

Miss, Mrs., Ms., or None of the Above: Gendered Address for Women in the Legislature

When it comes to titles used in the official setting of the legislative Chamber or the slightly less formal committee room, women are in the unique position of having several conventional options for identification purposes: Miss, Mrs., or Ms.¹ Each term specifies a different though similarly gendered status, whether one is single, married, or, for lack of a better term, indeterminate and thus independent of the matrimonial framework. The following article explores ways of naming women in the Legislature and is underscored by the history of general usage for women's titles since the turn of the 20th century. Furthermore, this discussion looks toward re-evaluating aspects of current parliamentary language, with the topic of gender-neutral address.

Amanda LeBlanc

A Short History of Ms.

At the 2016 Hansard Association of Canada² conference in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, a panel dialogue suggested that Ms. was the most popular title for women parliamentarians in Canada. It seems logical, then, to begin here, with Ms., which represents a relatively recent change in how the English language classifies women. While the examples noted below are exclusively American (as are the origins of the term) using Ms. is a widespread, accepted way of acknowledging women in Anglophone cultures. In 2009 American linguist Ben Zimmer traced Ms. back to a 1901 edition of the *Sunday Republican*, a newspaper in Springfield, Massachusetts. A brief, anonymous entry proposed the title as an elegant solution to not knowing a woman's marital status, for "to call a maiden Mrs. is only a shade worse than to insult a matron with the inferior title Miss." The writer deemed the title respectful, "easy to write" and pronounce as well as a merging of Miss and Mrs. (which both evolved from older terms for female master, the Middle English "Mistress" and the Middle French "maistresse").³

There are prior historical examples of Ms. being used, but none argue its merits in the same way as the *Republican* excerpt. The first documented case is

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A Message To My Younger Self

Karen Vecchio
Member of Parliament Elgin-Middlesex-London (Ontario)

First of all, you are going to marry your friend and Grade 13 Biology Partner, Mike Vecchio and have five children together. (I am sure you are already shaking your head...you

were thinking two, maybe three). Although you are the baby of the family and you feel like no one takes you seriously, your family will rally behind you and you will become the first female Member of Parliament for Elgin-Middlesex-London and your mom and dad will be "so proud" of you.

All of the little bumps in the road are going to make you what you are today so don't feel discouraged. Take each obstacle and learn something important from it.



the 250-year-old gravestone of Sarah Spooner from Massachusetts, and it may more so highlight the term's brevity for "a stonemason trying to save space on an already crowded slab" by simply abbreviating Mistress or Miss rather than inventing a new form of address.⁴ Another instance occurred in 1898, when the *Milwaukee Sentinel* used Ms., in this case presumably as a shortened form of Mrs.,⁵ for a headline regarding silent film star Caroline Dudley Carter, known professionally as Mrs. Leslie Carter. It would not be a stretch to spot inadvertent commentary in the editor's choice to alter Mrs. here, bearing in mind Carter's very public divorce from a wealthy Chicago businessman nine years earlier and her well-known persistence in keeping her married name throughout her career.⁶

The popularity of Ms. picked up steam in the 1950s, and it eventually became emblematic of the 1970s feminist movement, with the founding of *Ms. Magazine* in 1971. Today Ms. denotes respect through ambiguity, bypassing the issue of marital status. But instead of avoiding the "embarrassing position" of having incorrectly addressed a woman, which would signify a loss of stature according to the *Republican's* early twentieth-century contributor, the impetus now is more about questioning the relevance of domestic and gender norms in how people are identified along

with the values often assigned to those identifications. To go a step further, assuming that any gendered title must be used becomes problematic if the options given do not satisfy a person's needs. I will expand on this later, when discussing gender-neutral language in the Legislature.

