

"Women Are Persons"

by Wendy Despins

Seems like an odd statement to make . . . however until 1929 Canadian women were not considered persons.

The women depicted in the photograph on the front cover are referred to as **The Famous Five**. These five women were pivotal in achieving status for women in this country and shaping the opportunities for all women who came after them. It was through the efforts of Emily Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Irene Parlby, Louise McKinney and Nellie McClung that the Privy Council declared the "Woman are Persons" Act on October 18, 1929. This allowed for women to run for and hold political office, including the Canadian Senate. This is quite significant because up until the 1970's the senate approved divorces and these women believed that more equitable decisions would be made if they were part of the senate. Their petition had been defeated by the Canadian Supreme Court and their refusal to accept that decision lead to it ultimately being over turned by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council of England.

Predating this, women had to achieve the right to vote, many arguments were raised against giving women the vote including:

- A woman's place is in the home
- Politics are too corrupt for women
- Allowing women to vote will disrupt the home



- Women would vote with their husbands, so giving married women the vote would merely double the vote of married men
- Women would not vote if they had the privilege
- Women would vote too much
- Women can do more by indirect influence than by the ballot
- It is not "womanly" to express one's opinion in a straightforward fashion
- Women are too sentimental to vote
- Granting women the vote would give immigrant women the vote, increasing the uneducated vote.

In Manitoba we have a long history of social and labour activism often paving the way for the rest of the country.

On January 28, 1916 Manitoba became the first province in Canada to grant full political privileges to women.

Saskatchewan was close on Manitoba's heels passing a bill in March of 1916, with Alberta passing a similar bill in April 1916 as well. It would not be until a year later that the next provinces followed suit. On April 5, 1917 the Liberal government of British Columbia passed a bill giving women political equality, as did Ontario.

Finally, on May 24, 1918 all women in Canada were eligible to vote in federal elections under the Canada Elections Act.

The Wartime Elections Act of September 20, 1917 allowed that women in the armed forces or with military relatives the right to vote in federal elections. Other women remained disenfranchised. Finally, on May 24, 1918 all women in Canada were eligible to vote in federal elections under the Canada Elections Act.

It would take some provinces a little longer for women to achieve the vote in provincial elections, Prince Edward Island May 1922, Newfoundland April 13, 1925 and finally Quebec in 1940.

During the course of their lives these women's endeavors resulted in many other significant social reforms. Improvements to the status of widows and separated wives, the Dower Act in Alberta, and the Minimum Wage for Women Act to name a few. The impacts of these victories have been far reaching providing opportunities and rights that we enjoy today.

Two years ago I began with a series of articles around the topic of "What has the Union done for Me?" wrapping up in September of 2005 with what the membership has done for the union. This past September I wrote about the history of "Labour Day" and I am continuing here with a little more of our Canadian history.

Recently while in Calgary I happened across the Monument of the Famous Five by Alberta artist Barbara Paterson. Inspired by the work I was curious and wanted to learn more. I discovered the legacy that this generation of women left us.

We as union members are making our own history and are impacting future generations by what we do and what we lobby for. Countless benefits have been achieved for our membership, for almost 20 years women in MAHCP have enjoyed the benefits of the maternity leave top up. As the needs of our membership evolve MAHCP continues to advocate on behalf of its membership. The accomplishments and achievements of the past can serve us a stepping stones to look to the future and to establish future gains.



However, we must always be mindful that we can never take our rights for granted. There will always be someone trying to take our rights away as is evidenced by the recent change made by the Harper Government to the Status of Women Canada. The words “women’s equality” were removed from the mandate, the budget reduced by 38.5% and changes to the mandate and funding rules which prohibit women’s organizations from engaging in advocacy or lobbying activities.

The Harper government has also undermined gender equality by abolishing the Court Challenges Program and announcing there will be no new proactive pay equity law.

Let me close with a couple of quotes from women who have had a profound affect on the social and cultural development of our country.

“The purpose of a woman’s life is just the same as the purpose of man’s life – that she may make the best possible contribution to the generation in which she is living.”

Louise McKinney

“I want to leave something behind when I go some small legacy of truth, some word that will shine in a dark place.”

Nellie McClung



Just Another Tea Party?