Historica Canada Education Portal

Agnes Macphail

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Agnes Macphail biography from *The Canadians* series. In 1921, Agnes Macphail became the first woman Member of Parliament elected to the Canadian House of Commons. In the 19 years that she served in office, she fought for prison reform, disarmament, and equal pay for equal work for women. She was a major character in the changing role of women, and the advancement of women in politics.

Aims

In a variety of role-playing and writing activities, students will examine Macphail's political career in order to understand the times in which she lived and her contributions to the changing role of women. Students will also investigate the causes that Macphail championed in her career.

Background

The press identified Agnes Macphail as a single, matronly woman; a rather strict schoolteacher from rural Ontario. It was an image they perpetuated and an image she hated. She was so upset with the way she

was portrayed as a humourless and loveless spinster that before her death she gave old love letters to the National Archives with instructions that they be included in her papers for all to read.

Agnes Macphail, Canada's first female Member of Parliament took no chances on how she would be remembered. She was first elected in 1921 and would remain as the Lady Member from Grey County for 19 years. Her story is one of stubborn and serious dedication, and a lifelong refusal to remain in the place society dictated for her. Even when she won the nomination, Agnes was assured it was all a mistake and she should step aside and let a man do the job. She refused. If it was a mistake they would just have to learn to live with it.

She'd been a schoolteacher and she knew the way the farm people of Grey County functioned and thought. She was one of them and she believed, as they did, that Canada needed a new political movement. She was in at the founding of the CCF – which would become the NDP – and she took the lead in prison reform at a time when the perforated belt was still used to tear the flesh from prisoners' backsides.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Have your students become reporters on Parliament Hill and interview famous Members of Parliament (MPs) such as Agnes Macphail. Make sure your reporters find out what political affiliation their Member belongs to, how long they have been in office, what their party's platform is, what issues are important to them personally, and their background story (what

did they do before becoming a politician and how did they become involved in politics?). Reports can be presented in various formats: a news broadcast (live or video taped), a newspaper article (the class can create a political newsletter or journal by combining their reports), or a talk show.

2. Write a one-act play, song, poem, or short story about Agnes Macphail and the hurdles she had to overcome to get elected. Students can work individually or in groups. Since she was elected five times, a class could be broken up into five groups and each group could focus on one election, including what the major issues were and any attempts to thwart her nomination.

3. Agnes Macphail was actively involved in the formation of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the precursor to the New Democratic Party (NDP). Use the video to introduce political parties and the concept of platforms. What causes does the NDP advocate for today? What do the other major political parties in Canada advocate for? Bring in campaign posters from local MPs that show party symbols. Have students arrange them in order of right to left, based on "right wing" and "left wing" politics. Are there any that do not fit? What are the major issues that each party is pursuing right now, either locally, regionally, or nationally?

4. As a woman, Agnes Macphail did not have much credibility in the male dominated Parliament when she was first elected, yet she managed to make some significant contributions and changes. Macphail is an excellent example of the power of one voice. Many films (*The Power of One, Schindler's List*), books (*A Prayer for Owen Meany, Uncle Tom's Cabin*), or poems (look for ones by Edward Everett Hale) deal with the topic of one person making a difference. How do your students feel they

can contribute to humanity? Who are their role models or heroes, and what have they done to inspire your students? Have your students write to your MP about an issue that concerns them or have each student make a short speech to the class on a topic of their choice.

5. Show the Heritage Minute on Agnes Macphail. Compare it with other Heritage Minutes on women, such as Nellie McClung, or Jennie Trout. How have women's roles in society changed? How are they the same?

6. Agnes Macphail is best known for her avocation of prison reform. Have your students create a poster or pamphlet that either informs the public of the need for reform (Agnes's point of view) or explains why the penal system is effective (the other point of view). This would be a good activity to either introduce or wrap up a lesson on propaganda. Similarly, older students could have a debate about the current status of the penal system. What are some flaws? What are Canada's strengths in justice? Perhaps the system could be tried in a mock trial (this would be especially effective in a senior law course).

