

The History of Women's Suffrage in Canada

The objective of feminists throughout generations has been to attain the same political, social, and economical rights as men. One of the biggest feminist battles of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th was related to women's suffrage. In what follows, the suffragist movement and the federal suffrage in Canada will be described. Then, specific issues related to women's suffrage in the Prairies, British Columbia, and Ontario will be briefly presented. Finally, the consequences of women achieving the right to vote will be examined.

The Suffragist Movement

In the 18th century, the right to vote was not based on gender, but rather on ownership. Therefore, women who owned land were eligible to vote (MacIvor 76); however, in 1849, laws were passed to exclude women from suffrage since they were not even considered as "persons" in the legal sense (Gleason and Perry 78). The first suffragist organizations emerged in the 1870s and were influenced by the suffrage campaigns led in Britain and in the United States; however, the Canadian movement was far more peaceable and reasonable than the British and American movements (MacIvor 75; Jackel 3). Groups such as the Canadian Women's Suffrage Association (1883) and the National Council of Women (1893) stood for women's right to vote. Even though most of the leaders in these groups were educated and professional women (doctors, teachers, journalists), many married and middle-class women were also interested in the suffragist movement (Cook xi). This movement was supported by organizations such as the Grain Grower's Association and the Young Women's Christian Association (Stephenson par.5).



Dr. Emily Howard Stowe

One of the most popular Canadian suffragettes was Dr. Emily Howard Stowe. For many years she was the president of the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association, originally called the Toronto Women's Literary Club. Stowe, who was also the first woman doctor in the country, was extremely influential in the women's suffrage movement. She was so convinced that women's right to vote was a reasonable claim that in 1894, she declared: "I am perfectly indifferent to what people think and say. I represent Truth, and I know that all truth will triumph" (Cook xiv). A couple of years later, Dr. Augusta Stowe-Gullen followed the traces of her mother and became another important suffragette (Jackel 1).

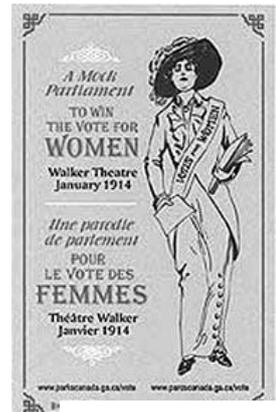
The suffragettes' request was quite moderate. As MacIvor pointed out, "they were not arguing for sex equality in all spheres of life; most of them agreed with their opponents that women belonged in the home, differing only in their belief that voting *was* compatible with women's sacred place in the home and family" (76). Women claimed that they should have the right to vote because they paid taxes just like men. Moreover, they thought they could bring new ideas to the existing politics. On the other hand, an argument against women's suffrage was that women were already represented by their father or husband and that an eventual right to vote would destroy harmony in the families. Also, it was believed that their biological inferiority made them too weak to withstand the strains of politics (Lamoureux 19-22). Finally, the Bible supposedly forbade women to engage in political issues (MacIvor 77). While one might assume that the opponents to women's suffrage were all men, it is important to specify that there was also "a traitor within the camp – woman herself, through ignorance, indifference, or actual hostility" (Cleverdon 49). Indeed, many working-class women did not see the usefulness of having the right to vote since they thought the education they were giving to their sons was the only power they needed (Prentice et al. 195).

Federal Suffrage

After years of claims and petitions, all female citizens of Canada gained the right to vote in federal elections on May 24, 1918 regardless of the provincial franchises. The Act became effective on January 1, 1919 (Jackel 2). This decision was supported by Sir John A. Macdonald, who introduced several bills in favour of women's suffrage in parliament, and Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who had declared five years before that "in every civilized country I see no reason why women should not have the franchise if they desire it" (Cleverdon 114). The federal suffrage was seen as a great victory by Canadian suffragettes.

The Prairies

The Prairie Provinces were the first to achieve women suffrage and had the easiest and shortest campaign to wage (Cleverdon 46). Women were supported by powerful farm groups and they even had a page in the Grain Growers' Guide to write about their cause (47). Since they were engaged in agricultural labour, they were respected and supported by the men in these provinces (Cook xvi). Moreover, men's dissatisfaction with government policies was strong and they thought that women could help them to make changes (Prentice et al. 196). In order for their cause to be heard, the Manitoban suffragette Nellie McClung and her colleagues created a Mock Parliament in 1914. This humorous show, which inversed the gender roles, was about the terrible things that would happen if men had the right to vote in Canada (Jackel 3). Two years later, on January 28, 1916, Manitoba became the first province to give women the right to vote. This decision was strongly influenced by a petition of 40 000 signatures, which was, until that time, the petition with the most signatures ever given to the Canadian Legislature (Scantland 17). Almost two months later, Saskatchewan followed and finally, in April, Alberta imitated the two other provinces.



Mock Parliament

British Columbia

In British Columbia, attempts to win women's suffrage were automatically defeated from 1902 to 1913. The press was an important enemy for the suffragettes. The discourse reported in an 1891 edition of the Daily Times newspaper was still common in the early 1900s: "The true woman who would make the most of her every God-given attribute asks not for the ballot, but for love and home" (Cleverdon 87). Fortunately, the enfranchisement of women in the Prairies encouraged the suffragettes to double their efforts and women's suffrage passed on April 5, 1917, with 43 619 votes in favour of it and 18 604 against it (Scantland 19).

Ontario

It is in Ontario that Dr. Stowe and her daughter spent most of their lives fighting for women's suffrage. Even though the first proposal for a provincial franchise was introduced in 1885 by the Liberal John Waters (Cleverdon 23), it was only in 1916 that a bill was accepted both by the Liberals and the Conservatives (Bélanger par.7). The right to vote was officially given on April 12, 1917.

Political Motives and Consequences of Women's Suffrage

The fact that most suffrage was won between 1916 and 1922 is not a coincidence. Indeed, politicians accepted the women's request at that time because they had to fulfill the promise previously made by the Liberal government (Prentice et al. 208). Moreover, the Liberals thought that women's suffrage would lead to the election of their government in the

future since feminist values and attitudes were often associated with Liberal ideologies (Gleason and Perry 377). Apparently, the electoral consequences of this political decision were not as important as the Liberals imagined because the women who decided to vote did not all vote for this party and men still represented the majority of the voters (377). As a matter of fact, women voted less than men because of the dichotomy between the private and public spheres, their numerous responsibilities at home and in the workplace, and the structure of the political system (236). Therefore, instead of changing the political system, women simply integrated the existing parties (255).

To conclude, it is important to mention that the campaign for women’s suffrage in Canada lasted more than sixty years. As Prentice et al. (1988) pointed out, “thousands of women and hundreds of organizations had been involved in the fight for political rights ... the movement never completely lost its focus or momentum” (209). By requesting the right to vote, Canadian women were trying to gain a political voice and thus a new power. In short, women’s suffrage was an important step towards gender equality.

To learn more about the history of women’s suffrage in other provinces in Canada, consult Fanny Gaboury’s article.

Dates When Women Gained the Right to Vote in Canada
January 28, 1916 Manitoba
March 14, 1916 Saskatchewan
April 19, 1916 Alberta
April 5, 1917 British Columbia
April 12, 1917 Ontario
April 26, 1918 Nova Scotia
May 24, 1918 Canada
April 17, 1919 New Brunswick
May 20, 1919 Yukon
May 3, 1922 Prince Edward Island
April 3, 1925 Newfoundland, Labrador
April 25, 1940 Quebec
June 12, 1951 Northwest Territories

Adapted from Stephenson

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