she had it easier as a woman entering the workforce in the 1970s. She didn’t have to follow any rules, because there were no rules. She was the only female lawyer she knew, and merely did what she had to do in order to succeed and progress. There was no “right” way to be a woman in the workforce, and so she blazed her own trail and did what made sense to her. There was (and maybe is) no such thing as “work-life balance.” In some ways, she was perhaps more liberated than the women in my generation, who are given advice about what to do and what not to do ad nauseam. Additionally, as an immigrant, she said she operated under a different frame of mind, in which she was grateful for any opportunities that came her way, such as answering the call to the bench when she was 29, even if it came with a significant pay cut. Justice Abella’s experience resonates with me, mostly because it reminds me of my mother’s — a refugee to Canada and a self-made businesswoman — own experience.

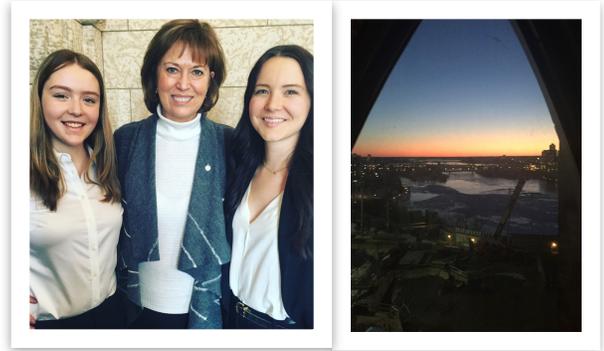
On our second day, I got to shadow MP Hedy Fry, along with my fellow Massey College fellow Jennifer Cape, as she went from meeting to meeting. Unfortunately, as those meetings were in-camera, we weren’t able to witness the important work she was doing. And so we were content with borrowing her time in between those sessions, asking her about her start in politics and the difficulties in navigating contentious national issues. She spoke candidly about the necessity of compromise, but also drawing a firm line when it came to one’s fundamental beliefs and values. It was a real pleasure to learn from such a powerhouse of a woman and MP, and to hear her trace her parliamentary experiences under various prime ministers. And the significance of spending time with Dr. Fry, the longest serving female MP, at the same time as Canada’s first gender-sensitive federal budget was released was not at all lost on me.

The most valuable part of the U of T Women in House program for me was the chance to experience Parliament in an entirely different way. As a former young journalist who covered politics in Ottawa, my time on the Hill was as an outsider with little institutional access and knowledge. The brief glimpse into a day in the life of a Parliamentarian, including getting frank and honest opinions and spending time in the House of Commons lobby, was incredibly fun and eye-opening. I am grateful for the opportunity.



## 2017 U of T Women in House Reflection

- **Name:** Nicola Plummer
- **Program:** Massey College (Master of Global Affairs)
- **Year:** 2
- **Name of your parliamentary host:**  
MP Pam Damoff



The full magnitude of the Hill hit me at a very surprising time.

It wasn't during the incredibly inspiring chat with Justice Abella, it wasn't while sitting in the morning session of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women during a visit from the Minister, and it wasn't while watching the historic M103 vote in the House of Commons – though these were undeniably highlights of the trip. The full magnitude of the Hill struck me during an unsuspecting moment of quiet reflection.

I found myself on the second floor in the Centre Block peering out a window, looking across the sun setting on our country. I was overwhelmed by emotions – some positive, some negative. Here we were at the seat of this country attempting to learn what makes Canada a nation to be proud of. In the context of a geopolitical environment with failed and failing states, nations coopted by hateful messaging, and rising borders, what makes us different? Are we really different after all?

