



5 FEBRUARY 2018

VOTES FOR WOMEN: A CENTENARY CELEBRATION

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Tomorrow will mark one hundred years since the Representation of the People Act received the Royal Assent. Under the terms of this Act 8.4 million British women were for the first time granted the right to vote at parliamentary elections. A somewhat weary - 'At Last!' - was very much the attitude of those who had been involved in the long and, at times, desperately bitter campaign and 'At Last' was the caption to this cartoon featured in the 23 January 1918 issue of *Punch* and then used by Millicent Fawcett, the leader of the constitutional campaign, as a frontispiece to her book, *The Women's Victory and After*, published in 1920. The image shows a Joan of Arc figure – eyes cast heavenward – holding a staff from which floats the banner of 'Woman's Franchise'. As a symbol, the maiden warrior had been actively associated with the campaign during the previous ten years or so as the suffrage campaign took a decidedly militant turn - and then, during the war, as the suffrage societies put their organizations at the service of the war effort. In an earlier work, *Five Famous Frenchwomen*, published in 1905, Millicent Fawcett had chosen Joan as the first of her heroines, and, while praising her military skill, had lauded her political astuteness. It was a combination of these attributes, demonstrated over many years by an eclectic legion of women – and men - that had – at last - brought women – or, at least, some women - the parliamentary vote.

For by 1918 women had been campaigning for the vote for over 50 years and during that time the campaign had been continually evolving, responding to changes in the nature of both politics and society. The popular narrative is nowadays dominated by the militancy of the 20th-century suffragettes but it is important to realize that this is by no means the whole story.

For to get a proper perspective on that 'At Last!' cartoon we have to begin in the mid-19th century - when to the majority of the population the idea of a woman voting was considered ridiculous. Voters were men, just as vicars, lawyers, soldiers and sailors were men. However in 1866 a new Reform Bill was under discussion - because the middle-class men who had been making Britain prosperous were not prepared to be excluded any longer from having a say in the way the country was governed. Taking advantage of the ensuing political discussion, a small group of women determined to do what they could to lobby for women to be included in the Bill. If a woman fulfilled the property qualification that allowed a man a vote, why should she not also be a voter?

The group included those who were already seeking ways to improve all aspects of women's social, economic, and educational position. They were beginning to recognise that while they were unable to influence the shaping of relevant legislation they would be unable to determine how women's lives were lived. The result was that, as one of the members mentioned in a November 1865 letter, 'some people are inclined to begin a subdued kind of agitation for the franchise'.

The group had a champion in the philosopher John Stuart Mill, whom they had supported when he stood as MP for Westminster earlier that year, and who the following June – that is June 1866 - returned the favour by presenting a petition to Parliament, signed by 1500 women, asking that the vote should be given to women on the same terms as it was given to men. The women who had organized this petition included 30-year-old



Elizabeth Garrett who a few months earlier had managed to qualify as a doctor – the first woman in Britain to do so. She had broken the barrier that construed a ‘professional’ as a man and in doing so had begun the work of eroding the accepted concept of what a woman was and what a woman could do. Working with her was her close friend, Emily Davies, who had encouraged her in her medical studies and before the end of the decade was to found Girton, the first woman’s college at Cambridge. The entry of women into higher education and the founding of secondary schools to provide an academic education for girls were also to be a means by which public perception of what a woman could be and do would slowly be reshaped.

On the day the suffrage petition was presented the women who had organized it were euphoric. But all too soon the energy that had enabled so many signatures to be collected in such a short time seemed to ebb away. After months of discussion these London-based women finally agreed to form themselves into ‘a Provisional Committee’, whereas in early 1867 Manchester set up a rather more effective suffrage organization, with Lydia Becker as its secretary. In July the somewhat feeble London committee became the rather more dynamic-sounding London National Society for Women’s Suffrage and at this point Emily Davies withdrew – to concentrate her efforts on Girton - as Elizabeth Garrett had earlier bowed out to devote herself to opening up the medical profession to women. By November 1867 a nationwide suffrage campaign had been established – with societies founded in Bristol, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Dublin, and Belfast. At this time the purpose of the societies was to present petitions to Parliament. This was seen as the correct way in which to exert pressure; methods were to change over the years.

