SUFFRAGISTS AFTER SUFFRAGE: CONTINUING WAVES OF FEMINISM

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For decades after white women received the federal vote in 1918, popular magazines asked if the extension of the franchise had really changed politics, invariably using one measure of success: the number of women elected to parliament and provincial legislatures. Grattan O'Leary, later a Conservative senator, suggested in a *Chatelaine* article in 1930 that the woman's vote did not have a discernable impact since women voted much like men. Vancouver suffragist Judge Helen Gregory MacGill disagreed, pointing out in the same magazine that women's voices were still underrepresented since they still faced both discrimination and their own feelings of "inferiority." A group of unsuccessful women candidates in the 1930 federal election added their views in a *Chatelaine* piece, "Why I Failed to be Elected." While some pointed to overt discrimination and lack of support, Manitoban Beatrice Brigden, who ran as a Farmer-Labour candidate, noted that nine of the ten women ran for alternative rather than "old line" parties: their radical views made their run for office even more of an

uphill battle.[1]

Whatever their explanations, there was some pessimism about feminism in the interwar period, a view that has been remarkably resilient in subsequent histories. "After gaining the vote in 1920, the women's movement simply sputtered" claim two legal historians.[2] While their book is a masterful discussion of the Persons case, this characterization of the women's movement is questionable. The idea of feminist waves — first (suffrage), second (sixties) and third (1990s) — perpetuates this unfortunate image of cresting waves and troughs of inactivity. Both the notion that suffrage was finished with, and that feminist apathy prevailed after 1918 are contradicted by four facts. First, the franchise was not universal: some women and men remained disenfranchised due to racial or Indigenous status until long after World War II. Second, the battle for the vote was not over; three Maritime provinces enfranchised just after the end of World War I and Quebec not until 1940, after a difficult struggle for legal equality and suffrage by Anglophone and Francophone suffragists in that province. Third, suffragists immediately put their demands on the legislative agenda in the 1920s and 1930s, pressing for reforms they had long promoted. And fourth, suffragists and the next generation of feminist activists threw themselves into old and new political struggles – though not necessarily electoral politics. The fleeting unity of the suffrage battle fragmented into multiple feminist causes, political organizations and visions of emancipation.

If we look at a few examples illustrating the fourth point, we can trace suffragists after suffrage. Of course, suffragists had never been a politically homogeneous group. They ranged from socialists to conservatives; some wanted to join the ruling elite while others opposed the class system tout court. Cracks in the edifice of suffrage unity were strikingly apparent when labour conflict swept across Canada in 1919. During the Winnipeg General Strike, Nellie McClung opposed labour's tactics and the strike, while on the other side, Women's Labor League organizer and strike supporter Helen Armstrong ended up in prison for her role aiding the strike.

The post-suffrage era brought these significant ideological differences to the fore, but even accounting for such divisions, there is ample evidence of continued organizational and lobbying work by feminists. However, rather than focus on federal elections or on Emily Murphy's search for a Senate seat (the Persons case), we need to examine how women expended their energies on local grassroots politics, on social justice issues including peace, education, labour or farm improvement, or on issues of class, ethnic and racial inequality linked to gender difference and discrimination.

Some suffrage organizations did not even disband: they established public forums to educate women about their new rights, and reformulated their political goals, merging suffragist views of women's maternal political power with a new emphasis

1 Grattan O'Leary, Is Women's Suffrage a Success? *Chatelaine*, September 1930, 12, 52; Helen Gregory MacGill, "Are Women Wanted in Public Life?" *Chatelaine*, Sept 1928, 2-4; Mrs George Holis, Miss Mildred Low, Miss Beatrice Brigden, Miss F.S. Greenwood, Mrs. Donald Macdonald, "Why I Failed To Be Elected" *Chatelaine*, Oct 1930, 17, 37.

2 Robert Sharpe and Patricia I. McMahon, *The Person's Case: The Origins and Legacy of the Fight for Legal Personhood* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

on their role as active 'women-mother citizens.' Newfoundland suffragists created a new League of Women Voters, designed to "agitate" to amend legislation relating to women and children. Saskatchewan's suffrage group, the Political Equality League, developed a new "Plan of Work," ambitious in its goals, calling for the nationalization of public utilities, international arbitration to end war, changes to the criminal code, education reform, and equal pay.[3]

Many suffragists had been liberal reformers at heart, and they continued to lobby for pragmatic policy changes, sometimes with the aid of the few newly-elected women legislators. In B.C., suffragist Mary Ellen Smith, a British immigrant and wife of Liberal-Labour MPP Ralph Smith, ran successfully for her husband's seat after his death, standing as an Independent Liberal. Under the banner "women and children first," she helped to realize suffragists' maternal feminist agenda, championing causes such as an Equal Guardianship Act, allowing women equal custody of their children, mothers allowance legislation, providing financial aid to impoverished widows with children, and a female minimum wage. She was less successful with other suffragist demands, such as women's right to sit on juries, and she also persisted with suffragist racial prejudices, opposing Asian immigration.[4]

