

## *Mary Ellen Smith: The Right Woman in the Right Place at the Right Time*

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ELIZABETH NORCROSS

A year or two ago, while researching the life of Mary Ellen Smith, I had the good fortune to interview a centenarian who had been active in the female franchise campaign prior to the First World War. This lady said, understating her own work, "It was something whose time had come." And then she followed that with a little laugh at herself and the other eager, earnest young women who had been campaigning--"But we had a lot of fun!" That story illustrates the political climate in which Mary Ellen Smith first went on the hustings. There were in British Columbia none of the ugly incidents that marked the campaign for women's political equality in many other parts of the western world. Smith rode into political office on a wave of goodwill towards women. Far from wishing to minimize her personal contribution to her own success, the point should be made that she was fortunate to have been born at the right time and to have lived in the right place. As an ambitious woman with a social conscience and leadership abilities, she was ready to use the advantages inherent in the social climate of the day. Furthermore, she served a long apprenticeship.

Mary Ellen Smith's political education began almost in her cradle. She grew up in a satellite village of Newcastle-on-Tyne, a place named Framlington, the daughter of a coalminer. The family home was a meeting place for other colliers and their wives who were keenly and intelligently interested in public affairs. The children, Mary Ellen and a younger brother, were encouraged to listen and participate in these discussions. There would have been plenty of talk since her father who had been a copper miner in Cornwall, moved in 1865 to Framlington where, during a strike of colliers, the owners imported hundreds of men from the south of England, among them Mary Ellen's father, Richard Spear. These men apparently did not know until they arrived that they were strikebreakers. Some turned around and went back home; some, I suppose, did not care; and some, like Spear, had sold

everything and could not afford to go home.

Mary Ellen became, at an early age, an elementary school teacher, and then, without much delay, the wife of a coalminer, a young widower named Ralph Smith, who had a baby daughter. In the next few years, the couple had three sons. Ralph had come from a similar background to Mary Ellen's, from a family very much aware of public affairs. He was one of four brothers, the sons of a coalminer, all of them miners. A great-niece of Ralph's wrote that they were all able men who had little schooling but were self-taught.

Little is known about Mary Ellen's life in Framlington. She probably had little time, even with *her* great energy, for community activities. However, she made her mark in spite of domestic responsibilities. The Framlington Local History Society has identified a semi-biographical novel, entitled *Dusty Diamonds*, published in 1910, which dealt with the lives of the colliers, from the strike of 1865 into the hero's middle age. In answer to a public appeal, the Society received several copies of the novel, one of which, to their great delight, had been annotated by the author. The book had only a thin disguise of fiction. In this special copy the author had identified, in his own hand, the real people and places: Smith was the romantic heroine of the piece.

The Smiths moved to Vancouver Island in 1891 when Ralph's health began to deteriorate. She had always been interested, so she told interviewers later, in the west coast of Canada and Nanaimo was a natural location for a coalminer. Ralph served as a provincial MLA and later as a Liberal MP, almost continuously from 1900 to the defeat of the Laurier government. After a few years in private life, he was back in provincial politics and elected in 1916. His political career had a direct bearing on Mary Ellen's insofar as Mary Ellen travelled everywhere with her husband and there is ample evidence that she was more than just a travelling companion. A columnist reviewing her first session in the Legislature, said she had served nearly twenty years of apprenticeship in the political arena.

In Nanaimo, Smith was active in the life of her community. She sang in the church choir, and organized its entertainments. A charter member of the Hospital Auxiliary, she probably initiated its formation at the end of the 1890s. At any rate, she served as an elected officer for a number of years. She founded the Laurier Liberal Ladies League. She joined and worked for the Women's Christian Temperance Union, a very strong advocate of the female franchise. Nanaimo, however, was a small pond for Smith. A major milestone was reached when she and Ralph moved to Vancouver at the end of 1911. The Laurier Liberal Ladies' League sponsored a farewell party in her honour. A day or two later, Ralph was honoured at a civic dinner, which was attended by all the community leaders and included men of every political stripe. Both these events received front page treatment in the local paper.

