

## **Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**

### **Women who made a difference**

### **Royal Bank Celebration of Person's Day**

**October 19, 2004**

It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to be here this evening, bringing you greetings from the Senate of Canada, and to participate in the celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Persons Case. I would like to personally thank Charlie Coffey, and the Royal Bank, as well as Filomena Frisina of Gowlings, Lafleur, Henderson, LLP, for sponsoring, and hosting this event.

Canada has been a place of great change throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The victory of the Famous 5 represented an important milestone for this country. Thanks to the educational efforts of the Famous 5 Foundation, and the statues which now greet visitors to Parliament Hill, as well as in the Olympic Plaza in Calgary, we learn that, on October 18, 1929, due to the appeal of the F5, the British Privy Council reinterpreted the term "*persons*", (with rights and privileges), in Section 24 of the British North America Act, to include the female sex. As a result, Canadian women were able to participate in all aspects of public life, including being appointed to the Senate, and to other positions at the federal level. As women Senators, we thank them. Their achievement has made it possible for the federal government to be more reflective of Canadian society.

What the Famous 5 achieved was a giant step forward for Canadian women, placing them well ahead of the women in other Commonwealth countries. Now that the Bank of Canada has put the F5 on the \$50 dollar bill, together with Quebec feminist Thérèse Casgrain, more Canadians will learn that ordinary Canadian women can participate in shaping the future of our country.

The Famous 5 and Thérèse Casgrain were not the only women who contributed to Canada's nation building. This evening, I would also like to pay tribute to a few women, some of whom, through oversight or omission, failed to find prominence in the pages of our history books.

To begin, I am going to talk about a fascinating woman by the name of Laura Secord, who lived in Queenston, (Niagara Peninsula), with her husband James, during the War of 1812. Their home was ordered to billet American soldiers. On June 12, 1813, Laura overheard the American plan of an impending attack on British forces at Beaverdams, which was under the command of Lt. James Fitzgibbon. Taking Beaverdams would mean that the Americans would seize control of the entire Niagara Peninsula, and Laura wasn't about to let that happen. So, on a very hot day in June, Laura Secord crossed 32 km through dense forest and streams, filled with wolves, wildcats, rattlers, and unfriendly Native forces. It was an 18 hour journey. With badly blistered and bleeding feet, Laura finally found Fitzgibbon to warn him. As a result of her heroism, the Native forces, under British command, won the Battle of Beaverdams on June 24, 1813. What Laura Secord did may have changed the course of the history of Canada.

However, women like Laura Secord were often not acknowledged for their selfless acts to defend home and country. Laura had to wait almost fifty years before her heroism was recognized. In 1860, when she was 85 years old, Edward, Prince of Wales visited the colonies, and her heroic act was finally officially celebrated for the first time. Many years later, in 2003, Laura Secord was designated as a "Person of National Historic Significance" by the Minister of Canadian Heritage.

Laura Secord was an ordinary woman, who made an extraordinary difference to Canada, and to our survival as a nation. There are many women like her, building individual success on the foundation of those who have come before them, through sheer determination and outstanding ability, ignoring what would appear to be insurmountable barriers.

Before the Famous 5 made their appeal to the British Privy Council, Agnes Macphail was the first woman ever elected to the House of Commons in 1921. At the time, she was the only woman in the House of Commons, and many of the male members were not happy that she was there. She persevered, through insults and harassment, and served in four consecutive sessions of Parliament. In 1943, following her success at the federal level, she became one of the first women elected as an M.P.P. in Ontario.

It took almost another 15 years for the second woman to be elected to the House of Commons, in 1935. For Martha Munger Black, becoming an M.P. was really just the climax of a truly dramatic and adventurous life. She

was 70 when she was elected as the representative from the Yukon. Martha was born a wealthy socialite in Chicago, but she soon became bored with the lifestyle, and at 32 she left her husband in Chicago to join in the Klondike Gold Rush. She made the 92 km trip on foot over the Rocky Mountains to Chilkoot Pass, and, having survived the trip, started a successful gold mining company, and later a prosperous sawmill in Dawson City. When her husband, George Black, became ill while serving as an M.P., Martha ran for office in his place, and won handily.

While women faced hurdles in politics, women also faced similar challenges in simply breaking into any profession. Becoming a doctor was a major challenge. In 1870, Emily Stowe, was the first woman admitted to the Toronto School of Medicine, after initially being refused on the basis of gender. There, she endured the threats of fellow students, and professors, who didn't think women could deal with intimate details about the human body. She received her medical license in 1880. Her daughter, Augusta Stowe, following in her mother's footsteps, was forced to withstand similar hardships when she enrolled in the Toronto School of Medicine in 1879.

These two women paved the way for Dr. Elizabeth Bagshaw\_who, from 1932 until 1966, spent every Friday afternoon as the medical director of Canada's first birth control clinic - illegal at the time. There, she gave out information, pessaries, jellies and condoms. During the Depression, Dr. Bagshaw passionately defended the value of her work in response to opposition from medical colleagues, and the churches. She said, "These people were just about half-starved because there was no work, and for them to go on having children was a detriment to the country. They couldn't afford children if they couldn't afford to eat."

Until recently, engineering was a profession completely dominated by men. Dr. Elsie MacGill didn't let this fact stand in her way. She was the first woman in Canada to graduate with a degree in electrical engineering, despite being struck with polio shortly after graduation. In response to praise from others, MacGill said, "I was lucky. I got a good education. So, my mother was a judge; so what? I didn't think it was any more remarkable for a woman being a judge than it was for me to be an engineer." She went on to become the first woman aeronautical engineer in North America, and the first woman aircraft designer in the world. During WWII, she had a staff of 4500, many of them women, producing more than 1,400 Hawker Hurricane

fighter aircraft for Canada's war effort! MacGill was certainly a great Canadian!

Throughout Canadian history, strong minded women have made a difference for themselves, for other women, and for their country. Today, I count myself fortunate to work with many brilliant and determined women who champion just and compassionate causes in the Senate of Canada. I am sure Agnes MacPhail would feel right at home in their company! Today, women make up about 30% of the Senate, and 20% of the House of Commons. I know these numbers will continue to grow because women, throughout our history, have challenged and overcome what appear to be insurmountable obstacles.

The F5 monuments, in Calgary and in Ottawa, as well as our new \$50 bill, remind us of all the unsung women heroes who have helped make Canada what it is today. Young girls are now learning about our history, our controversies, as well as our accomplishments, so that they may carve their own niche in our collective history. I look very much forward to the stories of achievement of the next generation of women pioneers.