Women’s Suffrage

It is hard to believe that from 1871 to 1917, women could not participate in the political life of the province. At the turn of the 20th century, women’s groups campaigned for the suffrage, or the right to vote. Their efforts were supported by a few male Members of the Legislative Assembly who introduced 16 suffrage bills between 1891 and 1914.

In response, the Conservative government, headed by B.C. Premier Bowser, decided to hold a referendum on women’s suffrage in conjunction with the 1916 provincial election. The results indicated widespread support for the cause from the male electorate.

In April 1917, the new Liberal government amended the Provincial Elections Act to grant women who qualified as British subjects the right to vote in provincial elections and the right to be elected to the Legislative Assembly. The newly enfranchised women voted for the first time in the 1918 provincial general election.

Political Trail-blazers

Over the past 90 years, 75 women have been elected to serve as Members of the Legislative Assembly. The record of their participation includes some notable trail-blazers. Mary Ellen Smith, MLA (1918-28) was the first female Member of the Legislative Assembly, and the first woman to be appointed a cabinet minister in Canada and the-then British Empire. Nancy Hodges, MLA (1941-53) was appointed the first female Speaker of the House in 1950, becoming the first woman to hold this position in a Commonwealth parliament.

Other trailblazers include female legislators who have become leaders of parliamentary parties. Rita Johnston, MLA (1983-91) was selected as leader of the BC Social Credit Party in 1991 and so became the first woman to serve as Premier of British Columbia and the first female premier in Canada.