MONEY MAKEOVER: CANADIAN WOMEN ON BANK NOTES

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Merna Forster is an author, historian and public speaker who advocates for recognition of female historical figures. She helped raise funds for a statue of Emily Carr in Victoria, and led the successful national campaign calling for Canadian women on bank notes. Now at the University of Victoria, she is Executive Director of the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History.

A century after women in Canada gained the right to vote, the country will finally put an iconic Canadian woman on the face of a bank note for the first time. On International Women's Day in 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Finance Minister Bill Morneau announced that the image of a woman from Canadian history will appear on a new bill in 2018. The news was a victory for the hard-fought campaign I launched in the summer of 2013 to end sexist bank notes, and for the more than 73,000 supporters who signed my petition at change.org/CanadianHeroines. Yet why was female representation on bank notes even an issue that required discussion, in a nation that boasts of being a world leader in advancing gender equality and women's rights? Is systemic sexism in our national institutions so firmly entrenched that the exclusion of half the population from a prominent national symbol was deemed acceptable?

Early Canadian bank notes portrayed many recognizable people, including reigning monarchs and their family members as well as Jacques Cartier, Samuel de Champlain, General James Wolfe, Montcalm, Governors General and their spouses. After the Bank of Canada was created, it assumed responsibility for issuing bank notes in 1935 and has since released seven different series, plus three commemorative bills. Recent bank policy has been to depict "portraits of former Canadian prime ministers and members of the royal family on the front and scenes that reflect Canadian culture, history and achievements on the back."[1] The faces of our current polymer series depict Queen Elizabeth II

1 Bank of Canada website, 2011.

and former prime ministers Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Sir John A. Macdonald, W.L. Mackenzie King, and Sir Robert L. Borden.

In 2004, lobbying resulted in the release of a $50 bill that depicted activists Thérèse Casgrain and the Famous 5 on the back. The issuing of this note marked the first time that identifiable Canadian women were celebrated, though it represented them with a medallion showing Casgrain and a statue of the five Albertans — rather than actual portraits.

The progress towards gender equality on Canadian bank notes was erased when the Bank of Canada began rolling out a new series of polymers in November 2011, and Canadians realized that Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney had purged Canadian women — replacing them with an icebreaker on the back of the $50 bill. In response to protests about the move, Bank of Canada spokeswoman Julie Girard stated "We've had the privilege to feature the Famous 5 on the 50 for the last series… now, it's our opportunity to celebrate new things."[2]

Neither the Bank of Canada Governor or Minister of Finance, responsible for approving bank note designs, showed a commitment to ensure that future bank notes would honour Canadian women as well as men. I eventually called for action from the two leaders in a petition launched in July 2013. This appeal highlighted the importance of recognizing the contributions of Canadian women in national symbols such as bank notes:

> Bank notes that belong to all Canadians should depict a wider range of Canadians, of both genders as well as various ethnic origins. Who and what is celebrated on our bank notes matters, as it reflects what we consider important in our culture and history and who we consider worthy of honouring for achievement. Women are not absent from the list of notable worthies in Canada, just notably absent or under-represented in many of the images that surround us and which contribute to our view of the world and our potential role in it.[3]

While Canada is finally about to celebrate one notable Canadian woman on the face of a bank note, a multitude of countries around the globe already depict non-royal female historical figures on their money. These countries include Japan, Columbia, Chile, Peru, Turkey, Ukraine, Venezuela, Mexico, Serbia, New Zealand, Philippines, Argentina, Israel, Uruguay, and South Korea.[4] The Royal Bank of Scotland announced in 2016 that Scottish scientist Mary Somerville and poet Nan Shepherd will be the faces of two new bank notes. Sweden has begun issuing new bank notes that will feature portraits of an equal number of men and women. Australia provides an excellent model for including nation builders of both genders on its bank notes, as four out of five feature a notable Australian woman on one side and a man on the other; the fifth note

2 Calgary Herald, 20 December 2011.

3 www.change.org/CanadianHeroines

4 Though 48 countries currently feature women on bank notes, Queen Elizabeth II dominates by appearing on 74 of the 120 female-fronted bills. See http://www.vox.com/2016/4/21/11456180/women-us-money.

depicts Queen Elizabeth II along with parliament buildings.

Activists in a number of countries recently resorted to public campaigns to ensure that famous men are not the only historical figures on national currency. The Bank of England, in addition to issuing countless bills honouring its female monarchs, depicted nurse Florence Nightingale and then social reformer Elizabeth Fry on bank notes. But when the Brits announced plans in 2013 to replace the latter with Sir Winston Churchill, activist Caroline Criado-Perez launched a petition which soon convinced new Bank of England Governor Mark Carney to fix the problem. He quickly announced in July 2013 that acclaimed author Jane Austen will be the face of a new £10 note in 2017.

In the United States, a grassroots organization created *the Women on 20s* campaign in 2015 to have an American woman on bills before the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in 2020. After the group submitted a petition to President Barak Obama on May 12, 2015, the government quickly committed to taking action and selected the legendary former-slave and abolitionist Harriet Tubman to be the face of a new bank note. Pocahontas had appeared on American bank notes in a group image back in the 1860s, while former first lady Martha Washington was depicted in the 1890s.

As for Canada, it took about three years for the high-profile campaign calling for Canadian women on bank notes to finally see concrete results. The battle involved: letter-writing and emails to every federal member of parliament as well as numerous Bank of Canada staff and board members, organizations and prominent citizens; lobbying politicians; op-eds in newspapers; numerous interviews on radio and television; extensive media coverage and social media engagement; and petition support from Canadians across the country – including notable Canadians such as author Margaret Atwood and activist Judy Rebick as well as a few politicians. Hundreds of women were nominated through an interactive website at womenonbanknotes.ca that enabled users to create images of bank notes featuring their picks, and share them on social media. Pressure mounted when city councils started getting involved in the national campaign, with motions calling for Canadian women on bank notes passed in Montreal, Whitehorse, Cambridge, Toronto, Oakville and North Saanich.

Once Prime Minister Trudeau and Finance Minister Morneau provided the long-awaited commitment to celebrate an iconic Canadian woman on our notes, the Bank of Canada moved quickly to involve Canadians by inviting them to submit nominations online. A bank website received over 26,000 submissions. It also established a seven-member Advisory Council, of which I was a member, to review the 461 names which met the qualifying criteria — which included the nominee being dead for at least 25 years. The council then produced a long list of a dozen women which was made public. A short list was later provided for review by Bank of Canada Governor Stephen Poloz and Finance Minister Bill Morneau, with the latter making the final decision in accordance with the *Bank of Canada Act*. The announcement of which Canadian woman will be the first to appear on the face of a bank note is expected in the fall of 2016, with the actual bill being issued in 2018 as part of a new series.

The lengthy campaign and the eventual announcement resulted in an interesting national discussion about female historical figures and which ones were banknoteable. Journalists, political pundits, petition supporters, historians, students and the general public weighed in on the topic through everything from television and radio talk-shows to online polls, articles, twitter and school projects. Many bemoaned their ignorance of women in Canadian history and expressed interest in learning more about the ones being suggested. While a national poll conducted by Angus Reid in May 2016 showed Canadians were divided about who to select for that lone bank note, 80% agreed that at least one Canadian woman should be depicted on the front of a Canadian bank note.[5]

Though the honouring of one female Canadian historical figure on the face of our money is a significant symbolic step towards including women as part of our national identity, gender equality on bank notes and in all other aspects of Canadian life remains the target just as it was for the current federal cabinet. Why not?

5 http://angusreid.org/women-on-money