

# Manitoba Women Get The Vote: A Centennial Celebration

Manitobans are immensely proud that their province holds the distinction of being the first to give some women the right to vote. In this article, the author recounts how early suffragists waged a successful campaign to extend the franchise and profiles famous suffragette Nellie McClung’s role in the battle. She concludes by outlining some of the celebrations held in honour of the centenary in 2016 and by calling for everyone to ensure we continue the work of these pioneer women by striving for full equality for women in our democracy.

**Hon. Myrna Driedger**

On January 28, 1916, Manitoba was the first province to grant some women the right to vote. One hundred years later Manitoba celebrated this centennial in a grand way. I was very honoured to be part of these celebrations in 2016. It was extra special for me because 2016 was also the year I became only the fourth female Speaker of the Manitoba Legislature.

*Charleswood MLA Myrna Driedger serves as Speaker of the Manitoba Legislature.*

Getting the vote for women was a human rights milestone – a step towards women’s equality. This enfranchisement of some Manitoba women can be regarded today as the first in a series of sweeping changes that ultimately allowed women to take their rightful place in our democratic society. Other provinces and the country soon followed in Manitoba’s footsteps.

Not all women were given the right to vote in Manitoba in 1916. Indigenous women in Manitoba didn’t receive the vote until 1958 and it wasn’t until 1960 that indigenous women were able to vote in Canada. There were many others that had to wait years to get the vote.



## A Message To My Younger Self

**Lisa MacLeod**  
MPP for Nepean—Carleton (Ontario)

Right now you don’t know this but you will have courage—both of your conviction and also as a self-starter. Your confidence and self-esteem will take hits at different times in life, but trust me, you’ll get back up stronger every time. You will learn who would go to the end of the earth for you but most of all you will learn that there is no greater love than for your daughter – she will test you and impress you. And no matter what life throws at you, know you got this!

### Women’s Right To Vote in Canada

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

# MANITOBA WOMEN GET THE VOTE

A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION



UNE CÉLÉBRATION DU CENTENAIRE

## LES FEMMES DU MANITOBA PRENDENT LE VOTE

Provided

Manitoba's suffrage movement was waged over 30 years, involving hundreds, perhaps thousands of Manitobans, mostly women. It began with the Women's Christian Temperance Union who believed that alcohol was destroying families and leaving women and children abused and penniless. Prior to that, in the early 1880's, a mother and daughter team of physicians (the Yeomans) brought to the attention of the temperance movement the horrible plight of poor women and those in jail. By 1910, the movement was in high gear.

### The Earlier Efforts

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Although we think mostly of Nellie McClung when we talk about women getting the vote, there were many groups who helped Manitoba to get there:

- Icelandic women's suffrage groups
- Women's Christian Temperance Union
- Manitoba Equal Franchise Association
- Canadian Women's Press Club
- Grain Growers Association
- Trades and Labour Council
- University Women's Club
- Young Women's Christian Association
- Many other men's and women's groups

### The Suffrage Struggle

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One of the groups that played a large role in the

historic Manitoba decision was the Political Equality League of Manitoba. The League had a brief existence – from 1912 to early 1916. These early feminists believed that if women were able to vote it would solve many of society's ills. Although the League's most famous member was Nellie McClung, an earlier suffragist named Margaret Benedictsson made a significant contribution. An immigrant of Icelandic descent, Benedictsson led the fight in Manitoba's Icelandic community, the largest of its kind in Canada. In 1908, she founded the Icelandic Women's Suffrage Society.

Journalists dominated the core group of members of the Political Equality League. Although there were also many men involved, the majority of members were professional women with good education. They strictly forbade the use of any violent or unlawful acts, unlike what was occurring with the British and American suffragettes. They believed in maintaining society's laws and norms while at the same time trying to reform the status quo.

The League used satire, suffrage literature and speeches as its main weapons. The most famous example of their satirical tactics is the highly successful mock parliament, staged in 1914. In the play Nellie McClung played the role of the Premier of the day, Sir Rodmond Roblin, who is famous for saying *nice women don't want the vote* during a heated debate with McClung. He felt that suffrage *would*

break up homes and throw children into the arms of servant girls. Unfortunately, it was a belief held by many men across Canada at that time.

### The Mock Parliament

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The Mock Parliament was held at the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg. It was a satirical depiction of women having all the power and men having to come and petition to get the vote. McLung, playing the role of Premier, said about men, *it's hard enough to keep them at home now... Politics unsettles men and unsettled men means unsettled bills, broken furniture, broken vows, and divorce... There is no use giving men the vote... Man has a higher destiny than politics.* The play was a howling success and it was a major factor in turning the tables and helping women get the vote.

