

*Liberation Deferred: The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918**

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The typical suffragist, according to popular interpretation, tended to be well-bred and middle-class. Statistics substantiate this socio-economic analysis. Using a sample of 156 female and 44 male suffrage leaders, this dissertation shows that by far the majority belonged to a well-educated, urban middle class. The movement attracted male and female professionals, social gospel clergymen, a few reform-minded businessmen, and the wives of professionals and businessmen.

The high level of education attained by the majority of male and female suffragists confirms that the movement was "well-led". Biographical sources also supply information about the suffragists' ethnic and religious origins, revealing a preponderance of native, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

The suffrage movement experienced two periods of organizational activity, between 1877 and 1895, and between 1906 and 1918, separated by a lull of some ten or eleven years. The first suffrage societies, at least in origin, had a feminist commitment. ("Feminist" is defined as one who demands complete social, economic and political equality between the sexes). The founders of these early societies, women like Dr. Emily Stowe in Toronto and Dr. Amelia Yeomans in Winnipeg, were professionals, frequently pioneers in their field, who encountered discrimination first hand and tended to be outspoken and aggressive. Labelled "Women Rightists" and extremists, these original suffragists were very unpopular and their societies attracted a small clientele.

Early in its history the suffrage movement began to attract a different kind of man and woman who were motivated by significantly different drives. Social reformers began to infiltrate the suffrage societies during the 1880s. The new members consisted at first largely of temperance men and women who were convinced that, if women had a vote, temperance would be assured. Several of these were social gospel clergymen who wanted good Christian women to have a vote to help bring in their larger social programme. In the twentieth century secular reformers interested in child welfare, public health, education and municipal reform joined the movement for the same reason. The new suffragists no longer stressed sexual equality but stated simply that women needed a vote to insure that the maternal influence extended into society.

Social reform suffragists, those with this prior commitment to reform, dominated the later period of suffrage history. The feminists did not

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completely disappear. A small minority continued to operate throughout this period and in fact were responsible for reactivating the movement in 1906. But feminist concerns became less and less important.

The ideology of the social reformers explains the unpopularity of feminism. The middle classes were on the defensive in this period, disturbed by the growing power and wealth of corporate magnates, the challenge from the unions, and the influx of foreign immigration. The social problems accompanying urbanization also seemed to undermine their conception of social order. Idealists within this class wished to preserve and strengthen the old order and to accept minor modifications if they served to preserve the essence of that order.

Canada's social reformers, traditionalists in many respects, regarded the family as the fundamental social unit and desired to resurrect it to its former position of importance. They endorsed woman suffrage because they believed it would *strengthen* the family by doubling its representation and giving the mother a political voice.

In this way woman suffrage became respectable, even patriotic. Of course, it no longer involved any re-evaluation of sexual spheres. In fact, all the intellectual currents of the period reinforced the need for woman to remain in the home. Much of the secular reform programme was child-centred and emphasized the importance of woman's role as mother. "Social imperialism", the desire to create a great race for a great nation, focused upon woman as the "mother of the race". Eugenics demonstrated the importance of woman's contribution to evolution and the need for her to be intelligent and healthy in order for her children to be the same. Once again, the emphasis was upon woman's reproductive function. Given this intellectual framework, it becomes obvious that any doctrine which challenged the primacy of woman's maternal role was doomed. The suffragists, moved by these intellectual currents and class anxieties, had no option but to reinforce the cult of domesticity.

Woman suffrage, then, became a conservative reform designed to bolster the social order by doubling the representation of the family and enlisting the assistance of good, pure, sober, Christian woman in enforcing middle class values and morality upon a deviant society. The greatest error in interpreting the suffrage movement is the assumption that someone who supported woman suffrage had a broad vision of women's rights and potential. In actuality, the majority of suffragists offered no real feminist critique of existing society and, in fact, endorsed the patriarchal family structure. This thesis attempts to understand why this was so and concludes that, as the women belonged to a class which was on the defensive in this period, class interests and the nationalist aspirations of that class naturally superceded the interests of their sex.