



WOMEN SUFFRAGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN CANADA

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Democracy's Long and Rocky Road

- The Vote: only one part of struggle for full democracy; each extension hard fought;
- Access to equality in education, the economy, health, law, and politics more generally also critical;
- But the Vote is symbolically very important as it defines the source of state authority and identifies which people need to be addressed and supported by politicians and governments.

Canadian Franchise Law


- By Confederation (1867), all colonies had male franchises with property qualifications and all had **disqualified women with property qualifications** who had earlier voted in small #s in many jurisdictions. British Columbia entered Canada in 1870 with a male franchise but without property qualifications; property qualifications not entirely eliminated until 1948;
- The first Canadian federal franchise (1885) formally excluded all women, the majority of Indigenous peoples, and most Asians;
- 1898 Ottawa returned the determination of franchise to the provinces which meant that women had to win federal franchise extensions at the provincial level.



“The Fathers of Confederation” by Robert Harris

All men, all white, all propertied, and overwhelming of British-French origin.

- **1916** beginning of extension of provincial franchises to (most but not all) women, first in Manitoba and lastly in Quebec in **1940**;
- **1917** Ottawa retrieved control of the federal franchise, first in the **War-time Elections Act**, which gave the vote to women with close relations in the armed service; **1918** extended it to women on the same basis as men;
- **1920** a **national franchise act** re-introduced. This disenfranchised prisoners, lunatics, poor house inmates (until 1929), judges, electoral officials and conscientious objectors and maintained provincial (BC but also Saskatchewan) exclusion of Asians Indians on reserves, the Inuit, and most Asians.

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- **1934 Dominion Franchise Act** explicitly disqualified 'Indians' on reserves and the Inuit, with the exception of veterans;
 - **1944 Dominion Elections Act** amended to excluded Japanese Canadians forced to leave BC;
 - In the decade after World War Two franchise exclusions of Asians, Doukhobors, Mennonites, Hutterites, conscientious objectors (1955), Inuit (1950) eliminated;
 - **1960 Bill of Rights** confirmed universal suffrage, now including First Nations people who no longer had to sacrifice status;
 - In **1982**, every Canadian citizen had their rights entrenched in the **Charter of Rights and Freedoms** but access to polls not legislated for Canadians with disabilities until 1992;
 - Feminists campaigned successfully for gender equality provisions in the Charter (Sections 15 and 28).



CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS



Penney Kome, *The Taking of Twenty-Eight: Women Challenge the Constitution* (1983)

Section 28. Notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons.

The Struggle for the Vote Continues 2015

- The so-called 'Fair Elections Act' (2014) increases the difficulty of satisfying the identification requirements of the Canada Election Act, endangering the franchises of the poor, the itinerant, and students in particular.
- July 2015 Court Challenge by Council of Canadians and the Canadian Federation of Students

The Opponents of Democracy

- Privilege always had defenders, who used every tactic to preserve their interests.
- Arguments of the 'antis' centred on supposed **merits and abilities** of those already in authority, their greater **stake in the community** (usually related to ownership of property), **historic entitlements** which others could not match, and, sometimes, notably but not only in the case of women, those in authority's **duty of care for or supervision** of those classed as properly dependent and thus unsuited to the franchise;

Champions of the Patriarchal Nation

- Men properly in charge of public life (the making of laws and the determination of opportunity in education and employment);
- The **nation** might be occasionally constructed symbolically as female but survival and morality was believed to depend on men and women adhering to gender roles that located men as leaders in government, the economy, the military, and the church and women holding subordinated roles in the family.

Henri Bourassa (1868-1952)

- Quebec politician and sovereigntist; without women at home producing babies and reproducing Catholic French Canadian culture, Quebec would not survive;
- The vote meant that “...French-Canadian women risk becoming ‘public women’, ‘veritable women-men, hybrids that would destroy women-mothers and women-women”.



Stephen Leacock (1869-1943)

- Political economist and humorist; “The ordinary women cannot do the ordinary man’s work. She never has and never will. The reasons why she can’t are so many that is, she ‘*can’t*’ in so many different ways, that it is not worth while to try and name them”.



