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Community leaders, sponsors, and supporters in Ottawa for the introduction of Bill S-248

Canadian Heritage Month Bill gains national momentum

— Our Caribbean community is moving closer to receiving formal national recognition with the introduction of federal legislation seeking to designate July as Caribbean Heritage Month. Community leaders say the proposed legislation reflects the longstanding contributions, cultural presence, and enduring nation-building role of Caribbean Canadians across the country.

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Ottawa – Canada's Caribbean community is celebrating the introduction of federal legislation seeking to formally designate July as Caribbean Heritage Month (CHM), marking what supporters describe as a significant step toward long-awaited national recognition for one of the country's most vibrant and influential diasporas.

Bill S-248, the Caribbean Heritage Month Act, was introduced in the Senate by the Senator Paulette Senior, and has already received public backing from an unofficial coalition of leading Caribbean organisations across Canada.

Supporters of the bill say the legislation represents more than symbolic recognition. They argue it acknowledges centuries of Caribbean presence in Canada, while affirming the community's contributions to the country's cultural, economic, political, and social development.

Canada's Caribbean connection dates back to the late 18th century, with migration from the region continuing steadily over generations. According to the 2016 Census, approximately 750,000 Canadians identified as having Caribbean origins. Community advocates estimate that figure has now surpassed one million people nationwide.

Today, Caribbean communities form an important part of the social fabric of major Canadian cities, including Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Vancouver.

Historical data has also shown periods of rapid demographic growth within the Caribbean-Canadian population. Between 1996 and 2001, Canada's overall population grew by four percent, while the Caribbean-Canadian population increased by 11 percent.

Ryan Singh, Chair and founder of the Indo-Caribbean Canadian Association, described the proposed legislation as overdue recognition for a community whose roots in Canada stretch back centuries.

"Appropriate recognition of the Caribbean diaspora, which has been part of Canada for several centuries and continues to contribute to the country's multicultural mosaic, is long overdue," Singh said.

He added, "The diversity of the Caribbean has strengthened Canada's own diversity. Caribbean Canadians deserve to be acknowledged for their lasting impact. We are here, and we should be seen, heard, and recognised."

Singh added that the proposed legislation carries significance not only for Caribbean Canadians, but for the broader Canadian identity itself.

"This bill is not only important to Caribbean Canadians, it is significant to Canada's nationhood," he said.

Supporters of the legislation point to the Caribbean community's extensive footprint across Canadian life, from entrepreneurship, academia, public service, and politics, to sports, music, literature, cuisine, and cultural celebrations.

Among the most visible examples is the Toronto Caribbean Carnival, regarded as the largest Caribbean cultural celebration outside the Caribbean region itself and one of Canada's largest annual cultural festivals.

Jennifer Hirlehey, Executive Chair of the Festival Management Committee, said the scale and impact of Caribbean cultural

Senator Paulette Senior (left) with ICCA's Ryan Singh

expression in Canada warrant formal national recognition.

"Each year, hundreds of thousands of people come together to celebrate and enjoy Caribbean culture in Toronto at the Toronto Caribbean Carnival – our economic impact and culture are deserving of recognition," Hirlehey said.

She added that Caribbean Heritage Month would provide an important opportunity to deepen cultural understanding while celebrating the openness and inclusivity that define Caribbean traditions.

"Caribbean culture is vibrant, lively, and inclusive. It represents the best of Canada," Hirlehey said.

"That is why Caribbean Heritage Month is so important; we will use this opportunity to share the joy and passion of our people with everyone," she stated.

Advocates also note that the proposed legislation arrives amid strengthening diplomatic and economic ties between Canada and the Caribbean region.

In October 2023, Canada hosted the first Canada-Caricom Summit in Ottawa under the theme Strategic Partners for a Resilient Future. The summit brought together then-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Caribbean Community (Caricom) leaders to advance discussions on trade, investment, sustainable development, and multilateral cooperation.

Community leaders say those state-level partnerships mirror the longstanding familial, cultural, and economic ties maintained by Caribbean Canadians whose identities and relationships continue to bridge both regions.

Before becoming law, Bill S-248 must complete several stages of the federal legislative process, including second reading, committee review, and third reading in the Senate.

If passed by the Senate, the bill would move to the House of Commons, where MP Michael Coteau (Scarborough-Woburn), has committed to sponsoring the legislation.

The bill would then undergo a similar parliamentary process in the House of Commons before potentially receiving Royal Assent.

Despite the remaining legislative hurdles, supporters of the initiative say they remain optimistic that parliamentarians from all parties will support the measure and formally recognise the enduring legacy and contributions of Caribbean Canadians to the country's evolving multicultural story.