

Essay Award Winners 2004 (First Prize)

Not Just Daddy's Little Girl: An Examination of the Barriers
to Women's Political Participation and of the Women Who Overcame Them

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Women have never enjoyed equal representation in Canadian politics. Since their federal enfranchisement in 1921, women have rarely become actively involved in politics. [1] Not only were female candidates unsuccessful, there were many elections that did not include a single female candidate. Until the 1980s, political representation of women was below twelve percent all across Canada. Presently, there are sixty-three women in the House of Commons out of a possible three hundred and one seats. [2] While the gap between men and women MPs is much smaller than it ever was, 21% is not equality. To understand why women continue to make up less than 50% of the federal or provincial legislatures, it is helpful to explore the uniqueness of the women who overcame political exclusion in Canada in the twentieth century.

In examining the early lives of thirteen Canadian female politicians, the four major advantages that led these women toward political success emerged. [3] Family political involvement, exposure to equal relationships, higher education and work outside the home allowed these women to be successful despite the social expectations of their day. From roughly 1900 to 1950, societal barriers stopped most women from considering work in politics. Further, the essay will show how women were discouraged by the structure of political parties as they began to undertake political work. Most political parties excluded women by relegating them to domestic roles in auxiliaries and by neglecting to provide them with sufficient support.

Considering all the obstacles and difficulties that women faced, one wonders how any woman managed to become politically active. Nonetheless, female politicians did exist at both the provincial and federal levels. A comparison of some Canadian female politicians will show that it was largely their early life experiences and their personal relationships that allowed them to break free from the dominant views about women's proper position and take their rightful place in Canadian politics. According to historian Margaret Conrad, women approach the description of their lives differently than men: they focus more on the close relationships they develop, because it is those relationships that have given females a place in society. [4] These relationships also affect the life paths women choose to embark upon.

With regards to the personal relationships and experiences of almost all of the women included in this study there are four major similarities. The first norm that will be examined is the political participation of the women's families, since many of these women had politically active fathers, uncles, husbands and even neighbours. The second condition that almost all of the women experienced in their formative years was exposure to the idea that women could do the same things that men could do. Many fathers encouraged their daughters to become involved in political discussions. Some women

saw equal relationships between their parents, who broke away from the traditional male and female roles in the household. Others experienced equality first hand with the men they married, who supported their endeavours and who encouraged their free thought. The third criterion that enabled women to join politics was an education. Some of the women were not able to attend university, but all of them were exceptionally good students while they attended high school. Lastly, all of the women included in this study were active in their community in women's organizations and many participated in the workforce. It would be a mistake to suggest that these female politicians shared the same lifestyles or held the same views. Senators Cairine Wilson and Thérèse Casgrain came from wealthy families in Quebec , while Agnes Macphail and Nellie McClung were farmers' daughters born in Ontario . Thérèse Casgrain was an ardent supporter of suffrage while Margaret McWilliams did not see a need for the enfranchisement of women. [5] From an examination of biographies available for female politicians in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century, it appears that almost all shared early experiences that shaped their outlook on life and gave them the confidence to choose politics as a career.

All but a few of the women in this study had politically active family members. Some of the women's fathers were members of Parliament while others were simply politically active citizens. As a young girl Cairine Wilson and her father, an MP, were frequent guests at Prime Minister Laurier's house. Not only did politics interest Wilson , but Laurier also became her idol. [6] Grace MacInnis' father, J.S. Woodsworth, was the founder of the Western socialist party the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. His beliefs had a major impact on young Grace, who actually hid material that might have looked suspicious after her father was arrested during the Winnipeg Strike. [7] Thérèse Casgrain was the daughter of a member of parliament and the niece of the premier of Quebec . On the surface it would seem unlikely for such a wealthy woman to eventually take up a cause like socialism. [8] However, in her autobiography she speaks highly of the generosity her father showed to his own constituents. His actions surely had a great impact on Thérèse's later concern for the working classes. [9] Muriel McQueen Fergusson was exposed to important political people through her father, who was a prominent lawyer in New Brunswick . [10] Flora MacDonald's father took her to her first political meeting at the age of thirteen which launched her career as an active Tory supporter. [11] Mary Ellen Smith's father, a coalminer, held regular political discussions at his home for his co-workers and neighbours. [12]

