

**Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**  
**A Tribute to the Famous 5:**  
**Women, words and their powers of persuasion**  
**Media Club of Ottawa**  
**Library and Archives Canada**  
**March 21, 2011 – 6-8 p.m.**

I wish to thank you for inviting me to speak to you today, to offer a tribute to the Famous 5 –Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Emily Murphy, and Irene Parlby. As the Famous 5 website proclaims, these women are “heroes for today” - their achievements have been undiminished by the passage of time. Their words - and their actions - have served as a source of inspiration for generations of women.

Despite their importance to Canadian history as nation builders, until a few years ago, most Canadians had never heard of them. As many of you may know, in 1996 the Famous 5 Foundation was established in Calgary with the goal of combating this ignorance. One of their objectives was to create two monuments to the Famous 5, to be placed in Olympic Plaza in Calgary and on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. The two sets of bronze statues, created by Edmonton artist Barbara Paterson, would cost a million dollars, and it was proposed that they be funded by five Canadian women.

How did I become involved? Very shortly after I was appointed to the Senate in 1998, Famous 5 Foundation President, Frances Wright, approached me to support this project. She noted that, if it had not been for the Famous 5, my appointment to the Senate would not have been possible. That, of course, also applies to all women senators since Cairine Wilson, so this alone wasn't a sufficiently good reason to support the project.

At the time, I remembered the controversy over the racist attitudes of Emily Murphy. Today, her remarks would have been directed towards someone like me. However, after thinking about it, I decided the overall achievements of the Famous 5 were of much greater significance to Canadian women today than some negative attitudes held by one of their members at the beginning of the 20th century. It was my belief that I could make a difference in advancing women's fight for equality by supporting the project. That was just a small part of the entire endeavour.

The Famous 5 Foundation and women parliamentarians wanted the Ottawa statue placed on the Hill, which was supposed to be off limits, because it had historically been reserved for prime ministers and monarchs. I am not sure of the politics behind the scenes in Calgary, but in Ottawa, the important work was done by parliamentarians, both in the House of Commons and in the Senate. Through persuasion and lobbying by women parliamentarians, all party support was obtained, and the Motion received unanimous consent in both Chambers.

On October 18, 1999, the statue was unveiled in Olympic Plaza in downtown Calgary by Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Person's Case. The

following year, on October 18th, 2000, a duplicate of this statue was unveiled here on Parliament Hill. This, incidentally, became the most frequently visited monument on the Hill, and helps to project to the world the power of persuasion of Canadian women. In 2004, the Famous 5 were immortalized on our \$50.00 bill, along with Quebec feminist, Thérèse Casgrain.

The Famous 5's impact on Canadian women was the Person's Case, when the Privy Council ruled on Oct 18, 1929, that women were legally persons in terms of their rights and privileges, making them eligible to be appointed to the Senate of Canada. This has helped to make the Upper Chamber more reflective of Canadian society in recent years. Today, approximately 35% of Senators are women.

But, I believe the impact of the Famous 5 goes well beyond the Privy Council ruling. Through the power of their words, and their presence as successful role models, the Famous 5 fundamentally changed Canadian society's perception of what women could accomplish. By so doing, they paved a path for all of us to follow.

It was amazing how they accomplished so much at a time when there were few feminists, and the bulk of society believed that women were incapable. This attitude was exemplified by Canadian humourist, Stephen Leacock, who wrote "The Woman Question" in Maclean's in 1915:

"The world's work is open to her, but she cannot do it. She lacks the physical strength for laying bricks or digging coal. If put to work on a steel beam a hundred feet above the ground, she would fall off. For the pursuit of business her head is all wrong. Figures confuse her. She lacks sustained attention and in point of morals the average woman is, even for business, too crooked."

He went on to say:

"There is nothing really open to her except one thing – marriage. She must find a man who will be willing, in return for her society, to give her half of everything he has, allow her the sole use of his house during the daytime, pay her taxes, and provide her clothes."

Can you imagine the kind of attitude the Famous 5 dealt with? They combated such opinions with logic and humour, winning the fight for women's suffrage, basic human rights, and their designation as persons with rights and privileges equal to that of men in the British North America Act.

