

## *Tilly Jean Rolston: She Knew How to Throw a Party*

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JULIETTE PROOM

Tilly Jean Rolston, the first woman to hold a Cabinet portfolio in the British Commonwealth, was friendly and quick-witted. The woman who helped introduce the Social Credit party to the British Columbia Legislature had few vices, but she loved to smoke in a private meeting, or when she was out of the public eye. At one typically empty meeting of the Vancouver Parks Board when Rolston sat as a commissioner (1939-1943), she lit a cigarette. Unfortunately, she also ignited the veil of her hat. Just as the chairman threw a tumbler of water at her face to douse the fire, a newspaper reporter walked into the room. "Tilly implored him not to mention her embarrassment," recounted *Daily Colonist* columnist, James Nesbitt. "But he told her it was too good a story to keep in the dark, so it hit the headlines."<sup>1</sup>

From the very start of her public life, Rolston grabbed headlines. She first made it into print in 1938, when, in the BC Council of Women's brief to the Rowell-Sirois Commission, she suggested senators be forced to retire at the age of seventy-five. John Dafoe, a commissioner on that Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, said, "That is a very revolutionary recommendation."<sup>2</sup> The chief editorial writer for the *Province* newspaper, D.A. MacGregor, began his report of the Commission's hearings with "the Provincial Council of Women, in a brief so admirably compiled and so forcibly presented by Mrs. F.J. Rolston as to draw a special compliment from the chairman, urged a Dominion taxation system, and Dominion responsibility for social services."<sup>3</sup> Soon after her landmark presentation to the society-shaping Royal Commission, Rolston left her Sunday School classes and plunged into elected office. Her church had delegated her to the Vancouver Local Council of Women, which launched her activity in that organization. She passed through its various offices, eventually becoming president of the Provincial Council of Women. At the same time, she was an executive member of the Pacific National Exhibition, the YWCA, the BC

Branch of the Canadian Society for the Control of Cancer and the Vancouver Symphony Society.<sup>4</sup>

Rolston took many of the points she outlined to the Rowell-Sirois Commission to governmental meetings for the rest of her life. Some became an integral part of the future Social Credit Party, but they all reflected her belief that people should be given every opportunity to look after themselves. For example, she recommended that Old Age Pensions be renamed "Retirement Insurance" and be made available at a lower age. They should be set up on a contributory basis, beginning at age thirty, so that larger pensions would be available. Her idea was not unlike Registered Retirement Savings Plans introduced by the Liberal federal government nearly forty years later. "A person would not be dependant upon the State, and I think it should be a contribution of their own," said Rolston when questioned by the hearing chairman.<sup>5</sup> However, she also believed the state should provide for those unable to look after themselves. In her brief to the Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, she recommended a federal unemployment insurance scheme, with provinces responsible for unemployables whom she defined as "those persons suffering from mental, physical or social handicaps."<sup>6</sup>

Other aspects of her brief are also interesting. She wanted education costs to be borne by the provinces, complaining that municipalities and rural districts carried too much of the load. "In BC there is an undue burden on real estate taxes. Leave the provinces [with the] responsibility for education finances, and the Dominion responsible for social services. Real estate, then, will carry the logical responsibility for purely local services, such as roads, sewers and water."<sup>7</sup> Rolston had the chance to implement her ideas fourteen years later when as Minister, she sponsored an education financing bill which became known as the Rolston Formula.

On her first attempt, Rolston was elected to the Legislature as a Conservative in Vancouver-Point Grey, three years after her appearance before the Rowell-Sirois Commission. Such early success has been common amongst British Columbia's elected women MLAs: nineteen of the twenty-three have won on their initial ballot. Her repeated re-election is also a common trait, although seven other female MLAs have not shared such a fate. Rolston was an active Vancouver Parks Board Commissioner when she joined the Legislature, an office later held by another notable Social Credit Cabinet Minister, Grace McCarthy.

The 1941 general election ushered in a new era in British Columbia politics when John Hart became Premier, defeating Duff Pattullo. Rolston polled third of ten candidates, with 13,584 votes, a thousand fewer than incumbent and Conservative Party leader R.L. Maitland, and 2500 more than her next rival. She joined CCF members Dorothy Steeves, Laura Jamieson and Grace MacInnis and Liberal Nancy Hodges in the forty-eight seat assembly. A key to her success could have been the riding in which she ran: women have been most successful in achieving seats in the Legislature when they run in Vancouver or Victoria constituencies.

