# "The Women's Parliament:" Political Oratory, Humor, and Social Change

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**Abstract:**

Why does humour change minds in politics when logic cannot? This article explores this question in the context of the suffragist movement in Manitoba, Canada in 1914, when the Women's Political Equity League found logical arguments ineffective in persuading provincial legislators to grant women voting rights. When the provincial premier rejected their petition, the Political Equity League staged a series of burlesques around the province of Manitoba in which they reversed the roles of men and women to make the issue of enfranchisement more salient to voters. These satires of the reigning premier have been credited for making women in Manitoba among the first to vote in the Western World. I draw on several rhetorical theories of humour, including those of Cicero, Campbell, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, to account for the societal shift in support of votes for women as a result of this parody. I conclude that when well-supported and trenchant logic proves ineffective in bringing about social change, innovative emotional appeals can provide the impetus for listeners to laugh uproariously and then rethink what may have been entrenched political or ideological beliefs.

> *"Do you not know of the disgraceful happenings in countries cursed by manhood suffrage? [· · ·] Although it is quite true, as you say, the polls are only open once in four years—when men once get the habit—who knows where it will end [· · ·] Politics has a blighting, demoralizing influence on men· It dominates them, hypnotizes them pursues them even after their earthly career is over· Time and again it has been proven that men came back and voted—even after they were dead" – Pearl Watson in* Purple Springs *by Nellie McClung, (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1921): 285·*

1 In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many citizens of North America and Europe were working to secure voting rights for women, driven by the recognition that without them, women were unable to participate fully as citizens: they had no recourse to change bad laws to which they were subject. Women's desire for the vote grew out of social activist work that many undertook in response to social conditions they found abhorrent. In the U.S., the recognition that women were relatively powerless in the social and political sphere grew out of the abolitionist movement, when speeches and rallies failed to persuade male voters to support either the cause of abolition or candidates who supported it. In Canada and Britain, women were moved to argue for full participation in society in response to the poor working conditions of women in low-paid service jobs, the unequal treatment of women

before the law, and their inability to effect change to improve women's lives generally. Isabelle Bassett describes the situation:

> Based partly on a belief that women possessed a higher moral sense than men, a form of feminism developed that aimed to harness this morality and apply it to the good of society in general. However, when reform-minded women tried to institute social changes, they discovered that they had little hope of making any progress without the effective power of the vote. (129)

By the second decade of the 20th century, the suffrage movements in North America and Britain had taken divergent paths towards achieving their goal. In the U.S., organizations worked to secure the required number of signatures on petitions in the early steps of having the American constitution amended to give women the right to vote. In Britain, suffragists had engaged violent protest to attract attention. In Canada, the suffrage movement focused its efforts at the provincial level, with activists—both male and female—speaking at rallies in support of their cause. Nellie McClung, president of the Political Equity League in Manitoba, directed the campaign for women's enfranchisement in that province. Of her leadership, Grant MacEwan notes,

> Mrs. McClung, with no less zeal [than the British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst], believed it was not necessary to go on window-breaking sprees in order to gain attention. Her oratory and logic were the best of all instruments[,] and she and her friends resolved to carry their cause directly to the Premier of Manitoba with an orderly show of strength. (163)

McClung felt that persuasive argument was the best tactic for achieving their goal. As a popular speaker, she believed the power of rational argument would be most effective in showing the provincial leadership the advantages of extending the franchise to women.

2 But what happens when logical argument fails? In Britain, suffragists turned to violent demonstration. In Canada, suffragists turned to humor. Rebuffed by a patronizing and ideologically entrenched provincial government, McClung and the Political Equity League of Manitoba staged a public burlesque or satiric stage performance called "The Women's Parliament," in which a delegation of men petitioned the all-female legislature for voting rights. When the same arguments used against women were refashioned to apply to men, the audience was hugely entertained by the absurdity. Even more remarkable, they changed their minds. What is the persuasive effect of humor? Why was the parody of the Premier of Manitoba in 1914 effective in swaying public opinion on the issue of votes for women when logical argument went nowhere?

