

WOMEN IN THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
of BRITISH COLUMBIA

Women's Suffrage

At the turn of the 20th century, women in British Columbia still did not have the right to vote. Many women's groups believed that they should have a right to participate in the political life of the province and campaigned for equal suffrage.

Between 1891 and 1914, 16 suffrage bills were introduced in the Assembly and then defeated. Finally, the Conservative government of Premier William Bowser decided that the issue should be put to the voters of British Columbia. As a result, a referendum on women's suffrage was held in conjunction with the Provincial General Elections of 1916. When the votes were counted, the male voters of the province had voted 65% in favour of extending the right to vote to women.

In April 1917, the new Liberal government amended the *Provincial Elections Act* to grant women who qualified as British subjects the right to vote in provincial elections and the right to be elected to the Legislative Assembly. Women in Vancouver were the first in the province to get the chance to vote when a by-election was held the following year. The newly enfranchised women of Vancouver used their vote in the by-election to help elect Mary Ellen Smith as the first female Member of the Legislative Assembly.



Mary Ellen Smith

Political Trailblazers

Since 1918, 102 women have been elected to serve as Members of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. The record of their participation includes some notable trail-blazers.

Mary Ellen Smith, MLA (1918-28) was the first female Member of the Legislative Assembly. She was also the first woman in both Canada and the British Empire to be appointed as a member of cabinet.

Nancy Hodges, MLA (1941-53) was appointed as Speaker in 1950, becoming the first woman to hold this position in both British Columbia and the Commonwealth. She was later the first female from British Columbia to be appointed to serve in the Senate of Canada.



Nancy Hodges
BC Archives I-32485

Rita Johnston, MLA (1983-91) was selected as leader of the BC Social Credit Party in 1991, becoming the first woman to serve as Premier of British Columbia and the first female premier in Canada.

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