

# SENATOR RAYMOND SETLAKWE PUSHED FOR CANADA TO RECOGNIZE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

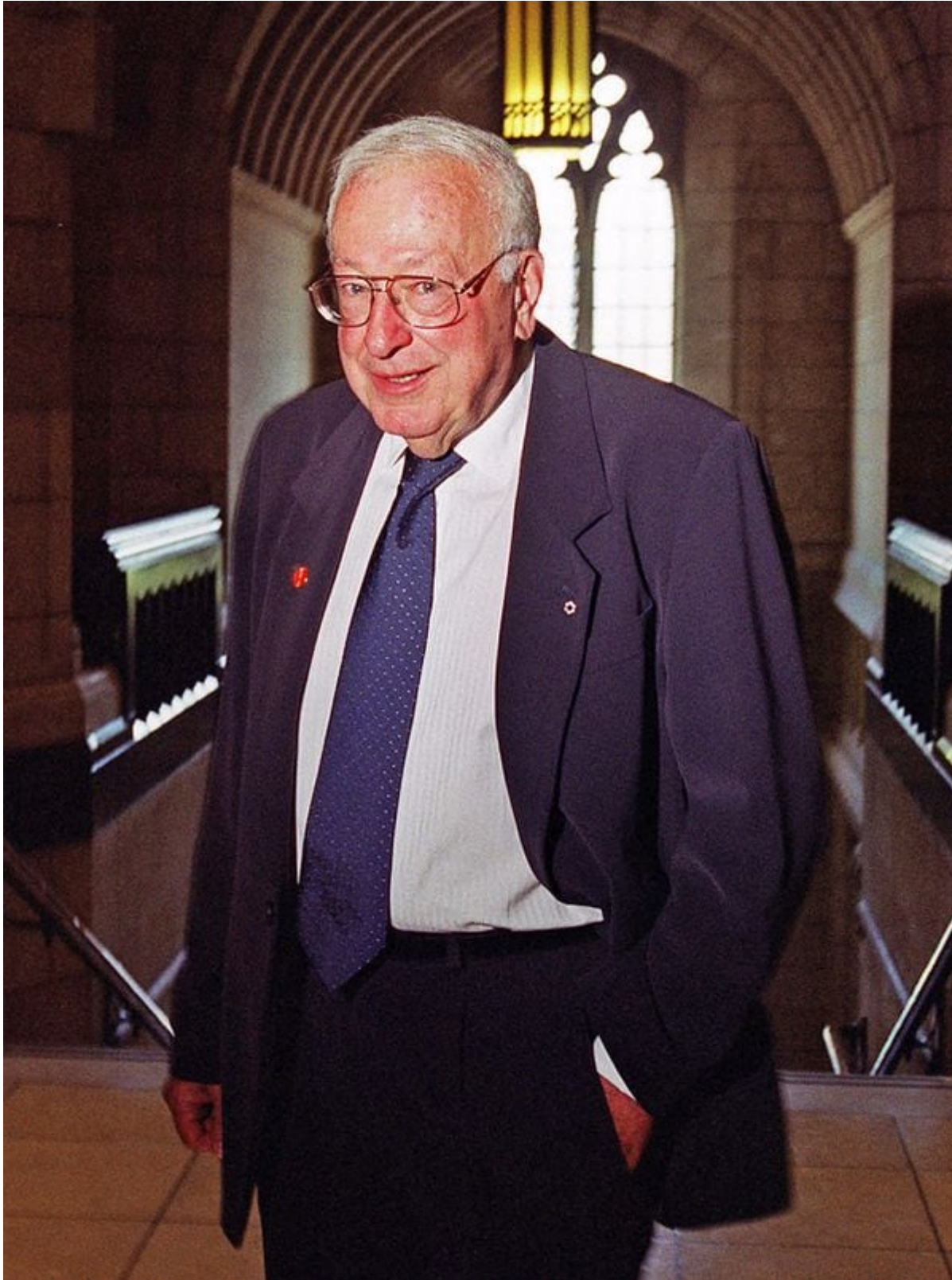
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Prime Minister Jean Chrétien named Raymond Setlakwe as the new senator from Quebec in 2000. Mr. Setlakwe was a businessman, long-time Liberal Party activist and personal friend of the prime minister. JONATHAN HAYWARD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

It was the year 2000 and Canada's Armenian community was still fighting for official Canadian recognition of the Armenian genocide that began in 1915, when an estimated 1.5 million Armenians living in Turkey were slaughtered in the dying days of the Ottoman empire.

"For 25 to 30 years, we had tried to introduce a resolution in the House of Commons recognizing the genocide, but there was opposition from the Turkish government, from lobby groups and from Foreign Affairs," recalled Aris Babikian, who was then a board member of the Armenian National Committee.

