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# Women in Canadian Legislatures 1978-1998

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by Norma Gauld

*In recognition of Women's History Month in October 1997 the National Library of Canada launched a project featuring historical and biographical information about 20 women who have made significant contributions to Canada's history by holding elected office at the federal and provincial levels. This article looks at the development of female representation in Canada and particularly progress accomplished during the last 20 years.*

Not all Canadian women won the right to vote at the same time. For example Inuit women have only had the federal vote since 1950 and it was not until 1960 that Status Indians received this right.<sup>1</sup> However, between 1916 and 1925 the right to vote had been won in all jurisdictions except Quebec.

By 1930, the right to stand for election had been won everywhere except in Quebec and New Brunswick. In Western Canada women had been elected to legislatures in Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba as well as to the House of Commons.

Also in 1930 the first women were appointed to the Senate following the successful termination in 1929 of "The Person's Case". The present Parliament, pursuant to a motion sponsored by Jean Augustine, MP and Senators Joyce Fairbairn and Marjorie LeBreton has agreed to honour the five women who initiated the case with a monument on Parliament Hill. Deborah Grey, MP (first Reform Party member of the House of Commons), speaking about these women said: "These girls were reformers. They went against the status quo. They were outsiders. And they made a pretty huge impact. I wouldn't be here if they didn't do that".<sup>2</sup>

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The women first elected to the House of Commons and the provincial and territorial legislatures is shown below.

## First Women Elected

Roberta MacAdams (1917) Louise McKinney (1917)	Alberta
Mary Ellen Smith (1918)	British Columbia
Agnes Macphail (1921)	House of Commons
Edith Rogers (1920)	Manitoba
Brenda M. Robertson (1967)	New Brunswick
Helena Squires (née Strong) (1930)	Newfoundland
Lena Pedersen (1970)	Northwest Territories
Gladys M. Porter (1960)	Nova Scotia
Margaret R. Morrison Luckock (1943) Agnes Macphail (1943)	Ontario
Ella J. Canfield (1970)	Prince Edward Island
Marie-Claire Kirland-Casgrain (1961)	Quebec
Sarah K. Ramsland (1919)	Saskatchewan
G. Jean Gordon (1967)	Yukon

Source: National Library of Canada, "Then & Now: Women in Canadian Legislatures"



**Agnes Campbell Macphail**

(Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Canada C-21557)

### The Situation Since 1978

On January 1, 1978, 45 women sat in Canadian legislatures. By the beginning of 1998 this figure had increased five fold to 231 and overall the percentage of women legislators grew from 4.2% to 20%. The figures show a steady rise in numbers and this twenty year span corresponds to the largest increase in the number of women in Canadian legislatures. "From the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s there has been a slow but steady increase in the number of female candidates and MLAs. That increase was substantially quicker in the second decade than in the first."<sup>3</sup> The greatest provincial gains occurred in the West (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, British Columbia), followed by Quebec and Newfoundland. However, it is important to note the increase in the number of legislative seats in eight of the twelve provinces/territories as well as in the House of Commons. The following table shows the increase in representation during this period

Of the 45 women sitting in 1978 it is interesting to note that 16 achieved Ministerial status; three were elevated to the Senate and six were already Senators. These women could reflect upon the historic accomplishments of their predecessors and look forward to many political "firsts" to come.

### Women in Canadian Legislatures 1978-1998

Jurisdiction	No. of Women Jan. 1, 1978	No. of Seats Jan. 1, 1978	%	No. of Women Jan. 1, 1998	No. of Seats Jan. 1, 1998	%
House of Commons	9	264	3.4	61	301	20.3
Senate	6	104	5.7	28	104	26.9
Alberta	2	75	2.6	22	83	26.5
British Columbia	6	55	10.9	20	75	26.6
Manitoba	1	57	1.8	11	57	19.3
New Brunswick	2	58	3.4	8	55	14.5
Newfoundland	1	51	1.9	8	48	16.6
Northwest Territories	0	15	0	2	24	8.3
Nova Scotia	1	46	2.2	6	52	11.5
Ontario	6	125	4.8	18	130	13.8
Prince Edward Island	2	32	6.3	4	27	14.8
Quebec	5	110	4.5	27	125	21.6
Saskatchewan	1	61	1.6	13	58	22.4
Yukon	3	12	25.0	3	17	17.6
Total	45	1065	4.2	231	1156	20.0