Rolston was a campaign trooper from the start. During that first race, she often complained "liberty has degenerated into license."<sup>8</sup> She was incensed when she told a campaign rally on October 10, 1941, that the Liberal



Vancouver City Archives

Tilly Jean Rolston



Irving Strickland

MLAs (l to r): Nancy Hodges, Tilly Jean Rolston, Dorothy Steeves, Laura Jamieson, Grace MacInnis, c.1941-1945.

government had used public funds to increase its popularity by sending congratulatory messages to newly-weds and parents of newborn infants. She appealed to women to stop "the atrocious" waste of money: "Women constitute fifty-two percent of the voters' list in this province. They have a great deal of power, and they should use it to elect an honest, sound government."<sup>9</sup>

During the war years, Rolston was particularly concerned with family standards on the home front. She told the BC Housewives League annual convention in November, 1941, that "a man may be the head of the house, but it has been women's work always to make one dollar go as far as two in the feeding and clothing of her family."<sup>10</sup>

Her first big speech in the Legislature came three months after her election, when she made her Party's reply to the Throne Speech. Commentator Bruce Hutchison, in the *Vancouver Sun*, said:

Anyone who still imagines there is any difference between the Liberal and Conservative Parties of B.C. should have watched the Legislature yesterday [January 8, 1942] in its first working session. The day presented the pleasing spectacle of two lady speakers: Mrs. Nancy Hodges, elected Liberal of Victoria, tall, handsome and eloquent; and Mrs. Tilly Rolston, elected Conservative of Vancouver, also handsome, vigorous and sure of herself. They agreed in every particular, and their speeches advocated precisely the same reforms, one by one.... They showed that the union is drifting, or rather pushing, to the left, as it must to survive the growth of the CCF. Both lady speakers were guilty of grand larceny of the CCF platform, which they helped themselves to without compunction. Mrs. Rolston, speaking from behind a formidable hedge of bouquets, demanded curtailment of liquor consumption; an increase in old age pensions; a housing scheme; and post-war planning. But she went further [than Nancy Hodges] in demanding compulsory savings and standardization of clothing to save money for the war.<sup>11</sup>

Rolston told the Legislature, "Sometimes we are inclined to feel old age pensions are a charity, but we forget these are the people who helped build up British Columbia." Asking for an upward trend in mothers' pensions, she said, "we can't have our boys and girls growing up without sufficient bread and butter and milk."<sup>12</sup>

Rolston found her niche in the Legislature's Standing Committee on Social Welfare from the beginning. As chairwoman of this Committee for six years, between 1943-50, she studied the lack of work for able-bodied unemployed, drug addiction, juvenile delinquency (especially psychiatric services and probation), old age and mothers' pensions, and hot springs treatment of arthritis.

In late 1942, she and the other female MLA's belatedly joined W.A.C. Bennett, Harold Winch and five other men on the Post-War Rehabilitation Council, an all-party committee of the Legislature, chaired by Education

Minister H.G.T. Perry. Among other things, the Council recommended a national health insurance scheme, and that the education tax be equalized, especially in rural areas. It also called for an orderly program of apprenticeship training, and a public utilities commission, modelled after Ontario Hydro, to oversee water and power resources.

Despite Bruce Hutchison's initial observation that Rolston stole her ideas from the CCF, she engaged in keen and frequent battles with those on the other side of the floor. Her contention that a woman's place was in the home, at least while there were children there, led to a battle with Laura Jamieson in 1943. Jamieson suggested government nursery schools be established to permit young mothers to work.<sup>13</sup> She believed children should not be tied to their mothers' apron strings. But Rolston retorted, "It is an insult to suggest that a mother can't bring up her own children better than some...starched, cultured academician." She then suggested it might be a good idea if women were paid by the state to stay at home to look after their children.<sup>14</sup> A year later, she repeated herself: "I don't think I stand alone in my belief that the biggest job any woman can do is raise her children and keep a happy home for her family.... Women are not superhuman; one job is about as much as most of us can do properly.... The biggest job any woman can do is that of raising a family of good Canadian citizens with a sense of responsibility."<sup>15</sup>

Rolston now prefaced her remarks by saying she wished it distinctly understood that her references to employed women did not apply to the women who had to work for a living, or to a woman who was the head of a family, and was therefore the main wage earner; nor did she allude to young women who were not married. Her preface now makes us wonder to whom she was referring!

