



It's Our History, Our Country

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Agnes Campbell MacPhail

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It's hard to think that there was a time in our country that women were not allowed to study medicine, vote or run for office or enter politics.

Politics...that ever hungry entity that can devour the souls of honourable people, make truthful people into liars and ruin many families' lives. But there are some good people that were in politics. Tommy Douglas and Agnes Macphail are part of the few, the strong, and the truthful.

Agnes Campbell Macphail (1890-1954) was born on this day. In her 63 years she managed to become the first female MP.

In 1921, she became Canada's first female MP, in the first federal election in which women had the vote. She was appointed to the first Canadian delegation to the League of Nations, and founded the Canadian Branch of the Elizabeth Fry Society, which was dedicated to the welfare of prisoners.

She lost her Commons seat in 1940, but ran successfully for the Ontario Legislature in 1943, where she served until 1951. Doing this today would be quite the accomplishment but in the early part of the 20th century, this was an amazing breakthrough in the female revolution.

Her life in the public eye all started in Proton Township, Grey County, Ont. where she was born to Dougald Mcphail and Henrietta Campbell. She attended teachers college in Stratford, Ont., and taught in schools in southwest Ontario.

While working in Sharon, Ont. Macphail became active politically, joining the United Farmers of Ontario and its women's organization, the United Farm Women of Ontario. She also became a columnist for the Farmers' Sun around this time.

After amendments to the Elections Act by the Conservative Party government in 1919,

Macphail was elected to the House of Commons as a member of the Progressive Party of Canada for the Grey Southeast electoral district in the 1921 federal election.

Macphail was re-elected in the 1925, 1926, and 1930 federal elections.

As a radical member of the Progressive Party, Macphail joined the socialist Ginger Group, faction of the Progressive Party that later led to the formation of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).

She became the first president of the Ontario CCF in 1932. However, she left the CCF in 1934 when the United Farmers of Ontario pulled out due to fears of Communist influence in the Ontario CCF. While Macphail was no longer formally a CCF member, she remained close to the CCF MPs and often participated in caucus meetings. The CCF did not run candidates against Macphail in her three subsequent federal campaigns.

Macphail was also the first Canadian woman delegate to the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, where she worked with the World Disarmament Committee. Although a pacifist, she voted for Canada to enter the Second World War.

In the 1940 election, she was defeated. Macphail was recruited by the United Reform Movement to run in the by-election to fill the seat.

On Aug. 19, she was defeated by Progressive Conservative candidate Alfred Henry Bence. He received 4,798 votes, while Macphail placed second with 4,057 votes.

It was her last federal campaign as a candidate. She was the first woman sworn in as an Ontario Member of the Provincial Parliament (MPP). Although defeated in the 1945 provincial election, she was elected again in the 1948 election. Macphail never married.

She died Feb. 13, 1954, aged 63, in Toronto, just before she was to have been offered an appointment to the Canadian Senate.

She is buried in Priceville, Ont., with her parents and Gertha Macphail, one of her two sisters.

<http://www.histori.ca/minutes/minute.do?id=10212>

<http://canadaonline.about.com/cs/womengov/p/agnesmacphail.htm>

http://www.clanphail.org/roots/agnes_mcnhail/