

Parliamentary Trailblazers in British Columbia

Did You Know?

The term **suffrage** means the right to vote in parliamentary elections.

The Women's Suffrage Movement in British Columbia



Sample suffrage petition from 1897

Between 1891 and 1914, 16 women's suffrage bills were introduced and defeated in British Columbia's Legislative Assembly. In 1916, Premier William Bowser decided to hold a referendum on the issue in conjunction with the provincial general election. The referendum results revealed that 65 percent of the men who voted were in favour of extending the franchise to women in British Columbia.

In April of 1917, British Columbia became the fourth province in Canada to grant women who qualified as British subjects the right to vote in provincial elections and to stand for election to provincial office. The following year, the federal government in Ottawa passed similar legislation, enabling women to vote in federal elections and be elected to the Canadian House of Commons.

While this legislation heralded a great step forward for women's rights, it did not immediately give rise to universal suffrage for all women in B.C. It wouldn't be until 1949 that suffrage was finally extended to include Aboriginal women and men and various ethnic minorities.

October is V



Mary Ellen Smith

1918 – First woman elected to B.C.'s Legislative Assembly

Mary Ellen Smith was born in England in 1861. She trained as a school teacher and, in 1891, immigrated to Canada with her husband, Ralph Smith. They eventually settled in Vancouver, where Mary Ellen Smith played an important role in her husband's election to B.C.'s Legislative Assembly in 1898, and later to the Canadian House of Commons.

Following her husband's sudden death, Mary Ellen Smith stood as an Independent candidate in the 1918 by-election for his vacant Vancouver City seat. She won the seat with 58% of the vote, the first woman elected to B.C.'s Legislative Assembly. She was also the first woman in both Canada and the then-British Empire to be appointed as a cabinet minister (without portfolio).

In 1916, a referendum on women's suffrage was held in British Columbia, and in 1917, the *Provincial Elections Act* was amended. Women who qualified as British subjects were now eligible to vote in provincial elections and to stand for election to political office.

In the Legislative Assembly, Mary Ellen Smith worked to raise the profile of women's and children's issues, introducing a bill to establish a minimum wage for women and girls, and supporting measures to create juvenile courts and allow women to sit as judges.

1873

White female property holders in B.C. are permitted to vote in municipal elections

1880–1890

Women's suffrage petitions are presented to B.C.'s Legislative Assembly

1891–1914

16 women's suffrage bills are introduced and defeated in B.C.'s Legislative Assembly

1916

A referendum on women's suffrage is held in conjunction with the provincial general election, with 65 percent of participating male voters expressing support for women's suffrage

1917

The *Provincial Elections Act* is amended to grant women who qualify as British subjects the right to vote in a provincial election and the right to stand as a candidate for election to B.C.'s Legislative Assembly

1918

Mary Ellen Smith wins a by-election in Vancouver, becoming the first woman elected to serve in B.C.'s Legislative Assembly

The federal government passes *An Act to confer the Electoral Franchise upon Women*, granting women who qualify as British subjects in B.C. and across Canada the right to vote in federal elections effective January 1, 1919

1921

Mary Ellen Smith becomes the first woman in the then-British Empire to be appointed a cabinet minister (without portfolio)