Manchester held its first public meeting in 1868 with one of its leading members, Agnes Pochin, speaking from the platform – and in doing so breaking through the invisible barrier that deemed it unwomanly for women to promote their own cause in this way. The following year the London National Society held its first public meeting, addressed by Millicent Fawcett. She was Elizabeth Garrett’s much younger sister, who, in May 1867, a month after her marriage to Henry Fawcett - MP for Brighton – and still only 19 years old, had been present in the Ladies’ Gallery of the House of Commons to witness the defeat of Mill’s amendment to the Reform Bill.

In the 1870s the divide between London and Manchester became not only geographical but philosophical. Manchester was seen as the more radical society - for instance many of the Manchester members were involved with the Josephine Butler’s campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts – an association that John Stuart Mill, who dominated the London society, thought could only harm the suffrage campaign. For, despite his intellectual contribution, Mill was a repressive influence.

Differences of opinion over how the campaign should be conducted were even found within a family as central to the campaign as the Garretts. For in the early 1870s, while Millicent Garrett Fawcett was a member of the committee of the London National society, her sister, Agnes Garrett, was joint secretary of the more radical Central Committee, founded to give the Manchester society a London presence, and their cousin, Rhoda Garrett, was one of the Central Committee’s most effective speakers, delivering speeches not only in London, but around the country.

The years 1880-1884 – in the lead up to a new Reform bill - were a time of optimism. It was thought that by developing a populist movement, holding mass meetings in London and in provincial cities to demonstrate that they were in earnest in their desire for the vote, women would convince parliament to include them in the new Reform Bill. But, although the 1884 Reform Act extended the franchise to new classes of men, women were still totally excluded.

Suffrage campaigners had to contend not only with setbacks from without, but with dissension from within its own movement. We must remember that the suffrage campaign can never be disassociated from the wider political scene and in 1888 ‘politics’ played its part by splitting the main suffrage society – reflecting the divide in the Liberal party over the issue of Home Rule for Ireland. It was, of course, much more complicated – with a good deal of ‘spin’ clouding the issue - but in essence Millicent Fawcett and Lydia Becker – and their followers - sided with the Liberal Unionists while other, more radical Liberals, supported Gladstone and Home Rule. The two factions only came together again in 1895-6 when they buried their differences in order to work together in support of a new suffrage bill. It was this co-operation that paved the way for the formation in 1897 of the



National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett – with the many local suffrage societies that had been formed throughout the country federating under this umbrella organisation. In 1907 Millicent Fawcett was given the formal title of president of the NUWSS.

By the turn of the 20th century, with many suffrage bills debated but none passed, the campaign had progressed from being not sure if it would even have a society to being a familiar presence in all the major cities of the British Isles. On the way, its side campaigns had ensured the passing of the Married Women's Property Acts and acts that allowed women to vote in local government elections and to stand for some elected positions in local government. Up and down the country, women were speaking at meetings - in cottages, in drawing rooms, in market places, in public halls – calling for their own emancipation.

However, at the beginning of the 20th century there was a feeling that the suffrage campaign was languishing – between 1897 and 1904 no suffrage bill had been discussed in the House of Commons. As a result, in October 1903 the NUWSS backed a National Convention for the Civic Rights of Women, at which it was decided to mount a very much more active campaign in the lead up to the next general election – which was due in early 1906. It is worth noting the date of the National Convention – 16-17 October 1903 – for it was just six days earlier - on 10 October - that in Manchester Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst called to her house a few women members of the Manchester Independent Labour Party and formed a new group, the Women's Social and Political Union. The timing may have been fortuitous – it is not known if she'd been invited to the National Convention – but, although she had been actively involved with the suffrage campaign since the 1870s, Emmeline Pankhurst was by now sceptical of the ability of the NUWSS to campaign effectively.

Initially there was some co-operation between the WSPU and the NUWSS but the harmony did not continue when the NUWSS realised that the increasing militancy of the WSPU was positively harming the cause. For the women of the WSPU had realised that by breaching the law they could achieve more publicity than by lobbying in the conventional manner. Their first real success came in Manchester in October 1905 when Mrs Pankhurst's eldest daughter, Christabel, and Annie Kenney, who until very recently had been a worker in a Lancashire cotton mill, were arrested and imprisoned. Christabel had spat at a policeman - Annie was arrested on a charge of obstruction. They both refused to pay the fines - choosing imprisonment with all its attendant publicity.