Source: National Library of Canada, "Then & Now: Women in Canadian Legislatures"

## First Women of Canadian Federal Politics

First Woman	
Governor General Speaker of the House of Commons	Jeanne Sauvé*
Prime Minister Minister of Justice and Attorney General Minister of National Defence	Kim Campbell*
Speaker of the Senate	Muriel McQueen Fergusson
Cabinet Minister	Ellen Fairclough
Senator	Cairine Wilson
Deputy Prime Minister	Sheila Copps*
Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons	Andrée Champagne*
Leader of a federal political party	Audrey McLaughlin*
Leader of the Government in the Senate	Joyce Fairbairn*

\* Indicates "firsts" achieved since 1978. Source: National Library of Canada, "Then & Now: Women in Canadian Legislatures"

### Some Political "Firsts" in Ottawa

Six of the individuals listed in the table of Parliamentary "firsts" have achieved this since 1978.<sup>4</sup> But there have been so many other important individuals during this period including:

- Flora MacDonald, Canada's first woman Secretary of State for External Affairs, 1979
- Iona Campagnolo, first woman President of a federal political party, Liberal 1982;
- Judy Erola, first woman Minister for the Status of Women, 1981-1984;
- Ethel Blondin-Andrews first Native woman elected to the House of Commons, 1988;
- Pat Carney, first woman President of the Treasury Board, 1988.
- Suzanne Tremblay, first woman Official Opposition House Leader, 1997.

Recalling her experience Senator Carney has said: "Often there were no women in the room, and when I would ask my deputy minister where the women were, they



**Ellen Louks Fairclough**

(Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Canada PA-129254)

were not even at the entry level. And I looked into that. ... We wrote a whole report on the answers we got. So we made a major attempt to advance women in the public service. And it's finally happening. We're starting to get the critical mass that's necessary".<sup>5</sup>

The first woman to run for the leadership of a federal party was Rosemary Brown (NDP, 1975). She commented: "It is not the quantity of women in politics that will change things, but rather...it is the qualitative philosophy that those women bring to politics which will decide if change will occur".<sup>6</sup> Since 1978 six women have contested the leadership of a federal political party. Sheila Copps (Liberal, 1991), Pierrette Venne (BQ, 1997) and Francine Lalonde (BQ, 1996 and 1997) were unsuccessful. Audrey McLaughlin (NDP, 1989); Kim Campbell (PC, 1993), and Alexa McDonough, (NDP 1995) all were chosen as leaders.

### The Provinces and Territories Since 1978

Many political "firsts" have been achieved by women in the territories and provinces.<sup>8</sup> In 1978 women in the Yukon Territory stood out because they held 25% of the legislative seats and because of Hilda Watson, the first woman to lead a political party successful in electing members (Yukon Progressive Conservative Party, Sep-



**A. Kim Campbell**

(Photo courtesy of the National Archives PA-198574)

tember 9, 1978). In 1970, Lena Pederson, an Inuit, was the first woman elected to the Northwest Territories Council. Nellie Cournoyea was chosen the first woman government leader of the Northwest Territories in 1991. Currently the Territorial Commissioners are Helen Maksagak, NWT and Judy Gingell, Yukon.

In the provincial legislatures the first woman Premier was Rita Johnston, British Columbia in April 1991. The first woman elected to the post in a General Election was Catherine Callbeck of Prince Edward Island in January 1993.

The first woman Deputy Premier was Grace McCarthy, British Columbia, 1975-1983 and 1986-1988. She was followed by two more women in her own province and at least four other provinces (Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick). Senator Lise Bacon, Quebec's Deputy Premier, 1985-1994 has said:

We cannot rest on our laurels, as some were tempted to do in the late 1980s. We cannot be satisfied with our political gains. We must always continue working to push back the frontiers; we must keep after the political parties to seek out more qualified women candidates; we must continue pressing our concerns in the political arena.<sup>9</sup>

The first woman Leader of the Opposition was Leone Bagnall of the PEI Progressive Conservative Party in January 1987. She was soon followed by Sharon Carstairs

in Manitoba in April 1988. Between 1978 and 1998 political parties in each province except Quebec have chosen a woman leader/interim leader and there have been numerous leadership contenders.