Nellie McClung's response to the Leacock article, also published in Maclean's read:

"No man has the right to citizenship on his weight, height, or lifting power; he exercises this right because he is a human being, with hands to work, brain to think and life to live...we might with equal foolishness declare that because a man (as a rule) cannot thread a needle, or 'turn a heel,' therefore he should not ever be allowed to vote... Women will make mistakes, of course, and pay for them. That will be nothing new – they have always paid for men's mistakes. It will be a change to pay for their own."

It was because of their words – the weapons women use, that the Famous 5 were so successful in their lives, shaping Canada as we know it with a series of firsts for women.

Henrietta Muir Edwards helped found the National Council of Women and the Victorian Order of Nurses. Emily Murphy became the first female judge, and Louise McKinney was the first woman to serve as an MLA in the British Commonwealth. Nellie McClung and Irene Parlby were both elected MLAs in Alberta in 1921, with Parlby becoming the first female cabinet minister.

What was happening in Alberta and other provinces was mirrored in Ontario, where women attained the right to vote in 1919, and in 1921, Agnes MacPhail was elected as the first woman MP in Ottawa. Later, she became one of the first women elected to the Ontario legislature in 1943.

Like today's women, the Famous 5 had multiple roles, and many responsibilities. They were wives, mothers, volunteers, politicians, lawyers, teachers, and writers. What Leacock neglected to understand about women – and all women instinctively know – is that our training as women in these multiple roles makes us great time managers. We have natural skills suited for the workforce. If you've ever held a baby, while simultaneously cooking, and getting two other children out the door for school, you know this is true.

The other characteristic of the Famous 5, shared by many of today's women, was an inability to accept the status quo. They often advocated for rights, not just for women, but also for the poor and the oppressed. Whatever they chose to do was not a career, but a vocation. Their understanding and empathy as women who had suffered oppression led them to try and improve the lot of others through their powers of persuasion.

Henrietta Muir Edwards and her sister founded a magazine called "The Working Women of Canada," to bring attention to the social conditions of working women. They lived frugally and financed this magazine out of their own pockets.

Upon entering politics, Louise McKinney became known as one of the most capable debaters, advocating for women's rights, and social welfare measures for immigrants and widows. Her major initiative – with the support of Emily Murphy - was the Dower Act, one of Alberta's most progressive laws, which improved the legal status of widows and separated wives.

The work of Agnes MacPhail to reform the prison system is now immortalized in a television *Historica* moment. On a visit to Kingston Penitentiary, after an uprising there, in 1925, MacPhail began to advocate for prison reform, against stiff resistance. She realized the prison system was designed to punish, rather than reform prisoners, and so she fought for better conditions, education, exercise, and proper training of staff. I wonder what Agnes MacPhail would think about the present government's views on crime and punishment?

Like Louise McKinney, and Nellie McClung, MacPhail was a superb debater, with a wonderful grasp of the facts, and a solid wit. After a speech on women's equality, she was confronted by a male heckler who yelled, "Don't you wish you were a man?" She responded, "Yes, don't you?"

While the views of Emily Murphy on race have been widely cited to denigrate the Famous 5, little has been said about Nellie McClung's defence of the rights of Japanese Canadians in the period prior to World War II. As B.C. politicians increasingly placed restrictions on them, McClung was asked to a debate at Vancouver's Empress Theatre. The

grey haired woman declared, “I could not take the responsibility of claiming for myself a privilege I wouldn’t give to anybody else. In my opinion every class and creed of people should have equal rights.” Last year, in recognition of Nellie McClung’s importance to Manitoba, a new monument to the Famous 5 was unveiled on the grounds of the Manitoba legislature.

Like Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung was an early member of the Media Club, with 16 books, and countless articles to her credit. These women, ordinary women who accomplished extraordinary things by questioning the status quo, served as the inspiration for the feminist movement in the 1960s. Many of them were members of this Club.

Among these members, perhaps the most colourful was Charlotte Whitton, the first woman mayor of a major Canadian city, elected in Ottawa in 1951. Prior to this she was an academic, and a social worker. She is perhaps best remembered for her quip, “whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Fortunately, this is not difficult.” Another feisty mayor is Hazel McCallion, who will be in Ottawa at the NAC on March 29, 2011, hosted by the Enbridge Famous 5 lectures.

Two other club members also come to mind - Florence Bird, and Doris Anderson. Both were journalists, but like the Famous 5, they had a tremendous influence on women’s lives through their writings, and political activism.

Florence Bird worked under the name of Anne Francis, and as a journalist, she focused on the rights of working women. She was appointed as Chair of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which tabled its report with 167 recommendations for the Government in 1970. It laid the groundwork for demands by women’s groups throughout the 1970s and 80s. Bird became a Senator in 1977.

Many of us know Doris Anderson as the editor of *Chatelaine Magazine* from 1957-77, subtly influencing women between the recipes and homemaking articles, with topics like pay equity, divorce, abortion and family violence.

In 1981, Parliament was debating the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that Anderson felt drastically undermined women’s rights. As head of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Anderson organized a Charter conference which the federal government pressured her to cancel. She resigned in protest, which triggered a demonstration in Ottawa by 1,300 women from across the country. The Ad Hoc Conference on the Status of Women led to the government adding section 28 in the Charter which states that the Charter rights apply equally to men and women. So, like the Famous 5, Doris Anderson, your predecessor in the Media Club, has profoundly influenced the rights of women in Canada.

There are women today who move the progressive agenda forward, and I count myself among them by having proposed two bills in the Senate to amend the National Anthem Act to include women, and by speaking frequently on the topic of equality across Canada and abroad. I must say, I was taken aback when I heard feminism is now referred to as the F word – the title of a recent CBC documentary - which refers to young women’s reluctance to describe themselves as feminists, in light of the media’s constant characterization of feminists as brittle, bitter, shrill, and ugly women who wear Birkenstocks. I don’t see anything wrong with Birkenstocks, do you?

It is unfortunate that the term “feminist” is being used to describe individuals as radically different as Sarah Palin and Hilary Clinton. So, in 2011, just what exactly does “feminism” mean? It’s not enough only to have women in politics, they need to be working towards equality for all. I would think the Famous 5 would agree that today it’s more about attitude than it is about gender.

What worries me is when some of my friends tell me that there is nothing more to be done by feminists because their daughters are doing just fine. Meaning, today’s women shouldn’t rock the boat when it’s not tipping over. But, we are not there yet, because we need to be sitting at the front of the boat with the men, in equal numbers. We need to be leaders, not only in government, but also in the private sector.

There is still a lot more to accomplish, and like the Famous 5, we can’t be complacent. For example, one of the recommendations of the 1970 Commission on the Status of Women was that Canada urgently needed a National Daycare Act. That was 41 years ago. Successive governments have talked about daycare – none have delivered on their promises. We are unlikely to see a daycare program of any sort now since Minister Finley has equated the desire for one as a Liberal plot “to ensure that parents are forced to have other people raise their children.” Never mind that most families need two incomes today just to pay their bills.

According to Trine Skei Grande, the leader of the Liberal Party of Norway, the availability of childcare from age 1 onward has been crucial in helping women in Norway to make substantial gains. They now make up 40% of their Parliament. She said that women’s leadership in the workforce has also helped to spur on Norway’s economy, and shaped many of Norway’s policies.

Even for parents who stay at home, we’ll never know their contributions to our economy since the new voluntary long-form census had one section removed – the section that assessed the contributions of women through unpaid labour.

Aside from daycare, pay equity, violence against women, and poverty, many other issues remain for us to resolve. Over the last five years, we’ve actually gone backwards in Canada, according to the international gender gap measure, down from 5<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> place, behind the U.S. for the first time.

Despite the fact that the Famous 5 opened the doors to politics for Canadian women, and today, we have many more educated, articulate, talented women who are gifted debaters, the number of women MPs in the House of Commons remains alarmingly stagnant at about 22%. According to Equal Voice, 1/3 is needed for a “critical mass.”

It is more encouraging for us to look to the provincial legislators, where increasingly, the party leaders are women. For example, there are now three women leaders in the provinces and territories: British Columbia’s Premier Christy Clark, Newfoundland and Labrador’s Premier Kathy Dunderdale, and Eva Aariak, the Premier of Nunavut.

Last fall, my fourteen year-old granddaughter phoned and said she had chosen to do a school project on women’s equality, and asked if I could give her some help. Of course, I said “yes,” and since she likes sports and is a keen soccer player, I encouraged her to do the project on women’s equality in sports. The way she thinks gives me confidence that the

future generation of Canadian women will be able to hold their own as the equal of men. I am sure the Famous5 would agree.