Now well and truly launched, the WSPU moved from Manchester to London to concentrate their attention on the seat of power – quickly gathering members from all walks of life. Some women who had worked for the constitutional societies saw the attraction of the more direct action taken by the WSPU and switched allegiance from the NUWSS. Once in London the leaders were joined by Emmeline and Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, a wealthy philanthropic couple who set them up in offices in Clement's Inn, off the Strand, and from 1907 funded and edited a WSPU newspaper, *Votes for Women*.

Although, when launched, the WSPU was ostensibly a reasonably democratic organization it quickly became clear that this was not the *modus operandi* favoured by the Pankhursts and Pethick-Lawrences. A constitution, weighed down with rules, elected committees and conferences, would, they thought, be detrimental to the militant operation they were developing. There were also personal and ideological differences that led to a group, under the leadership of Mrs Charlotte Despard, to break away in the autumn of 1907 to form the Women's Freedom League. Although still thinking of itself as a militant organization, the WFL made clear that it did not approve of attacks on persons or property and was still supportive of the Labour party, which the leaders of the WSPU no longer were. The WFL was to be a constant presence, steering a middle way between the absolutes of militancy and non-militancy by instigating a programme of civil disobedience – such as picketing Parliament and organizing a boycott of the 1911 census.

In June 1908 Emmeline Pethick Lawrence introduced the use of the colours purple, white and green to unify the marchers in a WSPU procession that made its way through London streets. This proved to be a superb branding exercise – the actual colours were, I'm sure, chosen for their impact, but were later given a soulful gloss, identifying white for purity, green for hope and purple for dignity. The NUWSS quickly adopted their own colours - red, white and green – the colours of the Italian Risorgimento – a reflection of the influence that Garibaldi and Mazzini had had on early suffragists. The number of suffrage societies was now increasing fast -



the Actresses, the Musicians, the Civil Service, the Conservatives, the Fabians, the Quakers, the Church of England, the Nonconformists, the Catholics, the Jews, the Gymnasts, the Irish, Women Writers, the Welsh, London Graduates, Scottish Graduates, Men, the New Constitutional Society, Women Teachers, and Women Tax Payers all formed their separate societies. Each adopted its own colours and devices. - but it is the purple, white and green of the WSPU that linger in popular memory.

The WSPU and the NUWSS, separately and on occasion together, organized other spectacular marches through London – with supporters travelling on specially organized trains from all around the country to take part in them. One of the most glamorous of the processions was held in the summer of 1911 – at the time of the coronation of George V. For this, all the suffrage societies, militant and constitutional, pooled their efforts.

The WSPU and the NUWSS also opened shops in high streets up and down the country. The WSPU shops were particularly notable - displaying in their windows their posters and an increasing array of goods - tea, soap, china, bags, buckles, belts, brooches, all bearing the slogan – ‘Votes for Women’. Examples of many of these items are held in the Museum of London collection – and can be seen in the suffragette display – and exhibition.

Periods of calm alternated with increasing militancy. The WSPU encouraged its members to demonstrate in whatever way they thought would most attract attention – and there was a hot-headed element that discovered that they could achieve this result by setting out to attack property, and then, by ensuring that they were arrested, refusing to pay a fine in order to go to prison. The WSPU derived as much publicity as it could from the martyrdom of its prisoners.

In 1909 one such prisoner took this system of protest a stage further by hunger-striking until the authorities felt compelled to release her. This tactic was adopted by other prisoners - and has become a byword of the suffrage campaign. To honour such hunger-strikers the WSPU presented them with medals - akin to a military decoration. In fact the idea of the WSPU as an army was a common metaphor. And it is ironic that what was called ‘the physical force argument’ was regularly produced by the anti-suffragists to justify refusing women the vote – that is, women were not worthy to be full citizens because as weak and feeble women they could not join the army to defend their country – and yet here were women putting themselves through extreme physical hardship in order to try and force the government to give them the vote. By the end of 1911 the government, rather than releasing hunger-striking prisoners, was subjecting them to forcible feeding. The woman was held down while a tube was inserted down her throat and some kind of liquid food was poured down. The prisoners suffered abrasions to their throats – had teeth knocked if they struggled – and in the most severe cases suffered pleurisy when the fluid was poured into a lung rather than the stomach. That the government was prepared to treat women in this way provided the WSPU with powerfully emotive weapon.

