

ELEVEN: THE CANDIDACY OF MR. SMITH

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

WOMEN AND THE VOTE

The women's suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century succeeded in getting women the right to vote. One of the critics of this movement was Stephen Leacock. In the October 1915 *Macleans* magazine, he wrote what can only be viewed from today's vantage point as a very unfortunate and condescending essay. "The Woman Question" acknowledged that women's right to vote was an inevitability. However, Leacock believed that the right to vote would change little about society for women.

Leacock based his position on a belief that women often did not have characteristics needed for full participation in the workforce. In 1915, there were few jobs available to women and those jobs that were available were underpaid. Leacock said "to turn a girl loose in the world to work for herself, when there is no work to be had, or none at a price that will support life, is a social crime"¹⁸. He said that giving women the right to vote would not solve this. Rather, the remedy "is bound up with the general removal of social injustice, the general abolition of poverty"¹⁹. As such, Leacock believed that the state must create social welfare legislation to support women and to ensure that they did not need to rely on marriage to survive.

Suffragist Nellie McClung eloquently and tartly responded to critics such as Leacock in the May 1916 *Macleans*. "Speaking of Women" said that men were afraid of granting women equal rights because men were afraid of losing their domestic help. McClung pointed out that 30% of women were already in the work force, though she did not address the issue of wage inequality. McClung said that even if the claim that women were physically inferior to men was true, this was no reason to deny women the vote because "the exercising of the ballot does not require physical strength or endurance"²⁰. To the point that the world was full of injustice, McClung responded "Is it any comfort to the woman who feels the sting of social injustice to reflect that she, at least, had no part in making such a law?"²¹. As such, McClung believed that women had every right to have an equal say in the public affairs of the nation.

18 Leacock, Stephen. "The Woman Question." In *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*, edited by Alan Bowker, U of Toronto P, 1973, p. 60.

19 Leacock, 59.

20 McClung, Nellie. "Speaking of Women: Anti-Suffrage Reasoning." In *Nellie McClung Readings*, Famous Foundation, p. 4.

21 McClung, p. 4.

In the end, the arguments of Nellie McClung and the “Famous Five” suffragettes who fought for women’s rights won the day. Manitoba was the first province to grant women the right to vote in 1916. Alberta and Saskatchewan soon followed. However, it was not until 1951 that every province and territory allowed women to vote in their elections.

1. Liberal democracies like Canada are at least theoretically based on the concept that ideas should be openly exchanged through rational debate. Ultimately, the best ideas should prevail. Leacock’s and McClung’s essays in *Macleans* help demonstrate this concept at work.
 - a) Is peaceful dialogue always the best way to deal with social injustice?
 - b) Is violence ever justified as a means to enact change?
2. Leacock was passionately opposed to the prohibition of alcohol, and the women’s suffrage movement was closely linked with prohibition campaigns. Do you think this would have influenced Leacock’s opinion on granting women the right to vote?
3. Examining our past is complex. Canadians today are right to view Leacock’s views on women as wrong. The suffragists were on the right side of history regarding the right to vote. However, the suffragists held other views that Canadians now view as wrong-headed. McClung and some of the “Famous Five” campaigned for prohibition, were Imperialists with racist beliefs, and even advocated for eugenics.
 - a) Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan points out that “We don’t like ambiguity—we want people to be either thoroughly bad or thoroughly good. We want heroes ... but I think you have to look at a person’s whole record”²². Discuss this statement.
 - b) How can we celebrate the glorious aspects of our past while acknowledging the scandalous aspects of our past?

22 qtd. in Carlson, Kathryn Blaze. “What happens when the heroes of the past meet the standards of today?” *National Post*, 14 May 2011. <http://nationalpost.com/news/what-happens-when-the-heroes-of-the-past-meet-the-standards-of-today>