

First Woman Senator: Cairine Reay Mackay Wilson (1885–1962)

by Carrie Lau

She was no radical feminist, but she brought about change with quiet persuasion.

It was controversial when Prime Minister Mackenzie King appointed Cairine Wilson as Canada's first female senator from among many candidates. But the senator would prove herself to not only be a good politician; she would make a name for herself as a compassionate champion of refugees and immigrants and as a zealous supporter of women in politics.

Cairine Mackay was born into an affluent Montreal family, the eighth child of Robert and Jane Mackay. Robert Mackay was a Liberal senator, and politics was often discussed in the Mackay home. As a young woman, Cairine Mackay became familiar with Parliament Hill because she often joined her father on his regular trips to Ottawa. Sir Wilfrid Laurier was a family friend whom Cairine Mackay greatly respected and admired. With all these influences, it is no wonder that she showed an interest in politics from an early age. Cairine Mackay was a bright student at the two girls' schools she attended, but did not go on to obtain a university degree, likely in keeping with tradition.

In Ottawa in May 1905, Cairine Mackay met Norman Wilson, a Liberal Member of Parliament, and the two were married in February of 1909. The newlyweds moved to Rockland, a small town in eastern Ontario. Over the span of the next fifteen years, their eight children were born. In Rockland, the Wilsons were part of an English minority in which it was daily routine to communicate in French. This way, Cairine Wilson honed her French-language skills, which would prove to be useful in her later years as a politician. Cairine Wilson was extremely active in

Rockland. She worked in her church as well as with the Red Cross, and planned a “knitting war” for the women of the community for the war effort. She would find these organization skills indispensable as a senator.

In 1918, the family moved to Ottawa. In the years following the Wilsons’ move, Cairine realized she wanted more from life than just housewifery. As a result, she became very active within her community and in many organizations. In 1921, Cairine Wilson took on her first position in politics as the co-president of the Eastern Ontario Liberal Association. In 1922, she helped bring the Ottawa Women’s Liberal Club into being, and was its president for several years. Cairine Wilson was the main founder of the National Federation of Liberal Women of Canada. To encourage the involvement of young people in politics, she led a committee in the creation of the Twentieth Century Liberal Association of Canada.

On February 15, 1930, Prime Minister Mackenzie King appointed Cairine Wilson to the Senate. This occurred four months after the ruling in the Persons Case, in which women were identified as persons and thus gained the right to be senators. Her appointment was controversial for several reasons. Some Canadians felt it inappropriate for the first female senator to be anglophone; others were angry that the first woman appointed to the Senate was one who had “never raised a finger in the fight to win for women the right to sit in the red chamber at Ottawa.”ⁱ

Despite initial criticism, Senator Cairine Wilson proved herself time and time again through action. As a former private secretary once said, “Cairine Wilson never, never turned anybody away from her office.”ⁱⁱ She encouraged other women to be informed citizens and to vote. She took particular interest in topics like divorce, health care, labour issues, and education. She was not afraid to speak out for what she believed in — for example, Cairine Wilson fought

the disenfranchisement and later the deportation of Japanese Canadians, but her efforts were in vain. Another example is when she spoke out openly against the Munich Agreement, at a time when the Liberal government approved of the agreement.

In 1937, Senator Cairine Wilson became the president of the League of Nations Society of Canada. In 1938, she led the creation of the Canadian National Committee on Refugees, of which she became the chairman. Cairine Wilson became the chairman of the Senate Committee on Immigration and Labour in 1947. In 1949, she became the first female Canadian delegate to the United Nations General Assembly. For her efforts regarding refugees, she received the Cross of the Knight of the Legion of Honour in 1950.

Tragedy struck, however. Norman Wilson died in 1956, and in 1960, Cairine Wilson developed uterine cancer. In the next years, her health deteriorated, and she passed away on March 3, 1962.

The remarkable humanitarianism of Cairine Wilson must be recognized as that of a national heroine. But Cairine Wilson was more than that; she was a shining example of the global citizen.

Quote:

“Without a belief in the dignity of man, without indignation against arbitrarily created human suffering, there can be no democratic principles.”ⁱⁱⁱ

— from an article by Cairine Wilson in *The Key*, the newsletter of the Junior League of Toronto

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Endnotes

ⁱ Valerie Knowles. *First Person: A Biography of Cairine Wilson, Canada's First Woman Senator* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1988), 83.

ⁱⁱ Knowles, 113.

ⁱⁱⁱ Knowles, 215.