As a retaliation for further broken promises from the government, in November 1911 and March 1912 hundreds of WSPU members went on an organised window-smashing campaign in central London, attacking shops and offices. Once sentenced the women – and there were around 200 of them - went on a mass hunger-strike – with many being forcibly fed. After the March 1912 incident the leaders of the WSPU, Mrs Pankhurst and Emmeline and Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, were arrested on a charge of conspiracy. Christabel escaped the police net and travelled to France - from where she continued to conduct the WSPU campaign. After the Pethick-Lawrences were eventually released from prison in the autumn of 1912 and made clear that they felt outright militancy was no longer politically expedient, they were told by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst that they were no longer welcome in the WSPU.

At about the same time Mrs Pankhurst’s younger daughter, Sylvia, was also expelled from the WSPU. Her main concern was to look after the interests of working-class women, thinking the best way to bring pressure on the government was to mobilize the East End masses.

As for the NUWSS, since the beginning of the century its membership had expanded dramatically. It definitely benefited from the publicity created by WSPU militancy because many women became interested in the Cause but, nevertheless, did not want to break the law. The NUWSS was extremely well managed; by 1914 it had over 50,000 members and over 500 local societies, incorporated into an efficient federated structure. There were



branches of its suffrage societies in most localities – from Wick in the north of Scotland to Falmouth in Cornwall. It employed scores of organisers - young women, often university graduates, who travelled throughout the country, educating the public in the arguments for giving women the vote. NUWSS finances were well-managed; Mrs Fawcett calculated that by 1914 the NUWSS was spending £45,000 a year – something over £4 million in today's money – in order to win the vote for women.

In the summer of 1913, at a time when the WSPU's campaign of violent damage to property – a campaign of arson and bombing - was escalating, the NUWSS organized its antithesis - a 'Woman's Suffrage Pilgrimage' – the idea being that members of its various federations would walk to London, holding meetings as they went – stressing all the while that the NUWSS was a non-militant and law-abiding organization in order to distance itself from the WSPU. The main routes ran from Newcastle, Carlisle, Land's End, and Kent – with tributaries feeding into them. Although not all that many women marched all the way, on each of the routes their numbers were bolstered by many members of local societies who joined them on shorter stretches of the route. The pilgrims collected 46,000 signatures to a suffrage petition and the final rally in Hyde Park was attended by an estimated 50,000 people.

The Pilgrimage did get some press coverage –and Asquith noted that it had 'a special claim' on his consideration, contrasting it with the actions of WSPU militants. But even this public show of dedication was not going to win over the government and was, anyway, generally overshadowed by the drama a month earlier when WSPU activist, Emily Wilding Davison, dashed onto the Derby racecourse. She died on 8 June and on the 14th the WSPU staged a magnificent procession to accompany her coffin through London.

WSPU militancy had been increased dramatically since February 1913 when Mrs Pankhurst was arrested and subsequently tried and imprisoned - on a charge of conspiracy resulting from the bombing of a house being built for Lloyd George. In April the government had introduced the Cat and Mouse Act – by which hunger-strikers were released from prison for a short time to recover their health and were then returned to carry on with their sentence - thereby doing away with the unpleasant necessity of forcibly feeding them. Needless to say many of the 'mice' did not return to prison when they were supposed to. Such women lived a kind of underground existence and became involved in progressively dangerous acts of terrorism, - such as setting fire to and placing bombs in railway buildings, empty houses, and churches, and attacking paintings in art galleries.

Many of the demonstrations in the years leading up to the First World War were prompted by the breaking of a governmental promise – or the perception of a promise. Three women's suffrage bills were put before parliament in 1910, 1911, and 1912 - but all failed. The NUWSS certainly felt that the actions of the WSPU did nothing to help the situation. Millicent Fawcett wrote that at the time when the 1912 Conciliation Bill was before Parliament 'The continued violence of the militants caused intense irritation and resentment among the general public, and afforded an excuse to those MPs who had promised their support to our movement to break their word'.

After the defeat of that Conciliation Bill, the NUWSS began negotiations with the Labour party, the only party that had made women's suffrage part of its programme. After the general election of December 1910 Labour, with the Irish parliamentary party, held the balance of power in the House of Commons, and so the NUWSS devised a plan to raise funds to support Labour candidates at elections, hoping to make a dent in the Liberal majority. It was a politically sophisticated strategy but one that clearly needed time to develop – and the outbreak of war brought an end to this aspect of the campaign. However, even though there was no general election in the immediate future, during the war years the Liberals were well aware that women's suffrage was Labour policy and that they had the backing of the well-organized and numerous NUWSS.

