

# THOSE LESS EQUAL: THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

**women's suffrage:** the right of women to vote

**suffragist:** a person who advocates extending the right to vote, especially to women

**prohibition:** the banning of the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages

By the time Laurier was elected in 1896, the practice of voting by secret ballot had been the law for more than twenty years. However, only male property owners were entitled to the franchise. Women, Native Canadians, immigrants of Asian ancestry, and many other newcomers to Canada were denied the right to vote. During Laurier's time as prime minister, women, the Native peoples, and other groups began organized efforts to win social and political equality.

## Women's Suffrage and Social Reform

Around the turn of the century, most Canadian women had very hard lives. Before the invention of labour-saving devices, such as washing machines, housework and child rearing consumed most of the average woman's day. Families of ten to

twelve children were common. For women, the risk of death or disability during childbirth was high, and many babies died at birth. Because women rarely worked outside the home after marriage, educational expectations for women were low. By 1900, women made up only 15 percent of undergraduates at Canadian universities. They were barred from many professions, such as law, and were not eligible for university scholarships.

The campaign for **women's suffrage**—the right to vote—came of age in the Laurier era. **Suffragists** were mainly middle-class women devoted to social reform. They blamed most social ills, including poverty and child neglect, on the evils of alcoholism, which was a growing problem. They demonstrated regularly to persuade the government to extend the franchise to women. Many prominent suffragists were also members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), founded in 1885, to promote prohibition. WCTU members supported women's suffrage because they believed most women supported **prohibition**.

Suffragists of this era were also known as "maternal feminists" because they were convinced that the skills of wives and mothers would bring a fresh, compassionate perspective to male-dominated governments in Canada. They believed that this feminine influence would lead to laws that would improve the lives of women and children.

Canadian suffragists were part of a worldwide movement. To attract

**Figure 7-23** The Manitoba-based Political Equality League is pictured here with their petition demanding women's suffrage in the early 1900s.



## Nellie McClung

One important suffragist was Nellie McClung (1873–1951). Raised in Manitoba, she became a teacher and well-known author who published many articles and books, including her autobiography. When her family moved to Edmonton, she promoted women's suffrage and prohibition. McClung was an effective speaker and often used wit and humour to "win over" an audience. Devoted to many reform issues affecting women, she worked especially hard to win suffrage for the women of Alberta.

In the excerpt that follows, McClung's words typify the maternal approach to women's rights that characterized the suffragist movement.



Women must be made to feel their responsibility. All this protective love, this instinctive mother love, must be organized some way, and made effective. There [is] enough of it in the world to do away with all the evils that war upon children, undernourishment, slum conditions, child labour, drunkenness. Women could abolish these if they wanted to."



public attention to their cause, suffragist leaders such as Emmeline Pankhurst in Britain and Susan B. Anthony in the United States organized demonstrations and hunger strikes. In Canada, the generally peaceful suffragist campaign was led by the Canadian Woman's Suffrage Association. This association was supported by Canada's leading women's organization, the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC), founded by Lady Aberdeen, the wife of Canada's governor general. Lady Aberdeen used her influence to channel what she called "the unused capacity of women in Canada" into efforts to achieve reform.

On the Prairies, the suffragist movement had some of its earliest successes. Perhaps this was because western women had struggled side by side with men against the harsh realities of farm life, and so prairie men were more inclined to regard women as equals. Moreover, western farmers saw women's suffrage as

a way to increase the farm vote and farmers' influence in provincial politics. Not surprisingly, the western provinces were the first to grant women's suffrage.

In British Columbia, the fight for suffrage would last more than forty-five years. It began when the province joined Confederation, in 1871. That year, the American suffragist Susan B. Anthony visited Victoria to speak in favour of women's rights. The following year, a bill supporting women's suffrage was roundly defeated in the provincial legislature—only two members of the legislature voted in favour of the bill. By 1873, women who owned property had won the right to vote in **municipal** elections, but in 1899, the suffrage bill was again defeated in the British Columbia legislature. However, this time the vote was close—15 to 17.

