

## Marion Dewar

### 1928 - 2008

**M**arion Dewar (née Bell) was one of Canada's most prominent political figures of the 20th century. During her lifetime, she advocated for peace, justice, nuclear disarmament, refugees, visible minorities and gender and sexual equality. She championed quality public services such as affordable public housing and childcare. She implemented a plethora of initiatives and proved that change at the local level could have a national impact.



Marion was born in Montreal and raised in Buckingham, in the Outaouais region of Québec. In 1949, she obtained her nursing degree from Saint Joseph's School of Nursing in Kingston and later studied nursing science and public health at the University of Ottawa. In 1951, she married Ken Dewar, with whom she had five children. She periodically practised as a nurse until 1971.

She officially entered politics at the municipal level in Ottawa in 1972, serving as an alderman for Britannia Ward. In an interview, she said she chose municipal politics more by accident than by plan; that she simply wanted to give it a try. In 1974, she was elected as deputy mayor, and from 1978 to 1985, she served as Ottawa's second female mayor. During her tenure, she declared Ottawa a nuclear-free zone, and helped sponsor over 4,000 refugees from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam through Project 4000. The latter initiative snowballed across the country and bolstered the refugee quota from 8,000 to 50,000. Dewar even opened up her own house to citizens in need. Under her mayoralty, she ensured that her policies met citizens' needs and improved their quality of life. In an interview, she stated: "We have a social responsibility to ensure that the interests of

cultural minorities and the disadvantaged are not sacrificed to short-sighted budgetary decisions.

Services which are vital to the health of our community are not negotiable".

In 1985, she opted out of municipal politics to join the New Democratic Party, where she served as its president until 1987. Even after retiring from politics, her fight for a better world continued. From 1989 to 1992, she was the Executive Director of the Canadian Council on Children and Youth, and in 1995, she served as the National Chair of Oxfam Canada. She also volunteered with several organizations, including the Ottawa Women's Credit Union.

In 2002, Dewar was made a Member of the Order of Canada and in 2000 was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Ottawa. Although she died after an accident in 2008, her legacy lives on: a scholarship was created in her honour "to foster academic and leadership excellence in immigrant and refugee youth". The Rideau Centre – now a vital component of downtown Ottawa – was championed by Mayor Dewar, who pushed through the deal to construct it, despite vocal opposition. The Marion Dewar Plaza, adjacent to Ottawa's City Hall, is also a standing reminder of her mark on the city.