Over the next day, I would see many of the elements that make us Canadian. I would witness an evangelical Christian MP question the Minister of Status of Women on whether she believes selective gender abortions in this country constitute violence against women, in a thinly veiled attempt to open up a wider conversation on pro-choice sentiments. I would witness debate on potential EI legislation that could help women who find themselves in work environments that pose a danger during pregnancy, still afford to pursue these careers and have children. And I would witness Liberal MPs cheer on the sole Conservative MP who voted for motion 103, a motion to condemn Islamophobia in Canada and "all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination." I would witness grown adults yelling at each other like children, members from all parties working together to craft legislation, and look out on a legislative body that, despite being 2017, fails to adequately reflect the diversity of all peoples they claim to represent. Hosted by the gracious and compassionate MP Damoff, I was lucky to see my Canada in the way an ordinary citizen normally cannot.

My Canada: progressive, conservative, risk-loving, risk-averse, open, closed. Our Canada is a beautiful and ugly dreamcatcher borrowed from another and woven with equally beautiful and ugly dreams. My experience on the Hill reminded me that being Canadian is both a privilege and a responsibility. It reminded me of an interview Gord Downie once did with the CBC in which he said: "I would want no part of propagating or galvanizing or burnishing some of the stupid mythology in this country. That we're this clean pristine place. That we've got it all figured out. That we know what's best for the world." When I travel, at least once every trip, I have had someone tell me how lucky I am to be from Canada. I take pride in the accident of my birth, but I am hyper aware that it borders on a dangerous kind of patriotism – patriotism that feels wrong given today's political discourse. Canada is this intricately designed dreamcatcher, borrowed from another, and infused with both beauty and ugliness. We are no paragon, we are who we are.

Downie's description of Canada is highly emblematic of my time on the Hill. I am incredibly grateful for and humbled by this experience as it allowed me to reflect on what it means to be Canadian at this time and place in our world history. I think what makes us different is our capacity to reflect as a nation and take those learnings

into account as we move forward. And I hope our MPs can continue to reflect on all parts of our nation as they weave new pieces into our design.

## 2017 U of T Women in House Reflection

- **Name:** Jennifer Cape
- **Program:** Massey College, Medical Doctorate
- **Year:** 3
- **Name of your parliamentary host:**  
Dr. Hedy Fry

Thank you Tina Park and the University of Toronto Women in House program for this opportunity. The discussions facilitated before, during, and after my time in Ottawa deepened not only my understanding of the country I love but also the world I live in.

My experience in Ottawa was, at times, encouragingly positive and, at others, disappointingly negative but, overall, extremely educational and thought provoking.

Our trip began at the Supreme Court with an introduction to and discussion with Justice Abella. I cannot thank her enough for being so approachable and speaking with so much passion and enthusiasm – it was truly inspiring. I appreciated the fundamental difference between the political and legal system she highlighted with the following quotation: “Politics is power, I prefer influence.” I was disappointed, however, in her discussion of work-life balance specifically the suggestion that you should “allow yourself to take 1-2 days off every 6 months to regroup.” In my opinion, this highlighted the aspects of Justice Abella’s personality that allowed her to destroy so many gender barriers and pave the path for us, mere humans (i.e. those who need two days off a week) to walk on. I was also disappointed by her suggestion that she “did not want to hear” about the family law cases that with unfavourable outcomes. While I questioned her further on this and she expanded, I feel as though she did not fully address my issue with that statement which may be due to poor question forming/not wanting to occupy more of the discussion time on my part. As a physician, I know patients who have experienced significant trauma while in the care of Child Protective Services. It is disappointing to hear that those sentencing/prescribing this kind of treatment do not see their responsibility extending into the appropriateness of the treatment (i.e. the efficacy of Child Protective Services). I extend this criticism to judges working within the criminal justice system. I see the similarities between physicians and judges both of whom are required to hear and consider the various facts, arrive at a verdict/diagnosis, and determine a sentence/treatment. If the treatment prescribed does more harm to the patient (i.e. damages more than corrects) I would argue it is irresponsible to prescribe that treatment. I simply do not understand how those sentencing do not take more responsibility in improving “treatment” options and more responsibility for the “patients” outcomes post-sentencing.