Shortly before this, Mary Ellen had spoken to the Young People's Society of her church in a full-length address, reported verbatim in the *Nanaimo Free Press*. In her speech to these young adults she explained with philosophical arguments, current at the time, why women should be considered and treated as the equals of men and why, as part of the package, they should have the vote. She identified the benefits that would accrue to the family and to society when there was full equality. Because this is the earliest

dated newspaper clipping among Mary Ellen Smith's papers, it must have had a special value for her: regardless of how strong-minded a woman might be and of how firmly dedicated to women's rights she was, speaking in public was just not ladylike. My aunt said that when she had something to say at the annual meetings of her country church, she whispered her views to her father so that he became her spokesman. A few years after her address to the young people, Mary Ellen Smith, MLA, was invited to address a meeting held under the auspices of the Victoria Liberal Association, with Premier Oliver and the member for Victoria sharing the platform. "Ten years ago," she said, "would you have come to this hall to hear a woman speak? No. In all probability you would have said, 'We get enough of that at home.'"

However, this woman made very good sense, at the same time projecting a kindness that won all hearts. Well, almost all. There were those who never quite forgave her for deserting the ranks of Labour and aligning herself with the Liberals. Smith, who was primarily interested in achieving justice for the disadvantaged of society, worked through the Party that had not only the inclination, but also the power to effect the reforms she wanted.

When she and Ralph moved to Vancouver, that city was just coming to the end of a heady boom period. Vancouver women--that is, the educated and the affluent, were in the grip of a fervour to improve the lot of their less fortunate sisters, as well as to raise the cultural standards of their raw young city. There, Mary Ellen Smith joined and held executive office in many women's organizations: she served a term as president of the Vancouver Branch of the Women's Canadian Club; was president of the Women Ratepayers' Association; and was regent of a primary chapter of the IODE and of the provincial chapter. Furthermore, she was first vice-president of the very active Political Equality League. Inevitably, her activities included membership in the Women's Suffrage League of Canada. However, in the University Women's Club, which had made the female franchise campaign their chief concern, Mary Ellen did not hold an executive position. She also supported with her membership a society which had founded a free nursery for the children of working mothers. She campaigned for a new institution for women prisoners. Although she was laying the groundwork for a political career, Smith probably had little thought of running for public office, even though the franchise was imminent.

Smith had the good fortune to be in the right place at the right time, and British Columbia had the good fortune that the times brought forth the right woman to fight for social justice. The community at large was beginning to develop a social conscience: the idea of "people first, property second," had taken root. If anyone foresaw a reversal of that philosophy after half a century, s/he was not very vocal.

At the turn of the century the subject of votes for women could raise a laugh in the Legislature. Ralph Smith, while he was not the first, was one of those MLAs who proposed to grant women the franchise, but the general mood was to regard it as a laughing matter. Always, legislators have had an occupational disease which is to be a little behind the times. As early as 1895, the editor of the *Victoria Daily Colonist*, male we can be sure, wrote the following: "The world has no more brain than it needs for the proper direction

of its affairs. Why then should any part of it be condemned as inferior, and its aid rejected without fair trial? Would it not be wise to let the new woman have a chance to use all her intellectual endowment, and will not the world be better for the work she does?" The times were changing.

Smith's fame spread. In 1916, she was filling speaking engagements in Toronto where the idea of votes for women did not have the general acceptance that it did in the West. A centenarian's explanation for that difference in attitude was that the pioneering days were not so far in the past for the West where it was recognized that women had played an equally valuable role with men in opening up the country. "They were ashamed," she said, "to withhold the vote." In 1916, in British Columbia, there was an election and referendum on the issue of the female franchise. The Liberals won the election and the women won the franchise. Ralph Smith was named to the post of Finance Minister, but within a few months of assuming that office, he was dead. Later in 1917, Mary Ellen went to Toronto on another speaking engagement, this time devoting herself mainly to the campaign of the Dominion Liberals since an election had been called for December. A Toronto newspaper described one of her speeches as "belligerent", and another suggested that many British Columbians had expressed shock that she should so disgrace her province. British Columbia was not so easily shocked. When the Premier called a by-election in January, 1918, to fill the vacancy caused by Ralph's death, Mary Ellen, who was a candidate, won by a very wide margin. She could honestly say in the Legislature in her first speech: "Not only did the women of my fair city stand behind me ...but the men were there, too." Her campaign slogan had been: "Women and children first." Clear-sighted and practical, for her suffrage was a means to an end, the end being improvement in conditions for women and children, and social justice for all through the women's vote.

