

# Celebrating BC's First 100 Women Members of the Legislative Assembly



*Approaching the 100th anniversary of the election of BC's first woman Member of the Legislative Assembly in 1918, the author reflects on some of the achievements of the first 100 women MLAs elected in the province. She notes that these women have often proven to be excellent role models for young people aspiring to a career in politics and public service.*

## Hon. Linda Reid, MLA

In 2013 British Columbia achieved an important milestone with the election of its 100<sup>th</sup> woman Member of the Legislative Assembly. We are also approaching the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the by-election victory of Mary Ellen Smith, the first woman elected to BC's Legislative Assembly, in 1918.

Between 1891 and 1914, 16 women's suffrage bills were introduced and defeated in British Columbia's Legislative Assembly. In April 1917, following a referendum on the issue undertaken in conjunction with the province's 1916 general election, British Columbia became the fourth province in Canada to grant women who qualified as British subjects the right to vote in provincial elections and to stand for provincial office. While this legislation heralded a great step forward for women's rights, the voting franchise would not become universal in BC until 1949, when it was finally broadened to include First Nations women and men, and women and men of Japanese background.



Mary Ellen Smith

I would like to take this milestone as an opportunity to celebrate the strength, character, and contributions of some of these remarkable provincial leaders.

## Mary Ellen Smith

Born and raised in England, Mary Ellen Smith immigrated to British Columbia with her husband in 1891. Smith had been a passionate activist on the drive for women's suffrage in the province in the decades leading up to the successful 1916 referendum, so it was perhaps fitting when she was called upon to run in her husband's vacated seat following his sudden death in 1917. First elected as an "Independent Liberal," she was re-elected in 1920 and 1924 under the banner of the Liberal party of the day.

As an MLA, Smith continued her advocacy work on behalf of women, children and the underprivileged, introducing a bill calling for a minimum wage for women that remained in effect until 1972. She is additionally recognized as the first female member of cabinet and the first woman to preside over parliamentary proceedings as an acting Speaker anywhere in the British Empire.

*The Hon. Linda Reid is Speaker of the BC Legislative Assembly. She is chair of the Canadian Regional branch of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians.*

## Nancy Hodges

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In 1950 British Columbia marked another first when Nancy Hodges was appointed as Speaker of the House — the first woman Speaker in any jurisdiction in the Commonwealth. Hodges grew up in London, England, before relocating to Kamloops, BC, in 1912 to facilitate her husband's tuberculosis convalescence. The couple moved to Victoria in 1916, where she served as women's editor for the *Victoria Times* newspaper and developed a strong reputation as a women's rights advocate.

Hodges won a seat in the Legislative Assembly in 1941, and served as a Liberal member of the Liberal-Conservative coalition that governed the province until 1951. She campaigned for the rights of women workers and women's property rights before her appointment as Speaker. After losing her seat in the 1953 provincial general election, Hodges was appointed to the Senate of Canada, becoming the first BC woman to sit in Canada's upper chamber.



Nancy Hodges

In addition to being recognized as the first visible minority woman elected to the BC Legislative Assembly, Brown was also the first African-Canadian woman — and only the second woman, after Mary Walker-Sawka in 1967 — to run for the leadership of a national party in Canada, finishing second in the 1975 New Democratic Party leadership campaign. In 1986, after serving three terms as an MLA, Brown left provincial politics, returning to work in academia, with international aid organizations, and as head of the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

## Jenny Wai Ching Kwan and Ida Chong

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MLAs Jenny Wai Ching Kwan and Ida Chong were both first elected in BC's 1996 general election, almost 50 years after a 1947 law extended the voting franchise to women and men of Chinese and South Asian backgrounds. Kwan and Chong became the first Chinese-Canadians elected to BC's Legislative Assembly, as well as the first and second Chinese-Canadian cabinet ministers in the province.

Born in Hong Kong in 1967, Jenny Wai Ching Kwan moved to Vancouver with her family when she was nine years old. She became Vancouver's youngest city councillor in 1993 before campaigning to become the New Democratic Party MLA for Vancouver-Mount Pleasant in 1996. During her first term in office, Kwan became BC's first Chinese-Canadian cabinet minister, holding portfolios in Municipal Affairs; Women's Equality; and Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers.

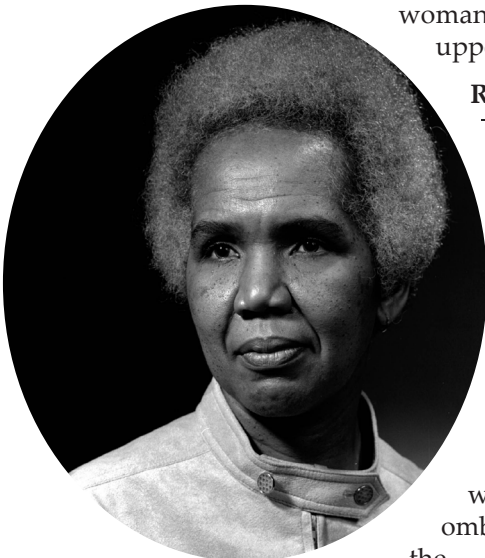


Jenny Wai Ching Kwan

## Rosemary Brown

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A generation later, another pioneering immigrant arrived in Montreal. Rosemary Brown emigrated from Jamaica to attend McGill University in 1951. After moving west, she served as ombudswoman for the Vancouver Status of Women Council before becoming the first African-Canadian woman elected to a provincial legislature in Canada, as the New Democratic Party MLA for Burrard in 1972.



