

Regional representation - and a lot of men named William. Analysis of Canadian ministers shows how building a cabinet shapes a nation

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FULL TEXT



Does she represent the eastern provinces or the West Coast? Does he live in a city suburb or a rural riding? Do we

need another lawyer, or should we tap a physician? Can they speak English and French?

These questions, along with a potential candidate's gender, ethnicity and leadership abilities, are among the many things prime ministers consider when choosing the right number —and right mix —of cabinet ministers.

Add in the behind-the-scenes drama of rewards and demotions within a political party, and forming a federal cabinet is both a messy and high-stakes affair.

With MPs returning to the House of Commons this week, the Star undertook a data analysis of cabinet ministers and prime ministers sworn in at the start of each federal government since 1867.

The analysis highlights trends in gender, age, profession and the home region of cabinet ministers to reveal how the makeup of federal cabinets has changed (or has not changed) in Canada's 152-year history.

"It's not just checking boxes," said Erin Tolley, professor of political science at the University of Toronto.

"Representation really matters in cabinets. Research shows that when people see themselves reflected in institutions, they perceive those institutions to be more legitimate, more fair and more democratic, and they feel more included."

We chose to look at cabinet ministers at the beginning of a federal government because this is when prime ministers set the tone and expectation for their years of governing. Our analysis does not include cabinet ministers who were added or removed during cabinet shuffles. It also does not look at the ethnic diversity of federal cabinets because Canada's Library of Parliament does not officially record the ethnicity of members of parliament.

Our data visualizations —a kind of visual history of federal cabinets —don't tell the whole story of these powerful groups of people.

Rather, they are snapshots that reveal trends, historical curiosities and the highs and lows of political parties.

In 2015, during his first statement as Canada's 23rd prime minister, Justin Trudeau told Canadians he had formed a federal cabinet "that looks like Canada."

Take a look below to see for yourself how the composition of federal cabinets have changed over time.

There is a bit of truth mixed in with Canadian political lore that, in the country's early years, the size of a federal cabinet was partly determined by how easily ministers could fit around the cabinet room table.

John A. Macdonald's first cabinet in 1867 was a baker's dozen —12 ministers plus himself as prime minister.

Even during these earliest days of government, Macdonald was mindful to have an even spread of ministers representing the four provinces which were then part of the nascent country. In 1867, for his first federal cabinet, he chose two cabinet ministers from Nova Scotia, two from New Brunswick, five from Ontario and four from Quebec.

It's a historical precedent that has since dogged every Canadian prime minister, says J.P. Lewis, a political scientist at the University of New Brunswick.

"Macdonald's concern for regional representation has stayed the test of time; it's stayed at the centre of a prime minister's concerns when forming cabinet."

In other parliamentary systems, such as those in Australia, New Zealand or the United Kingdom, regional representation matters when forming a cabinet, but "way, way, way less than in Canada," says Graham White, a retired professor of political science at the University of Toronto Mississauga.

"Canada has an unusually large cabinet and regional representation is the main reason why," he said. "Initially a prime minister had to have ministers from all four provinces. But it (representation) evolved into having an Anglo-Protestant from Quebec, or a Catholic in Ontario or a minister from the prairies...and on it went like that."

For the first 100 years, prime ministers also had religion top of mind when selecting cabinet ministers, a consideration often second only to regional representation, says White, noting it was primarily a tension between balancing the number of Protestants and Catholics in cabinet.

But by the 1970s, White adds, a cabinet minister's religion was less important, a sign of growing secularism in Canada.

When it comes to regional representation, there are two trends long understood by political scientists.

Conservative prime ministers often struggle to appoint enough cabinet ministers from Quebec or big cities, while

Liberal prime ministers sometimes, as in the case of 2019, are unable to fill cabinet posts from traditionally more conservative provinces.

Lewis, who is writing a book on Canadian cabinets, recalls two instances where these trends caused headaches for the affected prime minister and caught the country by surprise.

“Progressive Conservative John Diefenbaker struggled with cabinet representation from Quebec his entire time as prime minister,” Lewis said.

Fast forward 50 years and Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper had a hard time winning seats in big Canadian cities in the 2006 election. Lewis says Harper’s solution was to appoint a senator from Quebec to appease Montreal residents and convince David Emerson, a Liberal MP from Vancouver, to cross the floor to join his conservative cabinet.

“No one saw that coming.”

With a smile and clever quip, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made headlines around the world four years ago when he unveiled Canada’s first half-female federal cabinet.