3 In response to an earlier version of this paper, Jamie MacKinnon argued that the Mock Parliament was an instance of "those with little power refusing to take seriously the huffing

and puffing and posturing of those with (or who are mouthpieces for) real power." Several rhetorical theorists would seem to support MacKinnon's contention that humor is the tool of the powerless, and this may be true with rhetoric generally but humor's relationship to politics and political rhetoric, I would argue, is different. As Nellie McClung and the delegates to the Manitoba Legislature were to discover, logic is not effective for changing political belief because it is ideological, part of a system of belief. Humor, a disarming emotional appeal, may be effective against ideology in a way that logic cannot be because it approaches the topic in a non-threatening way, cajoling listeners into considering alternative viewpoints that they are likely to reject out-right if presented logically. If people can be made to laugh at a parody of their beliefs, they start see how those beliefs may need amendment: certainly many of the spectators at the performances of the Women's Parliament would have been sympathetic to Premier Roblin's beliefs at that time, but within two years of the performances many fewer of those spectators still shared his beliefs.

4 In this article, I analyze this historical event—the staging of a "Women's Parliament" in Winnipeg, MB—to try to account for the persuasive power of humor in the suffragist movement in Canada in the early 20th century. Historical accounts credit the staging of "The Women's Parliament" as a tactic that contributed directly to women in Manitoba being among the first in the Western World to vote. First, I draw on two historical theories of rhetoric—those of Cicero and George Campbell (both of whom tried to account for the persuasive power of humor)—to identify what made the perspectives of opponents to the suffragist movement in Manitoba in 1914 a suitable target for humor. Then, using the concepts of dissociation and reversal as defined by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, I analyze several examples of humor from the Women's Parliament to account for the shift in societal attitudes in favor of the enfranchisement of women as an eventual result of this parody. Finally, I examine how the Women's Parliament constitutes a form of subversive political humor based on the level of authority that it targeted.

5 But before the suffragist movement in Manitoba resorted to humor, supporters took their best shot at persuading the government of the day based on logic and persuasive oratory. In January 1914 Nellie McClung lead a delegation of several hundred women and men before the Manitoba legislature to present arguments as to why then-premier, Rodmond Roblin, and his majority Conservative government should support a bill being introduced to grant provincial voting rights to women. The delegates had five speakers, including McClung (the president of the Political Equity League); the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.); the secretary of the Grain Growers' Association of Manitoba; and several

prominent activists, one identified as Rev. R.W. Martinson. These speakers were selected to demonstrate to the Premier and the government that this legislation had support from a diverse cross-section of the populace.

6 Canadian suffrage arguments in the early twentieth century were based on two somewhat contradictory assumptions: "the one, that women were more moral than men, and the other, that they were equal to men" (Bassett 139). These assumptions were evident in the arguments laid before the Premier and the Manitoba legislature. *The Winnipeg Free Press*, reporting on the interchange between the Premier and the delegates, reported on Jan. 27, 1914, that

> all [of the delegates] emphasized that the women of the province should have votes in order to better the conditions, not only in political circles, but to extend the influence of women over the homes. It was claimed by the speakers in favor of the movement that the influence of the mothers ceased when the young man or woman left the home, but with women having votes in the political life of the province the refining influence of the home would be felt everywhere. (53)

This summary invokes an underlying belief in the superior moral influence of women: the moral training of young people should not end when they leave home, but the current conditions under the purview of men did not provide this much-needed guidance.

7 In his reply Roblin also drew on this assumption of the moral superiority of women when he responded that "the early training he had received from his mother . . . had instilled into him a great respect for women that placed them on a much higher plane than man" (*The Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 27, 1914). He acknowledged the worldwide movement in English-speaking countries for the enfranchisement of women, and he implied that the violent approach favored by the suffrage movement in Britain should provide compelling evidence that women everywhere were not ready for the vote: "But if a few short days of disappointment as in England, caused such hysteria as to endanger human life and result in the destruction of millions of dollars worth of property, is there not cause for the authorities to hesitate in extending the suffrage to women?" (*The Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 27, 1914). He points to the behavior of women and the response of legislators in Britain to justify his own rejection of the delegation's arguments and his maintenance of the belief that "the extension of the franchise would be a backward step" (*The Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 27, 1914). He also noted that he would vote against any resolution because "at present he could not see what the women would gain" (*The Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 27, 1914). Clearly, the reasoning laid out by the delegates in their presentation, however sound, did not persuade Roblin to rethink his position that the status quo served women well.