### Pink Teas

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How could women plot their strategies when they were forbidden by their husbands or fathers to attend those *dangerous* meetings? Pink Teas were developed as a way for women to gather and discuss issues of importance, including suffrage. Only women were invited, and frilly decorations and many pink doilies festooned the tea tables. If opponents appeared, the women simply changed the subject to the bland pleasantries one might expect at a regular tea gathering.

### The Petition

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The Political Equality League gathered signatures on a petition in 1913. 20,000 signatures were presented to the leader of one of the political parties. Nothing happened. Then in 1915, 40,000 signatures were gathered on a petition by 60 men and women. One of the women, 94-year-old Sturgeon Creek resident Amelia Burrett, collected 4,250 signatures herself. As the story goes, they were wheeled into the Legislature in a wheelbarrow.

### Celebrating Nellie

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Despite the significant role Nellie played in getting Manitoba women the vote she was largely ignored in a tangible way in Manitoba. She had been named the fifth most important Manitoban and eighth most important Canadian, yet she was still unknown to many people. No buildings in the provincial capital were named after her, no roads or parks were named in her honour, and there were no monuments to celebrate this important figure.



Provided

### Myrna Driedger poses beside Nellie McClung at the Famous Five monument on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly.

In 2002, when I was critic for the Status of Women, I looked for a way to celebrate Nellie's legacy. Working with policy analyst, Trishia Chestnut, we came up with an idea to build a monument of Nellie on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislature. We felt there was no better site to honour her legacy. My Private Members Bill created the Nellie McClung Foundation which led the charge, and the fundraising effort, to make this dream a reality. Research led us to honour Nellie in a way which was typical of pioneer women: the monument depicts her and her Famous Five colleagues, working together to get something done. Nellie's granddaughter, Marcia McClung, said she felt her grandmother would fully approve of this dynamic depiction of her work.

### Centennial Celebrations

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So why celebrate? Why is this anniversary important?

Quite simply, this successful suffrage campaign was a human rights milestone. Nellie McClung's fight to get the vote for women was nothing short of heroic. It shaped the landscape of our province.

With the Nellie McClung Foundation becoming the driving force in the celebrations, we recreated the Mock Parliament. This itself was very interesting because the play had never been a written document.



We hired a playwright to write the play 100 years after it happened. The play is now available for use all over Canada through the foundation website, [www.ournellie.com](http://www.ournellie.com).

We also held a black-tie Centennial Gala in partnership with the Canadian Museum of Human Rights exactly 100 years to the day that some Manitoba women got the vote. At the gala, which 1,000 people attended, we gave out Nellie awards in recognition of modern day Nellies who have followed in her footsteps through their work in social justice and women's and human rights.

And there was so much more going on in honour of the anniversary. The federal government introduced a stamp and a coin. The Manitoba Museum put together a special exhibit. The Governor General of Canada gave out the Person's Day Awards in our Legislature – only the second time this event has been held outside of Ottawa. A large plaque to recognize the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of some Manitoba women getting the right to vote was hung in the legislature on the day I hosted the Manitoba delegation of Equal Voice's Daughters of the Vote.

A stunning mural was painted on a wall of a downtown building. The Canadian Museum of Human Rights brought students to the museum for a special program as well as hosted the Honourable

Kim Campbell for a public presentation. The *Winnipeg Free Press* ran a series called "The Democracy Project" and many other organizations held events. Manitoba celebrated this historic occasion in grand style – with pride and passion.

### **Women in Politics**

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Not only did the legislation give some women the right to vote, it also allowed women to run as candidates for political office. Sadly, in the first 100 years after some women got the vote, there have been only 51 female MLAs in Manitoba as compared to over 850 men. In Canada, there were only 315 female MPs elected in those 100 years.

Does it matter? YES! It matters! Women make up 52 per cent of the world's population but remain underrepresented in elected office – a true democratic deficit. When women's voices and ideas are at the table it strengthens and enriches the debate and makes government policies and programs stronger for everyone.

### **Is the Battle for Equality Won?**

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Sadly, there is still a long way to go for full equality, even 100 years after women fought and won the battle for the right to vote. Let Nellie's legacy inspire you to make a difference!



## **A Message To My Younger Self**

**Geraldine Van Bibber**  
MLA for Porter Creek North (Yukon)

July 3, 2017: My birthday is today. I reflect on where I have been and where I have yet to go. Many birthdays can have that effect!

When a chance to explore interesting opportunities come one's way, jump and become involved. You learn, meet others and grow in character and spirit.

A very, very young version of me was shy, awkward and afraid. A very young version of me was starting to blossom and be aware of possibilities. A young version of me worked, started a family and became involved in community.

Commissioner of Yukon, Chancellor of Yukon College, Order of Canada, Yukon MLA – – To my younger self, you can achieve anything you set out to do. I hope to inspire and encourage other women in their journey!