In those last couple of years before the War it became obvious that 'votes for women' was not at the top of the government's agenda. Irish Home Rule, however, was - and because the Liberal government had only a small majority, the Irish Parliamentary party was able to ensure the defeat of the 1912 Conciliation Bill – worried that any change in the electorate would interfere with their plans for Home Rule. Through 1913 and 1914 the government was increasingly concerned with the threat of insurrection in Ulster – and not with the claims of women. The WSPU was incensed that the King agreed to host a conference at Buckingham Palace to discuss



the Irish problem. If the Irish could get attention, why should not the women? So, on 21 May 1914, the WSPU set out for Buckingham Palace to take a petition to the King. A riot ensued and after this the police began seriously to clamp down on the WSPU. They raided their central London office and closed it. WSPU organizers were forced to keep on the move. Christabel's replacement was arrested and kept in prison, on hunger strike and forcibly fed, from then until after the outbreak of war in August. The prison authorities had by now mastered the art of forcibly feeding prisoners without causing enough damage to necessitate release under the Cat and Mouse Act.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 took the suffrage societies by surprise – as it did the rest of the country. The majority responded by putting an end to active campaigning – Mrs Pankhurst waited until all suffragette prisoners had been released from prison under the government amnesty and then sent out a letter to WSPU members saying that ‘work for the vote was now futile’, but suggesting that at the end of the war that work would recommence. The president of the New Constitutional Society for Women's Suffrage voiced the feelings of the majority of suffrage campaigners when she wrote in her circular letter to members, dated 12 August, ‘In the present crisis there will be one desire amongst suffragists, namely, that laying aside for the time being the difference that divide, we should use all our energies for work for the common good.’ Or as Mrs Fawcett put it, ‘Let us show ourselves worthy of citizenship whether our claim to it be recognized or not’.

There was a quick recognition that by proving their worth in wartime women could only help their campaign. For instance when Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson went over to Paris to set up a military hospital her mother, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, applauded - writing ‘If you succeed you will put the Cause forward a hundred years’. Many of the pre-war suffrage societies remained in existence, with the NUWSS continuing to publish their paper, *The Common Cause*, and the Women's Freedom League theirs, *The Vote*.

Led by Millicent Fawcett, the NUWSS maintained its structure and supported the war effort, while keeping its metaphorical ear to the political ground. The large London society of the NUWSS quickly set up a bureau to provide women with information on opportunities of employment that had previously been the reserve of men and throughout the country NUWSS societies provided hospitality for the floods of Belgian refugees. They also set up maternity centres, baby clinics, and schools for mothers. Forty-five NUWSS societies became Red Cross centres, others ran canteens for soldiers on railway stations, and, most importantly, supported the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service, sending hospital units not only to the Western Front, but to Serbia, Salonika, Malta, and Russia. However, the war did create its own ideological difficulties leading, in 1915, to a split between those who were pro- and those anti-war, with Millicent Fawcett ensuring that the NUWSS executive was soon purged of the latter element.

Unlike the NUWSS, the WSPU to all intents and purposes disbanded, the Pankhursts substituting extreme patriotic endeavour for suffrage agitation. However, although many members did not agree with the direction now taken by the Pankhursts, they also disagreed amongst themselves and formed two new, separate, organisations, neither of which carried any political weight.

Although as an organization the WSPU did not really play any formal part in the war effort, as individuals many of its former members most certainly did. Working closely with Lloyd George, now minister of Munitions, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, Annie Kenney and Flora Drummond appeared at recruiting rallies at towns and cities around the country – and in July 1915 organised ‘The Right to Serve March’ – a rather pale echo of the pre-war suffrage grand processions. Lloyd George gave them £2000 to stage the march through London and this time, instead of demanding the Vote, women demanded the right to work in munitions factories. It is estimated that Lloyd George gave the Pankhursts an additional £15,000 to mount a campaign to combat dissension in industry, prevent strike actions, and minimise the influence of trade unions and left-wing activists. There is no doubt that the Pankhursts and their followers were very much more bellicose than the NUWSS. They disparaged men who were not fighting – and had the vote - contrasting them with the nationalistic women – who did not. In June 1917 Lloyd George even sent Emmeline Pankhurst to Russia to encourage Russian women to lobby to keep their country in the war. In fact she was in Russia when the Women's Clause of the Representation of the People Bill was debated in Parliament.



