
Nancy Hodges: Speaker and Trailblazer

by Margaret Boyes

The British Columbia Legislative Assembly in the 1950s was a male stronghold and few thought women would ever have real parliamentary power. Nancy Hodges' appointment as Speaker, by the coalition government headed by Liberal Premier Byron Johnson, was a giant step forward for women in politics.

Nancy Hodges was born in London, England and trained in repartee as a girl. She was ninth of 10 children with six older brothers. After graduating from London University she became a journalist and married newspaperman, Harry P. Hodges. They moved to Kamloops, British Columbia in 1912, because Harry had tuberculosis and needed a dry climate to recover. In Kamloops they edited the *Inland Sentinel*. In 1916 they came to Victoria where Harry became legislative reporter for the *Victoria Times* and Nancy, the women's editor.

After losing her bid for a seat in the 1937 provincial election, Hodges became a columnist at the *Times*. "One Woman's Day" was a variety of chitchat, epitaphs, poetry and comments on daily life. While writing for the *Times*, Hodges was a well-known clubwoman, women's rights advocate and British Columbia's leading woman Liberal. At different times she was president of the National Federation of Liberal Women of Canada, Victoria's Women's Canadian Club and the Victoria Business and Professional Women's Club.

Hodges gained a seat in the 1941 election, holding it through 1952. Her initiation into real politics came shortly afterwards. The Liberals were a minority government and Hodges supported coalition with the Conservatives. Premier T.D. Patullo who opposed the coalitionists shouted: "Coalition with the Conservatives will be the end of the Liberal Party in British Columbia."

Hodges responded: "Coalition won't kill any party that hasn't germs of decay in it already."

The coalitionists won in 1941 and held power until 1947. From 1941 to 1945 there were five women in the House: Hodges, Tilly Rolston and three CCF women, Dorothy Steeves, Laura Jamieson and Grace MacInnis. Hodges and Steeves, who was a great debater, had many battles

As an MLA Hodges opposed laying off single women to replace them with WWII veterans. She threatened to campaign for pensions for women at 40 if this practice was not stopped. She advocated inclusion of women in workers' compensation benefits, and presented a motion to protect married women's property rights in 1947.

In 1947, the Liberals were choosing a successor to Premier John Hart. Both Byron Johnson and Attorney-General Wismer wanted the job. Hodges supported Johnson but the delegates seemed to favour Wismer. She strode to the platform, shouted down Wismer supporters and in a passionate speech nominated Johnson who won by eight votes.

When rumours said her reward would be a cabinet post Hodges was furious. She considered that an embarrassment to the Premier. She said she would never accept a cabinet post. Her reward came in 1950 when Johnson appointed her to the Speakership. It was the highlight of her career. The only drawback to being Speaker, said Hodges, was being silenced. "I shan't be able to take part in any debates," she said. "And I'll doubtless find it hard to restrain myself at times."

Margaret Boyes is a freelance writer living in Victoria, B.C.

At five feet ten inches tall, wearing the traditional British black silk Speaker's robes and tricorn hat, Hodges struck a dramatic figure. A skillful orator with a resounding voice ideal for keeping rowdy MLAs in line she was the first woman Speaker of the House in British Columbia or anywhere in the British Commonwealth.

Hodges's salary was \$3,000 a year as MLA plus \$1,800 as Speaker. Her office was a three room suite in the legislative building with a mahogany desk, red carpeting, and a bust of Laurier on the fireplace mantel.

As Speaker, her day began at 6:30 when she would make breakfast, do some gardening and think about her daily column. She would plan the days' meals, then go to town perhaps to see the Premier, talk to a constituent, or judge a Klondike beard contest. She often made two or more speeches a day. She might talk to a breakfast club at seven a.m., a women's group at dinner and a political rally at nine p.m.

In 1950 Hodges went on a speaking tour across North America. In May she spoke to Californian Business and Professional Women's Clubs. She went to Ottawa in June to speak to the Canadian Federation of Liberal Women and the Women's Canadian Club. In July she was invited to the Halifax convention of the Federation of Canadian Business and Professional Women's Clubs which chose her "Canadian Woman of 1950".

In speaking to women's groups Hodges did not mince words; "You've got to stop passing resolutions and thinking that is the be-all and end-all. Get right down

and fight with the strongest weapon you have, and that is the vote."

Hodges loved speaking in crowded halls during campaigns. To silence hecklers she would often shout: "My friends, remember empty buckets make the most noise."

After her defeat in the 1953 election, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent announced Hodges's appointment to the Senate. There were now five women in the Upper Chamber. "I feel the appointment is a tribute to the women of British Columbia rather than any personal honour to me" she told a *Vancouver Sun* reporter. As a Senator she served on joint Commons and Senate committees to study the death penalty and divorce laws. She remained in the Senate until 1965 when at age 76 she retired to Victoria in poor health. When she spoke to a reporter in 1967 her voice had weakened and she could only speak for five to ten minutes. Before her death in 1969, she had the satisfaction of knowing she had set a pattern affecting the role of women everywhere.

"Throughout her political career," said Premier Bennett, "Mrs. Hodges displayed the qualities of a brilliant and constructive mind that should rightly earn her the admiration of all the people of British Columbia."

"There was nothing namby pamby about Nancy," recalled John McCrae who served as Coalition (Liberal) MLA from 1949 to 1952. "She was in control of the House at all times. She was very efficient and took her job very seriously."