8 The delegation was disappointed but not discouraged by their lack of success, although they believe that they had exhausted the traditional routes using logical argument. In response the Political Equity League, one of the organizations that had attended as part of the delegation, rented the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg where they staged "a burlesque skit[1] in which an all-woman Parliament debated whether to give men the vote" (Labarge 17); that is, a delegation of men approached the all-female legislature to petition for voting rights and were turned away with arguments resembling those offered by Roblin.[2] The burlesque was performed for several nights running to packed houses. McClung, president of the Political Equity League, assumed the role of Premier, creating a "wickedly witty parody of Roblin" (Labarge 17). How witty was it? The conservative newspaper and pro-government organ, the Telegram, reported of her performance, "Mrs. McClung's reply to the appeal for 'votes for men' was the choicest piece of sarcasm ever heard locally" (Qtd in Bassett 140). In her later literary recounting of the experience published in *Purple Springs* in 1921, McClung reprised her speech. Here is an excerpt that captures the flavor of her satire. She has her main character, Pearl Watson, playing the Premier, imitating his voice, phrasing, and physical mannerisms:

> But, gentlemen, you are your own answer to the question; you are the product of an age which has not seen fit to bestow the gift you ask, and who can say that you are not splendid specimens of mankind? No! No! Any system which can produce the virile, splendid type of men we have before us today, is good enough for me, and, if it is good enough for me—it is good enough for anybody! (282)

In this passage, the female Premier (and parody of Roblin), Pearl Watson economically frames a complex, sexist argument. First, she objectifies the men by focusing solely on their physical attributes and suggesting those are sufficient to justify their existence (they don't need to *do* anything). Second, she turns this objectification into evidence to support the status quo—a system that produced these good-looking men needs no change. Finally, she arrogantly offers herself as the measure of the world: "if it is good enough for me—it is good enough for anybody!" Such arguments are specious when directed toward women; the way that McClung has Watson recast them to apply to men highlights their absurdity. In the argument framed here, McClung has exemplified Cicero's point in *De Oratore* regarding humor in oratory: "men [and women] are most delighted with a joke when the laugh is raised by the thought and the language in conjunction" (154). In this passage, the source of

[1] Walter Blair notes that burlesques were immensely popular in 19th Century [North] American culture. When considering a means for critiquing antiquated ideas, the Political Equity League would have been aware of this popular tradition for puncturing over-blown sentiments and arguments, and they adapted it to their needs.

[2] According to Isabelle Bassett, the idea of the mock parliament had originated with suffragists in Ontario who had "used [it] so successfully before the turn of the century" (139).

humorous incongruity arises through conjoining the patronizing appreciation of the delegates' physical appearance (the language) with the recognition that our culture doesn't (or didn't in 1914) objectify or infantilize men so blatantly (the thought).

9 One of the central tools of burlesque is parody (Blair, 241). The Mock Parliament used parody or ridicule to highlight the absurdity of the arguments posed by proponents of the status quo. George Campbell notes that ridicule is "a potent engine" (20) to erroneous perspectives. While he asserts that ridicule is generally "confined to questions of less moment" (20), Campbell articulates the circumstances under which ridicule can be particularly effective:

> Ridicule [. . .] is fitter for refuting error than for supporting truth, for restraining from wrong conduct, than for inciting to the practice of what is right [. . .]. it is not properly leveled at the false, but at the absurd in tenets [. . .] it is not the criminal part which it attacks, but that which we denominate as silly or foolish [. . .] it is not falsity or mistake but palpable error or absurdity (a thing hardly confutable by mere argument), which is the object of contempt; and consequently those dogmas are beyond the reach of cool reasoning which are within the rightful confines of ridicule. (20-21)

Campbell notes that ridicule is effective for pointing out error or discouraging wrong conduct, and Premier Roblin's objections to enfranchising women fit Campbell's description. They are not criminal, rather they are foolish and absurd because they rest on sentimental, upper-class, and unrealistic conceptions of women's lives. In fact, the women that Roblin was addressing at this time had settled Manitoba side-by-side with the men, breaking sod, tilling soil, caring for livestock, giving birth in sod-covered shacks carved into the hillsides, and surviving the harsh prairie winters where snow storms in spring and fall could be less than 90 days apart. The implication that such women were too mentally frail and sheltered to engage in politics is delusional. The delegation had attempted the path of "cool reasoning" with its presentation to the legislature, but it found Roblin's objections were, as Campbell notes, "hardly confutable by mere argument," making them an appropriate target for ridicule.

10 In fact, by selecting ridicule as their response, the Political Equity League and its suffragist supporters recast Roblin's arguments—from principled objections to ludicrous maundering. This is the kind of unexpected twist that Campbell notes is the crux of an effective use of humor: "it is the design of wit to excite in the mind an agreeable surprise [. . .]. This end is effected [. . .] in debasing things pompous or seemingly grave" (8), making the surprising deflation of pompous arguments a potent source of humor.