It was not just their fathers who influenced these women to join politics. The other men in their lives also gave them political exposure and experience. Martha Black's political awareness came from her second husband. From the time her husband became the seventh Commissioner of the Yukon Territory in 1912 until she took over his constituency in the 1935 election, Black was keenly involved in the local and national politics that revolved around her. [13] Black was seventy years old when she took over her ill husband's seat in the Canadian parliament. [14] Grace MacInnis, Cairine Wilson, Thérèse Casgrain, and Mary Ellen Smith were also married to MPs. They all participated in their husband's work. Both Casgrain and Wilson helped their husbands with their re-election campaigns. [15] It was said of Mary Ellen Smith that she had twenty years of apprenticeship assisting her husband on his political trips and her biographer asserted that

there was “ample evidence that she was more than a travelling companion.” [16] After her stint as secretary to her father, Grace MacInnis became even more heavily involved in the C.C.F movement at the encouragement of her husband, Angus MacInnis. Margaret Aitken's brother was a member of the British House of Commons in England and during her election campaign he travelled to Canada to lend Margaret his support; [17] her uncle was the famous Lord Beaverbrook. [18] Familiarity with politicians allowed these women to see what the job entailed and to determine that they were capable as well. They were able to see that they could move outside their homes and that their lives could involve politics.

Female politicians seldom disregarded the traditional roles that were expected of them. The vast majority of these women were wives, mothers and homemakers. However, early in life almost all were taught that other contributions they could make were equally valuable. Some, such as Mary Ellen Smith, were encouraged to become involved in political discussions as children. [19] The fathers of both Grace MacInnis and Flora MacDonald took their children on long walks around town, educating them about their surroundings and listening to their ideas. [20] Irene Parlby's father encouraged her to be a doctor despite her artistic leanings. [21] The father of Muriel McQueen Fergusson urged her to “be all that she could be” and he allowed her to apprentice in his law office. [22] Cairine Wilson had a domineering father, but he often took Cairine with him to sessions of parliament. [23] Clearly the majority of these women were exposed to the idea that their gender should not prevent them from thinking on their own. They were able to build the confidence to pursue a lifestyle out of the ordinary.

It is interesting to note that it was usually their fathers who encouraged these women to think critically. Some of the women's mothers did embrace equality within their marriages; all were strong women. Grace MacInnis' mother worked outside the home and shared a cooperative lifestyle with her husband. [24] Mary Ellen Smith's mother, along with other local coalminers' wives, was passionate about public affairs. [25] In order to account for Nellie McClung and Agnes Macphail's political successes, one must look at the work that their mothers did. While Mrs. Mooney (Nellie's mother) might have held an “old world reverence for men,” she was extremely productive on their farm. [26] Later in life Macphail said: “[p]erhaps if I owed my father the ability to get into Parliament, I owed [my mother] the ability to stand it when I got there.” [27] Both mothers were just as responsible for the success or failure of their farms as their husbands. Historian Kathy Brock suggested pioneers were more likely to believe in and to practice equality between the sexes. [28] Deborah Gorham believes this phenomenon is related to the emotionally supportive role that frontier women played within pioneer families. [29] Females were also responsible for a major part of economic production in farming areas and so they were an integral part of agrarian society. [30] Many urban mothers also provided emotional and economic support for their families and they set an example for their daughters by working inside the home. Ellen Fairclough talks of the economic stress that befell her family during a recession and how her mother took in boarders to supplement their income. [31] While these mothers may not have paved the way for their daughters' lifestyles and vocations, they did show their daughters that women could be strong and industrious.