Throughout her years in the Legislature, Rolston called for improved mothers' pensions. In 1942, when the Liberal-led coalition added another five dollars to Old Age Pensions in the provincial budget, Rolston congratulated them, but bemoaned the size of the allowance paid to mothers.<sup>16</sup>

As a member of the Coalition government, Rolston toured the province, and occasionally spoke on the major issues of the day. But her favourite topics were always those pertaining to the housewife. She told the Legislature of one Vancouver woman who had been fined fifteen dollars for exceeding her wartime ratio of sawdust for fuel, despite the fact that the woman did not know of the limit. She chose to champion coloured margarine. Oleo margarine became the subject of public debate near the end of World War Two, when farmers became worried that it would displace butter in the average food basket. It remained a federal issue until 1948, when the oil-based product received the government's blessing. Two days before Christmas that year, a provincial ban on margarine was belatedly unearthed. In the weeks that followed, housewives blitzed the provincial government with appeals to repeal the ban. Attention soon turned to colour. Margarine was sold, but it could not be dyed to match the colour of butter. Instead, a packet of dye was included in the package so it could be whipped in by the user. Rolston told the Legislature "It must be palatable and colour is necessary. I don't want it to look like lard on bread--butter is coloured at times. If colouring is injurious,

then let us have a crusade against colouring of all foods.”<sup>17</sup> Rolston, a tenacious politician, pursued the coloured margarine issue through private members’ bills until one passed in 1952. At the height of her popularity, she topped the polls in the general election three months later. By that time, she had doubled her initial support.

Rolston had the floor for some time that day in 1949, when she complained about the lardy appearance of margarine. She thought it was time somebody did something about so-called comic books and children’s thrillers, too, and she thought hospital insurance had not gone far enough. And her lifelong bugbear, sales tax, was still a problem. She said, “It’s just penalizing family life and making it tough for young couples to get along. Even cleanliness is being taxed out of sight, what with a tax on soap.” She admitted at the end of her speech that she had not praised the Coalition government as much as some other Members had, but she said it was her “firm conviction that Members are not sent to the House to form a mutual admiration society.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1946, when Herbert Ascomb, who disliked women in public life, did not give her the Cabinet post she felt she deserved, Rolston began to lose faith in the Coalition. Just after Johnson took over power in the Coalition in 1948, Rolston aligned herself with W.A.C. Bennett, a not-too-popular maverick from South Okanagan. He moved, she seconded, that Bill 68 (An Act to Provide for the Imposition and Collection of a Tax on the Purchase and Use of a Tangible Personal Property to Provide Funds for Social Security and Municipal Aid) “be given a six months’ hoist.” The Speaker ruled the amendment out of order. Rolston moved, in an amendment, seconded by Tom Uphill (Labour - Fernie), that Bill 68 “be read six months hence.” Again, the Speaker ruled that the amendment was out of order. When it came time to vote on the second reading of the bill, both Rolston and the future premier, Bennett, voted with the CCF.<sup>19</sup>

The last straw came in 1951, when the province introduced user fees in hospitals, in addition to premiums. The week after Bennett quit the governing Coalition ranks, Rolston made her announcement to the Legislature: “Madam Speaker, I have lost confidence in the present government and now sit in the House as an Independent.” Saying loyalty to principle was more important than loyalty to Parties, she claimed that the eleven men in the Cabinet ivory tower had an “autocratic” disregard for the public.<sup>20</sup> Despite her move, Rolston still wanted to be a Member of the Conservative Party. A week after her action, she told a constituency meeting that she quit the “one cylinder government” because of numerous promises broken by the government leader, Boss Johnson.<sup>21</sup> Later that month, the Conservative Party held a meeting in Vancouver, to prepare for the June, 1952, election. Rolston phoned a key Party member at the downtown Georgia Hotel to say that if the Party wanted her back, she would be available at the Sylvia Hotel on English Bay for the next two hours. He passed the word around. No call went to Rolston. Soon she joined the fledgling Social Credit Party.<sup>22</sup>

“Her friend, W.A.C. Bennett, had joined around December 15th, 1951. Bennett and Rolston evidently conferred and saw fit not to have her come in at the same time. She announced it, I think, during the election, which had a

great impact on the Lower Mainland and everywhere. As a woman in her own right, as a forceful woman and a spokeswoman for women's rights and her cause, which was margarine over butter...it had a good effect."<sup>23</sup> Tilly Jean Rolston actually joined the Social Credit Party on May 2, 1952. By that time, she was already a visible campaigner for her friend's Party. Some observers say W.A.C. Bennett capitalized on Rolston's popularity, and rode her coattails to victory. At any rate, when he came to power in 1952, he rewarded her with a Cabinet post. It was a short-lived appointment. In 1952, she learned she had cancer.