11 Here is another excerpt from McClung's "barely fictionalized account" which sets out several pompous arguments:

> But my dear young friends, I am convinced you do not know what you are asking me to do, you do not know what you ask. You have not thought of it, of course, with the natural thoughtlessness of your sex. You ask for something which may disrupt the whole course of civilization. Man's place is to provide for his family, a hard enough task in these strenuous days. We hear of women leaving home, and we hear it with deepest sorrow. Do you know why women leave home? There is a reason. Home is not made sufficiently attractive! Would letting politics enter the home help matters. Ah no! Politics would unsettle our men. Unsettled men mean unsettled bills—unsettled bills mean broken homes—broken vows—and then divorce. Man has a higher destiny that politics. What is a home without a bank account? The man who pays the grocer rules the world. (McClung 283)

The pompous arguments in this passage are several: 1) men (i.e., women) don't think (literally), and therefore don't know what's good for them; 2) allowing men to vote will go far beyond upsetting the status quo (it might "disrupt the . . . course of civilization"; 3) men should not seek to rise above their appointed station (providing for the family); 4) allowing men to vote would distract them from their real work in the home, leading to bankruptcy, and then divorce; 5) individuals who pay the bills/raise children already have the ultimate political and social power (they rule the world), so they don't need any *real* political power. These arguments happen to be as false as they are patronizing.

12 Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's theories about the dissociation of pairs and the persuasive power of reversal are helpful here in identifying Watson's argumentative points and illuminating their speciousness to her listeners. The concept of dissociation involves the "refusal to recognize the existence of a connecting link [between interdependent elements that could originally be considered independent]" (411); in the present case, "Premier" Watson has associated the pair "child/man," in her assertion that the delegates "do not know what you ask. . .. with the natural thoughtlessness of your sex" (283), as did the real Premier Roblin two days earlier when he equated child/woman as an associative pair. In other words, they both construct a "natural" and "essential" connecting link between the two entities, child and woman/child and man. In recasting the argument, the suffragists intended to dissociate these ideas by representing the connecting link between child and man as also "natural" and "essential." They relied on listeners to reject the link between the two ideas because child and adult are binary opposites. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue that once the concepts have been dissociated and restructured, listeners do not return to the old association of the two ideas because they see the dissociation as "the inescapable solution" (415). The Political Equity League hoped the Mock Parliament would have this effect on the way viewers thought about women and their relationship to children—they are binary opposites.

13 A second concept that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca identified, reversal, explains why Watson's argument in this example was effective. Reversal refers to the tactic of transposing the established pairs rather than rejecting their association: "The significance of such reversals arises precisely from the fact that they are inserted into an aggregate that is otherwise accepted" (427). In this case, the audience's unquestioned acceptance of an inferior role for women is made salient by reversing the original pairing of child/*woman* vs. adult/*man*. When "man" is aligned with "child" and juxtaposed against "woman/adult," the audience must reconsider their acceptance of the original pairing.

14 Of course, the Mock Parliament used the tactic of reversal on a large scale too, systematically replacing men with women in the re-staging of the government and judiciously replacing *woman* with *man* in revised versions of all of the standard arguments opposing women's enfranchisement. Ultimately, the point of this reversal, at least where the Mock Parliament was concerned, was to transform the issue of votes for women so that members of the audience could no longer hear these standard arguments—the Premier's arguments—without remembering the parody and feeling superior to these ridiculous claims. As Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz note of ridicule, "Naturally, one doesn't want to associate with people or ideas one finds ridiculous" (217). Consequently, the Mock Parliament forced citizens to begin to distance themselves from their current government and its policy about votes for women. A parody is successful because it "makes its case by transforming the familiar [. . .] into something new. The argument sparkles in the tension between the original work and its imitation" (Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz 223). While the effect of a parody may be brief (when the context is lost, so is the effect of the humor), it can be powerful: "The object of a successful parody [. . .] is never seen in quite the same way again" (223). We can no longer take the original seriously.

