

Written by Patricia Turnier  
Monday, 05 March 2012 23:41

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Honourable Dr. -Senator Oliver was born in 1938 in Wolfville (Nova Scotia), Canada. He is the son of the late Helena and Clifford H. Oliver. [Senator](#) Oliver is a descendant of African-American slave refugees who came to Canada during the War of 1812. Nova Scotia is home to (Canadian) descendants of U.S. slavery. For more than 400 years, Blacks have been an integral part of the warp and weave of Canadian society and economy. Some were refugees from the United States, others were Black Loyalists (inhabitants of British America of African descent who joined British colonial forces during the American Revolutionary War) and so on. For instance, as an interpreter for the French and Natives in the early 1600s, Mathieu da Costa, a free man, undoubtedly played a role in the development of the fur trade industry along the Atlantic seacoast. Today, there are more than 800,000 Blacks in Canada and Statistics Canada projects that number will be more than double by 2031.

With long and deep ties to Canadian culture and history, Sen. Oliver is the nephew of Canadian opera singer Portia White and labor union activist Jack White; he is also the cousin of political strategist Shelia White and a descendant of politician Bill White. The latter, his maternal grandfather William A. White was born in 1874 to ex-slave parents in Virginia. He migrated to Canada in 1900, after a Canadian teacher of his in the U.S. state of Maryland impressed him so much that he perceived Canada as a land of opportunity for Blacks. He would later become Canada's first Black military officer and a chaplain.

Sen. Oliver's family is one of Canada's most prominent Black families. Sen. Oliver is currently one of two Black Conservative politicians in the Canadian Senate and has been active in politics for decades. Hence, he served as Director, Legal Affairs for the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) in six consecutive general elections, 1972-88; he also held many Executive Offices with the CPC - as National Vice President (Atlantic region), Director of the PCP Canada Fund, and a member of the Audit Committee of this Fund. Furthermore, Hon. -Sen. -Oliver served for years as Constitution Chairman and was a member of the Finance Committee for the Progressive Conservative Association of Nova Scotia. He is a former Vice-President of that Party.

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On September 7th, 1990, Sen. Oliver was summoned to the Senate for Nova Scotia upon the recommendation of then Prime Minister of Canada the Right Honourable Brian Mulroney. He became the first Afro-Canadian man appointed to the Senate. In the Red Chamber, he was Chairman of many standing committees, such as Transport and Communications; Banking, Trade and Commerce; Agriculture and Forestry and Human Rights. Senator Oliver was also Co-chair of the Special Joint Committee on a Code of Conduct for Parliamentarians. He has worked on a number of Private Members' Bills, including one to amend sections of the criminal code dealing with stalking and, more recently, a bill to address the issue of SPAM. Since his appointment to the Red Chamber, Senator Oliver has fought tirelessly for the rights and interests of minority groups in Canada, and has been an active member of over a dozen Senate committees. Prior to his appointment to the Senate, he was a barrister, professor, entrepreneur and social advocate.

Regarding more specifically his law career, he practised law in Halifax between 1965 and 1990 in civil litigation with Stewart McKelvey Stirling Scales as a partner. Subsequently, he worked at two other law firms for a total of 36 years. He taught at the Law School of the University of Dalhousie for 14 years as well as at Technical University of Nova Scotia and St. Mary's University. In addition, he was a Consultant, Advisor and Director of several companies. He is a former member of the Canada Council Investment Committee and ex-Director on the Advisory Board, AT&T.

Throughout his career, Hon. Sen. Oliver has demonstrated, and continues to demonstrate, his commitment to guaranteeing equality for all Canadians. Most recently, he raised \$500,000 to lead the first national study conducted in Canada that proves the business case for diversity. Senator Oliver continues to do great work inside and outside the Senate. Moreover, he became the first African-Canadian to hold the position of Speaker pro tempore of the Senate. The Deputy Speaker acts and presides over the Senate Chamber when the Speaker, the Honourable Noël Kinsella, is not present.

Senator Oliver has been featured in several publications such as *Sway Magazine*, *Who's who in Black Canada*

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*Journey: African Canadian History*

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*Some Black Men*

. Moreover, he wrote for

*The Nova Scotia Black Community & Diaspora: Models of Upward Mobility*

. In February 2008, Senator Donald Oliver introduced a motion to have the Senate officially

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recognize February as Black History Month which received unanimous approval and was adopted on March 4, 2008. His contribution to the Black community has been recognized. Thus, on January 15, 2011, Senator Oliver received the Martin Luther King Life Achievement Award from DreamKEEPERS.

