



Speaking Notes for Isabel Metcalfe, Chair, Ottawa Famous 5 Committee to The Ottawa Women's Canadian Club, February 16, 2010

Thank you for that warm welcome. Like most of you this week, I am really enjoying the Vancouver Olympics. Watching the Games, I was so touched to see that charming Alexandre Bilodeau attribute his gold medal to his family and, especially, the inspiration provided to him by his family and, his older brother Frederic.

Today, I would like to acknowledge my own family. My great husband of 37 years, Herb; my children Dan, Julie and Kathleen. Thank you for coming and for your constant support. My brother and sister, Allan & Christine. And my mother, here with us at the Head Table, Margaret Duncan Brunton, the first female Warden of Lanark County. Mother of 5, great grandmother, angel investor.

Speaking of men, hockey and gold, aren't you glad you are a Canadian women and do not need to worry about that Olympic medal. I am absolutely confident that our women's team will win and, with a bit of luck, maybe Canada's men's hockey team will win gold, too.

It is a particular pleasure for me to be here as the Ottawa Women's Canadian Club enjoys its centennial year. The women who founded this club were women of judgment, women of commitment and women to whom results mattered.

They were not women who were seeking social advancement or personal gain. And they weren't young women.

When Mrs. R.G. McConnell introduced the motion to establish this club, it was nearly three decades after her husband had conducted the first survey of the Alberta oil sands.

When Mrs. Clifford Sifton seconded that motion, it was fifteen years after her husband became Canada's Minister of the Interior and welcomed waves of new Canadians to open up the West.

And when Mrs. Adam Shortt was unanimously chosen as the Chair of the Club, it was 25 years after her husband became Canada's first full-time university professor.

Those women were using their judgment and their commitment to achieve results for the country and for the future.

Everyone here knows that the Famous 5 were also women of judgment, women of commitment and women to whom results mattered.

Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Irene Parlby, Louise McKinney and Henrietta Muir Edwards used a little-known section of the Supreme Court Act to force the government to seek a ruling on a vital point of law. Up until then, male politicians had contended that there was nothing they could do about appointing women to the Senate because their hands were tied by the law.

Well, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that women were not "persons". But the Famous Five didn't become famous because they gave up easily ... and they pushed their petition to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England. And finally, the decision came down that, indeed, Canadian women were "persons" after all.



As Chair of the Ottawa Committee of the Famous Five Foundation, I am fortunate to work with a dedicated group of women – and I want to acknowledge my teammates on our group who are present at this luncheon. Working together, we helped to give the Famous Five both their statue on Parliament Hill and a more rightful place in our Canadian heritage.

What hasn't come through, however, is that the Famous Five were, themselves, very real “persons”. They were very much flesh and blood ... colourful, courageous and controversial. They were “persons” who had triumphs and tragedies, just as the rest of us.

Emily Murphy was the first female magistrate in the British Empire.

But on her first day in Court, a male lawyer said that she wasn't a “person” and that she was sitting illegally. Emily Murphy was a suffragist and a reformer. She was also a mother who lost two of her four children in childhood. She wrote books under the name “Janey Canuck”.

She was married to a man of the cloth but she once said: “Matrimony is the only game of chance the clergy favour!”

She was only diplomatic when she needed to be ... otherwise, she was unpleasant, domineering and often self-important. She was also a visionary, an expert on the illegal drug trade and a woman with boundless energy. Most of the time Mrs. Murphy was very serious and earnest ... but she loved to wear hats, particularly those with large feathers and plumes and braids.

Louise McKinney spent her early adult life in North Dakota organizing for the Women's Temperance Union. After marrying, she expanded that work into western Canada. She was a champion of widows and children. In 1917, she was elected to the Alberta legislature and thus became the first woman in the British Empire to sit as an elected official. Four years later, she lost her seat because of her opposition to drinking and smoking. She was the only woman from western Canada to take part in the formation of the United Church of Canada. Louise McKinney's favourite adornment was the white ribbon of the temperance movement.

A year before she passed away, Mrs. McKinney spoke to the Women's Canadian Club of Calgary. She said that her message for women was simple: “Dream big and act honourably.”

Irene Parlby was an advocate for rural women. She became the second female Cabinet Minister in the British Empire and later represented Canada at the League of Nations. She was elegant, inspiring, organized and charming. She was an avid gardener known for her beautiful flower beds.

Like Emily Murphy, Mrs. Parlby loved hats, particularly ones with large brims ... and she enjoyed wearing gorgeous furs.