His now-famous explanation for gender parity —“because it’s 2015” —marked a historic milestone for women on Parliament Hill.

It took 148 years to achieve.

For most of Canadian history, men have held the balance of power in the cabinet room.

Prior to 2015, a total of 34 different women had been cabinet ministers at the swearing in of a new federal government, compared to a total of 413 different men.

This is according to a Star analysis of all prime ministers and cabinet ministers, as chosen at the start of each parliament since 1867. (The Star analysis did not include cabinet ministers added or removed during cabinet shuffles).

To underscore the historical underrepresentation of female cabinet ministers, consider that 22 of the 413 men in the Star analysis are named William or Bill —just 12 fewer than the total number of women cabinet ministers at the start of governments between 1867 and 2015.

Ellen Fairclough, an accountant from Hamilton, became the first female cabinet minister in 1957, almost four decades after women won the right to run for federal office.

Appointed secretary of state by Progressive Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker during his first term in office, Fairclough was later shuffled to two other ministerial posts, including Postmaster General.

Throughout her six-year tenure in cabinet, Fairclough faced pointed criticism for her conservative policies and cutting remarks on her outfits, particularly her hats.

Still, by most accounts, Fairclough was proud of her place in parliament.

In 1985, at the age of 80, she told the Star she was never uncomfortable being the only woman in Diefenbaker’s cabinet. “I had worked all my life in a male-dominated atmosphere, and the male sex held no terror for me. It never occurred to me to be cowed by them.”

Judy LaMarsh, an outspoken and highly qualified lawyer from Ontario, became the second female cabinet minister in Canadian history when Liberal prime minister Lester B. Pearson took office in 1963.

LaMarsh, whose initial post was minister of national health and welfare and minister of amateur sport, was the sole female cabinet minister during Pearson’s time in office, despite other strong female MPs in his caucus.

Canadian political scientists often refer to a story from the 1965 election when liberal candidate Pauline Jewett asked Pearson if she could serve as a cabinet minister.

“He said something along the lines of: ‘I already have a woman in the cabinet and I don’t think she (LaMarsh) wants to leave,’” says Susan Franceschet, a political scientist at the University of Calgary.

“What that shows you is at that time, having a single woman cabinet minister was not just the minimum, it was also the maximum.”

That sentiment is underscored by the Star’s gender analysis, which found there were two male cabinet ministers named William during each of Fairclough’s and LaMarsh’s tenures in cabinet. In other words, there were two

Williams for every woman.

A further detail that emphasizes how exceptional it was for a woman to be a cabinet minister —and how unprepared government was for women in office —is that there was no women’s washroom near the cabinet room in the 1960s.

When LaMarsh was a cabinet minister, a male colleague had to stand guard outside the men’s washroom while she used the facilities, according to the 1994 book “The Gilded Ghetto: Women and Political Power in Canada” by Sydney Sharpe.

A decade of having a lone woman at the cabinet table ended in 1968 when Liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau swept to power. Surprising some, he didn’t nominate a female cabinet minister during his entire first term.

“That was noticed,” said Franceschet, who is also co-author of the 2019 book “Cabinets, Ministers, and Gender.” Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, as prime ministers announced new cabinets and cabinet shuffles, journalists quickly calculated —and sought comment on —the number of female cabinet ministers. Most news reports cited experts who underscored the need for more women at the cabinet table.

In 2006, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper was criticized for appointing fewer female cabinet ministers than his Liberal predecessors. At the time of swearing in for his second term in 2008, however, women made up 30 per cent of his 27-person cabinet.

Now that Prime Minister Trudeau has formed two gender-equal cabinets, Franceschet says it will be difficult for future prime ministers to ignore this new norm when forming government.

While some research suggests that women in cabinet can influence policy outcomes, Franceschet says the more important consideration for having a gender-balanced cabinet is the symbolic message it sends to society.

“It signals to women and to girls that politics is not just for men. When more women are in visible political positions, more are willing to be in politics, more are willing to talk about politics with friends and family; it really is hugely important for society.”

As we enter a new decade —and mark 101 years since Canada allowed women to run for federal office —Franceschet wonders: Do we want more women in cabinet? Or do we want more women in prominent cabinet posts?

“That’s what we need to watch for in the future.”

At the close of 2019, with ‘OK, boomer!’ and other generational clashes playing out on social media, it’s interesting to consider the age ranges of cabinet ministers over time.

