

Mary Ellen Smith: First Female Member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
of BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mary Ellen Smith may not be a household name in British Columbia, but her time in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia helped to establish equal recognition for women in provincial politics.

Mary Ellen Smith worked as an elementary school teacher in England before moving to British Columbia with her husband, Ralph Smith, in 1891. Upon their arrival in Nanaimo, and later in Vancouver, the Smiths quickly became involved with a variety of community organizations and political groups. Ralph was elected to serve as a Member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia (MLA) in 1898, and a couple of years later, as a Member of Parliament (MP) in Ottawa.

While her husband was serving as MLA and MP, Mary Ellen Smith was involved with the movement to extend the right to vote to women. Her efforts, as well as those of many other women, paid off when a referendum on the subject was held in conjunction with the provincial general election of 1916. The male voters of British Columbia overwhelmingly said ‘yes’ to the idea, with nearly 67 percent voting in favour of extending the right to vote to women. The Legislative Assembly agreed with the result and passed legislation granting women the right to vote in 1917.

Ralph Smith returned to provincial politics and won a seat as an MLA in 1916, but died suddenly the following year. With women now having the right to vote and to run for provincial office, Mary Ellen Smith was called on to run in her husband’s vacated seat. She easily won the January 1918 by-election, becoming the first woman elected to serve in British Columbia’s Legislative Assembly.

While the newspapers of the day debated what the appropriate attire would be for the first female MLA and whether or not she should be permitted to wear a hat inside of the Legislative Assembly, Mary Ellen Smith quickly got to work in her new role. In 1918, she introduced a bill calling for a minimum wage for women. After receiving approval from the Legislative Assembly, it remained in effect until 1972, when it was replaced with minimum wage legislation that applied to both men and women.

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Mary Ellen Smith took pride in her role as the voice for women, children and the underprivileged in the Legislature, but she is known for two additional parliamentary accomplishments. When she was appointed to the Cabinet of Premier John Oliver on March 23, 1921, she became the first female member of cabinet in the British Empire. She served as a Minister without Portfolio, but resigned from the post eight months later by noting that “a cabinet minister without portfolio is as a fifth wheel on the political coach, a superfluity.”

By circumstance, Mary Ellen Smith is also widely regarded to have been the first woman in the British Empire to preside over parliamentary proceedings from the Speaker’s Chair. With the deputy Speaker absent from the Chamber, Speaker Buckham called on Mary Ellen Smith to briefly preside over the budget debate on February 22, 1928. Upon assuming the responsibilities of the Speakership that day, Members quickly adapted to Mrs. Smith’s presence and referred to her as “Madame Speaker” — a term still used today throughout the Commonwealth.

After failing to win the riding of Esquimalt in the provincial general election of 1928, there was much speculation about Mary Ellen Smith’s future. Stories circulated that she would be appointed to the Senate of Canada or perhaps that she would run for mayor of Vancouver. Ultimately, she decided to retreat from elected office, opting instead to serve as President of the B.C. Liberal Party. She held that position until the time of her death in 1933.