Ms. and Mrs. in the Legislature

In February 2010 Glen McGregor of the *Ottawa Citizen* drew attention to the fact that out of the 69 women then in the House of Commons, more Conservative government MPs preferred the "traditional honorific" of Mrs. (comparing two-thirds of Conservatives to one quarter of Liberals, for example).⁸ Female representation in the House of Commons reached a record high following the 2015 election, and out of the 92 women currently serving, 24 go by Mrs. But the title is statistically waning; in 2010 it had a usage rate of 39 per cent overall,⁹ and that rate has dropped 13 per cent. Liberals, not surprisingly, with a majority of the House, have taken the lead with 13 women using the title compared to 9 Conservatives, 1 New Democrat, and 1 Bloc Québécois. Interestingly, Conservative usage has decreased from two-thirds in 2010 to one-half in 2017 (9 out of 18), and Liberal usage has held at 25 per cent. The fact that the demographics of Mrs. continue to show a multipartisan mix suggests that linking particular titles with particular parties, relying on stereotypes of what is conservative or progressive,¹⁰ fails to accurately describe or foretell who will be called what in the Legislature. As McGregor conceded, "there's no predicting who will take which title in any party."¹¹

Reasons for using either term vary. That being said, Ms. is bolstered by feminist arguments against defining a woman's name through the institution of marriage, which is historically rooted in patriarchy. (There is no male equivalent for Mrs.; men are named Mr. by default, with no thought of matrimonial circumstance.) In 2009 the European Parliament went so far as to ban the titles of Miss, Mrs., Madame, Mademoiselle, Frau, Fraulein, Senora, and Senorita, and their High-level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity "adopted guidelines on the use of gender-neutral language in parliamentary documents and for the purposes of communication and information."¹² In Canadian Legislatures Miss has basically fallen out of use,¹³ which is to be expected. As recent as 2004 it was defined by the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* firstly as "the title of an unmarried woman or girl without a higher, honorific, or professional title" and secondly as "the title of a married woman retaining her maiden name for professional purposes."¹⁴ Though



A Message To My Younger Self

Julie Green
MLA for Yellowknife
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You are on your own journey – and it's okay if you don't know to where. The place you want to be at 20 isn't where you want to be at 30 or 50 or 70. Be confident in

what you believe and humble about what you don't know. Live a life that is meaningful by contributing to a better world. Work hard and don't take no for an answer. Take risks by challenging yourself to do things differently and better. Don't be afraid to ask for help or to show your humanity. Be true to yourself and loyal to your family and friends. Always be proud of who you are.

no official stance is taken on Ms. versus Mrs., the former is more common.¹⁵ The government of Canada style guide recommends how to use each term in official documents but cites Ms. as the default: “Use Ms. when referring to a woman unless a preference for Mrs. has been indicated . . . Do not use Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr. or Esq. with any other abbreviated title or with an abbreviation denoting an academic degree or honour.”¹⁶ It is intriguing that this style guide precludes Miss from the list of titles to avoid pairing with an academic degree or honour, thus alluding to its character as a less professional or more “junior” title.¹⁷

On the other side of the debate, reasons for choosing Mrs. include wanting to affirm one’s relationship choices and providing an opportunity for female politicians to self-define vis-à-vis the different worlds and roles they occupy. In 2010 Canadian MP Kelly Block, who continues to choose Mrs. today, stated that using that form of address “provides people with a really good understanding of the fact that I am married, without having to explain it . . . I think of myself as a wife and a mother, and then a member of parliament.”¹⁸

Since marriage equality was won Canada-wide in 2005 and the legal union no longer solely exists between men and women, we’d be remiss to cast the choice of Mrs. as necessarily conservative, patriarchal, and sexist because it exists within a matrimonial framework. Conversely, as Ms. becomes the cultural norm for younger and older women alike, its use may not always represent a statement of liberation.

Second-wave feminism taught us that “the personal is the political,”¹⁹ and the act of naming women indeed resonates at both the societal and individual level, as does how a woman communicates information about herself to the world or chooses to explain nothing at all. But we cannot stop there; the discussion of how women are gendered by language opens up to how we are all gendered by language. For example, Mr. has a proverbially neutral privilege when it comes to marital status, yet it is still a socially constructed neutrality that treats men differently, that makes it impossible for a man to indicate to others definitively that he is married. It’s a minor point but one worth noting if we are to examine the naturalness of the language we use to identify and relate with others.

This analysis also extends beyond choosing Ms. or Mrs. to exploring gender-neutral titles as a way of meeting the needs of those who do not identify within a normative gender framework.

