

Remarks – Ombudsman Paul Dubé
Luncheon hosted by Her Honour Lt. Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell
June 6, 12 p.m.

Thank you for those kind words, your Honour, for your exceptional hospitality, and for welcoming us so kindly to Queen's Park today.

On behalf of my colleagues assembled here, I express our collective thanks for the support you have once again shown for the Ombudsman institution.

I would also like to acknowledge that we are meeting today on traditional Indigenous territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples, which is now home to many First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

We are grateful for the opportunity to meet here and we thank the people who have taken care of this land for thousands of years and I am committed to contributing to reconciliation.

Merci infiniment pour votre accueil si chaleureux.

I know Your Honour has a deep passion and concern for democracy, and in particular, you have called upon the politicians working in this place to protect and serve democracy.

And I am here to say that we Ombudsmen, who act as independent, impartial and non-partisan oversight officers of the Legislature, are doing our part outside the Legislative Assemblies across Canada to do just that – to protect democracy.

The Ombudsman is not only a vital democratic institution that promotes good governance, sound public administration, administrative fairness, the Rule of Law, and a respect for rights.

We are uniquely positioned to address people's complaints about maladministration and lapses in fairness in the provision of public services in ways that no other institution can.

When Your Honour hosted us in this space in 2018, it was a very different, pre-pandemic world. You graciously welcomed close to 40 global delegates to the world board meeting of the International Ombudsman Institute, a similar group as you see before you today.

As you said at the time, and excuse my paraphrasing: "Ombudsmen do vital work... You bridge the gaps between citizens and institutions. You champion responsiveness and transparency. You build trust and restore people's faith in the social contracts that underpin good governance."

I would say that this is true now more than ever. At Ombudsman Ontario, for example, complaint numbers continue to climb to pre-pandemic numbers. We received almost 1000 more complaints last month than for the same period last year.

The COVID pandemic, in particular, placed tremendous strain upon our public services, and brought social inequities into sharp relief.

The help we provided, and continue to provide every day, is critical. The role of the ombudsman is vital to a healthy and engaged democracy.

Unfortunately, despite their benefit to citizens, democratic institutions like the Ombudsman are under threat.

They are facing attempts to undermine their effectiveness in a number of ways, through budget cuts or unstable funding, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, or outright elimination of the institution by governments that seek to silence voices that point out deficiencies in administration.

In response to those threats to Ombudsman institutions around the world, the European Commission created the Venice Principles, the first internationally accepted standards for the proper functioning of parliamentary and public services ombudsmen.

The importance of the Ombudsman institution in the promotion and protection of human rights, good governance and the rule of law has been reinforced by a 2022 United Nations Resolution on the Ombudsman and mediator institutions.

This UN Resolution endorses the Venice Principles and encourages members to establish independent Ombudsman offices and strengthen existing ones by ensuring their independence and vitality consistent with the Venice Principles.

This is an important step to strengthen independent and autonomous Ombudsman institutions worldwide and to raise awareness at international level for the essential role Ombudsman institutions around the world play.

However, we are still not well known or well understood and must continue to work diligently to raise awareness about what we do and how we do it, as well as demonstrate our value to society.

As said during my law career, "Rights don't do you much good if you don't know about them". We are therefore in constant outreach mode.

That is why it is so heartening to hear your kind words of acknowledgment and support for the work we do.

Your Honour, on behalf of the Canadian Council of Parliamentary Ombudsman, please accept our profound gratitude for your exceptional hospitality and support, your words of wisdom, and for recognizing the important role ombudsman offices play in building and supporting a healthy democracy.

Au nom du Conseil canadien des ombudsmans parlementaires, nous voulons vous témoigner de notre profonde gratitude pour votre hospitalité et votre soutien exceptionnels, vos paroles de sagesse, et pour avoir reconnu le rôle important que jouent les bureaux d'ombudsman dans l'édification et le soutien d'une saine démocratie.

Merci and Miigwich.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Dubé', written in a cursive style.

Paul Dubé
Ontario Ombudsman