

TARAH BROOKFIELD

OUR  
VOICES  
MUST  
BE HEARD

Women and  
the Vote in Ontario



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## P R E F A C E

**ON THE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY** of women's suffrage in Ontario, it may be difficult to imagine a time when women could not hold public office, let alone vote. In 2013, Ontario elected its first female premier, Kathleen Wynne. Though gender parity in government is still far off, and sexist, homophobic, and misogynistic remarks plague female candidates and elected officials, Wynne is not alone. Ontario's New Democratic Party leader, Andrea Horwath; Mississauga's longest-serving mayor, Hazel McCallion; Six Nations of the Grand River's chief, G. Ava Hill; Conservative senator Salma Ataullahjan; former school board trustee, city councillor, and federal MP Olivia Chow; and Lieutenant Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell have also made headlines, crafted policy, and served their communities in recent years. On election day, hundreds of thousands of female voters make electoral choices they hope will produce prosperous, just, healthy, and safe communities. Others, disillusioned or indifferent, avoid voting altogether. Beyond the vote, women use many tools to address and rectify inequality and injustice: art, social media, boycotts, marches, petitions, charitable or non-governmental agency work, sit-ins, strikes, research and writing, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience. All of these acts – even the choice to be apathetic – are at least the partial legacy of the Ontario suffrage movement, a five-decade-long campaign from the 1870s to 1917 in which women fought for the same political rights as men.

On 12 April 1917, Ontario became the fifth province to grant women the right to vote. Beginning in the 1870s, its suffrage movement emerged amid the vibrant international mobilization of women who sought political representation as a means to improve their rights and to assert influence in social, economic, and

political reform. Although individual suffragists held a range of political beliefs, the two most dominant views emphasized women's equality with men or positioned their maternal nature as respectable justification for the vote. Ontario suffragists largely pursued change by working within the established legal and political system, and they exhibited little of the militancy found in parts of the international suffrage movement. Collaborating with their counterparts elsewhere in Canada, the United States, and Britain, they built organizations and travelled extensively to participate in provincial, national, and international meetings. Much ink was spilled on letter writing, editorials, essays, plays, and petitions to expose the necessity and advantages of women's rights. Suffrage delegations descended upon the provincial and federal parliaments in support of pro-suffrage bills and audiences with political leaders. Activism centred in urban, rural, and northern Ontario, with Toronto being the headquarters of provincial suffrage organizations. Their efforts were derided by male and female opponents, who countered that "good" women neither needed nor wanted the vote. Many adversaries considered female enfranchisement dangerous, a risk to the sanctity of the family, good government, and the future of the province. Ontario's roots as a model British colony, grounded in social conservatism and social hierarchy, with a strong aversion to revolutionary thought, made progress on the suffrage question difficult.

Faced with suffrage victories in the Canadian Prairies a year earlier, the Ontario legislature succumbed to pressure and finally voted in favour of enfranchising women in 1917. Not all female residents immediately received the provincial vote. As with men, eligibility was restricted to women who were at least twenty-one, who were born or naturalized British subjects, and who had lived in the country for twelve months. The federal Indian Act overrode provincial voting rights, which meant that First Nations women (and men) who wanted to keep their Indian status were not enfranchised. Also excluded were female prison inmates and

residents of asylums and charitable institutions, none of whom, like similarly situated men, were deemed to possess the necessary independence to vote.

Canada's history of the female franchise is fraught with contradictions. For a long time, it was one of only two narratives – along with women's voluntary and paid labour in the world wars – that reliably interjected women's history into textbooks and monuments. It was among the first subjects in women's history approached by academic and popular historians alike. And yet, the suffrage story rarely emerged as a particularly memorable slice of history. The term itself is confusing, conjuring up the gloominess of suffering rather than the democratic origins of the word, from the Latin *suffragium*, which means “to vote.” The surviving images of the movement are decidedly static: groups of stern-looking women gathered together, adorned in fancy hats and voluminous dresses. The most action you can imagine here is a strongly worded letter or the occasional pounding of a podium for emphasis. In today's socially conscious era, the fact that Ontario suffragists were almost uniformly white, middle class, and deliberately exclusive makes their activism appear incompatible with twenty-first-century understandings of social justice. Given that disillusionment about politics, politicians, and the value of voting is now so prevalent, it is not surprising that suffrage history does not generate much excitement or desire for knowledge. Perhaps this is why even in my history classes, students commonly associate suffrage not with the campaign for voting rights that spanned two centuries but with the more tangible and catchy epilogue to the suffrage story: the Famous Five and the 1929 Persons case, the constitutional ruling that established the right of women to be appointed to the senate.