Henrietta Muir Edwards, however, hated fashion. She refused to wear corsets.

She published Canada's first women's magazine, and played a key role in establishing both the National Council of Women and the Victorian Order of Nurses.

Henrietta Muir Edwards was an interesting combination of apparent contradictions. For all her dislike of style, she painted beautiful dishes for the Canadian Pavilion at the Chicago World's Fair. She was caring, concerned, imaginative, liberated and thoughtful.



When the Famous Five approached the Privy Council with their petition, Henrietta Muir Edwards was 80 years old. And that was at a time when the average life expectancy of women in Canada was 59.

Nellie McClung, at 56, was easily the youngest of the Famous Five. She was a feisty, dynamic, optimistic, good-natured, lively and funny woman. She was a mother of five who was a journalist and reformer.

Her first novel, “Sowing Seeds in Danny”, was a very witty, national bestseller. In all, she had 16 books published in her lifetime. She led the fight throughout North America to get women the right to vote. She served five years as a Liberal MLA from Edmonton.

In 1914, Nellie McClung wrote and starred in a famous Mock Parliament which asked: “Why Should Men Have the Vote?”

But Mrs. McClung paid a terrible price in her family life. Although she spent a lifetime fighting against the ravages of liquor, two of her sons battled alcoholism. And upon Nellie McClung’s death, her daughter burned all of her papers.

As I said, the Famous Five were very real, very human.

In 1929, the Famous Five understood that becoming regarded as “persons” was extremely important but they also realized that it was not the last victory that women in Canada needed to achieve.

Nellie McClung wrote: “Sex prejudice and the male superiority complex, built up since time began, will not go out in one generation.”

Those 5 clever, tenacious and determined Alberta women made a vital contribution to our nation. The Persons Case began the long and vitally important Canadian struggle to amend the British North America Act, setting the stage for the concept that a constitution could be regarded as a living tree and therefore subject to change”. Constitutional Change.

Today, February 16th, marks quite an important day in that regard. On this day in 1967, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada was established. Florence Bird became the first woman ever to head a Royal Commission in Canada.

The Commission came about after an enormous, coordinated campaign from women’s groups, large and small. The effort included women from every part of the political spectrum, from every part of the country and from every walk of life. It took women to make it happen.

Many of the Commission’s 167 recommendations have been implemented. But some of the other recommendations are still waiting for action.

The Commission called for equal pay for work of equal value. It is 2010 and while most of us at this luncheon may be doing very well, Canadian women still have not achieved pay equity.

The Commission also called for a national child care program. Well, since that recommendation, I have attended school, graduated, had a career, married and raised a family. And I’ve become a grandmother – and my mother has become a great grandmother.

And we are both still waiting for that child care program!



The lesson remains the same. Women need to rely upon ourselves to make positive changes happen for women. I am pretty sure that none of the Famous Five would be surprised by the story of women and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Those of you who know me understand that I am an enormous fan of Prime Minister Trudeau ... and I was incredibly fortunate to have an opportunity to work for him. But Mr. Trudeau, and every Premier, and every single male Cabinet Minister in the federal government and all the provinces, and all the male lawyers and experts who worked on the Constitution, gave no thought whatsoever to including a women's equality clause in the Charter.

It took the amazing Judy Erola and a wide-ranging group of other women to bring pressure to bear on the guys. Judy is a remarkable person. She was the first female television weather reporter in Canada. When she ran for Parliament, she was a recent widow and a successful entrepreneur. Judy was named by Mr. Trudeau to his Cabinet ... and I can only imagine that it was not an easy feat for her to stand up to him on a constitutional matter ... but she did.

As Judy said, there is "not much point in being minister for the status of women when women have no status in the country".

And now here we are today, in 2010, the 100th birthday of this club.

We are still far from having equal numbers of women and men in our elected bodies ... and many of my colleagues and I are working hard to change that and to get more women in politics.

In Canada, our large businesses still lack enough women in senior roles.

Women still take on more obligations for sick or frail family members.

We all know the issues. But heaven knows that thanks to the Famous Five and other women over the past century, we are so much better off than we would be. It was women doing it for other women.

It was women showing judgment, commitment and clear focus on real results.

The century ahead will be one in which the fight for women's equality is almost certainly one of the defining challenges and opportunities before humanity.

We need to be up to doing our part ... just as those fascinating women who went before us, did their part.

With that in mind, I would like to end with the words of the pledge of the Famous 5:

I stand equal
To high and splendid bravery

Thank you. Merci.