
Quebec Monument to Honour Women in Politics

Fatima Houda-Pepin

In Québec, as of the election on December 8, 2008, around thirty percent of MNAs are women. In fact, women have not been a part of Québec's political landscape for long. Marie-Claire Kirkland was the first woman to win a seat in the National Assembly, and that was not until December 14, 1961. She was the lone female voice among hundreds of men for 12 years until she left politics in 1973, at which time Lise Bacon was elected. In 1976, Ms Bacon was re-elected, and four new women also won seats, under the Parti Québécois banner: Lise Payette, Louise Sauvé Cuerrier, Jocelyne Ouellet and Denise Leblanc-Bantey. In the Fall of 2012 a statue on the grounds of the National Assembly will honour all women in political life.



The role of women in politics is a subject that comes up often during elections. How many women are running? What do they do? Do they approach politics differently than men? Do they truly represent women's interests? There are so many good questions being asked that we often forget that the fight for equality in politics is

not yet won. There is still room for many more women in the political world, which has favoured men for far too long. As of October 31, 2011, only 19.5% of people elected to parliaments around the world were women.

The movement to give women the right to vote and the right to run for office in Québec is an epic story that deserves to be told, especially to young people, who may find it inspiring.

For almost 25 years, a group of women fought for their right to vote, calling on MNAs to pass legislation to that effect. They were led by three suffragettes, Thérèse Forget-Casgrain, Marie Lacoste Gérin-Lajoie and Idola Saint-Jean. Between 1922 and 1939, thirteen bills were introduced in the National Assembly of Québec and were rejected by the MNAs for all sorts of reasons.

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Here are some examples from debates in the legislature during that era:

- Experience has taught us that a man's place is in politics and a woman's place is in the home. For each to maintain their place, neither can overstep their role.

J.-C.-E. Ouellet, Dorchester
March 10, 1927

- This request to give women the right to vote goes against domestic happiness, social order and religion itself [...]. The Québec Council of 1909 disapproved of giving women the vote because it goes against Christian ideals.

Ernest Poulin, Montréal-Laurier,
February 22, 1933

- Women don't need the right to vote. When Canada was discovered, women didn't have this right, and no one complained then.

Pierre Gauthier, Portneuf,
March 20, 1935

- There are too many foxes in politics to let hens in. Robert-Raoul Bachand, Shefford,

March 20, 1935

- If women are granted the right to vote, it means they'll be able to become MNAs, ministers, involved in politics. And that is why I refuse to be involved in this: there are such far-reaching consequences.

Albiny Paquette, Labelle,
May 27, 1936

The misogynistic rhetoric finally came to an end when Adélard Godbout returned to power as Liberal Premier from 1939 to 1944. On April 9, 1940, he sponsored Bill 18, which granted women the right to



Sculptor Jules Lasalle was awarded the contract for the monument after a call for tenders. His maquette for the monument is on display in the National Assembly in Québec City. The project is scheduled to be unveiled in the Fall of 2012. (Credit: National Assembly of Québec)

vote and run for office. Maurice Duplessis, who always opposed women's suffrage, affirmed at that time that, "in the province of Québec, we have won nothing by granting women the right to vote.... We should not be taking women out of the home."

Godbout stood up against Duplessis, the staunch opposition of the Catholic Church and the unending petitions of anti-suffragettes, and even threatened to resign.

He did not have to wait long for his answer. In a last speech, which he gave on April 25, 1940, the same day that the bill was voted on, he said:

The conditions in which we are living make women equal to men. Women have the same duties and obligations.... Why should we refuse to grant them the same rights, especially when the issues we are called upon to examine have more to do with their realm of knowledge than ours?.... "Our society needs women.... I am promoting women's right to vote in order to elevate the level of our political discussions.

Despite this major step forward, it took more than 20 years from that moment before the first woman

became a Member of the National Assembly. When Marie-Claire Kirkland arrived in Québec City to take up her position as an MNA, she could not sign her own lease for an apartment. Her husband had to sign. Married women were legally incapable. Appointed a minister in Jean Lesage's government, Mme Kirkland used her legislative power to give women more independence.

In 1964, she tabled a bill that gave married women legal rights of their own. Since then, Québec women have been able to sign their own legal documents and make commercial and banking transactions on their own.

This is the story to be told by the monument. It will pay tribute to women in politics. It is an initiative of the National Assembly and a project committee, which has representatives from the City of Québec, the Québec National Capital Commission and the Council on the Status of Women. The statue will be situated right beside the imposing statue of Maurice Duplessis, the very man who opposed women's right to vote and run for office until the bitter end.