

100 Years of Suffrage: The Next Chapters

Velma McColl and Kathleen Monk

The story of Canada's first 150 years cannot be told without the voices of its women: Indigenous women who passed on their culture for centuries; European women who helped settle a forbidding landscape; African-American women who fled slavery on the Underground Railroad; immigrant women from around the world who demanded better lives for their children. And all of their daughters who fought for their rights and still refuse to take "soon" for an answer.

From the comfort of our lives today, it would be hard for us to imagine how revolutionary it was 100 years ago for a woman from southwestern Ontario to have mounted a hay wagon and demanded that a crowd of angry farmers listen to her vision of their political future. The courage she must have had to even contemplate such a step is breathtaking, for she would have known that her life would be forever changed by this single act of defiance.

Women in Ontario had only received the right to vote the year before, and it remained controversial and a threat to the status quo in 1917.

Yet Agnes Macphail was just 26 when she took the step that changed Canadian history. Less than two years later she was a member of the first farmers-led government in Ontario, and two years after that became the first—and for a long time the only—woman member of the Canadian Parliament.

It was an astonishing development for the thousands of toughened

battle veterans to return home in the winter of 1918-19 to find that women's roles in family, in business and finally in politics had been transformed in their absence. But it was a long, bitter struggle that had led to this early victory for greater equality in the Dominion, and one that took until 1940, when Quebec granted

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women the right to vote, to end even the first chapter.

It's important to remember that Agnes Macphail was preceded by lesser-known heroes like Emily Stowe, who had to work as a doctor on children's health illegally—despite having a medical degree—because women were not allowed to practise. And Adelaide Hoodless, who launched the Women's Institute and fought the dairy industry to insist on healthy pasteurization. And Marie-Lacoste Gérin-Lajoie who helped found the Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste and worked for decades on pensions, decent working conditions and votes for women in Quebec.

And the strength of western women shone through when, in 1929, the Famous Five, led by Nellie McClung, won the battle taken all the way to the Supreme Court to have women declared “persons.” How bizarre to have taken the opposite side on that issue, suggesting that women were “non-persons” or chattel, not able to participate fully in democracy and decisions in a country where today 50 per cent of the federal cabinet is comprised of women.

And the woman who now graces our \$10 bill, Viola Desmond—the first non-Queen to be granted the honour in our history—added the battle for racial and gender equality to our story. Desmond broke the colour bar in a Nova Scotia theatre and was prosecuted for having failed to pay the extra penny it cost to sit in the ‘whites only’ section.

The subsequent chapters of the struggle to establish first gender and then greater racial equality in Canada are better known. But on our

150th anniversary as a country, the temptation for only self-congratulation on how far we have come must be tempered by recognition of the journey still ahead.

It was only a 100 years ago that some women got the right to vote—interestingly, the first group were military wives of men fighting overseas—probably with the expectation that they would cast their husbands' votes. It was less than 90 years ago that we became persons. Divorce initiated by a woman was possible only by the 1970s. Freedom of choice did not come until the 1990s for many Canadian women.

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We can admire the past and our sisters who made great strides but we are still far from anything approaching equality in corporate boardrooms, senior academic and bureaucratic roles, representation in the courts and—perhaps most frustratingly—in any municipal council chamber, legislature or our own Parliament. Women of colour and and/or different sexual orientations still suffer less blatant but no less restricting discrimination in too many areas of Canadian life. Indigenous girls are far too often in



Agnes Macphail, a farmer and teacher, became the first woman MP in 1921. *Photo: Library and Archives Canada*

foster care—more than twice the rate of non-indigenous children and, in a national disgrace, are far more likely to be victims of abuse and violence.

Canada currently ranks 35th out of 144 countries on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, ranking lower than Mozambique, Bolivia and Belarus. Despite recent gains, women MPs in our Parliament still make up only 27 per cent of the House of Commons, meaning we are only halfway to halfway in terms of gender parity. Only 11 women in Canadian history have been premier of a province or territory—and only one other, briefly, our prime minister. And it's not that women aren't interested in politics, on the contrary, women voted more than men in the last federal election.

So, what are the next chapters of the march begun more than a century ago by the famous names we know today and thousands of our grandmothers and mothers who waged more personal campaigns in kitchens, schools, hospitals and on factory floors in steady progression? How can we continue to move the



Viola Desmond, who fought racial and gender bias in Nova Scotia, and whose image now graces our \$10 bill. *Photo: Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University/ Wanda Robson Collection/2016-16*

dial on issues of gender, racial and sexual equality?

The Daughters of the Vote initiative earlier this year—filling all 338 seats in the House of Commons with women between 18 and 24—showed some modern Nellie spirit by reversing for a few hours the male-dominated Parliament that has been the status quo since Confederation. In fact, more women sat in the House that day than have been MPs in Canada's entire history and their voices rang clear and true with stories from their communities and concerns about economic and sexual freedom, race, respecting cultural diversity and protecting the planet. It was an historic day that proved #addwomenchange politics.

A few years ago, 40 per cent of corporate boards in Canada still lacked a single woman despite a mountain of research showing the benefits of gender-diverse boards to decision-making and business performance. Finally, corporate leaders—men and women—are pushing to see a minimum of 25 per cent women grace those tables.



Nellie McClung, who led the fight of the Famous Five to the Supreme Court in the famous case to have women declared “persons”. Photo: Library and Archives Canada

Maybe that will happen in this decade, maybe not.

The Trudeau government has set a tone as an avowedly feminist government—everything from an expansion of sexual assault laws to finally (finally!) calling an inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, to a foreign policy focused on economic empowerment and sexual and reproductive rights, to now building gender-based analysis into all government decision-making. Oh yes, and 50 per cent women in cabinet is changing the way that decisions are made in Centre Block and around Ottawa, along with the steely determination of only the second and now longest-serving woman as a chief of staff to a prime minister.

Despite these strides, pent-up frustration among many women has led to quotas and benchmarks being called

pinkwashing – and they have, appropriately, demanded more. This is true for women living in poverty or who are fighting for physical safety or who are still being paid less despite having the same or better qualifications than men. They are mothers and sisters and daughters trying to live healthy Canadian lives.

One thing we *can* do is move beyond the zero-sum mentality among men that has haunted so many advances over the decades: The belief that progress for women displaces men, that female economic empowerment is somehow a threat to the natural order of things. Global development policy has shifted to understand that investments in women entrepreneurs change the future fortunes of not only their own families but ultimately whole communities, that this is a

building block for a thriving country. All genders have a vested interest in outcomes like these, so why don’t we embrace these philosophies more fully here at home?

There is no surprise that women are different—as much from each other as from men. We do not speak with a single voice and certainly do not vote as a single block. We are not afraid to speak passionately—regardless of where we stand on the political spectrum; to solve problems collectively; to act from a place that considers our children’s future or, for our indigenous sisters, that considers the next seven generations. We know that this changes conversations in coffee shops, in offices and on political campaign buses, sometimes uncomfortably.

Being more than 50 per cent of Canada’s population, our voices will only get stronger. And if we thought previous generations of Violas, Agneses and Nellies were impatient, there is a generation of women and girls coming who see the world differently, without the prejudices, self-limiting constructs and biases of earlier times. They see – and will demand – respect for sexual diversity and reproductive rights, more family-friendly working lives for everyone, proud equal participation in a thriving economy and a future that addresses how we live sustainably on the planet.

There is *so* much more to do. Like our sisters before us, we will seek a better, more inclusive world for our families—however we define them. **P**

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