



The Canadian
Accounting
Hall of Fame

Le Temple
de la renommée comptable
du Canada

Ellen Fairclough - inducted 2022



Ellen Louks Fairclough, nee Cook, was born in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1905. Money was tight: she later recalled her embarrassment at being one of the few in her public school class whose parents could not afford the ten cents a month asked of all students. She entered the part-time workforce at age 12, and for the next four years she was never without a part-time job after school, on Saturdays and in her summer holidays. After public school, since her family could not manage “Collegiate” fees, she enrolled in a three-year Commercial studies program, in which she learned skills that laid the groundwork for a series of bookkeeping, secretarial and clerical jobs. Unemployment rates were high in Hamilton in the 1920s, but she developed expertise in accounting, which was put to

the test at a brokerage firm, W. H. Magill, where she became known for her ability to straighten out some of the most challenging assignments. After the 1929 stock market crash she often worked from 9.30am until 1.00am, balancing books and calculating margins at the end of each trading day.

Despite the efforts of Fairclough and other employees, the Magill firm, like many other brokerages, went under in the early 1930s. Fairclough began working with a former brokerage colleague, who needed someone with a knowledge of the stock market and with accounting skills. During that period the Certified Public Accountants’ Association – a predecessor body to CPA Ontario - started to admit women, and in 1935 she passed her CPA exams, one of the first women to do so in Canada. This provided her with the impetus to form her own accounting and tax service firm, which in due course evolved into the Hamilton-based firm known as MacGillivray & Co. During this period she became heavily involved in volunteer and community organizations, including the Girl Guides, the YWCA, the United Empire Loyalists Association and the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (serving the last two as Dominion Secretary and Vice President respectively).

Fairclough entered politics in 1940: first as Hamilton City Councillor, then Deputy Mayor, in the 1940s. When elected an MP in 1950, she became the sixth woman to serve in Canada’s

Parliament. An early initiative was to introduce a private member's bill, to require equal pay for equal work in areas under Federal jurisdiction; while unsuccessful, the government enacted similar legislation after the 1953 election, and Fairclough was given much of the credit for this by the media.

When she was appointed to the Federal Cabinet in 1957 she had to sell her interest in MacGillivray & Co. She was initially Secretary of State, an undemanding role, but then Minister of Citizenship and Immigration – a very sensitive position, which included Indian Affairs, in which capacity she introduced historic legislation giving Status Indians the right to vote in Federal elections. (She visited as many as 100 reserves, and received numerous honours from Aboriginal groups.) Under her leadership the immigration system was changed from one favouring whites from Commonwealth countries to one that rated prospective immigrants according to their skills and education rather than race or nationality. Her final cabinet position was Postmaster General. She was named acting Prime Minister for a short period while Prime Minister Diefenbaker was travelling. It was said “If you are a woman doing the same work as a man and earning the same wage for that work, if you are a First Nations voter, if you were able to enter Canada as a refugee in the early 1960s, then one of the people you can thank is Ellen Fairclough.”

During the 1950s and early 1960s she was elected to Parliament five times, a record for any woman MP in that era. After losing her seat in 1963, she returned to Hamilton; she became an executive officer and director of Hamilton Trust and Savings Corporation, and resumed many of her former community activities. She continued her advocacy for women, and served as treasurer of Zonta International, an international service organization that advocates for, and empowers, women worldwide. She served as a board member, then Chair, of the Hamilton Community Foundation. She retired from Hamilton Trust in 1980, and then became Chair of Hamilton Hydro for eleven years.

Her path-breaking achievements were recognized with many honours. A predecessor body to The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario made her an Honorary Life Member in 1953; the Institute itself made her an FCA in 1965, and then in 2002 presented her with the Award of Outstanding Merit (being just the second woman to receive this rare honour). She was made an Honorary Chief by the Blackfoot Nation, and an Honorary Doctor of Laws by McMaster University. In 1979 she was inducted as an Officer of the Order of Canada, and then in 1994 she was promoted to Companion – the highest tier of the Order. She was inducted to the Order of Ontario in 1996, an Ontario office tower in Hamilton was named the “Ellen Fairclough Building”, and several Ontario schools were named after her. The Federal Government issued a postage stamp honouring her and her achievements in 2005. Queen Elizabeth II bestowed the “Right Honourable” title on her in 1992 – one of the very few Canadians other than Prime Ministers, Governors General and Chief Justices of the Supreme Court to be so honoured.

Fairclough's autobiography *Saturday's Child: Memoirs of Canada's First Female Cabinet Minister* was published in 1995. The title comes from the line in the jingle: "Saturday's child works hard for a living."

When she married Gordon Fairclough in 1931 they eloped to Buffalo because they could not afford the cost of a wedding; they had met ten years earlier. They had one son, Howard, who became a talented musician. She died in 2004, at age 99; one of her bequests was to add to the Howard Fairclough Organ Scholarship Fund, established with her husband in memory of their son whose health had been weakened by polio in his teens, and who died in 1986.