

# Trailblazer: Canada's First Female Clerk

Newfoundland and Labrador was the last province to enter Confederation, but it boasts an important Canadian first – Bettie Duff, who served as Clerk of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland and Labrador from 1977-1991 was the first woman to hold this position in the country. In this special edition of the Canadian Parliamentary Review celebrating 100 years of Canadian women parliamentarians, it is fitting that we are also able to honour one of the trailblazing women working within parliamentary institutions that support parliamentarians' ability to fulfill democratic responsibilities.

## Andrea Hyde

Newfoundland and Labrador's House of Assembly has the honour and distinction of having the first female Clerk of any legislature or parliament across Canada.

Bettie Duff became the Clerk of the House of Assembly in 1977, and held that position until her retirement in 1991. During her tenure, she worked with four Premiers and five Speakers, and experienced four General Elections.

As Clerk of the House of Assembly, Duff was well-respected by all parties, and much-admired for her graciousness and warm sense of humour. Her ability to mentor those around her created an atmosphere of growth and supportiveness, and her guidance was valued highly by her colleagues.

When asked about her work, she replied that the job of the Clerk was "challenging, and different from anything that I ever did before. I'm really enjoying it." (*Daily News*, November 21, 1981)

Her career previous to becoming Clerk of the House was equally as interesting. She was Private Secretary to Premier Joey Smallwood for 23 years, and then held executive assistant positions within government as well as in the House of Assembly with Speaker Gerald Ottenheimer before becoming Clerk.

When asked about Duff, Smallwood stated that he had only the utmost respect for her after "23 years of absolutely magnificent work and dependability," and that "she was privy to more government secrets than [almost] anyone else" (*Daily News*, November 21, 1981). Ottenheimer also spoke highly of her, stating that she was "extremely intelligent and loyal, with a good sense of responsibility and a good sense of humour" (*Daily News*, 21 November 1981).

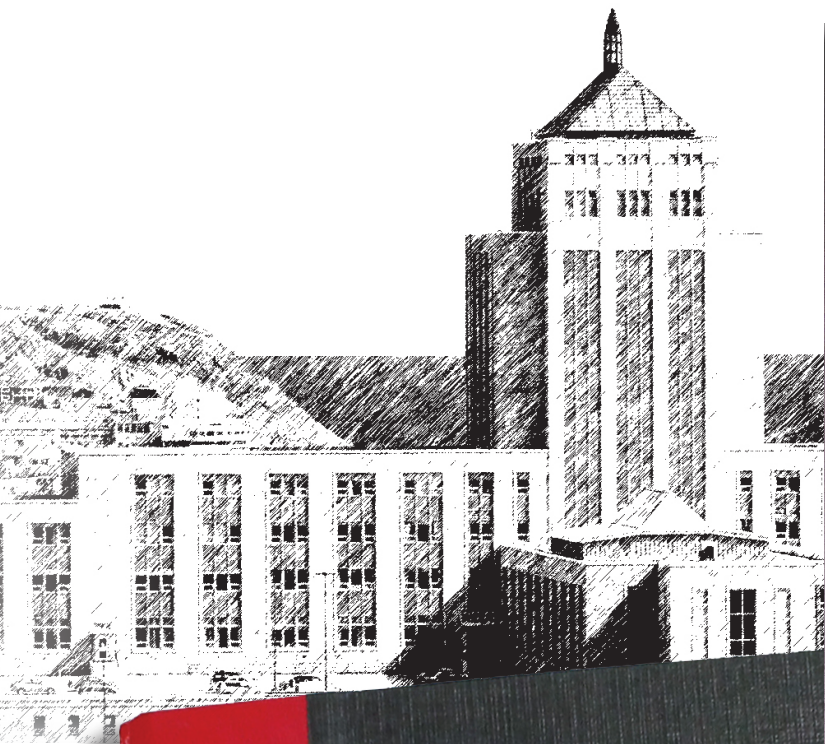
Upon her retirement in 1991, Premier Clyde Wells paid tribute, noting that "[Bettie] has served the entire House, both sides and the middle, quite well" as he "acknowledged her tremendous record of service" (*Hansard*, November 25, 1991).

MR. SPEAKER AND MEMBERS OF THE HONOURABLE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY:  
I thank you for the large measure of supply you have granted. I assure you that the appropriation that you have granted will be expended by my Ministers with care and efficiency.  
It is my pleasure that the Second Session of this thirty-Seventh General Assembly now be prorogued.

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ELIZABETH M. DUFF  
Clerk of the House of Assembly





**JOURNAL  
OF THE  
SECOND SESSION  
OF THE  
37th GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
NOVEMBER, 24th., 1977**

In her personal life, Duff had a lifelong interest in photography and travel, and she was a dedicated member of her local Catholic Church – St. Theresa’s Parish in St. John’s.

Bettie Duff passed away on August 28, 2016 – her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. She spent her final day attending church, and celebrating with family and friends.

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