Even though many of their mothers did not believe in equal roles for women, some female relatives and friends influenced the daughters otherwise. Nellie McClung states that if a certain Mrs. Brown had not taken her to a political meeting, she probably would not have gone. [32] Ellen Fairclough's aunt set an example for Ellen: she overcame her blindness to tour the United States with the Salvation Army Band and she encouraged Ellen to read. [33] Agnes Macphail's landlord invited her to join in political discussions with his neighbours [34] and her grandmother showed her that women were equally capable of doing jobs that were traditionally thought to be men's work. [35] Martha Black describes her visits to her Aunt Ione's house, "one of the advanced women of her generation," where she met Frances E. Willard and Susan B. Anthony. [36] These independent women likely showed these future politicians that it was possible to be a female and to be strong and self-sufficient.

Several of the men that these women married were not opposed to equality. Cairine Wilson's husband was devoted; ultimately his outlook made it possible for Cairine to work outside their home. Valerie Knowles notes this arrangement was rare in Cairine's conservative, upper class world. [37] Grace MacInnis' life with her husband is described as a team effort; her husband respected and appreciated her skills and her excellent education. [38] Ellen Fairclough's marriage was described as "one of those rare working partnerships;" her husband assisted *her* with her campaigns. [39] Mary Ellen Smith's husband introduced suffrage legislation into the B.C. legislature even though it had been struck down before. [40] The equality their husbands accepted provided these women with important support.

Dominant views about women's place in society also affected their access to education. When the debate about women entering universities first heated up in the 1870s many scholars were adamantly opposed to female education. [41] In 1919, fourteen percent of college and university students were women; it took a long time and significant struggle for women to be admitted to universities and usually it was done to make them better mothers. [42] It is no surprise that only Margaret McWilliams, Grace MacInnis and Muriel Fergusson held university degrees. However, all of the women, except possibly Martha Black, appear to have been good students. Flora MacDonald, Ellen Fairclough and Agnes Macphail were often at the top of their classes. The case of Agnes Macphail reveals the conflict between social expectations and personal aspirations. Her parents did not want her to leave home to go to high school. They felt they needed her help more than she needed to continue her education. However, after two years, her desire to go and her persistence won out over her parents' disapproval. In fact, when her father told her she could go, he said they would find the best school available. [43] Muriel McQueen Fergusson's diction lessons and experience in the drama society at school helped her to make the jump to political speech making. [44] The success these women had in school added to their confidence and led them toward becoming professional women.

The final similarity that almost all the women in this study share is their work outside their homes. On top of their domestic duties, which could often become overwhelming without help, these women worked outside the home, and were heavily involved in their

communities. For someone of an elite status, like Thérèse Casgrain, volunteer work was expected. She took great interest in this work and founded a number of organizations to help women. [45] Both Nellie McClung and Louise McKinney were ardent temperance supporters; at the time of her death McKinney was acting president of the national Women's Christian Temperance Union. [46]

Some of the women were paid for the work they did outside the home: Margaret Aitken, Margaret McWilliams and Therese Casgrain were journalists; Nellie McClung, Agnes Macphail, Grace MacInnis, Louise McKinney and Mary Ellen Smith all began their careers as teachers; Flora MacDonald, Grace MacInnis, and Mary Ellen Smith did secretarial work; Ellen Louks Fairclough was an accountant. Muriel McQueen Fergusson was a lawyer and the first female regional director of Family Allowances and Old Age Security in New Brunswick. She began her political involvement by campaigning and speech making, which was part of her job as a law clerk in her father's office. [47] When her husband fell ill she took over his legal practice and his positions as Judge of the Probate Court, Clerk of the County Court, and town solicitor of Grand Falls. [48]

It is also relevant to note that some of these working women got their start in politics at the municipal level. Margaret McWilliams was a city alderman for Winnipeg. [49] Ellen Louks Fairclough was elected alderman for the city of Hamilton in 1946, then senior controller and deputy mayor in 1949. [50] Muriel Fergusson was a city councillor from 1951 to 1953 and the Deputy Mayor in 1953 for the city of Fredericton. [51]