She took her first step in that regard in March of 1918 by introducing a Female Minimum Wage Act. While she promoted and supported a great deal of social legislation in the next ten years, she is given sole credit for this law. When moving second reading, she reminded the House that men enjoyed the protection of their labour unions while women, having nothing of that sort, must be protected in other ways. The Bill was very moderate in its terms. No actual minimum was set for any occupation, but provision was made for an inquiry in each case, and no compulsion would be exerted except as a last resort. The Female Minimum Wage Bill passed the committee stage with only one major amendment, that the administrative board of two women and one man be increased to a total of five. The male legislators, however great their respect for the lone female MLA, were not yet ready to put women in a dominant position on a board set up to administer a law passed for the protection of women.

In the next session, the Legislature made one of its first items of business the passing into law of the Female Minimum Wage Bill. Two years later, the Minimum Wage Board reported that ever since the law came into operation, there had been a constant movement towards higher wages and shorter hours for women and girls. At the same time that this report was presented, regulations were brought in to require employers to give pregnancy leave.

When the 1920 session of the Legislature opened, Smith again spoke in the Throne Speech debate. The *Daily Colonist* reported her comments at some length: "The people of this province are not worrying very much these days over the fortunes of political parties; they are not concerned to any degree in the Farmers' Party, or even a Women's Party, but they are very deeply interested in the matters of human needs... We are sadly in need of more humane legislation."

There is no reason to suppose that Smith had a career in politics in mind when she chose British Columbia as a place to live. However, she had chosen wisely. Her experience as our first woman MLA is in sharp contrast to the experience of Agnes Macphail, Canada's first woman MP. Smith received an ovation from all sides of the House when she made her first appearance: the Premier himself was one of the two members to present her to the Speaker. A basket of flowers arrived for her in the Legislature and masses more were sent with congratulatory messages to her suite in the Empress Hotel. Among them was one from the Local Council of Women with a letter "to tell you how delighted we are that you have been elected as a representative of Vancouver City--truly a wonderful realization of our hopes, our dreams, and our labours of the past thirty-two years." It was roses, roses all the way for Smith. For Agnes Macphail, it was very different. She did receive the loyal support of her rural Ontario riding for many years, but in the House of Commons, her fellow members regarded her as an interloper in an exclusive men's club. Macphail complained, too, of the lack of support she received from other women, except for farm women, and the mean criticism she received from women journalists.

Smith never forgot that her purpose in the Legislature was to promote more humane legislation. The Twenties were a great decade for social legislation. After the Female Minimum Wage Act, Mothers' Pensions were introduced. Poor widows, deserted wives, and unmarried mothers scrambled for a bare existence for themselves and their children. Society recognized its obligation not to let them starve, at least neither outrightly, nor obviously. Apart from the social stigma of accepting charity, most mothers found themselves only slightly better off if they went to work.

The Premier had named a commission in the fall of 1919 to investigate mothers' pensions, public nursing and maternity benefits. The report of the commission in respect to mothers' pensions was presented to the Legislature in April. It recommended an allowance of \$42.50 per month to a widow with one child under sixteen and \$7.50 per month for each additional child. If these allowances appear inadequate--and indeed they were, even in terms of their day--they were higher than those already in effect in the Prairie provinces.

When the Bill came up for second reading in the Legislature, Smith supported it. The needs of industrial widows and fatherless children were, she pointed out, precisely the same for the women with children whose husbands were confined in an asylum. She noticed that there was no specific provision for the unmarried mother, and she made a special plea for that group. And it was here she enunciated her famous and oft-quoted philosophy: "Mr. Speaker, there are no illegitimate children. It may be there are...people who will contend there are illegitimate parents but in God's name, do not let us

brand the child." This statement has since become so much a part of society's thinking that no one remembers what a startlingly fresh view of the problem it had been at the time.

Among other social legislation passed during the amazing decade in which Smith served as an MLA were the Juvenile Courts Act, which provided for the appointment of women judges in Juvenile Court; the Maintenance of Deserted Wives Act; the Testator's Family Maintenance Act; the Act for Registration of Nurses; and the Maternity Protection Act. Most of this was legislation in which British Columbia, prodded forward by Smith, pioneered and served as a model for the rest of Canada.

The Female Minimum Wage Act eventually lost its separate identity, but that was not until 1972. Mothers' pensions, which became known as allowances, also lost their identity in the general welfare system in 1958. One other piece of social legislation passed in Smith's time is still with us, recognizably the same, and that is Old Age Pensions. In the 1920s, British Columbia boasted that it led Canada in social legislation. Much of the credit must go to the politically conscious women of the province, with Mary Ellen Smith in the forefront.

