

# Cabinet shuffle brings “seismic shifts” to Indigenous affairs, health

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Canada has a new health minister and a new ministry of Indigenous services after a surprising federal cabinet shakeup Monday.

A week after Dr. Jane Philpott decried the health system’s “negligence and systemic discrimination” against Indigenous Canadians, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tapped her to head a new ministry overseeing services on reserves. Former Indigenous affairs minister Carolyn Bennett remains responsible for treaty rights under the new title of Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs. New Brunswick MP Ginette Petitpas Taylor replaces Philpott as Minister of Health.

Philpott said splitting the Indigenous affairs portfolio enables the government to dismantle old “colonial structures” and build stronger nation-to-nation partnerships with Indigenous people. “These are seismic shifts,” she told reporters after the swearing-in ceremony.

As Minister of Indigenous Services, Philpott will focus on six priorities: child and family services, health care, infrastructure, education, food security, and housing. Bennett will focus on the long-term goal of ending the 1876 Indian Act, which gives the federal government control over most aspects of Indigenous life.

Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde welcomed the “new approach” in a statement. “First Nations are an order of government in Canada and the government has to be organized to address that reality.”

The new division of responsibilities stems from the recommendations of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, explained Frances Abele, a professor of public policy at Carleton Univer-



Former health minister Dr. Jane Philpott will now manage Indigenous services.

sity in Ottawa. The commission, and many Indigenous people and academics, argued that a single ministry couldn’t both administer and dismantle the Indian Act. The jobs require “different functions, different skills,” and ultimately different ministries, Abele said.

The alignment of Philpott, Bennett and Jody Wilson-Raybould, the first Indigenous person to serve as justice minister, “bodes well for the kind of fundamental change that is needed,” she added.

Christopher Cochrane, an associate professor of political science at the University of Toronto, said the new ministries will be easier to hold accountable for “tangible outcomes.”

“There was too much going on,” and a “good deal of frustration with lack of

progress and accountability under the old system,” he said.

Douglas Angus, professor emeritus at the University of Ottawa’s Telfer School of Management, agreed that restructuring was “long overdue,” and has the potential to be “the best thing that has happened to this file ever.”

The change also suggests “renewed effort” to improve services for Indigenous people, an area of direct federal responsibility where the government “has not done a particularly good job,” said Patrick Fafard, an associate professor at the University of Ottawa’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs.

The choice of Philpott to tackle the challenge reflects her demonstrated ability as health minister, but also her convic-

tion that improving the health status of Canadians relies “much less on health care services and much more on action on the social determinants of health.”

More surprising is the choice of rookie MP Ginette Petitpas Taylor as Minister of Health, Fafard said. “It suggests that the Prime Minister has considerable confidence in her abilities.”

Before entering politics, Petitpas Taylor served 23 years as a victim services coordinator with the Codiac RCMP in New

Brunswick, where she provided crisis counselling, domestic violence intervention, and domestic violence risk assessment to victims of crime. Her [Liberal Party biography](#) describes “her longstanding passion for battling social issues,” including as a volunteer for the Coalition Against Abuse in Relationships and the Canadian Mental Health Association’s Suicide Prevention Committee in Moncton.

Taking over as Health Minister, Petitpas Taylor will lead the federal response to Can-

ada’s opioids crisis. “It’s absolutely a priority for government,” [she told reporters](#).

She also inherits the challenges of marijuana legalization and responding to calls to expand access to assisted death.

“This is a very new responsibility for me and I am looking forward to meeting with the officials in order to ensure that I am properly briefed on all of the portfolios ahead,” Petitpas Taylor said.

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