Gender-neutral Address in the Legislature: Alberta as an Example

The Alberta Legislature can be seen as a case study for the use of gender-neutral language. In Alberta’s *Hansard* members are identified by titles, followed by their last names, for example, Ms. Brown. In 2015 the *Alberta Hansard* team received a member request for a nonidentifying honorific. We carefully weighed our options and shortly thereafter adopted the by-request policy of not using titles to identify members when they

A Message To My Younger Self



Annie McKittrick
MLA for Sherwood Park (Alberta)

When I reflect on my life’s experiences, I realize that everything I have done – every volunteer role, position of employment, travel and educational opportunity – has guided and informed me in my current role as an MLA. I was fortunate to have exposure to public service early in my life; I had the privilege to attend a United Nations affiliated high school. I met and befriended people from all over the world with diverse worldviews. I grew up discussing such subjects as democracy, human rights, and the role of government. As an adult, I continued to travel, to study and to develop a deep commitment to social justice. All of these elements led me to seek elected office.

My advice to my younger self is this: grab onto all the experiences you can. Be mindful of how these experiences influence your views of community, government, and public service. Your right to vote is an honour – treasure it always. Foster a culture of learning about your candidates and your elected officials. See yourself reflected in them, and believe you too can seek elected office.

speak. Five members are now identified in transcripts solely by their last names and are not assigned the titles of Ms., Mrs., Miss, or Mr. when they go on record. Also, when referred to by table officers reading division vote tallies, these and six additional MLAs are called “Member” or “Minister,” followed by their surnames.

Strathcona-Sherwood Park MLA Estefania Cortes-Vargas was Alberta’s first member to request a move toward more nongendered language. On the morning of December 1, 2015, Cortes-Vargas addressed the Assembly, sharing perspectives from the trans and gender-variant communities on naming and questioning the relevance of gender-specific titles to the debate transcript: “You know, I’m being called Member Cortes-Vargas because I don’t think it is relevant to know in the transcripts whether I’m a woman or a man . . . What if I don’t know whether I’m a woman or a man? It doesn’t matter. I’m a person, and Cortes-Vargas is my name, and that’s all you really need to know.”²⁰ Editors at *Alberta Hansard* were given the new challenge and opportunity to review practices concerning gendered language, and with the accommodation afforded members, we are able to support greater inclusivity in the way that legislative information is presented.

Accommodating someone’s preferred form of address could be seen as the baseline of good behaviour, elementary to the rules of Legislature decorum so that proceedings may occur in a respectful, orderly fashion. This standard could also be equated with existing protocol outlining how members are to be identified

in the Assembly, for example, by their constituencies or, in the case of ministers, by their portfolios, not their actual names. If an error in address is made (if a gender-assigning title is used but not desired), the *Hansard* editor would weigh the extent of that error and the possibility that if not corrected, it may indicate a lapse in parliamentary civility, a gaffe.

Conclusion

Whether one assumes Ms. over Mrs. to denounce perceptions of sexism or Mrs. over Ms. to declare marital status, discounts Miss in pursuit of what is considered a more professional title, or refuses gendered address to promote neutrality, at the core of these decisions is a growing societal understanding of language and its everyday implications for citizens. With each title comes the potential loss of power felt by being labelled inappropriately by others or being pressured by convention instead of finding a suitable way of self-identifying in the world. What is paramount is that one’s choice is respected. There is no place where this is truer than in the Legislature, where we uphold democratic ideals of dignity, decorum, and equality. To cite Alberta MLA Cortes-Vargas: “It’s how we show that we are willing to educate ourselves and we are willing to accept differences amongst everyone.”²¹

Notes

- 1 In Canada though female Premiers, ministers, Leaders of the Official Opposition, leaders of other opposition parties, House leaders and whips are called by their portfolio titles or House roles, it is not uncommon for

A Message To My Younger Self

Nadine Wilson
MLA for Saskatchewan Rivers (Saskatchewan)

In my parliamentary lifetime, I have strived for 10 years to be an invigorating and optimistic legislator with a purpose in life and someone who is choosing to leave a positive footprint in my community and province.

I have been fortunate to have achieved a balance of work and family. My life is not only fulfilled by helping others through politics, but also rich in private happiness and support. I have been married to the same man for close to 40 years and we share parental pride in our four children and their families.

The skill I developed that has gotten me this far is listening – both active and passive. My younger self had to learn this over time, but it has brought me much success in life. My advice is to listen to your inner self as well as others – doing so will guide you well.