Women often focused their sights on local issues and elections, where they were less beholden to established party politics and where they could more easily combine political work with care of their families. The latter can't be underestimated: women's primary responsibility for caring work limited both their time and geographical mobility. An English immigrant, Annie Gale, backed by a non-partisan Women's Ratepayers Association, was elected to Calgary City Council after World War I on a platform reminiscent of suffragists' maternal feminism: protection of child labour, control of food prices, milk purification, and better health care.[5]

Educational reform had long been on suffragists 'to do' list; some feminists ran for election to School Boards, advocating equal pay for female teachers and better educational services for working-class children. Amelia Turner, a Calgary suffragist and Labour Party activist ran for the School Board in 1929, proposing free school texts for all children in order to democratize access to basic education.[6]

Vancouver suffragist-socialist Helena Gutteridge, a leader in both the pre-World War I suffrage and labour movements, and a former "suffragette" in Britain, was elected Vancouver alderman in the 1930s. Her social justice platform called for subsidized low-rental housing, public ownership of utilities, and she vigorously opposed efforts to fire

3 Margo Iris Duley, "The Radius of Her Influence for Good: the Rise and Triumph of the Women's Suffrage Movement in Newfoundland, 1909-25" in *Pursuing Equality: Historical Perspectives on women in Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. Linda Kealey (St John's: ISER, 1993), 14-65; Elizabeth Ann Kalmakoff, "Woman Suffrage in Saskatchewan," MA Thesis, University of Regina, 1993.

4 http://womensuffrage.org/?p=21014. Accessed 15 April 2016.

5 http://womensuffrage.org/?designsentry_portf=improving-cities-annie-gale-and-calgary-canada. Accessed 15 April, 2016.

6 Patricia Roome, "Amelia Turner and Calgary Labour Women, 1919-35" in *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics*, eds. Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster (University of Toronto Press, 1989), 89-117.

married women workers as a solution to Depression unemployment. Suffrage was an ongoing issue: the city's restrictive, property-based voting laws excluded many renters, women without a legal share in their family home, and Native and Asian residents. Gutteridge proposed universal suffrage for everyone in the city, a radical idea considered beyond the pale by most of her fellow councilmen.[7]

If there was one issue which had converted women to suffrage, it was temperance. For women who became suffragists to combat 'the liquor interests,' the vote initially appeared a resounding success as some provinces enacted prohibition. That this became one of their greatest disappointments became apparent later in the decade, when many governments abandoned prohibition for state-regulated sales of liquor. Other legislative success stories, long supported by suffragists, such as provincial eugenic legislation, also appear far less to us like victories, more like mistaken pathways.

The more exaggerated claims suffragists had made about wiping out crime and corruption were always overly optimistic but they did work to see some of their cherished proposals like mothers allowances and a minimum female wage become law in many provinces, even though these reforms proved less than transformative in their actual implementation, failing to alter relations of inequality between women. A significant minority of suffragists also developed a more radical political agenda, arguing that gender equality was only possible when it was linked to socialist transformation.[8] In the aftermath of a devastating world war, suffragists and newly politicized feminists founded peace organizations, including Canadian chapters of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF or WIL). Suffragists Violet MacNaughton, Rose Henderson and Laura Jamieson transferred their feminist idealism to WILPF, which argued wars could never be eradicated until economic and social inequality — including gender and racial oppression — were vanquished and imperialism challenged. WIL feminists were motivated by various ideals — humanist tolerance social co-operation, anti-capitalism — but they agreed war was caused by territorial ambitions, greed, prejudice, and the propensity to use violence in settling disputes. Vancouver suffragist Laura Jamieson (later a CCF member of the B.C. legislature) was an indispensible organizational force for the WIL in the interwar period. Sometimes facing intense public skepticism or hostility, WIL women wrote, pamphleted, petitioned and lobbied the public and politicians in order to convey their feminist pacifist views.

Rose Henderson's pathway from suffragist to feminist-socialist activist is just one example of this wave of activism following 1918. Radicalized by World War I and the labour revolt of 1919, Henderson was dismissed from her job as a social worker in Montreal but threw herself into a new life of political activism, aiding the labour movement,

7 Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992).

8 Thomas Socknat, "For Peace and Freedom: Canadian Feminists in the interwar Peace Campaign," in *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left*, eds. Janice Williamson and Deborah Gorham (Toronto; Women's Press, 1989), 66-90; Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989).

socialism (later the CCF), and women's equality, as well as international peace and disarmament. Henderson had what feminists today often call an "intersectional" analysis; as her biographer, Peter Campbell says, she "did not focus on any one of the major hierarchies of power in capitalist society, but rather on them all."[9]

To be sure, suffragists after suffrage were alarmingly complacent about continuing racist exclusions from the vote, and issues we see as critical today — Indigneous women's rights, domestic violence — were absent from their agenda, reflecting a dominant Anglo-European and colonial perspective. Nonetheless, feminists did not fall into a trough of inactivity after 1918; instead, they developed new campaigns, issues and organizations that reflected highly divergent views of how to achieve gender equality.

9 Peter Campbell, *Rose Henderson: A Woman for the People* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2010).