

The Suffragists

Date: May 24, 1918

Canada Elections Act: Women Get the Vote

The Canada Elections Act first enfranchised all Canadian women over the age of 21 for federal elections, regardless whether they had the right to vote in provincial elections. Throughout the debates, the telling argument was the competence shown by women during World War I.



In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation to grant women full voting rights. In 1902, Australia gave women the right to vote in national elections.

But in Canada, woman did not have universal suffrage yet (definition: an advocate of the extension of voting rights, especially to women).

The Valiant Five were five Canadian women who, in 1927 asked the Supreme Court of Canada to answer the question, "**Are women persons?**"

In 1928, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously decided women were not "persons" who could hold public office as Canadian senators. The terms of the Constitution Act, 1867, and the historical incapacity of women to hold office under common law barred the suit of Henrietta Muir Edwards and her companion Alberta suffragettes.

In 1929 the British Privy Council reversed the decision and called the exclusion of women from public office "**a relic of days more barbarous than ours.**" The case came to be known as the Persons Case.

Also known as the Alberta's "Famous 5" were petitioners in the groundbreaking Persons Case

- * Emily Murphy (the British Empire's first woman judge);
- * Irene Marryat Parlby (farm women's leader, activist and first woman Cabinet minister in Alberta);
- * Nellie Mooney McClung (a famous suffragist and member of the Alberta legislature);
- * Louise Crummy McKinney (the first woman elected to the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, or any legislature in Canada or the British Empire);
- * Henrietta Muir Edwards (an advocate for working women and founder of the Victorian Order of Nurses).

Together, the five women had many years of active work in various campaigns for women's rights dating back to the 1880s and 90s and they enjoyed a national and, especially in the case of McClung, an international reputation among reformers.

The Official Word: "Specifically the question was whether Section 24 of the British North America Act, 1867, included the possibility of women becoming senators: "The Governor General shall... summon qualified Persons to the Senate; and ... every Person so summoned shall become and be a Member of the Senate and a Senator."

Only men had been appointed to the Senate thus far. For years, pressure had grown for women to be appointed to the Senate.

In *Edwards v. Canada (Attorney General)* [1930], The Supreme Court of Canada ruled unanimously that women were not qualified to be senators. The stated grounds included:

- * the framers of the act, in 1867, could not have had it in mind to permit women senators, since women did not participate in politics at that time;
- * the act exclusively used the word he to refer to senators.

Four months later, Cairine Wilson became the first woman to sit in the Senate.

Along with Thérèse Casgrain, the Five have been commemorated on Canada's newest fifty-dollar bill.

The more powerful Canadian House of Commons had elected its first female member (Agnes Macphail) in 1921, well before the Persons Case. However, the precedent did establish the principle that women could hold any political office in Canada.

Moreover, the Five clearly did devote their energies to increasing women's participation on legislative bodies with greater power: two became members of the Alberta Legislature and one a member of the House of Commons.

The **Woman's Christian Temperance Union in Canada** originated in Owen Sound, Ont, in 1874. Under the influence of Letitia Youmans of Pictou, Ont, the temperance union idea spread and a national WCTU was organized in 1885, with Youmans as president. At the time, the union was the largest non-denominational women's organization in Canada.

Believing that the abuse of alcohol was the cause of unemployment, disease, prostitution, poverty and immorality, the WCTU campaigned for the legal Prohibition of all alcoholic beverages. The WCTU promoted the work ethic of sobriety, thrift, duty and family sanctity, in addition to such reforms as woman's suffrage, sex hygiene and mothers' allowances. National and provincial prohibition legislation, approved during WWI, was a highlight for the WCTU. The defeat of these laws and the adoption of government control of alcoholic beverages during the 1920s heralded the decline of the organization. In 1995 there were 1700 members in 67 branches (down from 2473 in 1987).

(l-r)
Nellie
McClung



Agnes
Macphail



Louise
McKinney

