

Thérèse Casgrain

OC 06/07/67

CC 18/12/74

When Thérèse Casgrain was small she sat quietly with her ankles crossed. "I was the only daughter," she told Ann Charney of *Maclean's*. "There were three boys in the house. What was permitted for them was not permitted for me . . . always because I was a girl. I was a very good student, but I was not allowed to study beyond a certain level. I remember when I told my father that I wanted to go to university, he laughed at me and said, 'Go to the kitchen and see if the cook can teach you something.'"

Thérèse went to the Convent of the Sacred Heart, where she learned Italian, and to the kitchen, where she learned cooking, and at 19 married Pierre Casgrain, a Liberal who sat in the House of Commons seat formerly held by her father, a Conservative.

At 25 she made a nervous speech in her husband's campaign. "As long as I live I will see myself on that balcony at the back of the hotel in Baie St-Paul. The crowd numbered about 2,000 and I was seized with panic. But, because I loved my husband, I spoke before all those people, and that's how it all began."

She went on to face significant opposition as a ladylike suffragette. ("Nothing justifies giving the vote to women," said the Archbishop of Quebec, "neither natural laws nor the good of society.") When she went with a delegation to see Quebec Premier Louis Taschereau, he received them in the legislative dining room. "I congratulated him on having chosen such a suitable place," said Mme Casgrain. "After all, it was next to the kitchen."

In the twenties Quebec feminists had basic reasons for disliking the status quo: Women could not hold a number of public offices. Teachers received token wages. Under civil service regulations no woman could be paid more than \$1,500 annually. Article 187 of the Quebec Code permitted a husband to separate from his wife if she committed adultery but permitted a wife to leave her husband only if he kept a concubine on the family premises. In 1930 the Dorion Commission, appointed by Taschereau, recommended several improvements, but on this particular inequity it concluded that: "In principle, adultery can be as sharp a wound for a woman as for a man; but whatever may be said, everyone knows that, in fact, the wound to the heart of the wife is not generally as severe as the wound to the husband who has been deceived by his wife."

In 1942 Madame Casgrain decided to run for office as an Independent Liberal. She failed to win her husband's old seat in the Commons (he had become a judge) and after some reflection quit the Liberals and joined the socialist Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. "Some of my friends thought that I had gone mad, but the many friends I lost were replaced by other, truer friends." She

would be a very independent socialist, as she had been a very independent Liberal. In 1951 she was elected CCF leader in Quebec. She ran for Parliament, and lost, nine times more.



In her spare time she established the Quebec branch of the Civil Liberties Union and founded *La ligue de la jeunesse féminine*, where young French-Canadian girls of leisure were trained in good works, and *La fédération des femmes du Québec*, a coalition of Quebec women of all life-styles.

In 1970, when she was 74, Pierre Trudeau, an old family friend, offered her a seat in the Senate. "He said to me, 'Think it over,' but I thought, if I take some time he'll think I'm going to ask some man for advice, so I said, 'Yes,' right off."

She reached the Senate's age limit the next year and retired, but she has remained active and is still unburdened by party-line consistency. As she told Mme Charney, "I have a lot to say, and people are willing to listen. To those who think I'm an old dépassée woman, I simply say I am, as I was, much ahead of your time."