7. Agnes Macphail was concerned with her image as a woman. When she first came to Parliament Hill, her focus was on acceptance by her male peers. As she proved her worth as a politician, Agnes became more occupied with maintaining her gender. She hated her image as a single matronly woman. Ask your students how Agnes might have felt. How do women today maintain their "femininity" in male-dominated careers, such as business, law enforcement, and technical trades? Bring in some magazines (especially teen and women's magazines, like *Seventeen, Teen, Canadian Living, Chatelaine,*etc.). How does the media portray women today? How would Agnes have fit in as a single woman today?

8. The first portion of this video deals with the turn of the nineteenth

Century. What was life like for Canadians? What issues did farmers face? Attempt to recreate the time period. Have students dress up in costumes and recreate scenes that Agnes might have found herself in. Bring in music to create the atmosphere. Ask them to describe how Agnes Macphail was representative of the times but also ahead of her times.

9. There are a number of creative writing assignments that could follow the video. These allow the students to imagine the attitudes, and atmosphere of the society that Agnes Macphail was up against.

- Imagine you are a journalist in 1921-22. Write an article about either Agnes Macphail's nomination or her first speech in Parliament. Remember that you are most likely male, and keep in mind how society felt about women having the right to vote, let alone having a female in the House of Commons.
- Compose a letter from Agnes Macphail's father (addressed to her) encouraging her to step down from Parliament and allow a man to do the job.
- Compose a letter from her father years later, apologizing for not supporting her, and explaining how he felt that societal pressures forced him to react the way he did.
- Write a formal essay defending, refuting, or revising the argument that Agnes Macphail was a very stubborn woman, with a lifelong refusal to conform to traditional gender roles.
- Have your students imagine they are presenting Agnes Macphail with a life long achievement award for the advancement of women in politics. They are to write a speech outlining her achievements.

10. Have your students critically analyze the information available on Agnes Macphail. This can be done in a seminar type discussion, or in

written format. They should take into account societal views at the time, as well as who was reporting, and writing about her. They should then evaluate whether or not the portrayal of her is fair and objective, or tainted with prejudice and/or bias.

11. This video is a very effective resource to begin a study on the changing role of women. Have them discuss and evaluate the hardships and restraints that Agnes Macphail was subjected to considering that teaching was a socially acceptable career for women and a position in the Federal Government was not. This would make an effective issue for a class discussion.

12. Put the students into four groups and assign each group one key issue Agnes Macphail supported. These include: farmers' rights, the need to recognize women as individuals, the rights of miners to organize and join unions to fight for their rights, and her views presented in the League of Nations on the International Disarmament Committee. Give them time to research some background information, and then have them present the information as a speech in the House of Commons, or as a Heritage Minute.

13. An interesting role-playing scenario is to put Agnes Macphail on trial for overstepping the socially acceptable boundaries of women in 1921. Roles to be played:

- Agnes Macphail
- Lawyers, two for the defendant and two representing the crow

Witnesses called to the stand:

- Prime Minister King
- Her Mother and her Father
- Voter who supported her
- Liberal representative from her riding
- Nellie McClung
- A representative from the United Farmers of Ontario
- Bob Gardiner

You need a judge, some jurors, and possibly some members of the press who could report at the end. Another possible scenario is to hold a press conference with the above witnesses present. Have Agnes Macphail and her supporters defend why she belongs in the House of Commons, and her opposition and reporters argue why she does not.

Resources

The Canadians: Agnes Macphail

Heritage Minutes: Agnes Macphail

Agnes Macphail - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Crowley, Terry. *Agnes Macphail and the politics of equality.* Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1990.

Crowley, Terry. "Agnes Macphail and Canadian working women." *Labour/Le travail* Vol. 28 (Fall 1991). 129-148.

Macphail, Agnes. *Agnes Macphail on convict or citizen?: the urgent need for prison reform.* Toronto: Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, Literature Dept.

Doris Pennington, Ed. *A Brave and Glorious Adventure: The Letters and Speeches of Agnes Macphail.* Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1989.

Pennington, Doris. *Agnes Macphail, reformer: Canada's first female M.P.* Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1989.