

WOMEN IN THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY



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 Legislative Assembly but all were defeated. Finally, the 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 election 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 Legislative Assembly amended the Provincial Elections Act, 1917, 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 woman MLA.

While this event was an important step forward for women's rights, it did not immediately result in universal suffrage for all people in B.C. For many, the path to suffrage took much longer owing to persistent racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination. It was not until 1949 that suffrage was finally extended to include all Indigenous women and men, as well as several other ethnic communities in B.C. The last religious community in B.C. to be granted suffrage were the Doukhobors in 1952.

POLITICAL TRAILBLAZERS

Mary Ellen Smith, MLA (1918-28) was the first woman 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 woman from British Columbia to be appointed to serve in the Senate of Canada.

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



Mary Ellen Smith

Image B-01563 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives. Photographer Steffens-Colmer.



Nancy Hodges

Image I-32485 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.



Rita Johnston

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