Renaude Lapointe
1912-2002

Renaude Lapointe was a respected Quebec based journalist who became Speaker of the Senate of Canada (1974-9) during the third administration of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

She had a number of ‘firsts’ to her credit. When she became a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1989, the citation declared: “This distinguished citizen has served her country and the status of women admirably through a wide range of activities. One of the first women to become a journalist and then editorial writer of a daily French-language newspaper, she was the first Franco-phone woman to become Speaker of the Senate of Canada.”

Born in Disraeli, Quebec, she originally trained in music and joined Le Soleil as a music and drama critic, working in that role throughout the 1940s and 1950s. She became a writer for La Presse from 1959 to 1971. In addition, she worked as correspondent for Time and Life magazines as well as the CBC International Service. In recognition of the respect in which
she was held, Ms. Lapointe was named Canadian Journalist of the Year, 1965. She also became the biographer of Monsignor Joseph Charbonneau, Catholic Archbishop of Montreal, who had courageously supported the Asbestos workers’ strike in 1949 in the face of the opposition of the Duplessis government.

In 1971 Pierre Trudeau appointed her to the Senate, and she served until her retirement in January 1987. Other women had created some ‘firsts’ before her in the Senate: Cairine Wilson, from Ontario, became in 1948 the first woman to chair a standing committee (Immigration and Labour) while Muriel McQueen, from New Brunswick, became the first woman Speaker (1972) and immediately appointed the first women pages.

Those years 1974-9 were perhaps not the most interesting parliamentary period of the Trudeau prime ministership as Canada was struggling with soaring inflation and there was no hint of glasnost during Leonid Brezhnev’s regime. After her period as Speaker, Senator Lapointe served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during a much livelier time.

When she died in May 2002, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien issued a statement saying he was deeply saddened by the news of the death of “a remarkable woman, respected by everyone who knew her as an excellent journalist and a Senator without peer”. He added, after a reference to her record as Speaker: “She again proved herself to be a trailblazer as a member of the Group of 78, who signed in 1981 a declaration calling on Canada to place the needs of the world’s poor at the centre of our international agenda. Like so many issues that Renaude Lapointe took to heart, this is still of great relevance today.”