

“100 Years of Women’s Suffrage: Canada’s Cautious Commemoration.”

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Presentation to the Hamilton Law Association
100th Anniversary of Women’s Suffrage in Canada Celebration
Hamilton, ON, 15 June 2018.

100 years ago, on May 24 2018, most women became eligible to vote in federal elections in Canada. While many women and men remained subject to racial and indigenous exclusions, no other single piece of legislation enfranchised so large a proportion of Canadians. This achievement should be celebrated as a triumphant moment in the onward, upward advancement of Canadian democracy, and of Canadian women in particular. It is important symbolically, as a marker of advancement in democratic rights. That is not to say that it delivers equality or other democratic rights directly or automatically, but it is an important symbol of those rights.

Yet the commemoration of this federal milestone has garnered relatively little attention, as compared with how it’s been celebrated in countries like [New Zealand](#) and [the UK](#). It is not news that women’s roles in forging Canada’s democracy have gone largely missing in official accounts of Canadian history. Quick now: who was the first female MP in Canada? Can you name any of the “famous five”? Do you recognize the name Mary Two-Axe Earley? And why did it take until 2018 to feature a woman other than the Queen on a Canadian banknote? Still, Ottawa’s relative neglect of the centennial of women’s suffrage, especially with a self-proclaimed feminist prime minister in office, demands some explanation.

Feminist historian Veronica Strong-Boag suggests that one reason for Canada’s [“curiously cautious commemoration of women suffragists”](#) is that the politics of remembrance has become a contemporary minefield. As she points out, we are only beginning to reckon with some of our more flawed historical figures. Renaming bridges and buildings may indeed be appropriate, as a step in coming to terms with their contributions to historic and institutional injustices. We are right to feel uneasy celebrating mainstream suffragists who pushed for voting rights extending only as far as white women. In the undergraduate class that I teach on feminism and politics, there is little interest or enthusiasm for these “first wave” feminists of their great grandmothers’ generation, who students associate with colonialism, racism, slavery and other ills.

Still, history is complex. It is important to note that the nascent women’s movement that coalesced with the first women’s rights convention in July 1848, at Seneca Falls NY, was firmly integrated with the abolitionist movement. The leaders were all abolitionists, and Frederick Douglass spoke at the Seneca Falls Convention, arguing for women’s suffrage. Women of colour like Sojourner Truth who spoke boldly of the experience of the female slave, and who asked “Ain’t I a Woman?” were also major forces in the movement, working not just for women’s

suffrage but for universal suffrage. Nevertheless, the 15th Amendment's passage in 1870, granting *black men* the right to vote, became a spur that politicized white women and turned them into suffragettes. Were they truly not going to be granted the vote before former slaves were?

Yes, similar exclusions marked the suffrage movement in Canada. Still, neglecting the women who made important strides in advancing female suffrage 100 years ago will not cure the ills and inequalities of our society.

In this brief talk, I want to consider both historical and political science perspectives on suffrage. This means looking at change over time, and appreciating context, causality, contingency and complexity. Asking questions about power and how it gets leveraged, and examining acts of solidarity and compromise between individuals and communities with diverse experiences and interests. Examining the ideology and belief systems of those who pushed for and resisted suffrage for women, and what they reveal about gender roles, family, class, and the system of white settler colonialism. There are many things we can learn from a deeper public reflection of the warts-and-all process by which women gained the right to vote.

First, examining the history of female suffrage helps us uncover power relations on multiple axes. Here we must ask the question what was at stake in granting this basic political right? Why was it so contested? Why did women's suffrage come when it did, and under what circumstances? What compromises were made? Social movement actors make history, but they do not do so in circumstances of their own making. For suffragists, reform required working creatively within existing institutional arrangements and prevailing patterns of political power. (In political science and political sociology, we refer to these contexts of action as "political opportunity structures".)

Let me provide a couple of illustrations.