A familiar pattern for these women was to jump directly from community involvement into provincial and federal politics. Louise McKinney was a stronger temperance activist than she was a politician; it was the fight for temperance legislation that led her into public office. [52] Irene Parlby's involvement with the United Farm Women of Alberta can be directly linked to her eventual election as an U.F.A representative in Alberta's provincial legislature. [53] Agnes Macphail was still teaching and Ellen Fairclough was still working as an accountant when they began getting involved in their local political associations. Fairclough also worked her way to executive positions in the United Empire Loyalist Association and in the Zonta (a organization for business and professional women). [54] For a farm girl like Macphail, becoming active in the farmer's organizations seemed natural. Nellie McClung and Irene Parlby joined the farmer's movement once they married. All three women spoke publicly for the movement; Parlby became the first president of the United Farm Women of Alberta. Nellie McClung was also a strong supporter of the temperance movement, a founder of the Political Equality League in Winnipeg, and a suffrage supporter. [55] Mary Ellen Smith was heavily involved in local organizations: among other things, she founded the Laurier Liberal Ladies' League, became president of the Vancouver Branch of the Women's Canadian Club and of the Women's Ratepayers Association and was the first Vice President of the Political Equality League. [56] Muriel McQueen Fergusson began her fight for the poor in her youth by gathering clothes and packing food baskets. After her marriage she worked with teenage girls, founded the Grand Falls Literary club and wrote for the newspaper in Saint John. [57] These women were able to gain experience, contacts, and marketable skills that would later aid them with their election campaigns.

The esteem that many of these women earned in the community because of the work they did helped them to overcome the stereotypes about women.

These stereotypes were ingrained in popular beliefs about females. The traditional views about women's proper role in the home and family shaped women's political struggles. It was not just men who believed women belonged in the home. Even ardent feminist Nellie McClung had a mother who thought that women were meant to be only wives and mothers. [58] Additionally, women were thought to be fragile and, therefore, incapable of political action. Christine MacDonald recalls that opponents to female suffrage stated that going to the polls could “contaminate” female voters. [59] Others argued that women should not be enfranchised because they would not vote intelligently. [60] Lastly, earning a living somehow demeaned a woman. McClung noted that most people happily accepted women's voluntary work, but it suddenly became improper once the work paid a salary. [61] These ideas dominated every aspect of women's lives, especially their political participation.

Remarkably, many women did overcome societal barriers to join political parties; however, instead of welcoming these women as equal members, party leaders continued to present opposition. [62] Statistical evidence shows that political parties acted as “gatekeepers” to the political arena. [63] As the party system was developing in Canada, it was the dominant expectation that women would remain in the private sphere; therefore, most party leaders were not ready to accept women as equal members. [64] As women began to become members, the major parties formed separate women's associations. The Liberal party was the first to create a distinct women's organization; the Conservatives followed suit a few years later. The National Federation of Liberal Women of Canada (NFLW) was created in 1928, and it encouraged women to set up Liberal associations of their own all across Canada. [65] Several justifications arose. Political organizers suggested that women did not feel comfortable operating in the “male dominated liberal constituency organizations.” [66] The associations attempted to give women a political outlet more conducive to their uniquely female talents. [67] It was also proposed that women could receive training and preparation so that they could participate in politics. However, these associations did not fulfill their mandates.

