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Rookie senators hope to keep day jobs after they move into the red chamber

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The Canadian Press

MONTREAL - One of Canada's new senators planned to keep working as a TV hockey analyst, and another hoped to remain mayor of his Quebec town.

Despite his appointment this week, Jacques Demers will still be commenting on Montreal Canadiens games for RDS network and will also cover Team Canada at the Olympics.

"I'd asked the people from Mr. Harper's office and they got back to me and said it was no problem that I could continue doing both jobs," Demers said in an interview Friday.

"I don't know the schedule. I don't know what's the plan, how many times they meet at the Senate. I don't know none of that right now. But obviously, at Mr. Harper's level, the people I've spoken to, there was no problem."

Claude Carignan wasn't so lucky.

Also appointed this week, Carignan initially expressed his wish to remain mayor of St-Eustache in a statement posted Thursday on the city's website.

But the next day, the Prime Minister's Office declared he would resign the mayoralty and Carignan issued a

statement saying he would not, in fact, seek re-election this fall.

Word that both men would hope to keep their day jobs while drawing \$132,000 for sitting in Canada's Parliament raises some questions about the role of the red chamber: What does it do? What authority does it have? And does Canada need it?

Parliamentary expert Ned Franks estimates that, in the last decade, senators have spent an average of 70 days a year sitting in Parliament, which he says is about a third of what the average Canadian spends at work.

Senators also adhere to looser conflict-of-interest rules than MPs, he added. The original purpose of the Senate, he said, was to allow wealthy landowners to gain political power while maintaining their personal incomes.

"Sitting in the senate and having another job is not impossible," said Franks, professor emeritus at Queen's University.

Many Canadians might not be aware of this but, in theory, the Senate is virtually identical to the House of Commons in its role and power.

On one side of the Peace Tower, the green-coloured House of Commons can

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propose legislation, vote on it three times, study it at parliamentary committees, and send it down the hallway for final approval.

So it's shuffled off to the other side of the Peace Tower - to the red senatorial chamber. On this side, members can also propose legislation, vote on it three times, study it at parliamentary committees and send it down the hallway for final approval.

Like their cousins in the Commons, senators can sit in cabinet and, in theory, also become prime minister.

But there's a big difference between the two chambers: one side is elected, the other side isn't.

For that reason the Senate rarely dares to block legislation sent its way by the democratically elected Commons, and proposes far fewer bills than its elected counterpart down the hall.

There's another major difference between the chambers: the House of Commons is frequently a frenzied forum for partisan shouting matches and name-calling.

Senators, who don't have to fear such trifling matters as getting re-elected, tend to treat each other more respectfully and, when they discuss legislation, are far less likely to spew partisan soundbites for the assembled TV cameras. Very few TV cameras bother covering the Senate's activities. In fact, cameras aren't even allowed inside the chamber.

At least one senator did become a leader of the opposition. Former prime minister Arthur Meighen was named to the Senate and, from his plush red chair,

was chosen leader of the Conservative party in 1941.

The power doesn't end there.

If the Governor General one day deems that Demers, the jovial hockey analyst, has the confidence of the House of Commons, he could technically become the country's prime minister, Franks said.

But on the day of their nominations, these senate rookies seemed to have their ambitions set on less lofty places than the prime minister's chair.

"We're going to check with lawyers to see if there's a possibility to keep both (jobs), but that's what I intend to do if I get the opportunity," Carignan said when asked if he plans to give up the mayor's seat.

The 44-year-old, who ran unsuccessfully for the Conservatives in last fall's federal election, also has a private law practice and sits as vice-president of Quebec's union of municipalities.

He said he wanted to give up his two other jobs while remaining mayor and senator. But constitutional experts say that's impossible.

Stephane Beaulac, a constitutional lawyer at the Université de Montréal, said that kind of double-dipping would have been impossible under Quebec law.

"It's not because of federal law - it's because of provincial law that he becomes unable to keep his functions as mayor," Beaulac said.

Harper has tried to democratize the Senate by creating elections and setting term limits.

But a number of experts, provincial premiers, and the opposition say that could create a variety of new problems: more partisanship, legislative gridlock between the houses of Parliament, and less power for under-represented Western Canada.

Changing the seat distribution would require contentious constitutional negotiations between the provinces and federal government.

Rejean Tremblay, a sports columnist at La Presse newspaper, offers another possible solution to the Senate jigsaw puzzle. It's the same solution favoured by the Bloc Québécois and NDP: abolition.

He wrote in Friday's paper that he admired Demers a friend. But he questioned how the semi-literate hockey coach could serve in Canada's Parliament.

"How will Jacques Demers be able to carry on a conversation with senators like Jean-Claude Rivest and Marcel Prud'homme, two seasoned politicians who are great specialists in Canadian affairs? How will he be able to prepare for debates?" Tremblay wrote.

"I've been in favour of abolishing the Senate for many years. Maybe this (Demers nomination) is a step in the right direction."