In 1912, the provincial Liberals made suffrage part of their election platform and, in 1916, a suffrage referendum passed as part of the

**municipal:** city or town

### Time Line 7–1

#### The Enfranchisement of Women in Canada

- 1916 Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta
- 1917 British Columbia, Ontario
- 1918 Nova Scotia; federal enfranchisement of women
- 1919 New Brunswick
- 1922 Prince Edward Island
- 1925 Newfoundland (joined Confederation in 1949)
- 1940 Quebec

**Figure 7-24** This handbill, circulated by the Women's Political Equality League, asked for support in getting the vote for women. Do you agree with the reasons listed on the handbill? To whom is the message in this handbill being directed? How effective would it have been? Add a few more reasons to the list that you think might be effective.

## VOTE FOR WOMAN'S FREEDOM

### THE WOMEN OF BRITISH COLUMBIA WANT THEIR POLITICAL FREEDOM BECAUSE

1. IF WOMAN HAS TO OBEY THE LAWS IT IS ONLY JUST THAT SHE SHOULD HAVE A VOICE IN MAKING THEM.
2. WOMAN'S INFLUENCE WOULD BE INCREASED AND LAWS FOR WOMAN'S PROTECTION WOULD BE MORE EASILY SECURED.
3. AS POLITICAL RIGHTS MAKE MAN NOBLER, SO THEY WOULD MAKE WOMAN NOBLER ALSO.
4. THE BALLOT IS AN EDUCATOR. WOMAN NEEDS THE EDUCATION OF THE BALLOT; THE WORLD NEEDS THE EDUCATION OF THE WOMAN'S BALLOT.
5. WOMAN CAN BETTER PROTECT HER HOME INTERESTS.
6. WOMAN HAS BORNE HER SHARE OF THE TOIL, SUFFERING AND LONELINESS IN THE PIONEER WORK OF THIS PROVINCE AND SHE OUGHT TO HAVE A VOICE IN HOW IT IS GOVERNED.

WOMEN ARE FREED FROM POLITICAL SLAVERY IN NORWAY, SWEDEN, FINLAND, NEW ZEALAND, AUSTRALIA, TASMANIA, ISLE OF MAN, UTAH, WYOMING, COLORADO AND IDAHO, WITH THE RESULT THAT THE LAWS ARE BETTER AND CONDITIONS IMPROVED.

### GIVE THE WOMEN THE BALLOT

provincial election. By 1917, British Columbia women finally gained the official right to vote and the right to hold political office.

For the most part, however, change did not come quickly (see Time Line 7-1). During the Laurier years, most Canadians believed that specific areas of life were "natural" to each sex. For example, politics and business were considered "man's work." Such beliefs hindered the struggle for women's equal rights, and many years would pass before women would have their rights recognized in law.

### The Rights of the Native Peoples

At the turn of the century, the survival of Native lands and culture was threatened by government policies. The goal of federal government policy was to assimilate Native people into Canadian society and to make treaties with aboriginal groups that would free up land for European settlement. The Native peoples wanted to retain their traditional territory and based their claim to land on the Royal Proclamation of

1763, which recognized them as "Nations or Tribes," extended to them the protection of Britain, and recognized their right to own the land they had used and occupied. An excerpt of the Proclamation follows:



"It is just and reasonable ... that the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with whom We are connected ... should not be molested or disturbed in the Possession of such Parts of Our Dominions and Territories as, not having been ceded to or purchased by Us, are reserved to them, or any of they, as their Hunting Grounds.

"And We do further declare it to be Our Royal Will and Pleasure, for the present ... to reserve under our Sovereignty, Protection, and Dominion, for the use of the said Indians, all lands and Territories not included with limits of Our ... new governments, or within the Limits of the Territory granted to the Hudson's Bay Company, as also all the lands and Territories lying to the Westward of the Sources of the rivers which fall into the Sea from the west and the North West."