Instead of moving into organizational and leadership roles, women carried out the domestic duties of the party. Women paid separate membership dues, which usually meant they were not automatic members of the larger party. [68] Women could not gain equal access to political affairs or impact policy decisions because they were contained in their “proper” sphere, where they baked and fundraised for the larger party. Eventually, in 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women condemned women's auxiliaries for blocking women from equal political access. [69]

As women gained some status in society, particularly the right to vote, more women recognised that they should become elected officials. Nevertheless, prejudice against women in politics continued long after women were first enfranchised. [70] As a number of scholars note, the quality of support female candidates received from their parties was limited. Jane MacDonald, president of the Women's Liberal Federation wrote in 1969, “I

can speak from experience when I say a woman candidate is entirely on her own once she becomes a candidate.” [71] Without support from their parties, it is not surprising that women had difficulty running successful campaigns. Women were often run as “sacrificial lambs” in ridings that had shown long-term support for an opposing party. [72] One argument used by party officials to explain why women were not elected stated that they had few qualified women whom they could nominate to winnable ridings. This claim was contradicted by Liberal Judy LaMarsh, who was in parliament from 1960 to 1968, when she criticized her party because they did not “actively recruit promising women to run as candidates.” [73] In fact, Janine Brodie found that between 1945 and 1975, women's educational or occupational status was not a factor in their nomination to a receptive riding. [74] A woman's gender, and not her qualifications, determined whether she would be likely to secure party support in political campaigns.

Clearly society did not force women to remain in the private sphere nor did all political organizations suppress women. Many women believed that their role was in the home and they found it fulfilling. Interviews with some female auxiliary members promote a sense that many women were quite happy with their level of participation within the political parties and auxiliaries. [75] Nevertheless, first hand accounts and statistical evidence cannot be ignored: those women who overcame bias, gender socialization and over-work were not given equal access to public office. Separate women's associations were restrictive, and political parties very rarely provided equal opportunities for their female candidates.

The few women who succeeded show distinctive traits. It was the personal and early relationships these women had that allowed them to overcome limitations surrounding women's role in society. The exposure to public affairs that they received gave them background knowledge that allowed them to be politically active. Their family members, particularly their fathers, gave them the self-confidence to strive for more in life than traditions dictated. Their success in school likely added to this self-assurance. Supportive husbands did not stand in their way and in some cases aided in their campaigns for public office. The work they did outside the home allowed them to gain some of the resources and support that is required to run a successful election campaign. Considering the obstacles that social norms and political parties placed in front of women candidates, it is likely that these female politicians succeeded precisely because of the strong and unusual influences in their lives. [76]

References

- [1] Canadian women over the age of 21 were given the right to vote in federal elections on May 24, 1918. Provincial enfranchisement of women varied: Manitoba was first (January 1916) and Quebec was last (April 1940).
- [2] This statistic includes Shelia Copps who recently lost a by-election in her riding. "Women in the House of Commons," Senators and Members – Current Information , Library of Parliament, 23 June 2003, <<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/people/house/WomenHofC.asp?lang=E>>
- [3] This is by no means a comprehensive study of the foundation of political success; unfortunately it was impossible to include more female politicians simply because details about their early lives are not available.
- [4] Ellen Louks Fairclough. *Saturday's Child* . (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), viii (Introduction by Margaret Conrad).
- [5] Mary Kinnear. Margaret McWilliams . (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 47 (Written by McWilliams in a letter to Catherine Cleverdon 1 October 1946).
- [6] Valerie Knowles. *First Person* . (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1998), 45.
- [7] Ann Farrell. *Grace MacInnis: A story of Love and Integrity*. (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1994), 40.
- [8] Susan Mann Trofimenkoff. "Thérèse Casgrain and the CCF in Quebec." in *Beyond the vote: Canadian women and politics*. Edited by Kealey, Linda, and Joan Sangster. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 140.
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- [10] Joan Reid, "Muriel McQueen Fergusson: a study of interwave feminism in New Brunswick" (Masters Thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1988), 8.
- [11] Alvin Armstrong. *Flora MacDonald* . (Canada: J.M. Dent & Sons Limited, 1974), 3.
- [12] Elizabeth Norcross. "Mary Ellen Smith." in *Not Just Pin Money* . Edited by Barbara Latham and Roberta Pazdro. (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984), 357.
- [13] Martha Louise Black. *My Ninety Years* . (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing, 1976), 82.
- [14] Black, 136.
- [15] Valerie Knowles. *First Person* . (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1998), 68 and Casgrain, 42.
- [16] Norcross, 358.
- [17] Margaret Aitken. *Hey Ma! I did It*. (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1953), 55.
- [18] BBC News. "Jonathan Aitken - a 'swashbuckling' life." UK Politics. 7 December 1998. (29 February 2004) http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/229560.stm and Anne Chisholm and Michael Davie. *Beaverbrook: a Life* . (London: Hutchinson, 1992), 317.
- [19] Norcross, 357.
- [20] Farrell, 12, 14 and Armstrong, 28.
- [21] National Library of Canada. "Irene Marryat Parlby." *Celebrating Women's Achievements*. 30 January 2004 (24 February 2004). <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/history/12/h12-307-e.html>