To summarize, Mr. Oliver has advanced public policy in areas ranging from finance, agriculture, forestry, communications and transportation to banking, trade, and commerce, but is most notably recognized as an advocate for human rights, employment equity and corporate responsibility. Senator Oliver wears many hats: lawyer, farmer, politician, author, teacher, a developer and businessman. On March 4, 2010, Oliver was named Speaker pro tempore of the Senate of Canada. In addition, Senator Donald Oliver is an honorary patron with Canadian Crossroads International and a Queen's Counsel. With a political life spanning over 50 years, Sen. Oliver has served as Director, Legal Affairs in six general federal election campaigns with the CPC - 1972, 1974, 1979, 1980, 1984, and 1988.

On a personal level, Senator Oliver is married to Mrs. Linda Oliver (née MacLellan) – a telecommunications consultant. The couple has one daughter, Carolynn Oliver. When not in Ottawa, Sen. Oliver resides on his farm in Queens County, Nova Scotia. The family enjoys Alpine skiing, golf, travel and gardening. *On October 3rd 2011, Mega Diversities had the pleasure to speak to Hon. Senator Oliver.*



**PATRICIA TURNIER, LL.M TALKS TO THE HONORABLE SENATOR OLIVER, LL.D:**

**P.T. You are the proud nephew of the late Portia White, the international singer considered as Canada's Marian Anderson. If a biopic were to be made about her life, which actress would you like to portray her and why?**

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**Hon. Sen. O.** I would like it to be Oprah Winfrey because I believe she is the one who can deliver an excellent and compelling performance regarding my late aunt. She is established, a very professional and high caliber actress. I strongly believe that her portrayal of Portia would do her justice. Both women became trailblazers in their own right. Furthermore, Oprah has a global reach, so it would be a wonderful way to pay tribute to my aunt on an international level. This would give an opportunity to the world to know more about Portia. I definitely think that Oprah would be the classic and right choice to play the role.

### **P.T. Growing up who inspired you to become the man that you are today?**

**Hon. Sen. O.** That's really an interesting question. I think that there are a number of people. However, it starts with my parents. They had a huge impact on me. From my father, I learned everything about work ethic. He always believed in work and thought there was dignity in labor. He taught me that you always have to do your best in any tasks you undertake. You can't succeed by being idler. You need to have integrity by delivering the work you say you will do, avoiding white lies and so on. Moreover, he told me that while you are doing a task always keep in mind that someone is watching, so always make sure that you stand out.

My mother was more artistic. She was an accomplished pianist and a great singer like her sister. So, she taught me a lot about discipline and determination. This is how you become a great musician or you excel in any other spheres. In addition, my brother Rev. Dr. William P. Oliver is a Baptist preacher who inspired me. He has a church in Halifax. He taught me about giving back to the community. He devoted his life to his church.

He got involved in activism regarding systemic discrimination and racism. It always has been important for him to improve the quality of life of people. It never was only about preaching with him. He managed to be out there to break down barriers and to be unafraid to challenge the status quo. During my youth, I personally devoted a lot of time in the Baptist church.

From a political point of view, the late Robert Stanfield, the 17th Premier of Nova Scotia (who brought the first form of Medicare among other accomplishments) and who later became leader of the federal Progressive Conservative Party of Canada , inspired me. He is considered one of Canada's most distinguished and respected statesmen. He gave me guidance in my political career. Also, the fact that my uncle Bill White was a politician, the first Black Canadian to run for federal office in Canada definitely shaped me. It was instrumental having people in my

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environment worthy of emulation.

To conclude, I got the drive and diligence from my parents in terms of work ethic. Other members of my family such as Jack White, a labour union activist and a pioneer as the first Afro-Canadian to run for election to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, also influenced me. Having uprightness and high standards as guides, I dedicated my life by adhering to my commitment to serve others. My brother's spirituality and activism have really been an important part of my life. These components shaped, molded and influenced me to become the man that I am today.

**P.T. What does it mean to you to be the first Afro-Canadian male Senator, Queen Counsel and Speaker pro tempore in the country's history?**

**Hon. Sen. O.** It is a huge honor. I have to pinch myself from time to time to make sure that it is not a dream [Laughs]. For me, it is also a great opportunity to serve the Canadian citizens and the global community. It is an opportunity to be an agent of change by promoting diversity and other important issues, such as fairness in terms of human rights. My roles as a Senator and Deputy Speaker are instrumental in advancing these causes.