I came to this project as someone with my own ambiguous relationship with suffrage history. I have always been interested in the ways that women have sought change through formal and grassroots politics. My early introduction to the subject was via

my master's research on Dr. Grace Ritchie-England, Quebec's first woman doctor and suffrage champion, an individual whose story highlighted the differing and divisive expressions of feminism among Montreal suffragists. Yet by the time I started my PhD degree six years later, specializing in Canadian history and women's history, suffragists went unmentioned in my coursework. Instead, we concentrated on exciting new research about women whose histories had previously been ignored: workers and immigrants, girls and widows, lesbians, black women, and Indigenous women. Quite frankly, I presumed that the suffrage story had already been told, and I was not convinced that it deserved much more attention. Not until Veronica Strong-Boag asked me to join the Struggle for Democracy project did I begin to reconsider suffrage in Canadian history. Had I been too dismissive? Was there more to discover about suffragists individually and collectively? Did their flaws, whether narrow-mindedness or inconsistencies, actually make them more interesting? Why did the vote matter so much to them and to their opponents? And what did it ultimately mean for women? I was also keen to make sense of Ontario's place within the larger struggle for political equality in Canada.

As I delved into dusty scrapbooks, newspaper accounts, memoirs, voting registries, census records, parliamentary debates, and the occasional oral history interview, I discovered that Ontario suffragists were more complicated than I had originally thought. By daring to think they were as deserving as men to choose their destinies and to claim the right to participate alongside their fathers, brothers, and husbands in a civil society, they showed great courage and defied expectations of their sex. They were also more diverse than I had assumed. Many were free thinkers on a range of subjects: religion, marriage, politics, and global governance. Even the most conservative surprised me at least once, with their insight, their compassion, or simply their boldness. At the same time, they were not the heroines we sometimes yearn to discover. Ultimately, the vast majority of Ontario suffragists represent a

small privileged group, who appeared to see no contradiction in demanding equal rights for women, mostly like themselves, while simultaneously being silent about or complicit in other forms of oppression. Class prejudice, racial discrimination, anti-Semitism, eugenic assumptions about supposed mental and physical defects, and imperialist sentiments, notably but not only concerning Indigenous peoples, were commonplace. Those limitations confirm the social stratifications of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ontario. Though the women were willing to challenge the gendered imbalances of power, only a handful mounted a broader struggle for a fully democratic or egalitarian society.

This book owes much to two ground-breaking historians, Catherine Lyle Cleverdon and Carol Lee Bacchi. Published in 1950, Cleverdon's *The Woman's Suffrage Movement in Canada* provided the first thorough account of the country's suffrage struggle. Offering a largely celebratory chronology of achievements and setbacks, it discussed key legislative victories and suffragist leaders. Written in the aftermath of Charlotte Whitton's 1946 assessment that women in contemporary Canadian politics were a "flop," its presentation of suffragists' dogged determination in the face of apathetic and sexist opposition was a wake-up call about the glacial pace of progress. Whereas Cleverdon focuses on achievement, Bacchi's *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of English-Canadian Suffragists* questions the motivations and beliefs of the suffragists and emphasizes their relatively middle-class and Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. Written in 1983, when most of the suffragists were dead (except in Quebec), it condemns their collective commitment to British liberalism and evangelically inspired social reform: the majority were interested in political power to maintain social control. Despite substantial reservations, however, Bacchi acknowledges the importance of the suffragist achievement. Read together, these books provide a rich primer to key issues in the history of our national suffrage movement.

My own work updates the story by reassessing suffrage leaders and ideas in light of new evidence and perspectives. In the thirty-five years since the publication of Bacchi's book, women's and gender history has expanded significantly. Much more is known about ideals of femininity and masculinity, as well as their disruptions, in differing time periods and contexts. The field now pays greater attention to the rich and diverse interplay of race, class, and gender. New interpretations direct our attention to both the accomplishments and the limitations of the suffragists' arguments, tactics, and perspectives, as well as the influence of the British and American campaigns, and the connection between suffrage and other social reform movements.

Ontario's suffrage story typically begins in 1877, when Dr. Emily Stowe founded the Toronto Women's Literary Club. The club constitutes the earliest documented instance of suffrage activism in Canada, and the legacy of its founder remains central. To better understand the significance of this ground-breaking educator and physician, *Our Voices Must Be Heard* begins almost a century prior to her birth. In its search for a broader outlook, it opens with women's struggle for fundamental rights during the founding of Upper Canada, later known as Canada West and then Ontario. The United Empire Loyalist diaspora from the American Revolutionary War and reasserted British traditions created a patriarchal and imperial culture of contradiction in the new colony. On the one hand, British settler women were valued for their reproductive labour and moral potential, even if custom and law placed them at a substantial disadvantage when compared with similarly situated men. Ontario's imperial/colonial regime was still more oppressive to Indigenous and enslaved women. Despite pervasive inequality and vulnerability, women from diverse backgrounds made their political opinions known and demonstrated a capacity for demanding better terms for their sex and their communities that pre-dates the suffrage movement. Ontario's history

of oppressive laws and customs – and defiance of them – inspired Stowe and her fellow activists.

Though suffragists across the province rejected the status quo, Toronto was the persistent heartland of protest. As the home of the provincial legislature and the region most affected by the late-nineteenth-century triumvirate of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization, the so-called Queen City stood at the centre of a bustling reform movement. For women like Stowe, drawn to the city for its educational and professional opportunities, it represented possibility and modernity; however, as the site of male-dominated economic, intellectual, and political power, it, like the province itself, would not easily yield to the radical idea of female enfranchisement. Despite the centrality of cities to the great cause, Ontario remained predominantly rural during the period of suffrage activism. Without support from women in farming communities and small towns, the suffrage campaign would have been far weaker. The main narrative may reside in Toronto, but *Our Voices Must Be Heard* detours whenever possible to other sites of activism, such as Hamilton, which for a short period was home to the two most vocal anti-suffragists, Adelaide Hoodless and Clementina Fessenden. From time to time, the book checks in with Haudenosaunee women's leadership and resistance at the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve. Also featured are stories from the northern resource towns of Port Arthur and Fort Williams on Lake Superior, a vibrant suffrage hub in the early twentieth century.

In addition to chronicling the course of suffrage activism, *Our Voices Must Be Heard* examines how and when remarkable, if seemingly ordinary, women used their newfound electoral rights. You will meet voters such as Hannah Williams, daughter of Laura Secord, one of seven women who cast their ballots in Canada West in 1844, a piece of feminist effrontery that was quickly punished by the legislative exclusion of all women voters. Forty

years later, when widows and unmarried women property owners gained the municipal franchise, you'll glimpse female millworkers and daughters of the town elite registered to vote in Paris, a textile town noted for women's industrial employment and opportunity. The book concludes with the story of a military nurse, Edith Anderson Monture, the only First Nations woman and status Indian in Ontario permitted to vote in 1917, a right she reportedly relished but one that set her apart from others like her. Ontario's complicated history of female activism intertwines throughout this volume with parallel histories of female abolitionists, socialists, and pacifists whose ideologies and conception of human rights sometimes linked their causes to the suffrage movement. For women whose race, ethnicity, class, and religion made them largely unwelcome in the mainstream suffrage campaign, ostracism did not mean inactivity. Black, Jewish, and working-class women typically engaged politically within their own communities, often in direct opposition to the state. Though designated the "great cause" by its true believers, obtaining the vote was only one outlet for women's protest against a status quo that consigned them and many others to subordination.

Enfranchisement did not produce the social and political revolution that some suffragists foresaw. Much like men, enfranchised women participated in existing political parties or rejected formal politics altogether. Gender might have shaped political allegiance, but it did not determine it. Yet the suffrage victories were nevertheless significant. In the nineteenth century, the democratic franchise was a key symbol of citizenship, and its denial affirmed inferiority. Its achievement raised the possibility, although never the guarantee, of using state power to challenge patriarchy. The vote offered women electoral channels for advancement and resistance that made it harder to deny them access to education, to property, to elected office, and to freedom from prejudice and violence. That promise, originating as it did in a society that had consistently dismissed women as properly subordinate to men, was

far from inconsequential. Ultimately, for all its limitations and the limitations of its champions, suffrage gave unprecedented legitimacy to women's voices and choices. Voting, as the anti-suffragists who massed in opposition fully understood, mattered a great deal.



## **WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY**

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