The first woman Minister of Finance was Janice MacKinnon, Saskatchewan in January 1993 followed the same year by Elizabeth Cull of British Columbia. In Newfoundland the first woman elected since that province joined Confederation was Hazel A. McIsaac in 1975. There have been women Speakers in PEI, NWT, Manitoba, New Brunswick and British Columbia.

A survey of the literature about women's representation in Canada is beyond the scope of this article, however, some academics agree that "when female representation reaches about 15 per cent of the total number of legislators, they begin to make a significant difference. And after women achieve representation of more than 25 per cent...their influence is impossible to resist".<sup>10</sup>

This is an argument that has been made by many of Canada's female legislators. Elaine McCoy, an Alberta Cabinet member from 1986 to 1992, said:

Women politicians do make a difference... and that's why I believe our agenda for the 1990's—the agenda of women and women's organizations—must be to encourage and help more women get into politics...If more of us take seats in the legislature, at the cabinet table and in the top ranks of the public service, then gradually issues of concern to half the human race will no longer be ghettoized as 'women's issues'.<sup>11</sup>

Senator Joyce Fairbairn made essentially the same point in 1996:

Although women have come a long way in the political realm since she first arrived on Parliament Hill more than 30 years ago, there is still plenty of room for strong, determined women who want to make a contribution to their country.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

1. Arscott, Jane and Trimble, Linda J. *In the Presence of Women: Representation in Canadian Governments*, (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, Canada), 1997, p. 82.
2. Ebner, Dave. "Famous Five make history again: all parties expected to support Hill site for statue", *Ottawa Citizen*, December 19, 1997, p. A1.
3. Studlar, D.T. and Matland, R.E. "The dynamics of women's representation in the Canadian Provinces: 1975-1994", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2 (June 1996), p. 292.

4. Unless otherwise noted, sources of federal "firsts" are the following: *Compilations: Women in Parliament and the Provincial Legislatures*, Ottawa: Library of Parliament, Information and Technical Services Branch, 1997; "Appendix 4 – Pathfinders for Women in Political and Social Leadership" – *Canadian guide of electoral history and leadership 1967-1987*, Ed. Wayne D. Madden, (Alberta: The Editor), 1988, pp. 182-184.
5. Sharpe, Sydney. *The Gilded Ghetto: Women and Political Power in Canada*, (Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers), 1994, p. 119.
6. McPherson, Kay. "Four per cent is no solution", *Canadian Forum*, Vol. LIX, number 692 (Sept. 1979), p. 9.
7. Sharpe, Sydney. *The Gilded Ghetto: Women and Political Power in Canada*, (Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers), 1994, p. 199.
8. See *Compilations: Women in Parliament and the Provincial Legislatures*, Ottawa: Library of Parliament, Information and Technical Services Branch, 1997; "Appendix 4 – Pathfinders for Women in Political and Social Leadership" – *Canadian guide of electoral history and leadership 1967-1987*, Ed. Wayne D. Madden, (Alberta: The Editor), 1988, pp. 182-184.
9. Sharpe, Sydney. *The Gilded Ghetto: Women and Political Power in Canada*, (Toronto : Harper Collins Publishers), 1994, p. 204.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 216-217.
12. Logie, F. "Women & Politics: You've come a long way", *Calgary Herald*, March 11, 1996, p. 4.

#### A Selection of Related Articles from Previous Issues of the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*

- Jerome Black. *Minority Women in the 35th Parliament*, vol. 20 (1):17-22, 1997.
- Jan Brown. *Changing the Gender Agenda of Politics*, vol. 17 (2): 8-10, 1994.
- Shirley Dysart. *Barriers to Women's Participation in Parliament*, vol. 17 (3): 12-14, 1994.
- Joyce Hayden. *Recognition and Respect: The Transitional Role of Women in Public Life*, vol. 14 (1): 21-23, 1991.
- Barbara Reynolds. *Twelve Days with the Sub-Committee on Women and the Indian Act*, vol. 5 (4): 4-10, 1982.
- Donley Studlar and Gary Moncrief. *Women Cabinet Ministers in Canadian Provinces*, vol. 19 (3): 10-13, 1996.