Rosemary Brown



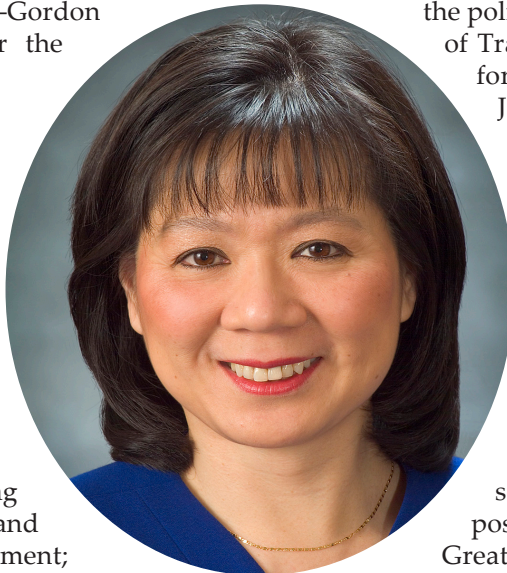
A daughter of a Chinese immigrant mother and second-generation Chinese-Canadian father, Ida Chong grew up in Victoria, BC. She spent close to 20 years as senior partner in an accounting practice and one term as a municipal councillor prior to her successful 1996 campaign to represent Oak Bay–Gordon Head as an MLA for the Liberal party.

The novice MLA was appointed Official Opposition critic for Small Business and deputy critic for Finance during her first term. After the 2001 general election resulted in a Liberal government, Chong held a variety of cabinet positions, including Community, Sport and Cultural Development; Science and Universities; Healthy Living and Sport; and Small Business.

In recent decades BC women have proven themselves as leaders in virtually all of the province's top posts. Women have led all of the province's major provincial parties. Four women have been elected Speaker of the House, two have been appointed Lieutenant Governor, and two have served as Premier of the province, with women also maintaining a substantial and increasing presence at the cabinet table.

**Rita Johnston**

Canada's first woman premier, Rita Johnston, was born in Saskatchewan and raised in BC's Lower Mainland. Prior to entering politics, she spent years operating a successful small business in Surrey, BC, and served two terms as a



**Ida Chong**



**Rita Johnston**

Surrey municipal councillor — experience she would later put to good use as Minister of Municipal Affairs. Johnston was first elected as a Social Credit party MLA for Surrey in 1983. In addition to serving as Minister of Municipal Affairs, where she received plaudits for her competent administration from colleagues across the political spectrum, she also spent time as Minister of Transportation and Highways, Minister of State for the Kootenay Region, and Deputy Premier. Johnston was appointed Premier on April 2, 1991, after the Social Credit caucus selected her to succeed Bill Vander Zalm.

**Carole James**

In 2003 the BC New Democratic Party elected its first woman leader, Carole James, who also made history by being the first woman to serve as provincial Leader of the Official Opposition. James has dedicated much of her life to public service, holding positions with the Greater Victoria School Board and as vice-president of the Canadian School Boards Association, and she also served an unprecedented five terms as President of the BC School Trustees Association. She



**Carole James**

was Director of Child Care Policy in the BC government for two years, and served on the Greater Victoria Region Social Planning Council, the City of Victoria Parks and Recreation Committee, and the Task Force on Violence prevention.

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## Christy Clark

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British Columbia's current Premier Christy Clark was first elected to the BC Legislative Assembly on May 28, 1996 as a Liberal MLA. Following the 2001 general election, she was appointed Deputy Premier and held portfolios in Education, and Children and Family Development, before deciding to take time away from public life to focus on her family. In 2011 she returned to politics to successfully contest the Liberal Party leadership race following the departure of Premier Gordon Campbell. Clark was sworn in as Premier on March 14, 2011. In 2013 she achieved another milestone, becoming the first woman in BC to lead a party to victory in a provincial general election. She currently serves as BC's second and longest-serving woman Premier.



Christy Clark

As of the time of writing, 31 of BC's 85 MLAs are women, including eight of 20 cabinet ministers. At the Legislative Assembly, four of eight active committees (including the Legislative Assembly Management Committee) are chaired by women. I am honoured to serve as Speaker, and the longest-serving current MLA, at a time when the Speaker, the Lieutenant Governor and the Premier are women, and when both parties with official status in the Legislative Assembly have been led by women.

One of my greatest privileges as an elected MLA is to meet with students and young people and speak with them about how they can contribute to making BC a more prosperous and secure province. Our first 100 woman MLAs provide a rich diversity of role models and leaders who have worked hard to make BC a better place. Their record and achievements serve to inspire young people – and all of us – to continue their work to make a positive difference in our communities.