

Former Parliamentarians award former Senator Kirby, mental health advocate

By ALEX VRONCES

The Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians (CAFP) is recognizing former Liberal Senator Michael Kirby with its Distinguished Service Award on June 9 in Ottawa.

The award recognizes former Parliamentarians who have made “exceptional contributions” in their public service to Canada and who “demonstrate continued interest and activity in the promotion of human welfare, human rights, and parliamentary democracy in Canada and in other parts of the world.”

“I really feel honoured,” said Mr. Kirby. “To be recognized by all parties is very touching, because it is not something I would have ever expected.”

CAFP members can nominate former Parliamentarians for the award and a selection committee headed by the president chooses the recipient. House Speaker Andrew Scheer (Regina-Qu’Appelle, Sask.)

and Senate Speaker Noel Kinsella will present Mr. Kirby with the award on Monday.

Mr. Kirby, 72, was born in Montreal and earned his PhD in applied mathematics from Illinois’ Northwestern University in 1965. He said the analytical skills he picked up and refined throughout his schooling substantially contributed to his success in public office, and a large part of this success was owed to his penchant for problem solving.

From 1980 to 1983, Mr. Kirby served as secretary to the Cabinet for federal-provincial relations and deputy clerk of the Privy Council and served as the senior bureaucratic advisor to the then-prime minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

He said he devoted the majority of his time and energy in this role to the constitutional file, which eventually led to the patriation of Canada’s Constitution.

In 1984, he was appointed to the Senate by prime minister Trudeau, where he would

spend his next 23 years and do some of his most prominent work.

While chairing the Standing Senate Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce from 1994 to 1999, then-deputy minister of health David Dodge approached Mr. Kirby to assume a new role. Mr. Kirby said the deputy minister was looking for somebody who would assess Canada’s health-care system “outside of the orthodoxy.”

That meant becoming chair of the Senate Social Affairs Committee, a position he held from 1999 to 2006 and led him to the cause that still consumes his professional life today.

After talking with other members of the committee about what they would tackle next, Mr. Kirby said he noticed that each had an extended family member who suffered from a mental illness and couldn’t get adequate help.

“Health is always looked at from the neck down, not from the neck up,” said Mr. Kirby,



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before talking about the 2006 report the committee released on mental health in Canada. “We pulled mental health out of the shadows at last... It was the first-ever national report on mental health,” said Mr. Kirby.

In 2006, Mr. Kirby retired from the Senate and, not more than a year later, went on to chair the then newly-created Mental Health Commission of Canada at Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) request. In 2008, he was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Canada, at least in part “for his leadership of the Mental Health Commission of Canada,” according to his proclamation.

Mr. Kirby currently serves as the founding chair to the Partners for Mental Health, a national charity devoted to changing the way we think about mental health. He said he realized a few years ago that the missing piece to the mental health puzzle was a grassroots organization that would “mobilize Canadians so that mental health never goes back into the shadows again,” and he is trying to fill that gap. But he said there is still plenty of work to do.

Though the former Senator said he still enjoys solving problems, he said there may not be another big one to solve on his agenda.

“My God, I’m turning 73 this summer,” said Mr. Kirby when asked about what’s next for him, before he let out a loud laugh over the telephone. “I never planned any of the other things I did, so we’ll have to wait and see.”

“For a guy who likes solving problems,” he said, “this has got to have been an ideal career.”

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Previous Recipients of the Former Parliamentarians Association’s Distinguished Service Award

2014	Liberal Michael Kirby
2013	NDP Bill Blaikie
2012	Progressive Conservative Walter McLean
2011	Progressive Conservative Jim Hawkes
2010	Liberal Keith Penner
2009	Progressive Conservative Douglas Roche
2008	Liberal Sheila Finestone
2007	Liberal Jacques Hébert
2006	Progressive Conservative Wilton (Willie) Littlechild, Q.C.
2005	Liberal J. Roland Comtois
2004	Progressive Conservative Bruce Halliday
2003	Liberal Aideen Nicholson
2002	Liberal John M. Reid
2001	Douglas M. Fisher
2000	Progressive Conservative Stan Darling
1999	Liberal John Ross Matheson

Source: Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians