

"The Presence of So Many Ladies": A Study of the Conservative Party's Response to Female Suffrage in Canada, 1918-1939

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the first two decades of the Conservative Party's adaptation to a fundamental change in its political environment: the grant of female suffrage rights in 1918. It challenges the conventional wisdom that nothing much happened for women in mainline political parties until the second wave of the women's movement in the 1960s. The paper also contributes to the recovery of some prominent Tory women's contributions.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie les deux premières décennies de l'adaptation du Parti conservateur à un changement fondamental dans son environnement politique: l'octroi du droit de vote aux femmes en 1918. Cela défie la pensée conventionnelle qui dit qu'il ne se soit pas produit grand chose pour les femmes au sein des principaux partis politiques jusqu'à la deuxième vague du mouvement des femmes dans les années 60. Cet article contribue aussi à la récupération de contributions de conservatrices qui ont joué un rôle important.

A hush fell over the crowd in the old Winnipeg Amphitheatre, as a distinguished-looking, white-haired gentleman ascended the platform and began his remarks to his fellow Conservatives. "If there is one feature of this magnificent gathering that, to me, is more gratifying than another," Robert Rogers intoned, "it is in that we are honoured by the presence of so many ladies from all Provinces of this Dominion." His courtly tribute to the 255 female delegates at the first-ever leadership convention of the Conservative Party of Canada was met with polite applause on speech night, although it did not rescue his floundering campaign. On the next day--October 12, 1927--the "Honourable Bob" could do no better than a distant fifth behind the eventual winner, R.B. Bennett, though he had been the only candidate to make a special appeal to the women. The impact of the gesture may have been muted because he had made it with rather antiquated grace to "the ladies." The awkwardness of Rogers--a master of the traditional Tory machine--in dealing with the new phenomenon of women in partisan politics symbolized the confusion felt within Conservative ranks during the interwar years.

Veteran male loyalists were as unsure of how to treat the newly-enfranchised women of the party as the female Conservatives were unsure of what roles they wished, or would be allowed to play.

The interwar years are generally characterized by students of Canadian women's history as falling between the first and second waves of the women's movement. Notwithstanding the struggles to win legal "personhood" through the courts, and gain provincial voting rights in Quebec -- goals achieved in 1929 and 1940 respectively--widespread popular attention to the cause of women's rights peaked in 1918, with the passage of a dominion bill to enfranchise female voters on an equal basis with males. The pioneer historian in the field, Catherine Cleverdon (1950), portrayed the suffragists as little short of Canadian heroines for their struggles over half a century to win full voting rights for women. A leading revisionist, Carol Lee Bacchi, was less impressed with the lasting impact of their work. "The female suffragists did not *fail* to effect a social revolution for women," she wrote. "The majority never had a revolution in mind" (1983, p. 48). In her interpretation, most Canadian suffragists were simply middle-class reformers

imbued with a maternal feminist outlook. Achieving the vote was primarily a means to other, non-feminist ends. Recently, a new school of revisionists has accepted the "potentially radical" impact of the vote for women, who hitherto had played no direct role in choosing the country's law makers (Strong-Boag & Fellman, 1986, p. 178).

Most political scientists who have looked at the interwar years agree that very little was accomplished during that time in terms of moving women from passive voters to active decision-makers in the public arena. As evidence, they cite the quick disappearance of the suffrage movement, the early demise of a proposed women's party, and the "minimal progress of women in legislative politics in the first 50 years after suffrage" (Brodie, 1991, p. 4). Despite gaining the right to vote and run for office, women candidates were not elected to federal and provincial legislatures in anything but token numbers for the next half century. Furthermore, although the two major parties did seem to allow women into their ranks, and welcome their assistance at election time, a noticeable inequity appeared to persist in terms of roles and hierarchy. The pattern has been dubbed "the higher the fewer." The higher one went within the party organization, the fewer women one would find holding responsible positions (Bashevkin, 1985).

A few scholars of Canadian women have begun to paint a fuller picture of progress on many non-traditional political fronts. Women continued to play a significant, growing role in voluntary organizations and professional groups, for instance, and pushed further into the paid workforce, all the while retaining a very central place in their homes and extended families. "The idea that 'nothing much happened' after women won the vote," state Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, "must clearly be abandoned" (1989, p. 4). Evidently this is so, but it still leaves the nagging impression that "nothing much happened" for women within traditional political parties. A closer look at the modest stack of published work in this area reveals that very little is actually known about women's experience in the old-line parties between the two world wars. Overall patterns are visible, but specific evidence is lacking, and hard to find. Does it matter? Notwithstanding the salutary effects of a broadened

definition of "politics" that extends far beyond parties and elections, in the end the latter phenomena must still be addressed. As Lise Gotell and Janine Brodie rightly point out, "A number of studies have identified political parties as crucial gatekeepers guarding the doors of political power for women" (1991, p. 58). The full integration of women into Canadian political life will not be accomplished until both sexes are reconciled to equitable roles for women and men to play in major political parties.

The focus of this paper, then, is on the institutional response of the Conservative Party of Canada to a major change in its operating environment: the grant of federal voting rights to most adult women in 1918. The two decades under study represented an active period for the party, with five general elections, two leadership conventions and three different Conservative administrations. A number of "firsts" for Tory women occurred in those crucial years. The national party selected its first female convention delegates, elected its first woman MP, and saw its first female Senator appointed. More importantly, the men and women of the Conservative party began the process of adaptation to the new reality of a dual-gender party and political system. There is much to be learned about the progress of mainstream, middle-class women into the Canadian political arena from a careful study of the Tories during this apparent lull between the first and second waves of the women's movement.

Prior to 1914, party politics in Canada was largely a man's world. Election campaigns, it is true, had become somewhat more civil since the days of John A. Macdonald. Out-and-out fistfights were now rare, candidates less frequently arrived at the podium roaring drunk, and partisan newspaper coverage was less apt to be libellous. Nevertheless, the tariff and tin-pot navy campaign of 1911 was a "bonnie battle," in the vernacular of the day, and one carried out almost exclusively by the men. A young woman dressed in flowing white robes to symbolize the purity of the young Dominion of Canada might ride on a campaign parade-float, but for the most part the men marched, and the women watched (Leacock, 1912). Party scrutineers and canvassers, many discreetly toting samples of the

obligatory encouragement for wayward voters--a free bottle of booze--were overwhelmingly male. Through triumphs and disappointments, the men of each party had formed deep, lasting bonds with their fellows. This male camaraderie, forged over time in the shared quest for election victories, was one of the most important "hidden" benefits of party membership to many a party loyalist who had little hope of personal political advancement. The passage of a women's suffrage bill would change all that.

Not all men opposed female voting rights, though many did. For that matter, not all women favoured it (MacLellan, 197.1). There was a comforting familiarity in the old ways for many members of both sexes in the prosperous years prior to 1914. Yet, most Canadians by 1918 accepted the inevitability of this change. World War One played a major role in transforming people's attitudes. As for the Conservative party, its experience with women voters really began with the khaki election of 1917. In the months prior to the election call, the Conservative leadership feared defeat. At the same time, they believed that the re-election of their government was essential to ensure a maximum war effort. They intended to impose manpower conscription to secure needed replacements for the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in Europe. An election defeat would sink the plan. The fate of the entire Allied cause, they convinced themselves, might rest upon their success at the polls in Canada. In such a charged atmosphere, an idea began to hatch that would ultimately bring female suffrage to the top of the public agenda.

In 1916 Arthur Meighen--a rising star in cabinet--wrote to Prime Minister Robert Borden with a proposal for using voter eligibility rules to help ensure Conservative re-election. "To shift the franchise from the doubtful British or Anti-British of the male sex," he suggested slyly, "to our patriotic women would be in my judgment a splendid stroke." Actions by the legislatures of the three Prairie provinces had already enfranchised the European-descended women of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta in provincial elections. The result was a carefully drafted bill, the War-Time Elections Act, which removed the right to

vote from male citizens of alien birth or mother tongue who had been naturalized since 1902, and granted the vote to the wives, widows, mothers, sisters and daughters of Canadian servicemen who had served or were serving overseas. A companion bill, the Military Voters Act, extended the vote to all members of the armed services, including nurses.

Taken together, the two measures were a blatant gerrymander, not to mention cruelly exclusionary on ethnic and cultural lines. A prominent opponent of the measure, Dr. Margaret Gordon, labelled the bill a "win-the-election" measure. "It would be direct and at the same time more honest," she charged, "if the bill simply stated that all who did not pledge themselves to vote Conservative would be disfranchised." Still, the new Union government feared defeat. Wilfrid Laurier, the silver-tongued orator, remained a formidable opponent. Women supporters of the measure who were prepared to speak from platforms, or lobby other women in support of the Unionist cause, were welcomed with open arms to previously male-only constituency campaigns. Women were barred from standing as candidates, but the half million newly-enfranchised female voters represented 25% of the total electorate. The irony of the situation caused one female activist to comment wryly upon the "humorous spectacle of our anti-suffrage friends making speeches on the necessity and importance of women voting, while other anti-suffragists took women to the polls" (Geller, 1976).

Long-time suffragists did not appreciate their cause being used in so cynical a fashion. Prime Minister Borden sought to allay their fears by pledging himself to introduce full female suffrage before the next election. Nevertheless, the 1917 campaign revealed the potential for mobilizing female voters on more traditional lines than gender, particularly ethnicity or class. Using their votes and voices to win the election and thus, hopefully, the war proved more appealing to many established women, particularly those of ethnically British origin, than closing gender ranks and refusing the vote until it was offered to all women, regardless of background. Recent scholarship has established that even many active first-wave

feminists shared the ethnocentric and often racist assumptions of mainstream Canadian society (Valverde, 1992).

Robert Borden kept his word to Canadian women leaders. Though a late convert to the cause of female suffrage, the Prime Minister himself introduced the enabling legislation early in the 1918 session of Parliament. It received royal assent on May 24, 1918. In 1920, a new Dominion Elections Act established a uniform federal suffrage law for enfranchised men and women across Canada, and confirmed the right of female citizens to stand for election to Parliament. The rules governing female participation in the Canadian political system had thus been permanently changed, and just in time for the general election of 1921. The challenge for the Conservative party was to adapt to this potentially far-reaching innovation or be left behind. The significant impact of women on the conscription election of 1917, as voters and campaigners, seemed to point the way to momentous changes in the way partisan politics would be done.

On the surface, at least, the actual impact of female suffrage in the first few elections seemed to typify the title of a Shakespearean play: much ado about nothing. Certainly, the number of voters casting ballots had more than doubled from prewar years: 3.1 million in 1921 compared to 1.3 million in 1911. All parties sought to show how their own platforms contained the best policies to deal with the presumed interests of women voters: jobs for their husbands, concern for consumer prices, future opportunities for their children, and protection for society's unfortunates. Each party made use of female speakers, although the latter tended to address daytime gatherings of women. In the end, however, the cacophony of appeals from Conservatives, Liberals, Progressives, Farmers, Labourites and Independents seemed to cancel one another out. Women divided their votes among the parties in almost the same proportion as the men. Religion, class, region and ethnicity seem to have been more decisive factors than gender in influencing women's voting preference. Only a handful of women were nominated as candidates, none of these for the Conservative party. Agnes Macphail, running for the United Farmers of Ontario, was the sole female victor in 1921.

This dismal pattern of apparent female irrelevance to the election outcome was repeated in 1925 and 1926. What had happened? Where had things gone wrong? How could 52 per cent of the newly enlarged electorate have so little impact upon electoral and party politics? The answer seemed to lie partly with women voters, and partly with the men who continued to run the political parties. There seems no doubt that women encountered opposition -- overt and covert -- when they approached the party associations at the local constituency level. "Antagonism and prejudice do exist," a female journalist noted in 1928, "more especially in Eastern Canada, where men have conducted the political game so long that they resent the intrusion of women, and seem unable as well as unwilling, to break the habits of a lifetime" (Perry, 1928). A prominent male reporter, Grattan O'Leary, felt that women's progress in party politics was hampered because they were still too new at the game. "The hustle and scramble of ward politics, long years of humble tutelage before the knees of the boss -- the knocks and cudgellings of local campaigns -- these," he pointed out, "provide the training by which so many men rise to political preferment" (O'Leary, 1930). Viewed in this light, a decade was not very long for women to penetrate a strange and somewhat hostile environment, absorb the nuances of a new sub-culture, make valuable contacts, acquire practical experience, accumulate personal IOUs, and thereby earn the needed support to capture a constituency nomination, or even a position on the local party executive. Furthermore, most Conservative constituency associations jealously guarded their local autonomy, and would stoutly oppose any attempt by party leaders to parachute in an outsider, male or female, in the manner of a Jean Chretien in 1993 and 1997.

After their defeat in the 1926 election, the Conservative party decided to choose a replacement for the retiring leader, Arthur Meighen, at a national convention. This decision represented an innovative departure for the Conservatives, whose parliamentary caucus had always hitherto selected the party chieftain. The Tories recognized that their parliamentary party was particularly unrepresentative of the country's regions. There

were no francophone MPs from Quebec, and only one party standard-bearer from the Prairies. Needless to say, the all-male parliamentary caucus was totally unrepresentative of the gender makeup of the country as well, but this factor did not provoke much public comment at the time.

It has become accepted wisdom that women delegates were about as rare as a three-dollar-bill at major Canadian party conventions until the affirmative-action regulations of the 1970s (Brodie, 1988). In actual fact, the 255 registered female delegates in attendance at the Winnipeg convention of 1927 represented 15 per cent of the total, not too shabby when one remembers that not a single woman had gained the nomination of the Conservative party in any constituency in the country during the previous three general elections. Given the widespread antipathy of the local party stalwarts towards women entering active politics, it was an achievement of some note, and one that had required considerable behind-the-scenes effort from the party elite. The Tory caucus had established a National Convention Committee to organize the Winnipeg gathering. Among the 39 members were 12 women, at least one from each province. This body put into place the general rule-structure for the convention, though it delegated much of its day-to-day authority to the chief organizer, Major-General A.D. McRae. One of the most significant decisions of the Committee concerned delegate selection. Each constituency would be represented by the candidate from the last election, as well as four additional delegates, men or women or both at the option of the constituency (Glassford, 1992). This decision opened the door to female representation, but did not guarantee it.

Initial reports were not encouraging. A travelling party operative reported picking up "a dissatisfaction among the Conservative women that they...have not been permitted to participate in affairs of the Party to the extent desired." The Conservative Women's Association of Montreal sent a letter to other women's Conservative associations around the country, protesting the unfair treatment. The central party organization got the message. New instructions were sent out to each riding association, pointing out that it was "desirable that agriculture, labour and women

should be adequately represented....It is felt there should be no doubt on this question." The National Convention Committee had one other option at its disposal: the provincial delegates-at-large. The appointment of this class of delegates was at the discretion of each provincial Conservative association, according to a formula based on population. In July of 1927, the National Convention Committee ruled "that twenty-five per cent at least of the delegates at large from each province should be women." The end result was 255 female delegates, some as riding representatives and some as delegates-at-large.

As one would expect, the proceedings were dominated by male delegates. All six leadership candidates were men, as were the nominators and seconders who spoke on their behalf. So were the chairs of the various committees such as policy resolutions, party organization, rules, and credentials. Nevertheless, women delegates were proportionately assigned to each of these convention bodies, and six women spoke from the main platform. Most of these speeches were brief and highly symbolic. The one featured female speaker was Iva Fallis, first vice-president of the Liberal-Conservative Association of Ontario, and a member of the National Convention Committee. "The Conservative party," she asserted, "has erred on the side of failing to realize the wonderful energy and enthusiasm available among the women of the party." She asked her female peers to remember they were "making history in this Convention, not only for the Conservative women, but for all the women of Canada." She implored them not to become discouraged because "the great mass of women voters display on many occasions such an appalling indifference to the great problems of our country." After all, she concluded, "politics for women is only in its infancy, and there must be pioneer work done."

Generally, the Conservative men at the convention were courteous, and the women were deferential. Mrs. Henry Joseph of Montreal stated, to hearty applause, that "it was the Conservative men who gave the women the vote." Going out of her way to allay male fears, she announced, "We do not wish in any way to interfere with the work of

the men." The Tory women did in fact have a separate meeting part way through the convention but they declined to organize a separate Conservative women's association. Instead, the report of the party organization committee recommended that each provincial party association "have the privilege of sending ... a woman representative" to the proposed Dominion council, to join the male representatives. Further encouragement was given for "the formation of Macdonald-Cartier clubs and other Conservative associations of young men and women."

The policy resolutions passed on the convention floor were largely bereft of ideas specifically addressed to women. It was assumed that a platform designed to guarantee prosperity, security and national unity would be as appealing to females as to males. This sentiment was voiced from the platform by Jessie Kirk of the Winnipeg Women's Conservative Association. "Women who are the home makers of any nation," she stated, "should stand by our men in the obtaining and keeping of their employment." The party did commit itself to "the principle that men and women should receive equal remuneration for work of equal value," and called for more vigour in preventing exploitative working conditions through "a system of inspection in which women should take part." Finally, the party demanded "ample provisions for the care of our war veterans, nursing sisters, and the widows and orphans of those who made the supreme sacrifice." There was certainly nothing radical about the platform, taken as a whole, but it did include a few items targeted to appeal to the liberal and maternal feminism that dominated mainstream thought among Canadian middle-class and farm women of the 1920s.

The next big opportunity for women and the party to show how they were adjusting to each other came in 1930, with the calling of a general election. "Is it not time for a change?" asked a *Chatelaine* reporter on the eve of the federal campaign. "There are scores of capable homemaking women and family heads, of business executives, of clever, experienced professional women, who could contribute something worthwhile to parliamentary and public life in Canada" (Perry, 1930, p.11). This appeal went

unheeded among Conservatives. Of the ten women who stood for election in 1930, one was a Liberal, and the other nine either represented third parties or were unaffiliated. Major-party nominations in winnable constituencies were hotly contested. It was unthinkable to most veteran male politicians that they should step aside and simply hand the nomination in such a riding to a woman, no matter how promising her credentials. Nominations had to be earned.

The only Conservative woman to play a prominent public role in the 1930 campaign was Mildred Bennett, younger sister of the leader. As yet unmarried, she travelled the country with her brother in his private railway car, a key member of the leadership entourage. She was invaluable in moderating the leader's occasional moodiness, and in bucking up everyone else's spirits. Her role did not end there. Given R.B.'s bachelor status, she willingly played the public role of "first lady" on the tour. For instance, here is an item from the official Bennett campaign itinerary for July 1st, 1930: "Ladies present Miss Bennett with address of welcome and Bouquet of flowers. Miss Bennett replies." On other occasions, the schedule was too tight to allow Mildred any time to speak. Still, the crowds insisted on at least seeing her. "The Chief only has one hour," General McRae notified her regarding one particular stop. "Nevertheless, I think they would like to see your smile." She even cut a record to help the campaign, a three-minute gramophone recording in which she addressed herself to the women of Canada. McRae recommended it "particularly for afternoon tea parties and other functions carried on by the ladies." It was also available for use over the radio.

Women did not play much of a role in the central organization of the Conservative campaign. Perhaps the woman with the most behind-the-scenes influence on the Conservative party fortunes was Alice Millar, Bennett's long-time personal secretary. Along with George Robinson, a Bennett associate who oversaw his personal re-election in Calgary, Millar virtually ran the party's campaign in Alberta. "I think you had better be in a position to give Red Deer a little more money," he advised her, late in the campaign, "but discuss the whole situation with George and anything you and he

decide to do will be entirely satisfactory to me." Bennett's own money financed a good part of the Tory effort in Alberta, but preoccupied as he was with the leader's tour, he delegated that responsibility with complete confidence to Alice Millar.

As part of their publicity effort, the Conservative party headquarters in Ottawa had requested from each English-language riding a list of faithful party stalwarts, who might be designated to receive a periodic party-insider's mailing. This was intended to be a list of "key men and women" in each riding but, betraying their roots in an all-male party atmosphere, the party brass kept referring to these designated loyalists as simply the "key men," period. Nevertheless General McRae, the national campaign organizer, shared with this key list his conviction that "the women should take an active part in the coming campaign." That this "active part" was something less than overall leadership was made clear by the suggestion that his right-hand man, Redmond Code, made regarding publicity for Bennett's campaign radio broadcasts. "Get a number of young women," he recommended, "to call toll-free subscribers on the day of each broadcast, giving them the hour and station on which the speech will be heard." The point of this example is not so much that women were being given menial tasks, but rather that they were being given tasks at all. Not so long ago, even staffing the phone-banks would have been a job for a few of the "boys."

There was nothing like a good scare--fear of a Grit victory in a safe Tory riding, for instance--to alert the local party bosses to the potential benefits of a mobilized cohort of party women. Mrs. F. S. Greenwood, the lone female standard-bearer for the Liberal party in 1930, attributed her defeat in St. Catharines in part to this factor at work. "The Conservative member did not just know how to tackle the proposition of a woman candidate," Mrs. Greenwood noted, "so their executive proceeded to organize their women, which had never been done in Lincoln before, and they certainly worked" (*Chatelaine*, 1930, p.38). Ironically, the sterling contribution of the Tory women workers of Lincoln riding helped immeasurably to defeat a promising female Liberal

candidate. Nevertheless, this local race illustrates the general point, first revealed in the 1917 campaign. Where involving women directly in the election spelled the difference between victory and defeat for the party, the old-guard males proved ready to accept the new realities.

While anxious to involve "the wives, mothers and sisters" actively in the Conservative cause, the Tory brain trust was more concerned about two other questions: how the women would vote and, indeed, whether they would vote. It was believed that the women possessed influence beyond their 52 per cent share of the adult population. "The young men and women who are more or less responsive to their mothers' conclusions greatly add to this percentage," noted General McRae. The main issue of the 1930 election was unemployment, providing the perfect backdrop for a traditional partisan battle over tariffs. Bennett promised to use them to "blast a way" into world markets for Canadian products. This violent, though colourful, imagery was toned down for an election pamphlet aimed directly at women, and entitled "To the Mothers of Canada." The brochure was steeped in traditional separate-sphere assumptions. "The parent who worries most about the future of the children is the Mother," it began. "You are the one profoundly anxious that your son or daughter shall have an opportunity, in Canada, to make a success of life." The answer to a mother's natural worries, according to Tory propaganda, was R. B. Bennett and a vigorous trade-protection policy that would create new jobs.

On July 28, 1930, well over one million Canadian women went to the polls. They did not yet turn out in the same proportions as men--that form of the gender gap did not disappear until the 1970s (Gotell & Brodie, 1991). Nevertheless, sufficient of them voted Conservative to make Mildred Bennett's brother the new prime minister of Canada. For the next five years, the Bennett government wrestled with the Great Depression. There was little in the Conservative policies that specifically targeted women. Bennett and his cabinet believed that if they could restore prosperity to the country the women, as keepers of home and hearth, would benefit right along with their families. One initiative was the Ottawa Imperial

Economic Conference that Bennett chaired in 1932. At the time, his government was taken to task because "not a single Catholic, either French or English speaking," was included in the list of personnel attached to the Canadian delegation and secretariat. No one ventured to suggest that not a single woman was included above the level of stenographer. Such considerations of gender-balance did not yet figure in the calculations of politicians, journalists and interest groups, the way that religion, ethnicity and region assuredly did.

One symbolic appointment that did attract comment was the summoning to the Senate of Iva Fallis, the first Conservative woman in the upper chamber. Just prior to the 1930 election, Mackenzie King had recommended the appointment of an active Liberal, Cairine Wilson, in response to the favourable court ruling in the famous "Persons" case. Five years later, R. B. Bennett followed suit. Iva Fallis had been the most prominent Conservative woman at the Winnipeg leadership convention, and was a tireless worker in the interests of the party. At home in both the women's associations and the male-dominated regular party committees, she had further distinguished herself by establishing a number of Conservative youth clubs across Ontario. The *Toronto Globe* approvingly described her as a "seasoned political speaker," and "active worker" in party affairs, and a "farmer's wife." A feature article in *Chatelaine* captured a more assertive side of the new Senator. "When chairmen were in the habit of saying, soothingly, 'And now Mrs. Fallis will say a few words to the ladies,' she would stand up...and follow quickly with 'And perhaps a few words to the men, too'" (Dempsey, 1936).

By the time the 1935 election was called, the Conservative government was on its last legs. The new national campaign organizer, J. Earl Lawson, was a youngish Toronto MP with little sympathy for the role women might play in party affairs. This negative attitude cost the party potential workers. One prominent Tory woman, who had even been asked "to run as a Liberal" in the 1934 provincial election, was furious at the cold shoulder he gave her. "I offered my services to Earl Lawson to help in any way in the Conservative Campaign," she recounted, "and I got a note from

some subordinate whose initials I did not recognize, saying that they would consider my 'qualifications.' You would have thought that I was applying for a typist's job." Not surprisingly, then, the Conservative promotional literature in 1935 was much less effectively targeted to Canadian women voters than five years earlier. Of a series of 18 Tory campaign pamphlets, the one that came closest to acknowledging a female presence in the electorate was: "Bennett Helps Canadians to Build New Homes." By contrast, the Liberal party pumped out a million copies of "The Forgotten Consumer," their primary pamphlet for Canadian women, who were widely assumed to be the principal shoppers in the nation's households. Too late, Lawson and his backroom advisors twigged to the fact that their old-fashioned approach was going nowhere with female voters. A full-page ad in the October 1, 1935 issue of *Maclean's* urged women to think of their future before voting. "Women of Canada!" it begged in bold letters. "You cannot afford to experiment. Security is vital to your home, your happiness and your future welfare." The Tory ad merely underscored the genius of the Liberal slogan, "King or Chaos," for in 1935 it was Mackenzie King, not R. B. Bennett, who represented the safe choice in a five-party campaign.

The front-running Liberals ran no female candidates, but among the 15 women who did stand for election was Martha Black, an Independent Conservative who ran in Yukon. On October 14 she joined Agnes Macphail, only the second Canadian woman to be elected to the federal Parliament. Despite the historic nature of her victory in a difficult riding, characterized by a few thousand voters scattered over several hundred thousand square miles of frozen northland, Martha Black has not been highly regarded by recent scholars. "Mrs. Black's election, far from being a symbolic triumph for Canadian women, demonstrated the degree to which the women's movement had declined," states one respected account. "Martha Black...had run for office only because her husband, Speaker of the House George Black, had been too ill to defend his seat....She stepped aside in 1940 to allow her husband to resume his place in parliament" (Thompson & Seager, 1985, p. 59). Her five-year

tenure as an MP has been contemptuously dismissed as merely "keeping the seat warm for George." In her own memoirs, she described herself as "the political 'pinch-hitter' for George Black" (Black, 1938).

This one-dimensional portrait does a disservice to a most remarkable woman. Born in Illinois, a survivor of the great Chicago Fire, she was deserted by her first husband. Undaunted, she joined her brother in trekking on foot through the steep mountain passes of Alaska to join the Yukon Gold Rush in 1898, unaware at the time she was pregnant with her third child. She found no gold, but soon was earning a good living by running a mill, until her marriage to George Black, a young Yukon lawyer originally from New Brunswick. She helped her husband campaign for the Yukon federal seat in 1921, and each election thereafter. Her assistance was more than symbolic; Martha Black was as popular with Yukoners as her husband. As Erik Nielsen later noted, in Yukon in those days there were no Conservatives, only Blacks and Liberals (1989, pp. 65-66).

George Black's 1935 "illness" was something more than lumbago or rheumatism. He suffered a complete mental breakdown, a condition no doubt worsened by a lifetime of heavy drinking and the lingering traumatic effects of front-line duty in the First World War. Even though Speaker of the House from 1930-34, Black in true frontier fashion kept a gun in his parliamentary office, and delighted in sneaking the odd potshot out his open window at the squirrels and rabbits that scampered about on the lawn behind the Centre Block. Early in 1935, something snapped in George's mind, and he grabbed his gun, determined to settle some score with R. B. Bennett. The Commons security staff succeeded in disarming him, and he was committed to a veterans' hospital in London, Ontario. His recovery was not immediate, however, as Martha later revealed in a private letter obtained by the Prime Minister. "In both letters and language for months past," she disclosed, "my husband has accused me of practically every crime in the decalogue with the exception of murder."

At the age of 69, with an invalid husband, Martha Black was faced once again with the necessity of making a living. Opportunity presented

itself in the form of a political offer she could not refuse. "As you know," she wrote to Bennett, "Yukon Conservatives have asked me to run in the coming election." She accepted their offer, and threw herself into the campaign. Not everyone welcomed her candidacy. "There were the younger women, who said, 'What can this damned old woman do for us at Ottawa?'" she explained in her memoirs. "That was hard to take." Opposition from political opponents was more expected, but even after the vote, some were ungracious. "On hearing of my election," Mrs. Black continued, "a feminine supporter of my opponent remarked bitterly, 'She ran nothing but a sob-sister campaign anyway.' Well, what if I did?" On another occasion, she revealed that her "sourdough pancakes and baked beans played a big part" in her narrow election victory (Black, 1938, pp. 310-312). Such refreshing candour by Black was treasured by her Yukon constituents, but has damaged her reputation with subsequent generations, particularly when contrasted with the more serious image of her contemporary, Agnes Macphail. Yet Martha Black was more than a survivor. She played the political game by the rules of her day and won. If she bowed out in 1940, at the age of 74, who could blame her? Her husband, now fully recovered in health, was seven years younger than she.

R.B. Bennett was not personally opposed to female Conservative candidates. In fact, there is evidence to show that, in 1935, he acted behind the scenes to try to open up a few ridings for capable women. "As requested by you," F. D. L. Smith, editor of the *Toronto Mail and Empire* wrote to Bennett, "I had a talk with Mr. Denton Massey this afternoon about the possible introduction of women members to the Senate and House of Commons." Smith and Massey discussed two principal obstacles. The first was attitudinal. "I find," Smith acknowledged, "in the Albany Club and elsewhere the old conservative prejudice against 'skirts' in Parliament." The second was operational. "Mr. Massey notes some difficulty in most constituencies to get the convention to nominate a woman." Denton Massey, the Ontario campaign director, did suggest two names as possible candidates. The first woman was a popular Toronto-area municipal politician. Massey felt that "Mrs. Plumtre, if

backed by a little money, might win the constituency of Rosedale." The second woman named was from rural Ontario, but, as Smith lamented, "the problem of finding a constituency for Mrs. Fallis is another matter." In the end, the difficulties proved insurmountable, and Bennett appointed Iva Fallis to the Senate, instead.

The result of the 1935 election was an electoral drubbing for the Conservative party. Three years later, the Conservatives decided to hold a national leadership convention in Ottawa. The occasion provided another opportunity to measure women's progress in the party, a full two decades after Robert Borden first introduced the women's suffrage bill in 1918. One of the key behind-the-scenes people involved in organizing this gathering was a woman, Jane Denison. In 1927, she had been General McRae's secretary while he was involved in organizing the party's first-ever leadership convention. In fact, she had served the Tory party in that capacity for several years in the 1920s, under both McRae and his predecessor, S.F. Tolmie. In 1936 she resumed her former position, and for three years, with minimal help, she kept the national party office up and running, all for the non-princely salary of \$150 per month. What nominal supervision she received came from R.K. Finlayson, Bennett's chief of staff. Periodically, she submitted reports detailing her activities and the work of the party office directly to the Opposition Leader. She ran a tight ship, and accomplished wonders on an annual budget of \$4,000. Operating under the overall direction of the joint national chairmen, J.R. MacNicol and Maurice Dupre, Denison was instrumental in pulling together the first Conservative party convention in 11 years.