Instinct might lead you to guess most cabinet ministers as senior citizens, since top positions in government, board rooms and other positions of power seem to be dominated by older generations.

“Actually, there aren’t too many oldsters,” said Graham White, a retired professor of political science at the University of Toronto Mississauga. “People always think that an awful lot of old guys have been in cabinet but there haven’t been too many cabinet ministers in the over-70 crowd.”

A Star analysis found only 24 occurrences where a minister was 70 or older at the start of each parliament since 1867. These occurrences involved 19 different ministers.

Richard William Scott, secretary of state in Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier’s 1905 Liberal government, is the oldest cabinet minister in the Star analysis. Scott was a few weeks shy of his 80th birthday at the start of the 10th parliament —nearly 40 years past the average life expectancy for 1900. In his previous terms as cabinet minister, Scott was 75 at the start of the 9th parliament and 71 at the start of the 8th.

The same Star analysis of prime ministers and cabinet ministers found most in their 50s at the beginning of their cabinet term. (The analysis did not include cabinet ministers added or removed during cabinet shuffles).

White notes that a subtle shift occurs around the 1950s, when more cabinet ministers started their term in their 40s.

“I can offer a guess to why that is,” said White, author of the 2005 book “Cabinets and First Ministers.”

“Up until that point, all the men typically had fairly long careers before getting into politics. More recently, it’s easier to get into politics at a younger age...so what we now have, in effect, are more professional politicians.”

In 1984, Progressive Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney's first government had the largest proportion of cabinet ministers in their 40s, according to the Star analysis. Sixty-three per cent of his 27-person cabinet were in their 40s.

Erin Tolley, a political scientist at the University of Toronto, says that while experience matters in forming a federal cabinet, age is rarely a consideration on its own.

"It becomes a proxy for other things," she said. "A prime minister will want a mix of ministers on cabinet; some who are experienced and who have served in cabinet or held other leadership positions. But they will also want to balance that off with fresh faces and new perspectives."

Most Canadians will guess that many politicians on Parliament Hill boast a background in law.

And one look at the great swath of red, stretching from 1867 to 2019, in our Star visualization clearly – and quickly – shows just how much law professionals have dominated federal cabinets.

A Star analysis of all prime ministers and cabinet ministers, as chosen at the start of each parliament since 1867, found that 44 per cent had (or have) law backgrounds. The Star grouped lawyers, barristers, law professors and paralegals as law professionals. Our analysis did not include cabinet ministers added or removed during cabinet shuffles.

"We have been overrepresented by lawyers, which is a very important point," said David Zussman, a professor in the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. "The way people do their work is very much a reflection of what their professional training is.

"As a lawyer, you'll approach your work in a certain way, which is legalistic. A lot of your analysis, the framework around which you make your decisions, will be legally bound."

On the other hand, he adds, those with backgrounds in social activism, science or history, will bring a different, and just as valuable, set of skills to the job.

"They will look at issues in a different way and come up with slightly different policy responses."

Zussman says one of the reasons so many lawyers become politicians is that the law is among the few professions that makes it easy for people to step in and out for political service.

Of course, cabinet ministers and prime ministers without a law background left an imprint on Canada.

A Star analysis found, among other things, a cabinet minister with a farming background was included in all but nine initial cabinets of the 43 governments; after the mid-1930s, a teacher or professor was included as a cabinet minister at the start of each new government; and cabinets at the beginning of the 2015 and 2019 governments had the largest breadth of professional backgrounds.

Interestingly, several cabinet ministers in the early half of the 1900s have 'gentleman' listed as their profession.

Zussman, a member of the 1993 transition team for Jean Chrétien's government, says that having a mix of professional backgrounds on federal cabinet could, in theory, lead to fairer, more rounded policies.

"We are sensitive to gender because women see things differently than men. We say older people see things differently than younger people. I'm not sure we've yet come to the conclusion that lawyers see things differently than nonlawyers."

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Data for the Star analysis was obtained from Canada's Library of Parliament PARLINFO site.

The analysis includes cabinet ministers and prime ministers sworn in at the start of each federal government since 1867. It does not include cabinet ministers added or removed during shuffles. It also excludes members of cabinet without cabinet minister posts.

Megan Ogilvie is a Toronto-based data reporter. Follow her on Twitter: @megan_ogilvie

CAPTION: What goes into the making of a cabinet? A Star analysis of historical appointments shows the evolution of Canada's government.

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