The Turn of the Century: Political and Legal Realities

FOCUS

This section will help you understand
a. how the “new woman” of the 1900s differed from the traditional Victorian woman
b. the limitations placed on women by their political and legal status.

TIMELINE 1900-1940

1901 One in six Canadian workers is a woman. Domestic servants earn between $8 and $21 a month.
1903 Emily Stowe, Canada’s first female doctor, dies.
1907 Women operators strike the Bell Telephone Co.
1908 Lucy Maud Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables is published in Boston.
1911 Women form over 21% of the Canadian workforce.
1913 Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson dies.
1916 Women in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta win the right to vote in provincial elections.
1918 Canadian women win the right to vote in federal elections.
1921 Agnes Macphail becomes the first woman Member of Parliament.
1922 Women get the provincial vote in PEI. They now have it in every province except Quebec.
1928 The Supreme Court of Canada rules unanimously that women are not persons under the BNA Act.
1929 British Privy Council overrules Supreme Court ruling and officially recognizes women as persons.
1930 Cairine Wilson is first woman appointed to Canadian Senate.
1932 First family planning clinic in Canada is set up by Dr. Elizabeth Bagshaw in Hamilton, Ontario.
1936 Two thousand women petition the British Columbia government for a free birth control clinic.
1938 Trans-Canada Airlines begins hiring stewardesses. Each must be a registered nurse, at least 5 ft. 3 in. tall, and weigh no more than 125 lbs.
1940 Women over 21 get the vote in Quebec.

Tradition: The Victorian Ideal

Queen Victoria ruled over the British Empire for 54 years, from 1837 till her death in 1901, the longest reign in British history. She gave her name not just to an era, but to an image of womanhood and social conduct. She was an adoring wife and bore her husband, “dear Albert,” nine children. Widowed when she was 42, Victoria remained in mourning for the rest of her life.

Despite spending her whole life in the public eye, Victoria had no sympathy with people who wanted rights for women. She believed that a woman’s place was in the home, caring for her husband and children.

Figure 2-1 Queen Victoria
By the time of Victoria’s death, conditions had already begun to change. In Canada, women were first admitted to the universities in the 1880s. By 1900 many of them were seeking jobs that were suitable for people of their education and training. They also began to participate in sports, and many of the stricter fashion rules were being relaxed. The Victorian Age was over, and women began to organize themselves more effectively to acquire the rights that had been denied them for so long.

**Political Realities**

It was not until 1918 that Canadian women won the right to vote in federal elections. For the first two decades of the 20th century they remained disenfranchised. This did not sit well with the “new women,” most of whom were middle class, Protestant, and well educated. Some of them were working outside the home in fields like medicine, education, social work, and journalism. To give themselves more political influence, women began to form their own organizations. Between 1900 and 1920, these organizations attracted large memberships. By 1912, one out of every eight adult Canadian women belonged to a women’s organization.

- **Women’s Christian Temperance Union**: the first Canadian branch of the WCTU was founded in Owen Sound in 1874. Many reformers thought that alcohol lay at the root of all social evils, so they joined this organization in large numbers. The WCTU provided valuable lessons in political organizing and lobbying techniques for members like Nellie McClung. Besides fighting for the prohibition of alcohol, the WCTU also actively lobbied for women’s suffrage and mothers’ allowances.

- **National Council of the Women of Canada**: formed in 1893 by Lady Aberdeen, wife of the Governor General of Canada. The Council brought together representatives from different women’s groups across the country, thus providing a network for women to communicate their concerns and ideas.

- **Federated Women’s Institutes of Canada**: the first Women’s Institute was formed in 1897 by Adelaide Hoodless in Stony Creek, Ontario. Soon there were branches in every province. Women’s Institutes were rural organizations that stressed the value of country living and of being well informed about national and international issues, especially those that had a direct effect on women and children. As a group, the institutes were an effective lobbying force for women’s rights.
Fédération Nationale Saint Jean Baptiste: established in 1907 in Montreal as a distinctly Catholic, francophone women’s organization. It offered support to the poor and dispossessed. The FNSJB’s mandate was to assist girls and women through education and to improve the conditions of working women. Marie Gérin Lajoie, a founding member of the group, played a very active role in the suffrage movement in Quebec.

Coloured Women’s Club of Montreal: formed in 1902 by the wives of Black railroad workers, the club sought to bring attention to the problems faced by Blacks in Montreal, especially racial discrimination. The group also helped newly arrived Black immigrants adjust to life in Canada.

Through their experiences in these different organizations, Canadian women could see that until they enjoyed the right to vote, no meaningful reforms would take place. Soon they began to unite their efforts to achieve this most important goal.

Legal Realities
In the early years of the century, women were not considered “persons” under the law. This meant they were denied many of the legal rights men took for granted:

- A woman surrendered all property rights to her husband when she married.
- Many widows were not provided for in their husbands’ wills. Money and property were passed directly to the male children, and their mother became dependent on them.
- Women were barred by law from homesteading. On the death of a homesteader, his widow lost all rights to the land and it reverted to the government.
- A man could seek a divorce on grounds of adultery, but until 1925 a woman could not. She had to prove that her husband was guilty both of adultery and desertion.
- A divorced woman had no rights to her former husband’s property and no right of custody over her children.
- A Canadian woman who married a non-Canadian lost her citizenship. An Aboriginal woman lost her Indian status if she married a non-status man. There was no loss of citizenship or status for men when they made similar marriages.

Figure 2-4
What does this magazine cover from 1914 tell you about popular ideas on the “place” of women in society? How does the title of the magazine reinforce the popular view? Why would this view work against giving women the right to vote?

Primary Source
ONE PERSON IN LAW

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage... But though our law in general considers man and wife as one person, yet there are some instances in which she is separately considered as inferior to him... and therefore all deeds done by her... are void.

Primary Source
A VERY HIGH PEDESTAL

People opposed to women's rights often used the most idealistic arguments to support their position. Surprisingly, even some women agreed that they should be "protected" from political and legal responsibilities. Following are two excerpts from letters to a newspaper in 1912, the first from a man, the second from a woman. What are the writers saying? Do you agree or disagree with their arguments? Can you explain why?

- Women who believe in woman suffrage seem to think that we men want to deprive them of their liberties; but we wish to do no such thing. All men who are worthy of the name of men, place woman upon a very high pedestal, to which no man, in his sphere, could ever hope to attain; and we want her to remain there, where she can command our respect and esteem and use the powers that God has given her for the good of humanity... Why should she besmear herself with the rottenness of politics?

   — Letter to the Editor, Toronto Globe, 1912.

- I fear some of the women who scream for votes are the women whose opinion is not valued by men... I maintain that women without the vote are a powerful factor, but women are too impulsive to be given the legislation, and, may I add, too hysterical. The woman who rises above the weaknesses of her sex is fit for the vote... but we must not forget the women who are bundles of nerves and yet if once we had the vote, they would have it equally. But I fear I also am a woman and only scratch the surface.

   — "A Descendent of Eve." Letter to the Editor, Toronto Globe, 1912.

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Figure 2.5 Many men still placed women on a pedestal early in the 20th century. They thought of them as objects to be worshipped and protected from the harsher aspects of reality.

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RECONNECT

1. Using your own words, write a brief definition of the "new woman" of the early 1900s. How did she differ from a "Victorian woman"?

2. What was the single most important political goal for women at the turn of the century?