15 Another way in which the humor may have contributed to a shift in the audience members' ideological stance is to consider how the event used reversal to disarm the sexist arguments of the opposition. The views that Roblin expressed rely on sexist stereotypes to characterize (and insult) all women, including those in the delegation to the Manitoba legislature. When the stereotypes are recast in terms relating to men's lives, humor arises from the resulting incongruity—the infantilizing of men. It also prompts audience members to contemplate the implications of these sexist attitudes from the inside: what if this joke were reality? Merrie Bergman argues that episodes of sexist humor work by creating insult to the individual (usually a woman) who is the butt of the joke. She notes that the insult arises from the necessity that such humor demands of "finding fun in an episode

when part of the stage-setting that we have contributed to the episode, and that is necessary to the fun, hurts someone" (79). While men were likely not hurt by the sexist humor created by the Mock Parliament because they do not inhabit the world characterized by the parody, the reversal does enable them to glimpse a sexist world that objectifies or dehumanizes them and limits their possibilities and opportunities. In this particular case, the Mock Parliament uses sexist humor against fictional men to highlight the plight of real women limited by sexist attitudes and stereotypes.

16 David Paletz identifies four different types of political humor based on the target of the attack, the exact focus of the humor, and its level of seriousness. He notes that the humor moves from supportive through benign and undermining to subversive as the level of political authority targeted increases from an individual occupying the position to policies the individual supports, to the authority position itself, then to the institution with which that authority is associated, through to "the political system as a whole" (485). For example, when the policies supported by a political authority are the target (i.e., Roblin's opposition to enfranchising women), the political humor can undermine the status quo. When the humor attacks the political system as a whole, the humor is considered subversive because it targets cherished beliefs and ideals rather than political authority figures. Paletz describes three characteristics of subversive humor: 1) it targets figures or concepts of "relatively high authority," 2) it can contain "disturbing foci," and 3) it may "[exacerbate] tension in the audience by [a] lack of satisfactory resolution" (491) of the humor. In fact, the Women's Parliament targets ever-increasing levels of authority as its critique unfolds, but by focusing the critique around the authority figure of Premier Roblin and personalizing the critique of widespread political ideals as policies that he "espouses, promotes, is identified with [in the province], [and] takes responsibility for" (485), the participants mitigate the disturbing focus on legally-enshrined cultural beliefs that only men (of European descent)[3] were capable of voting intelligently. Another area that elevates the level of the Mock Parliament's satire from "benign" or "undermining" to "subversive" is its focus on why women should have the vote: the unexpected shift in focus from votes for women to votes for men in an alternate universe serves to "challenge the audience, bringing to its members truths about authority they might rather not know or actively avoid" (Paletz 486), that is, that women are adults and should be treated as such by institutional authority.

[3] Not all men were allowed to vote in 1914; in fact anti-Chinese legislation prevented the enfranchisement of all Canadians of Asian descent until the mid-twentieth century (Audette A1).

17 Although Paletz suggests that audiences may find subversive political humor uncomfortable (he uses the example of Lenny Bruce in the U.S. in the 1960s), in the case of the Mock Parliament in Manitoba in 1914, the crowd appeared to love the political humor and embrace the ideas behind it. Perhaps the Political Equity League chose a propitious or kairotic moment in history when society generally was growing more favorably disposed to the idea that women should vote. The play continued to be performed beyond January 1914 to packed theatres across the province, and the subversive humor had its intended effect: Roblin's stranglehold on the provincial government was reduced to minority rule in a subsequent election, and he was defeated the following year. The Liberal party that replaced him, using the enfranchisement of women as a platform in their campaign, expedited a bill through the provincial legislature to give women full voting rights in January 1916. Historians note, "the evening [at the Walker Theatre] was later given some of the credit for the defeat of Roblin's government the following year" (Labarge 17). While the audiences were mightily entertained by McClung's performance as the paternalistic Premier Roblin, they were also convinced that the women had a legitimate and important argument.

18 This historical event, the Women's Parliament, shows that humor, especially parody or satire, can have a powerfully persuasive impact on topics of significant societal importance. When well-supported and trenchant logic proves ineffective in bringing about social change, innovative emotional appeals (such as incisive satiric commentary) can provide the impetus for listeners to laugh uproariously and then seriously reconsider or even rethink what may have been entrenched political or ideological beliefs. The suffragists who participated in the Women's Parliament used the rhetorical strategy of reversal to recast the enfranchisement debate in terms that made the issues salient to audience members. The depiction of a fictional world in which men were judged too incompetent to vote enabled suffragists to engage the imaginations and the will of their audience members in support of their cause. This satire was an early step in the long process of subverting the status quo, changing male voters' minds so that they embraced the idea of enfranchising women and the political party that identified this issue as central to its election platform. Rather than the iron fist of violence chosen by some British suffragists, the velvet glove of persuasive humor was a most effective strategy for Canadian suffragists.

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