Rodmond Roblin (1853-1937)

- Conservative Manitoba premier (1900-15);
- “Most women don’t want the vote...they shrank from the polls as from a pestilence....a retrograde movement...that will throw the children into the arms of servant girls ... hundredfold more influence in shaping public opinion around her dinner table than she would have in the marketplace.”



Clementina Trensholme Fessenden (1843-1918)

- Ontario advocate of British imperialism and Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire; she feared suffrage would open the door to socialism, agnosticism, anarchy, feminism, all of which would destroy the British Empire.



The Champions of Greater Justice

- Longstanding Canadian traditions of protest
- Rebellions of 1837-1838 against the Chateau Clique and the Family Compact
- 1830s-1840s PEI protests against landlords
- The Riel Rebellions of 1870 and 1885
- Continuing Indigenous protest against confinement to reserves and loss of lands
- Strikes and unionization
- Appearance of labour/socialist parties
- Many protests involved women

Dreaming of What Might Be

THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR IN CANADA 1880-1900

WRITERS: Sean Carleton, Julia Smith, Robin Fank
ILLUSTRATOR: Sam Bradd



Workers in Canada have always had to fight to gain control at work and for power in society. This is the story of how one group,

THE NOBLE AND HOLY ORDER OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR, quickly gained momentum in Canada.

during the 1880s and 1890s by uplifting working people and inspiring them to struggle to improve their lives.

Knights of Labor in Canada 1880s and 1890s

The Knights of Labor helped organize the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada and independent labour campaigns in the 1880s and 1890s. They were especially noteworthy for advocating rights for women and Black workers. ("Preview from *Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working Class Struggle*, forthcoming with Between the Lines Press, Spring 2016.")

Agitating for Women Suffrage

- Stirred generations 1860s-1940 in movement dominated by women
- Most suffragists were middle class; most likely to have the knowledge, the time, and the finances to become politically active; also disproportionately white, Protestant, and English-speaking. Most were also small-l liberals, very much in the tradition of **John Stuart Mill (1806-73), the author, with his wife Harriet Taylor Mill, of *The Subjection of Women* (1869)**. This argued the oppression of women was a hold-over from ancient times.
- The middle-class or elite character of much of the movement encouraged a belief in **women's special maternal role** and an inclination to attempt to control community members who were considered immoral, dangerous, and inferior. Those views could fuel racism, classism, and, occasionally, support for a vote restricted to those who were better-educated and white.
- **Example: National Council of Women of Canada, founded 1893 and adopted women suffrage 1910, but membership with diverse opinions and evolving views.**



National Council of Women of Canada


Founded 1893, as part of an international movement, to mobilize women to improve communities and, increasingly, to win equality.

Suffrage and Diversity

- **Farm women** active in groups such as the Saskatchewan Grain Growers (founded 1913) believed that the vote would improve life on the farm (e.g. better maternity care and education) and help change property laws to recognize women's contribution;
- **Example: Violet McNaughton (1869-1978)**, English teacher who migrated to Saskatchewan, married a progressive farmer and become a leader in suffrage, farm, women's, peace, and co-operative politics; a 'mother' of medicare in Saskatchewan; organized the Saskatchewan Women Grain Growers.




Violet McNaughton on the left

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- **Labour women** within various labour and socialist parties saw the vote as a way for women like themselves to transform a capitalist economy;
 - Like women within the mainstream liberal tradition, they encountered a male culture that was deeply misogynous.
 - **Example: Helena Gutteridge (c 1879-1960)**, an English union organizer and militant **suffragette** (meaning someone who espoused militant tactics in contrast to **suffragists** who supported peaceful protest) who moved to Vancouver in 1911 to work as a tailor; organize the BC Suffrage League; leader in Vancouver Trades and Labour Council; first woman on Vancouver City Council as a CCFer 1937




Helena Gutteridge

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- **Professional women**, many sole-wage-earners and/or responsible for the care of other family members, emerged out of the first generations to attend universities, normal schools for teachers, and medical schools. Nurses, doctors, teachers, and journalists were especially active.
 - **Example: Eliza Ritchie (1856-1933)**, Nova Scotia; philanthropist and atheist with a Phd in German philosophy from Cornell University; believed “the spirit of the age is democracy”.