- [22] Canadian Press. "Film focuses on remarkable woman" Calgary Herald . Calgary, Alta.: 19 January 1996, F7. And Mary Biggar Peck. *The bitter with the sweet : New Brunswick 1604-1984* . (Tantallon, N.S.: Four East Publications, 1983), 158.
- [23] Knowles, 38, 44-45.
- [24] Farrell, 20.
- [25] Norcross, 357.
- [26] Candace Savage. *Our Nell* . (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1979), 3, 19.
- [27] Margaret Stewart and Doris French. *Ask no quarter: A biography of Agnes Macphail* . (Toronto: Longmans, Green and Company, 1959), 26.
- [28] Kathy Brock. "Women in the Manitoba Legislature." In *In the presence of women: representation in Canadian governments* . eds. Jane Arscott and Linda Trimble. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company Canada, 1997), 185.
- [29] Gorham, 49.
- [30] Gorham, 49.
- [31] Fairclough, 19.
- [32] Savage, 26.
- [33] Fairclough, 16.
- [34] Doris Pennington. *Agnes Macphail: Reformer* . (Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1990), 23.
- [35] Stewart and French, 25.
- [36] Black, 11
- [37] Knowles, 51.
- [38] Farrell, 65 and 130.
- [39] Mary L Ross. "Ellen Fairclough: first woman in the cabinet." *Saturday Night* . 72, no. 18 (August 31, 1957): 34.
- [40] Norcross, 359.
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- [43] Rachel Wyatt. *Agnes Macphail: Champion of the Underdog*. (Montreal: XYZ Publishing, 2000), 8.
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- [45] Trofimenkoff, 141.
- [46] Carol Hancock. *No Small Legacy* . Winfield, B.C.: Wood Lake Books, Inc., 1986, 91.
- [47] Reid, 11.
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- [54] Conrad, 13.
- [55] Mary Hallett and Marilyn Davis. *Firing the Heather* . (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1993): 79, 111, 119
- [56] Norcross, 358-59.
- [57] Richard Jackson. "First woman speaker". *Atlantic advocate*. 63, no. 8 (April 1973): 18. And Peck, 158.
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- [60] Christine MacDonald, 1.
- [61] Hallett, 186.
- [62] Sylvia Bashevkin contends that certain gender expectations that maintain males as influential and females as campaign workers, namely "masculine assertiveness and female docility," still exist within political parties. Sylvia Bashevkin. *Toeing the lines: women and party politics in English Canada* . (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993), 75.
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- [64] Brodie, 26
- [65] Patricia Myers. "A Noble Effort: The National Federation of Liberal Women of Canada." In *Beyond the vote: Canadian women and politics*. eds. Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster. (T oronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 1989, 39.
- [66] Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, 7.
- [67] Myers, 42.
- [68] Myers, 43.
- [69] Bashevkin, *Toeing the lines* , 99.
- [70] Hallett, 172.
- [71] Myers, 52.
- [72] Sylvia Bashevkin, "Women Participation in Political Parties," in *Women in Canadian Politics: toward equity in representation* . ed. Kathy Megyery. (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada and Dundurn Press, 1991), 74.
- [73] Myers, 52.
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