**P.T. Is it in your plans to pen your memoir in the future?**

**Hon. Sen. O.** I am thinking seriously about it for the last four months. I have many ideas on my mind. I am wondering if it should be biographical, didactical with a mix of specific points, or a collection of quotes of people who communicated with me via e-mails and so on. I will have to decide if it will be just about me or a larger piece where people can learn from my life's journey. Now, it is the moment to think seriously about it because I will be soon 73, and like judges age 75 is the mandatory retirement age for senators. Working on my memoir during my retirement would be the ideal moment because I will be exempt from political duties. So now, I am in the process of thinking about the form the book will take.

**P.T. You are an honorary patron with Canadian Crossroads International. In 1962, you were a Crossroads volunteer to Ethiopia, an experience which changed you forever. Can you share with us how this experienced was pivotal for you?**

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**Hon. Sen. O.** It really was a huge change for me to be in the Horn of Africa. We flew over and when I landed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, I saw Africa for the first time in my life. This continent is the cradle of civilization and it is home to the world, where humankind was created. Ethiopia is one of the oldest sites of human existence. Going to Africa was like coming home. I went to Haile Selassie University (in the capital of Ethiopia) and met students there. We went up north afterwards and I really enjoyed the fact that we lived like ordinary people. We slept in a hut on the floor and we didn't have any electrical power, etc. I really got back to nature. It was a great awakening for me to remember the most essential things in life.

**P.T. What I think is amazing about Ethiopia is the fact that it is the only African country which was not colonized like the others.**

**Hon. Sen. O.** That's right. I learned about the wealth of their religion, traditions, foods, languages, etc. It was an amazing experience to be in the second most populous country of the continent. Ethiopians were able to keep their culture for thousands of years and have not been assimilated. Their roots are authentic. When I was there, for some citizens it was their first contact with people from America. The majority of the population didn't have access in those days to television. So, they discovered through us our culture. It was a sharing and learning experience on both sides.

**P.T. What bill did you vote for during your career that you are the most proud of and why? What bill(s) would you like to become a law and what public policies would you like to see come to fruition?**

**Hon. Sen. O.** This is another excellent question. One of the bills that I introduced, among others that I am proud of, is about combatting stalking. More specifically, it concerns people of both genders who are being harassed or chased by some civilians. At the time, I thought that the Canadian legislation was weak for this matter while citizens from coast to coast were being regularly harassed. These people were practically confined to their homes because if they went out, their safety was endangered by these "harassers" who were pursuing them almost in a psychotic way. Most stalking victims are women. I drew up a private members' bill against stalking. We introduced it and it went through all the regular procedures - reading debates and so on. After, it was merged by a government on the first bill, it became the law of the land. I was very happy to vote for this and it is definitely one of my greatest achievements in my legislative career.

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Moreover, I introduced proposed laws to have private elected speakers. Bringing in the Anti-Spam Bill is something else that I did. At some point, spams were costing Canada almost 9 billion dollars a year. A new bill was needed to change this policy. Finally, I voted for that proposed law with great pride because the intent of the legislation is to deter the most damaging and deceptive forms of spam, such as identity theft from occurring in Canada and to help drive out spammers. Our government studied successful legislative models in other countries and, based on their experiences, we developed a focused plan to address spam and related online threats.

The second question is more difficult to answer because there are a number of issues that I observe as an Afro-Canadian Senator which cannot be legislated. For instance, you cannot legislate people's behavior. I would like to see more done in terms of diversity and equality. It is important to see more people of color advancing. You cannot put these issues in a piece of legislation, go to the process in the House of Commons and the Senate to pass it as a law afterward.

**P.T. Don't you think it is possible to find a way to enact a law on systemic discrimination?**

**Hon. Sen. O.** It is not that simple to make it a subject matter for consideration by the legislature. It is a complex process to create laws which aim to create social cohesion and equality of opportunities. Systemic discrimination is very hard to prove and it is an abstract concept. In other words, there is a big subjective part in this issue even if we know it is real. By definition, discrimination is the concept of harming other people based on their membership in a protected class that the Canadian Charter recognizes. Systemic discrimination can be described as patterns of behaviour, policies or practices that are part of the structures of an organization which create or perpetuate disadvantage for a marginalized group or individual. The law cannot cover subjectivity. However, in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the concept of discrimination is included. Furthermore, we find it in some human rights' codes. Maybe we should look more into strengthening these laws, amending or modernizing them. I believe for the most part, the first step is to continue giving speeches to educate people or raise awareness among the population. Also, mechanisms and measures can be created to change the numerical data, the practices and decision-making processes, the organizational structure in institutions to bring concrete solutions to systemic discrimination.

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