



# Trailblazing Women in British Columbia's Justice System

## OCTOBER IS WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

In honour of Women's History Month, this handout highlights the contributions of trailblazing women in British Columbia's justice system.



**Mabel French**  
First woman called to the BC bar

In 1910, Mabel French moved from the province of New Brunswick to Vancouver, BC. A trained lawyer, she had earlier won a hard-fought battle in her home province to be allowed to practice law.

However, in 1911 the Law Society of British Columbia, to which all lawyers must belong to be eligible to practice in BC, refused to allow French to sit the examination for call and admission to the bar.

French's case eventually came before the Supreme Court of British Columbia, but was dismissed, as was her subsequent appeal in 1912. The Court of Appeal felt that a change to the eligibility of women for the legal profession must be made by the provincial Legislature.

In February 1912, provincial Attorney General William J. Bowser introduced *An Act to remove the Disability of Women so far as it relates to the Study and Practice of Law*. The Act received royal assent on February 27, 1912. A month later, French was called to the BC bar, paving the way for women to practice law in British Columbia.

### Did You Know?

In 1912, when Mabel French was the first woman to be called to the BC bar, women still did not have the right to vote or run as candidates in provincial elections.



**Helen Gregory MacGill**  
First woman to become a judge in BC

Born in Hamilton, Ontario, Helen Gregory MacGill earned two undergraduate degrees and a Master of Arts before gaining work as a journalist. She moved with her husband and family to San Francisco, then Minnesota, and finally, Vancouver.

In Vancouver, MacGill was a founding member of the Vancouver Women's Press Club and a campaigner for women's rights and the suffrage movement. MacGill joined the University Women's Club where she served as chair of the Laws Committee. In 1912, she voiced her support for Mabel French's cause and the Act that would allow women to practice law in the province.

In 1917, MacGill was appointed as a Juvenile Court judge, the first woman to hold this position in British Columbia. In her 25 years with the court, she became a noted expert on the rights of minors and is credited with helping to establish the family court system in British Columbia.

**Edith Paterson**  
First female member of the  
Law Society of BC to become a judge

Edith Paterson was raised in Vancouver and educated in Montreal and Toronto. She completed her legal training at Osgoode Hall and was called to the bar in Ontario in 1915. The following year, Paterson returned to Vancouver to practice law and was called to the BC bar.



In 1929, she followed in the footsteps of Helen Gregory MacGill when she was appointed to the Juvenile Court. Paterson was the first female member of the Law Society of BC to serve as a judge.



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## Patricia Proudfoot

First woman appointed to the BC Supreme Court



Raised in the province of Saskatchewan, Patricia Proudfoot moved to Rutland, BC for high school and, in 1946, enrolled at the University of British Columbia, where she obtained a law degree.

Proudfoot was the first female judge appointed to the Criminal Division of the Provincial Court and, in 1977, the first woman appointed to serve at the Supreme Court of British Columbia. In 1978, Proudfoot acted as Commissioner of the Royal Commission on the Incarceration of Female Offenders.

She went on to serve from 1989-2002 at the BC Court of Appeal - the province's highest court. In 2007, Proudfoot was awarded the Order of British Columbia, the highest provincial honour, for her contributions to the legal profession.



## The Right Honourable Beverley McLachlin, P.C., Chief Justice of Canada

First woman appointed to the BC Court of Appeal ~ First female Chief Justice of the BC Supreme Court ~ First female Chief Justice of Canada

The Right Honourable Beverley McLachlin, P.C., was raised in the province of Alberta, where she completed both a Master of Philosophy and a law degree. She practiced law first in Alberta and later in BC where, in 1974, she became an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Law and the University of British Columbia.

Chief Justice McLachlin was appointed to the Supreme Court of BC in 1981 and was elevated to the BC Court of Appeal in 1985. In 1988, she returned to the BC Supreme Court to become the first female Chief Justice.

In 1989, Chief Justice McLachlin was sworn in as a Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada and was subsequently appointed Chief Justice of Canada in 2000. She is the first woman to hold this position in Canadian history.

## Role of the Attorney General

The Attorney General, a member of the Executive Council, is the Chief Law Officer of the Crown.

The Attorney General presides over the Ministry of Justice and superintends all matters connected with the administration of justice in British Columbia.

She also ensures that the administration of public affairs is in accordance with the law.



## Honourable Shirley Bond

First Female Attorney General in BC

The Honourable Shirley Bond is a member of the 40th Parliament and currently serves as the Minister of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training and the Minister Responsible for Labour.

First elected to the Legislative Assembly in 2001, Minister Bond has held an extensive range of Cabinet positions.

From 2011-2013, Minister Bond was the first woman to hold the position of Attorney General in British Columbia.