It is well known that the first legal step to women's suffrage federally was the passage of the *Wartime Elections Act* on 20 September 1917, which was effectively a bargain in return for conscription. The Act, passed by Prime Minister Robert Borden's Conservative government, extended the franchise to the wives, mothers and sisters of serving soldiers, as well as to women serving in the military, thus selectively increasing the voter lists by approximately 500,000 people. The same Act also took the vote away from many Canadians who had immigrated from "enemy" countries. The Act's legacy is contentious, as it both provided many women with the vote for the first time, while also legitimizing in law many widely-held anti-immigrant fears.

A less familiar story can be told of Saskatchewan, which granted women the right to vote in 1916. Things moved very quickly in this province, and that also deserves explanation. On February 14th, 1916, the Saskatchewan Equal Franchise Board presented a petition with 10,000 signatures in favour of women's suffrage to Saskatchewan Premier Walter Scott. The provincial franchise for women was officially granted exactly one month later, on March 14th. A

key factor in this case was that Scott's Liberal government was facing public accusations that it had accepted bribes from liquor lobbyists to oppose prohibition. The allegations had come to light on Feb 10 – only 4 days before the suffragists presented their petition. In light of the liquor scandal, and with its tenure in office running out, the government understood that its political survival depended on its ability to show its commitment to prohibition and deliver on this score. Key to achieving this goal were women's votes, as suffrage and the Christian temperance movement were closely tied to each other. With the women's delegation in attendance that Valentine's Day, the premier publicly committed the government to suffrage legislation. The shift was so sudden and unexpected that, according to historian June Menzies, the head of the suffragist delegation loudly exclaimed in the chamber: "Mister Premier, this is so sudden!"¹ Things continued to move quickly from there. During the same week that a public commission of inquiry into the bribery allegations was appointed, the government introduced its legislation. The result was that women were set to vote in the Dec. 1916 prohibition plebiscite (it passed with over 75% in favour). Women also voted in the next provincial election in June 1917, which the Liberals won handily.

Beyond understanding how the suffrage movement interacted with power politics and political opportunity, a second reason to look closely at suffrage is what it reveals about Canada's vast regional differences. Of course, Canada is a complex and highly plural state, and this was even moreso in the early 20th century than today. Different opinions and beliefs caused the struggle for women's suffrage to take root differently in each of Canada's provinces. And political responses were also varied. Sometimes, as with Québec and New Brunswick, there was much debate and opposition, while in Saskatchewan, there was much less resistance.

A predominant explanation for why suffrage proceeded earlier in the west (Manitoba, Sask, Alberta all granted women suffrage within the first 4 mths of 1916) emphasizes the importance of agriculture and homesteading across the prairie provinces. Since women in those provinces had to play the role of equal partner in pioneering conditions, their husbands could hardly fall back on the argument that women and men naturally held forth in different spheres (the public & work sphere for men; home, hearth & family for women). Prairie women became politically active initially through organizations such as Grain Growers' Associations where they lobbied for homesteader and land grant rights for women, recruitment of doctors, nurses & midwives for rural communities, the establishment of libraries and schools, and improvements to the agrarian system. Consequently farmers organizations were relatively quick to support the suffragist cause. However, it has been pointed out that the suffrage movement in the west was also infused with intense debate about the rising "foreign element" among homesteaders at the turn of the 20th century. Put in this light, support for suffrage was the obverse of ethnic tolerance. As one reformer at the time put it: "What an outrage to deny to the highest-minded,

¹ Cited in June Menzies (1968), "Votes for Saskatchewan Women." Pp 79-92 in Norman Ward and Duff Spafford (eds.), *Politics in Saskatchewan* (Don Mills: Longman).

most cultured native born lady of Canada what is cheerfully granted to the lowest-browed, most imbruted foreign hobo that chooses to visit our shores.”² Not only did foreign immigration raise issues of “justice” for non-immigrant white women, it could also be viewed from a more pragmatic angle. As immigrant women were thought to be less likely to vote, female suffrage would increase the electoral power of the dominant non-immigrant group.

In Quebec, suffrage was delayed another 24 yrs – until April 1940 – due in large part to opposition from the Catholic Church. Arguments against giving women the right to vote were centred on their place in the home and their role as guardians of the French-Canadian race. Even after they won the right to vote, resistance to women in political life remained strong. It was not until 1961 that women would have a voice inside parliament. Incidentally, women were not permitted to practice law in Quebec until 1941, though they were allowed to attend law school.