As Education Minister, she finally had a chance to do something about lessening the real estate tax load. Until that time, the province made basic grants to school districts to help defray education costs, but the major cost was carried by landowners. In addition, the province gave municipalities one-third of the revenue gained from the three percent sales tax, about ten million dollars in 1951. The other two-thirds of sales tax revenue was spent on health and municipal improvement projects. Under the Rolston Formula, school taxes of nine mills would be imposed in urban areas and eight mills in rural areas. Where a school district's budget went beyond the 1952 level, as they inevitably did at a time of rapid growth in British Columbia, local taxpayers would pay fifty percent of the increase, except in Vancouver, where local taxpayers would pay seventy-five percent of the increase. The province promised to pay the rest, keeping all the sales tax to itself. Basic and supplementary grants under the new system would amount to \$28.4 million, originally more than the \$27.2 million that would have been allocated under the existing formula. During debate on the bill's second reading, on March 24, 1953, W.A.C. Bennett said, "Tying education to sales tax is basically unsound because if we have a recession, the sales tax would come down while the school tax would be going up. This Rolston Formula...is the best insurance the municipalities have had. The government is their partner in education."<sup>24</sup> At midnight, debate was still raging. Former Education Minister, William Straith, called it a "vicious piece of legislation." Mr. Bennett decided to take advantage of the split with the old Coalitionists, and give his Social Credit Party its first real test at the polls.

His gamble paid off: public enthusiasm for the neophyte Party was remarkable. Unfortunately, Rolston, who always approached campaigning with relish and vigour, was in bed for much of the race. She made a few appearances in the first week of June, days before the June 9th election. But it was not enough. She came fourth in the field of six. Robert Bonner, a long-time powerhouse of the Social Credit government, topped the list with almost three thousand more votes than Rolston. In an unusual move, Mr. Bennett invited her into his Cabinet despite her defeat. She did not last long. Tilly Jean Rolston died of cancer on October 13, 1953. She was the first woman in British Columbia to be given a state funeral.

## Footnotes

1. James K. Nesbitt (column), *Victoria Daily Colonist*, June 1, 1975.
2. Transcript of proceedings, Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, March 23, 1938 (brief no. 206): 5644. Rolston is incorrectly identified as Ralston.
3. *Vancouver Province*, March 24, 1938: 7.
4. Unattributed biography, Provincial Archives of British Columbia: Tilly Jean Rolston file.
5. Transcript of proceedings, Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, March 23, 1938 (brief no. 206): 5639.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*: 5641.
8. *Vancouver Province*, September 27, 1941.
9. *Vancouver Province*, October 10, 1941.
10. *Vancouver Province*, November 13, 1941.
11. Bruce Hutchison, "Experienced Observer Finds Women MLAs Pack More Meat into a 20-minute Speech Than Their Male Colleagues in Long Orations," *Vancouver Sun*, January 9, 1942.
12. "Higher Pensions 'New Budget's Claim to Fame,'" *Vancouver Sun*, January 27, 1942.
13. See Laura Jamieson's pamphlet, *Women, Dry Those Tears* (c. 1945), and also Doriese Nielsen's *New Worlds for Women* (1944).
14. *Vancouver News-Herald*, March 4, 1943: 12.
15. *Vancouver Province*, February 26, 1944: 6.
16. *Vancouver Sun*, January 27, 1942: 12.
17. *Vancouver News-Herald*, February 16, 1949.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Journals of the British Columbia Legislature*, 1948.
20. *Vancouver Sun*, March 30, 1951: 1.
21. *Vancouver Province*, April 7, 1951: 1.
22. Obituary, *Vancouver News-Herald*, October 14, 1953.
23. Transcript: "The Beginnings of Social Credit in BC"; Lyle Wicks in conversation with William J. Langlois, Sound Division, PABC, October 14, 1976: 6-16.
24. *Vancouver Sun*, March 25, 1953: 1.

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