One significant departure from 1927 involved youth-delegate representation. A new party regulation provided that "from the Provinces of Ontario and Quebec 9 young men and 9 young women, and from each of the other provinces and the Yukon 3 young men and 3 young women be selected as delegates." Before long the new policy was called into question, but the National Convention Committee, which included Martha Black and Jane Denison, held firm. The addition of some 40 female youth delegates helped raise the total number of women in attendance above 1927

levels. A Montreal *Gazette* report on the eve of the convention stated that the organizers were expecting 400 women delegates among the 1800 eligible to attend, indicating a female proportion of slightly more than 20 per cent.

Women played a modestly more significant role in the public proceedings of the 1938 convention. This time women speakers from the podium numbered 14, compared to six in 1927. Earl Lawson chose a woman, Gertrude Van Koughnet, to move his nomination as a candidate for the leadership, while Joseph Harris asked Mrs. George Gooch to second his nomination. Neither Lawson nor Harris was a front-runner, but the symbolic gestures did indicate some appreciation of women's importance to the party. The most significant speech by a woman was given by Senator Iva Fallis. She stressed to her fellow Tories "the importance of enlisting the fully organized support of the women of their party" if they hoped to win again. "That," she added, "is perhaps something for the men to think about." Speaking in French, Mme. F.X.A. Giroux stated, "*Notre parti devra rendre justice à la femme.*" These were the most pointed remarks in an otherwise banal parade of high-sounding generalities. One of the most beloved Conservative women of that era could not attend the convention. Mildred Bennett Herridge had fallen suddenly ill and died in May, only weeks before the convention. Iva Fallis delivered a tribute in her memory before the full convention.

Once again, Conservatives confronted the perennial question of whether a separate women's association should be created. Provincial women's associations existed in some provinces but not in others. Early in his leadership tenure R. B. Bennett had not favoured a separate organization, but by 1938 he had changed his mind. Press reports, however, indicated that the female delegates themselves arrived in Ottawa with mixed opinions as to the advisability of a distinct women's branch. When the report on party organization was approved by the full convention, the pertinent provision regarding a possible women's association read as follows: "that there be no separate National Conservative organization for women but that this shall not be deemed to prevent separate organizations of Conservative women in such

Provinces as may decide to so organize." In other words, separate women's associations if necessary, but not necessarily separate women's associations. Creation of such a body at the federal level would not come until the 1940s.

After twenty years, then, what progress can be reported in the accommodation of Canadian Tories and women? Officially, women were welcomed to the Conservative party, though never during this era on a 50:50 basis of equality with men. Places for them were opened up on party executive slates, as convention delegates, and as minor platform speakers. Only two Tory women achieved elite legislative status: Martha Black as a one-term elected MP, and Iva Fallis as an appointed Senator. Nevertheless, precedents for the future had been set. Mildred Bennett had shown that a woman could have "star" quality on the hustings. Behind the scenes, Jane Denison and Alice Millar had proven their mettle in party and campaign organization. And, although men continued in 1939 to dominate party proceedings at all levels, a different policy had been put in place for the party youth. Despite opposition, the party elite in 1938 had held firm on equal representation for young women with young men to the Ottawa convention. A separate Young Conservative association, with a constitution guaranteeing significant female representation on the national youth executive, was

established that would ensure the next generation of party men and women were nurtured in a more gender-equitable environment. Meanwhile, more and more local ridings were learning what the Conservatives of Lincoln had learned in 1930--an active corps of party women could significantly affect the outcome of a tight constituency race.

It should not be surprising that a Conservative party would proceed only incrementally to integrate women into its activities and ethos. Radical changes rarely appeal to centre-right, bourgeois parties. Moreover, it must be said that large numbers of Conservative women during the interwar years continued to share the assumptions of many of the Tory men regarding appropriate gender roles, both in the party, and in society. Moving from the private to the public sphere required attitudinal changes as well as institutional adaptation. Progress toward genuine gender equity within the Conservative party would be a gradual process. Nevertheless, by 1939, the journey was well begun. When the second wave of the women's movement began to form in the years after World War Two, these activists would find a modest base already established by talented, courageous women of the interwar years--women such as Mildred Bennett, Martha Black, Jane Denison, Iva Fallis, and Alice Millar of Canada's federal Conservative party.

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