Women who had been members of the WSPU were among those who took the opportunity the War offered to start new organisations. For instance, the Women's Police Volunteers was co-founded by Mary Allen, an ex-hunger-striking suffragette, and the Women's Emergency Corps by Evelina Haverfield, another WSPU activist. The military hospital that two former WSPU members, Louisa Garrett Anderson and Dr Flora Murray, opened in Paris, soon moved to London, where it was more or less the first in which male patients were treated by female staff.

As well as joining organisations formed by erstwhile suffrage activists, women who had never given any overt support to the suffrage campaign offered themselves in great numbers – around 34,000 as members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) and, of course, as workers in the munition factories. By 1917 women were accorded the right to form an integral part of the official war machine, with the War Office admitting the need for women's services to run in parallel with the army, navy and airforce, allowing for the formation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, the Women's Royal Naval Service and the Women's Royal Air Force. And on the Home Front, with the men off to the War, women took over their jobs – becoming, for instance, bus conductors, postwomen, window cleaners, factory and agricultural workers.

So in just two or three years the position of women had dramatically altered. But, although after 1914, individual women saw a very great change in their social and economic circumstances, rather ironically nothing changed politically until the government realized it had to deal with a new problem concerning 'votes for men'. For many men had lost their right to the vote, no longer meeting the residential requirements because of the time they had spent abroad fighting for their country, and there were many men, now out in the trenches, who had not qualified as voters before the war. The government made it known that it did not feel able to deny these men the prospect of a vote and, in June 1916, the constitutional suffrage societies responded by stating that if the government intended to extend the male franchise then a campaign for female suffrage would be resumed. Of course they intended this to be a constitutional campaign – not WSPU-type militancy. It is indicative of just how far Mrs Pankhurst had distanced herself from the pre-War WSPU that at this point she stated that she would be in favour of soldiers and sailors getting the vote – even if women continued to be excluded. In the event Parliament decided to set up an all-party committee to discuss possible changes to the electoral register. It was chaired by the Speaker, Willoughby Dickinson, who in 1907, as a private member, had introduced a women's suffrage bill.

In January 1917 the Speaker's Conference reported that it had decided- not unanimously but by a majority - that some women should be granted a measure of enfranchisement. The one proviso not yet settled, was 'what age should the woman be?' – for the Conference was not prepared to grant the vote to women on exactly the same terms as to men. The NUWSS, together with other suffrage societies, had lobbied MPs behind the scenes and, having won the vote in principle, Mrs Fawcett was prepared to drop the demand for complete equality in order to get some measure passed by Parliament. As she commented in May 1917, during a deputation to the prime minister, 'We should greatly prefer an imperfect scheme that can pass, to the most perfect scheme in the world that could not pass.'

Asquith assured the deputation of his sympathy with their demands. Although there were years of disappointment to make suffragists wary of such a claim, a couple of months later they were able to take strength from a good omen – Parliament voted to remove the grille that caged women in the Ladies' Gallery. And then, when the Women's Suffrage Clause was debated in the House, it became clear that, for the very first time, such a measure had government support. During the bill's passage through Parliament nearly every MP was approached by a deputation from his own constituency and letters poured into the House of Commons from all the suffrage societies. The result was that by the terms of Clause 4 of the Representation of the People Act, given the Royal Assent on 6 February 1918, women over the age of 30 were granted the parliamentary vote. Not all women over 30, however - because either she or her husband (if she had one) had to occupy a house, or land or premises valued at no less than £5. This was not an onerous qualification but was one that did disenfranchise about twenty-two per cent of women who were eligible by age. As Lilian Lenton, formerly a very active member of the Women's Social and Political Union, ruefully commented, 'Personally I didn't vote for a very long time, because I hadn't either a husband or furniture, although I was over 30'. The lack of 'furniture' referred to the fact that her low income obliged her to live in a low-rent furnished room. In addition, women



graduates – including those who had studied at Oxford and Cambridge, which still refused to award women degrees - were eligible for the ‘university constituency’ vote –an example of plural voting only abolished in 1950. And, reflecting the fact that the war was not yet over, women serving abroad in the Red Cross or with the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, were entitled to vote even though they were not resident in their usual constituency. They had, of course, to be over 30 – while the voting age for men on active service was lowered to 19. In the event, at the 1918 General Election around 3000 women took advantage of this provision.