So regional context, and distinctive structural and cultural factors – such as economic dependence on agriculture and the role of the Catholic Church – matter.

Third, examining suffrage closely highlights very clear differences between women, even in relation to one movement. Of course, there were many women who opposed suffrage. These were differences built around religion, social class, ideology, etc. Hamilton’s own Adelaide Hunter Hoodless was a voice for rural Canadian women, who is credited with a founding role in several key Canadian women’s organizations (the Women’s Institutes, the Victorian Order of Nurses, the YWCA, the National Council of Women), and who spearheaded the inclusion of domestic science in schools. Although a champion for women in many ways, Hoodless was no fan of suffrage. She saw no reason why women should vote, or want to vote. Her sole mission was to educate women in practicalities that resulted in healthy families. Hoodless’ call for a restoration of women through home economics was, for many of the country’s prominent conservatives, a reassuring response to the more ‘radical’ movement of women into the workforce and the rising demand for female enfranchisement.

Even women who supported suffrage had very different political visions of what they wanted to do with it. For most, suffrage remained deeply tied to maternal feminism. It was driven by a sense of urgency about disturbing changes in private life. In many instances, the arguments of maternal feminists had nativist overtones. Immigration and urbanization brought many middle class women into contact with poverty, crime and abhorrent working conditions, much of which was often attributed to the slovenliness, alcoholism and poor parenting of the foreign immigrant. Other suffragists were inspired by a more socialist feminism. Their agenda included reform of property laws, improved working conditions, better wages. Others could be considered agrarian feminists.

² This comment appeared in the *Grain Growers Guide* (1909) a newspaper published by the organized farmers of western Canada between 1908 and 1936, and is cited in Catherine Cleverdon’s masterful 1974 tome *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 6.

Today, when we consider the deep fragmentation of the feminist movement, the disagreements between liberal and radical feminists, or the debates about whether [Margaret Atwood is a “bad” or a “good” feminist](#), we might well reflect on how the suffrage movement related to these distinctive visions. In light of #metoo, the suffrage movement offers an interesting mirror for women’s history. It reveals changing gender roles over time, and asks what causes particular social movements to pop up at particular times? And what makes them successful?

Fourth, looking at suffrage requires considering the importance and meaning of the concept of political representation. What does it mean to have a representative assembly? How are representatives to be chosen? How can they be held accountable? Of course, voting gives us the power to affect how our country is governed by electing those who will represent our interests in parliament. Yet we know there are major limitations to the promise of representative democracy, as we experience it today. Having acquired voting rights 100 yrs ago, we rightly ask why women hold only 26% of seats in the House of Commons today. If women held 50% of seats in the House of Commons, would we have achieved the promise of representative democracy? The evidence suggests that having more women in office *does* make some difference. Yet, regardless of their gender, it also appears that MPs are increasingly irrelevant within our prevailing institutions. A report out this week from Samara Canada shows that overbearing party leaders and their staff contribute to increasing loss of agency for individual MPs. Perhaps it is more important to have a parity cabinet than a parity legislature? Or perhaps having Katie Telford as Chief of Staff is more important still? Our system is in need of reform, and feminists today must play a critical role in thinking about how to improve our representative democracy.

Finally, let me end with a thought that I try to inspire in my students, who often appear bored and tired by the history of suffrage. Who take voting for granted, and perhaps don’t even vote. Struggles over liberal democratic rights, what we might call “bourgeois” legal struggles, often transition into other struggles in our society over other kinds of rights and resources. They seldom remain closed and singular, but rather morph into other political struggles. So of course suffrage 100 years ago did not translate directly or automatically into a truly egalitarian society. Many challenges remained, and these have been taken up by Pauline Johnson, Viola Desmond, Sandra Lovelace, Jaime Black and other courageous women who fought and continue to fight for the [“land of the fair deal”](#) long ago glimpsed by Nellie McClung. The flawed beliefs of some of the earliest suffragists should not blind us to the courage required to win the vote for most women, or the necessity to contest barriers to equality that persist in Canada today.