Smith was not only our province's first woman MLA, but also she had the honour of being the first woman Cabinet Minister in the British Empire. Had it been otherwise, she would have been the first woman Speaker. What happened was this: Premier Brewster, who had so gallantly introduced her to the Legislature, died a few weeks later and was succeeded by John Oliver. Oliver had no use for women in public life. After the general election of 1920, in which Smith was elected by another tremendous majority, he sought to silence her by appointing her Speaker. She declined. "I did not wish to be so prettily muzzled," she told inquiring reporters. Her constituents urged the Premier to appoint her to a Cabinet post. Oliver had to give in. He made her Minister without Portfolio. Before a year was out, Smith resigned the empty honour. While her letter to the Premier was diplomatic, her statement to the press was frank: "I felt I was a fifth wheel in the political coach, having no department to administer and with no responsibility, yet having to assume praise or blame for the activities of the government."

So back she went to the floor of the Legislature, "enjoying" as she said, "many a good tilt." In one speech, she declared "that she could fight just as hard as any other Honourable Member when necessary. If anyone tried to intimidate her, she was prepared to go to the mat with him." On one occasion, the schoolboy humour of the legislators upset her. A measure about which she felt very strongly was an amendment which made the father of an illegitimate child responsible for that child's support to the age of sixteen. Because she wished to have the age raised to eighteen, she lobbied all members of the Legislature until she thought she had secured unanimous support. So she was deeply shocked when a young war veteran, Captain Ian Mackenzie, Conservative, asked that the vote be delayed. Mackenzie argued that because this was a very serious matter he would like time to give it more thought. Accordingly, the vote was held over. When the proposed amendment came up again, Mackenzie announced solemnly that he and his fellow *bachelor* member, Major Lyons, had discussed the matter with great care and had

come to the conclusion that they could support it, provided the measure was not made retroactive. Major Lyons, who told me the story, added that he "knew nothing about" the escapade of Mackenzie.

Smith did not wish to confine herself to issues affecting only women and children. But, her male colleagues calmly referred the problems of their female constituents to her, and she began to feel this a burden as time went on.

Smith was also a national figure. In 1923, the Department of Immigration sent her on a tour of England to increase interest there in emigration to Canada. She received generous coverage in the British press; she was honoured with membership in the Royal Colonial Institute, London, and the Overseas League; she was presented to the King and Queen at their holiday home; and she was a guest of Lord and Lady Aberdeen (former vice-royalty in Canada) and Viscountess Rhondda.

In the provincial election of 1928, Liberals were defeated and so was Smith. The newspapers were immediately full of speculation about her future. She should run for mayor of Vancouver said one; there was the possibility of a Senate seat for her, said another. At any rate, they agreed that she should not be lost to public life. While it was not said aloud, she also badly needed a job, and what job was there for a woman in her mid-sixties who had known no career but politics? While the Dominion Government did not appoint her to the Senate, they did send her in 1929 to Geneva as Canada's sole representative at an International Labour Conference. The provincial government helped out, too, but only temporarily. In 1931, Attorney-General Pooley (Conservative) sounded out the Opposition Leader, T.D. Pattullo, on a proposal to grant Lady McBride a government annuity. Pattullo pointed out that there were others meriting similar consideration, and cited Smith, in particular. So the government decided to make an annual allowance of twenty-five hundred dollars to Lady McBride, widow of Sir Richard McBride, late Premier of the province, and an allowance of fifteen hundred dollars a year to Mrs. Mary Ellen Smith, widow of Ralph Smith, former member of the Dominion House and Minister of Finance in the British Columbia Cabinet at the time of his death. The reason they did not cite her own service to the country seems obvious--they could not make any corresponding claim for Lady McBride. In April, cheques were forwarded to the two women with accompanying letters stating that thereafter similar cheques would be sent monthly, subject to further instructions. Those first cheques were the last they saw. However, the Conservative Party continued the allowance to Lady McBride. The Liberals seemed not to have had the will, or perhaps the means, to do the same for Smith.

Smith continued in public life serving as president of the Provincial Liberals and chaired their convention in the fall of 1932. In the spring of 1933, she died of a stroke. The press tributes to her work for the women and children of the province were lengthy and generous. The Vancouver *Sun* summed it up: "Her efforts added materially to the happiness and security of women in this province. Mrs. Smith was an agent of civilization. Her work will not soon be forgotten."

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