Following the discussion with Justice Abella, we had the opportunity to meet with several female MPs. This was an overwhelmingly positive experience. I truly appreciated the respect each MP showed for one another, regardless of party memberships. I enjoyed hearing the ways in which these women exercise reason even in the face of ignorance – stark contrast to the commonly propagated ideology that women are “too emotional.” Most significantly, I appreciated each MP’s response to my question of how they balance the self-doubt that seems to challenge women more than men. I especially appreciated Dr. Caroline Bennet’s response: “My son asks me, “Mom, why are you always right?” and I say “because I am so willing to admit when I do not have the



answers.” I learned that nerves, no matter your level of experience, never fade and that, even with experience, they play a crucial role mitigating against hubris and allowing one to understand the weight of their decisions.

I spent the final day of the trip shadowing Dr. Hedy Fry who was also incredibly personable and kind. Dr. Fry allowed approximately 10 seconds for introductions before enthusiastically encouraging discussion centered around our own individual questions. I began the discussion by asking her to describe her transition from medicine to politics. The conversations included the following quotation that I feel best highlights the strengths of Canadian ideology.

“When I graduated medical school there was much more financial incentive to work in the US – higher salary, assistance buying a house. But I chose Canada because I felt so strongly about living in a just society.”

As both an American and a Canadian citizen, I have always compared the too seemingly similar countries and struggled to describe the differences. My experiences in medicine have led me to the following realization regarding defining the differing ideologies: Canadians value all citizens. Americans citizens have the opportunity to be valued but must earn this value through financial means. Public health care and public education is strong in Canada. Private health care and private education is strong in the US. Canada is a country. The United States is a business.

Our discussion with Dr. Fry eventually centered on how to achieve meaningful change in society. As a politician that had tremendous success advocating for gay rights, she described to us the difficulties the party experienced in attempting to legalize gay marriage. Dr. Fry described that the first attempt failed miserably and, in response, the party put that issue on “simmer” and addressed other issues more likely to succeed. When she eventually turned up the heat, the law was overwhelmingly successful. I challenged her on this highlighting that that was an effective way to achieve “success” in the political system, but that was still over 30 years of people suffering. While time constraints limited our conversation, Dr. Fry did emphasize that in order to be successful in politics, one must do what his/her voters want and what will ensure his/her voters will keep him/her in office.

I found this aspect of politics fundamentally limiting/paralyzing. It would seem that politicians are limited to push for change only within the limits determined by necessary efforts of self-preservation. In my experience, those who push for change are often the target of turmoil and resentment and unrest. These negative emotions risk deterring a voter from re-electing a candidate. It would seem then, that the role of the government is to create laws that reflect the views of the people instead of challenging the views of the people for the better.

By far, however, the most disappointing aspect of the whole experience was observing question period. Earlier, I saw first hand the passion people have for politics but, now, when placed in this hostile environment, when placed in this inefficient system, as it is currently, the behaviour that is encouraged and, perhaps, required is astonishingly unacceptable. Heckling, hurling personal insults, dodging important questions, using flowery language and superficially benefiting from voicing meaningful ideas – unbelievable. I felt ashamed and embarrassed especially considering the number of people from First Nations communities that were present. The childish way the opposition challenged the party in power was insulting when considering the impact the subjects debated have on the people, especially those from First Nation communities, that were present.

Overall, the experience confirmed my interest in politics as an interest I will pursue near the end of my medical career. I believe I will be a more effective political leader if I am able to navigate the system freely – i.e. with financial security, with my history and reputation in medicine, and with the strength of previously built advocacy relationships. As I voiced previously, it was very disappointing to witness how the opposition

challenged and exploit the weaknesses of people instead of their ideas. In tennis, as in politics, strong opponents exposure your weaknesses and, ultimately, improve your abilities. Dr. Hedy Fry entered politics after 20 years of medical practice and, perhaps after 20 years in a field of my choice, I will do the same – freely, with efforts to undermine me as person rendering futile.