That year, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien named a new senator from Quebec, a businessman, long-time Liberal Party activist and personal friend of the prime minister, a man named Raymond Setlakwe. He was also a leading member of one of Canada's pioneering Armenian families.

"We knew that he was of Armenian background and that he was an old friend of Jean Chrétien," said Mr. Babikian, who is now a Progressive Conservative member of the Ontario Legislature for the Toronto riding of Scarborough-Agincourt.

Mr. Setlakwe, who died on Oct. 14 at the age of 93 in his hometown of Thetford Mines, Que., proved crucial in the fight to recognize the Armenian genocide. A Senate motion had been prepared by Shirley Maheu, a Montreal senator who was close to the Armenian community, but there remained ardent opposition to the idea, including within the Prime Minister's Office. The decision was taken to have the newly minted senator, Mr. Setlakwe, second the motion.

Despite the daunting odds, Mr. Setlakwe was reassuring. He told Mr. Babikian: "Leave it to me. I'll work it out." Bypassing senior officials in the PMO, Mr. Setlakwe spoke directly to Mr. Chrétien and secured his support. The Armenian group then got to speak directly to the Liberal caucus in the Senate. The motion acknowledging the Armenian genocide passed in 2002, creating a precedent copied two years later by the House of Commons.

"His intervention directly with Prime Minister Chrétien played an important role in swinging the pendulum" in our favour, Mr. Babikian said.

For Mr. Setlakwe, whose family had been touched directly by the massacres of Armenians in their native Turkey, it was also personal. Speaking to the Senate in March, 2001, Mr. Setlakwe recalled his grandfather's five brothers had died at the hands of the Turks, as had three of his mother's brothers.

Decades of ignoring the Armenian genocide had made it easier for genocidal regimes that came later, the senator said. "Had this been done before the Holocaust, Hitler would have not been able to say in 1939, 'Who remembers the Armenians?'"

"It's because humanity is far from being safe from a repetition of such a massacre that it's all the more important that this massacre be recognized," the senator continued. Mr. Setlakwe retired from the Senate two years later, at the mandatory age of 75, but was invited to be part of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's official delegation on a bilateral visit to Armenia in 2018.

Raymond Setlakwe was born in Thetford Mines on July 3, 1928, to Calil Setlakwe, a local merchant, and his wife, Nazlia Nakash. Raymond's grandfather, Aziz Setlakwe, arrived in Canada in 1904 and formed the foundation of a family that remains prominent in the business and community activities of the central Quebec region between Montreal and Quebec City.

Aziz was a trailblazer in the Armenian community, helping other migrants make their way in Canadian society, including Yousuf Karsh, the famous photographer, who settled in the nearby city of Sherbrooke as a young man.

In an area that is overwhelmingly French-Canadian, the Setlakwe name has always been distinctive. But it was also unusual for other reasons. The family's original surname was Sarafian, but it was changed after Aziz fled the Turkish city of Mardin, where his five brothers were killed in Turkish massacres during the 1890s. Setlakwe is a deformation of the phrase meaning "six brothers" in Arabic.

The Setlakwes established a dry-goods business in Thetford Mines that morphed into a department store as the town boomed because of its neighbouring asbestos mines. The mines have long since closed, but the city has developed a strong node of small and medium-sized manufacturers, and A. Setlakwe Ltd. still operates a chain of small department and women's clothing stores, and there's a family-run garment import business.

Mr. Setlakwe's granddaughter, Margo Setlakwe Blouin, recently took over leadership of the retail firm, marking the fifth generation of family ownership. A separate furniture business is run by another branch of the family.

Mr. Setlakwe attended Bishop's University, earning a bachelor's degree, and Laval University, where he graduated in law. He worked for a couple of years as a lawyer in Montreal but soon returned to Thetford Mines and the family business.

He became a fixture of the business community and was a member of the board of the local hospital foundation for 35 years. "He was the No. 1 ambassador for Thetford," former mayor Henri Julien said.

But politics was his passion. Mr. Setlakwe was a lifelong Liberal who boasted of meeting every Canadian prime minister since William Lyon Mackenzie King. He was such a political junkie, his son Paul recalled, that he always had a subscription to Hansard. Yet he never ran for elected office.

Mr. Setlakwe was named a member of the Order of Canada in 1996 and received an honorary doctorate from Bishop's University in 2003. In 2016, he received the Medal for Exceptional Merit from

the Lieutenant-Governor of Quebec. A skilled golfer, he was also an ardent downhill skier and hit the slopes until he turned 90. The main Setlakwe department store still includes an important sporting goods department.

Although he suffered from heart problems, Mr. Setlakwe remained active in the family business until recently, last going into the office a month before his death.

Mr. Setlakwe, who was predeceased by two of his siblings, leaves his wife, Yvette Bourque; brother, Stephen; four children, Louise, Paul, Ann and Robert; as well as six grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

**There are no comments yet.**