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Quebec, 1944: Finally, women are allowed to vote

Thérèse Casgrain led suffragists' decades-long fight

By John Kalbfleisch, Special to The Gazette September 7, 2012

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Women vote in Outremont in August 1944, probably the first they were allowed to cast a ballot. Some left their kids with friends to vote, then returned the favour.

MONTREAL – Just over 68 years ago, on Aug. 8, 1944, Quebec women voted in a provincial general election for the first time. They could do so thanks to a resolute, decades-long campaign by suffragists, not just female but also male, and none among them more resolute than Thérèse Casgrain.

Women had been able to vote in federal elections since 1919, and that same year New Brunswick ceased being the last provincial holdout — the last, that is, except for Quebec.

Here, curiously, it was a kind of lost right. The Constitutional Act of 1791 had given the vote to certain “persons” in Lower Canada who were property owners, and a few women who so qualified took advantage of this loophole to start voting. They were probably the first in the British Empire to do so.

(In one election a Trois-Rivières man who had put his property into his wife’s name was turned away from the poll as being no longer eligible. He suffered the double humiliation of being denied the vote and of seeing his wife vote in his stead.)

In any event, the breakthrough for women was temporary, and what was called the Constitutional Act’s “historical irregularity” was removed in 1849.

The case against Canadian women voting, which was felt most strongly in Quebec, sounds absurd today. Votes for women would undermine men’s rightful place as the head of a household. A woman’s proper place was in the home, tending to her husband and children, and not near a polling booth where she could be exposed to strong emotions, even violence. Nor did women have the needed mental equipment to understand politics.

Such attitudes, persisting into the 20th century, were galling to Thérèse Casgrain and feminist allies like Idola Saint-Jean and Marie Gérin-Lajoie. Between 1922 and 1939, they saw 13 suffrage bills introduced in the Quebec legislature, all rejected.

Casgrain, born into a prominent and wealthy Montreal family, set up the Ligue des Droits de la Femme in 1928. Along with Saint-Jean and Gérin-Lajoie, she ceaselessly trumpeted the injustice of the male-only franchise. Her arguments, as the Great Depression took hold, were often grounded more on practicalities than on abstract principle. For example, if women — who, after all, were closer to such problems as Quebec’s high infant mortality rate — could vote, then perhaps such problems could be more effectively addressed.

Casgrain organized delegations of activist women that met from time to time with provincial legislators, including Premier Louis Alexandre Taschereau, a Liberal, and his Union Nationale successor, Maurice Duplessis. They got publicity, but no results.

Opponents of women’s suffrage ranged from the hidebound through the fatuous to the downright rude. “It goes against Christian ideals,” fumed Ernest Poulin, Montréal-Laurier MLA, in 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, MLA for Portneuf, offered in 1935. “There are too many foxes in politics to let hens in,” said Robert-Raoul Bachand, Shefford’s MLA, that same day.

Yet attitudes were changing. In 1938 the opposition Liberals under Adélar Godbout endorsed extending the franchise. When they defeated Duplessis’s Union Nationale the following year, Casgrain and her fellow campaigners began working hard to remind Godbout of his promise. They were gratified in February 1940 when a women’s suffrage bill was included in the Throne Speech.

But the battle wasn’t over. Thousands of Quebecers, probably a majority and including many women themselves, especially in rural areas, still opposed the vote for women.

So did the Catholic church. Several weeks after the Throne Speech, Cardinal Rodrigue Villeneuve, Quebec’s senior prelate, leapt to the attack. He advanced the objections about “the authority structure of the family” and the exposure of women “to all the passions and intrigues of electoralism.” He added that women’s votes were not needed because the reforms that such votes might help achieve “could be just as well achieved through the influence of female organizations outside politics.”

In her memoir *A Woman in a Man’s World*, Casgrain writes that Godbout was stunned by Villeneuve’s intervention. As a practising Catholic, he even considered resigning.

Finally, he spoke with Villeneuve by phone. He duly threatened to resign, but warned the cardinal that he would recommend that his colleague Téléphore-Damien Bouchard be invited to succeed as premier.

Bouchard’s anti-clerical views were well known — several years later, he would be fired as Hydro-Québec’s first president for expressing them too stridently — and Villeneuve took the hint. “The next day,” Casgrain records, “as if by magic, the violent objections to the bill disappeared from the pages of our newspapers.” On April 25, the women’s suffrage bill became law.

In the 1944 general election, the first after the bill’s passage, women did indeed turn out to vote. A photo in *The Gazette*, though it looks suspiciously posed, shows 10 women patiently lining up to vote in Outremont, with no sign whatever of “passions and intrigues” abounding.

Alas, it would be many years before women actually began to enter Quebec’s legislature. (Casgrain, who died in 1981, became a legislator only after being appointed to the federal Senate in 1970.) Beginning with Mae O’Connor in Huntingdon in 1947, a handful tried, but none succeeded until Claire Kirkland-Casgrain in 1961.

Since then, the number of female legislators in Quebec City has grown steadily, if slowly. When the current election was called Aug. 1, they held about 30 per cent of the National Assembly’s seats, and on Wednesday Quebec might have its first female premier in Pauline Marois of the Parti Québécois. Thérèse Casgrain, though an unequivocal federalist, would surely have been proud.

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NOTE: An earlier version of this article stated that New Brunswick women gained the right to vote provincially in 1934. In fact, they had been able to do so since 1919, winning the right to run for the provincial legislature in 1934. *The Gazette* regrets the error.

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