- them also to be identified in the transcript by one of these honorifics, typically Ms. or Mrs.
- 2 *Hansard* is the official record of parliamentary debate in Canada and other Commonwealth countries.
 - 3 The *Republican* entry is reproduced and commented on in Ben Zimmer's "Hunting the Elusive First 'Ms.'," *Visual Thesaurus.com*, June 23, 2009. <https://www.visualthesaurus.com/cm/wordroutes/hunting-the-elusive-first-ms/>
 - 4 Dennis Baron, "Is it 'Miss' or 'Ms'? A newly-discovered 1885 cite suggests it's Miss," *The Web of Language*, July 27, 2010. <https://illinois.edu/blog/view/25/30864>. See also Baron's *Grammar and Gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.
 - 5 *Ibid.*
 - 6 See Edward T. James et al., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary, Volume III: 1607-1950, A-F*. s.v. Caroline Louise Dudley Carter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) page 294.
 - 7 Ben Zimmer, "Hunting the Elusive First 'Ms.'," *Visual Thesaurus.com*, June 23, 2009. <https://www.visualthesaurus.com/cm/wordroutes/hunting-the-elusive-first-ms/>
 - 8 Glen McGregor, "Is That Ms. or Mrs. MP?," *Ottawa Citizen*, February 8, 2010. Accessed online via Pressreader, <http://www.pressreader.com/canada/ottawa-citizen/20100208/282415575430288>
 - 9 This percentage includes six women from the Bloc Québécois who, at the time, preferred Mrs. However, McGregor noted that "this is a technicality and never used in the House. In French, all women are called Madame." *Ibid.*
 - 10 I mean these terms in the adjectival, general sense, not in the partisan sense.
 - 11 McGregor.
 - 12 European Parliament – Equality and Diversity Unit Directorate – General for Personnel, *Women in the European Parliament*, page 8. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/publications/2016/0001/P8_PUB\(2016\)0001_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/publications/2016/0001/P8_PUB(2016)0001_EN.pdf)
 - 13 After searching debate records of the current Legislatures for all Canadian provinces and territories, I found only one instance of Miss being used to identify a speaker, Miss Monique Taylor from Ontario.
 - 14 *Canadian Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Miss."
 - 15 The style guide for the *Globe and Mail*, a major national newspaper, echoes the primacy of Ms. for women: "The standard honorific is Ms., unless we know that a particular woman prefers and uses Mrs. or Miss. The honorific Miss is used occasionally if a long-established stage name appears in the news pages, such as Miss Hepburn, Miss Taylor. This is a judgment call." http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/STYLEBOOK.20041110.style_1615/Stylebook/National
 - 16 Public Works and Government Services Canada, *Termium Plus – The Canadian Style*, accessed online at <http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tcdnstyl-chap?lang=eng&lettr=chapsect1&info0=1>
 - 17 *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 12th Edition (2011), similarly defines Miss in terms of youth and inexperience: "1. A title prefixed to the name of an unmarried woman or girl. 2. A girl or young woman, especially one regarded as silly." When it comes to professional associations, they offer the rare job of "beauty queen: Miss World," along the same lines as the famous actress, and the more common "female shop assistant [and] teacher."
 - 18 Cited in McGregor.
 - 19 See Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is the Political: The Women's Liberation Movement Classic with a New Explanatory Introduction." <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>
 - 20 *Alberta Hansard*, December 1, 2015, morning, pp. 701-702. http://www.assembly.ab.ca/ISYS/LADDAR_files/docs/hansards/han/legislature_29/session_1/20151201_0900_01_han.pdf
 - 21 *Ibid.*, p. 701.

A Message To My Younger Self

Colleen Mayer
MLA for St. Vital
(Manitoba)



Although your journey started in the small town of Fisher Branch, it is your strong work ethic, the relationships you build, and your drive that will take you places even you couldn't predict.

One of your greatest assets is your voice and after being elected as a School Trustee and Member of the Legislative Assembly to represent St. Vital, you will use that voice to advocate on behalf of residents in a community close to your heart.

Remember that life isn't always about the destination, it's about the journey. There will be days when the path isn't clear, but if you continue to write your own story, you will create a life of purpose, connection and success.

See, you can do it.