Eliza Ritchie




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- **Non-British:** always a minority, with other equality causes, and economic survival, vying for attention and persisting, although not total, prejudice from feminist mainstream;
 - **Example: Mary Ann Shadd Cary (1823-1893),** Black activist in the Underground Railway, 1st Black woman to edit a newspaper (*Provincial Freeman*, 1853-9), active in Canada and US as suffragist;
 - **Example: Margret Benedictsson (1866-1956)** Icelandic immigrant and editor of the newspaper *Freyja* (woman or goddess) 1898-1910; founder of Manitoba's Icelandic Suffrage Society 1908.

Shadd Cary and Benedictsson




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- **French-Canadian:** progressive Quebecers faced the special problems of opposition from the Roman Catholic Church and from nationalists, who considered feminism a secular import that threatened the survival of a distinctive community in North America.
 - **Example: Thérèse Casgrain (1896-1981),** leader in the campaign to get the vote for women in Quebec; 1928-42, president of the League for Women's Rights; 1951 elected leader of the Quebec wing of the CCF; 1961 founded the Quebec branch of Voice of Women



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- **International Linkages:** The Canadian suffrage movement never existed in isolation. Canada was regularly visited by British champions, including **Emmeline Pankhurst** (1858-1928), founder of the militant (suffragette) Women's Social and Political Union and **Susan B. Anthony** (1820-1906), American anti-slavery and suffrage activist.
 - Canadians also read about the international movement, joined British and American campaigns, and were often in contact with activists elsewhere.



Failure is Impossible.
- Susan B. Anthony

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- **Men:** most activists were women but suffrage was often a philosophical commitment to greater equality and a family effort.
 - **Example: Allan Studholme (1846-1919),** Hamilton labour leader and MLA; introduced repeated bills (1910-1914) for women suffrage in the Ontario Legislature; described women's enfranchisement 1917 "the proudest moment of my life."



Canada's Most Famous Suffragist

- Nellie Letitia Mooney McClung (1873-1951), prairie suffragist, lecturer and novelist; author of the best-selling and still in print *In Times Like These* (1915), champion of prohibition, education, healthcare, equal inheritance and custody legislation, and equality in employment; but despite criticism of mistreatment of 'First Nations' and friendship with **E. Pauline Johnson** (1861-1913, the Indigenous champion, performer, and poet, McClung considered Indians a dying race. She briefly endorsed a federal franchise act excluding women born in enemy nations in 1917 and, later, eugenics as one way of both controlling the fertility of women deemed inferior (by reason of intellect) and of protecting them from male predators.
- Played anti-suffrage Conservative premier of Manitoba, Rodmond Roblin in 1914 'Mock Parliament' in Winnipeg.



Women are going to
form a chain, a
greater sisterhood
than the world has
ever known.

Nellie L. McClung

The Unfinished Revolution

- Suffragists hoped to transform Canada and many were disappointed with the results of the extension of voting rights;
- Nevertheless significant legislative advances in the 1920s, i.e. mothers' pensions and old age pensions; then in the 1930s a resurgence of conservatism;
- Women engaged in the traditional parties but also in the Communist party, various labour/socialist parties, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, and Social Credit, but everywhere encountered resistance to integration and authority.
- 1921 Election of **Agnes Campbell Macphail** (1890-1954), Canada's first female MP'
- Symbolic significance of the franchise important but difficult to assess;
- **1970 Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women**, a response to mounting awareness that women did not yet have equality in Canada, both in politics and in most other areas of Canadian life.
- 1971 Founding of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women
- 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- 2015: still waiting ... missing and murdered women, reproductive choice, pay gaps, And only 76 of 308 MPs (2011-15)



AGNES MACPHAIL:
*The First Woman
Elected to Canada's
House of Commons*

*"Do not rely completely on any other human being,
however dear. We meet all life's greatest tests alone."*

– Agnes Macphail

Photo: Courtnick Merrilly/Visuals Unlimited

First Woman MP in Canada

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