A NUWSS Victory Celebration was held in the Queen’s Hall on 13 March 1918 – with Mrs Fawcett in the chair and her long-time friend, Sir Hubert Parry, conducting his ‘Jerusalem’. Afterwards he said he hoped the piece would become ‘The Women Voters’ Hymn’ and assigned copyright to the NUWSS. The Women’s Party – launched by the Pankhursts in 1917, held their ‘Patriotic Meeting and Celebration’ in the Royal Albert Hall three days later. The Women’s Party combined a bellicose, xenophobic stance with a series of progressive proposals. For instance they campaigned against the unions, but for shorter working hours and better conditions, for equal pay, equal marriage and divorce laws, for national health and education, and for state-subsidized housing. Their aim was for everybody to be middle class – and for the working class to be abolished.

In general suffrage campaigners, both suffragists and suffragettes, did not criticize the decision to accept the partial enfranchisement, recognizing that, as had happened in Norway before the war, the discriminating qualification could not be upheld for long. With Britain still at war the response to the suffrage victory was, perhaps, a little more muted than might have been expected – the general atmosphere conveyed by the *Common Cause*, the NUWSS paper, was very much one of business as usual –they moved straight on to discuss, for instance, the necessity to repeal the hated Defence of the Realm Act, to reform women’s prisons and to discuss the relationship between women and the judicial system. And then there was the problem of the nationality of married women and whether or not the payment of family allowances was a good idea. As the war drew to a close there was discussion about the problems that would arise from the demobilization of women workers. And, of course, their remit now was to enable women to make use of their new political legitimacy, publishing pamphlets to guide them through the complexity of getting onto the voting register and using the vote.

On 21 November 1918, ten days after the end of the war, a bill to allow women to stand as MPs was rushed through Parliament, meeting with virtually no resistance in the House of Commons. The Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act introduced an interesting anomaly – a woman could stand for election to Parliament when she was 21 – although she would not be old enough to vote for herself.

The first general election that allowed women both to vote and to stand for election took place in December 1918 and it has been estimated that in the final week before polling day the popular press was so excited by the novelty of women voters and women candidates that between one-quarter and one-third of the election coverage was dedicated to ‘women’s issues’. However, having only just acquired the right to stand, women candidates had only about three weeks to mount their campaigns. Christabel Pankhurst, standing for the Women’s Party, was among the 17 women candidates. As a reward for fighting what Lloyd George termed ‘the Bolshevik and Pacifist element’ she was given the coveted ‘coupon’ of coalition endorsement, but, even with this backing, was defeated and never repeated the experience. The only woman to be successful at this election was an Irishwoman, Constance Markievicz, but, as a Sinn Fein member, she never took her seat and at the time was actually interned in Holloway. A year later, in November 1919, Nancy, Lady Astor, became the first woman MP, elected at a Plymouth by-election.

The Women’s Party ceased to exist by the end of 1919 but the NUWSS - now renamed the National Society for Equal Citizenship - continued lobbying throughout the 1920s. Millicent Fawcett continued to speak and write on behalf of the society until in March 1928 – after 62 years of campaigning - the vote was given to all women on the same terms as it was given to men. Millicent, who had been created DBE in 1925, was in Parliament to see the act passed, writing in her diary that night, ‘It is almost exactly 61 years ago since I heard John Stuart Mill introduce his suffrage amendment to the Reform Bill on May 20th, 1867. So I have had extraordinary good luck in having seen the struggle from the beginning.’



It is often suggested that it was the War that won the Vote for women – although, of course, the majority of women war workers, who tended to be young, were excluded from the extended franchise. However, women's war work was the excuse – not the reason. It was not so much that war work was the winning argument, but rather that it disarmed the opposition. The changes in society brought about by the War offered a smokescreen to those in government who had so vehemently opposed 'votes for women' - behind it they could change their minds. That is, they could say they were granting women this right because, by actively supporting their country in its time of need, they had proved themselves worthy citizens. But I would suggest that without the campaigning that took place in the 50 years before 1914 women would have been in no position to take part in the war effort as they did. For the idea of what a woman could or could not do had undergone a very real change during that time, much of it as a by-product of the pioneering efforts of the women who were also campaigning for a change in the franchise. Similarly, there is much debate as to whether it was the militant or the constitutional campaign that resulted in 'votes for women'. My feeling is that the constitutional campaign would have achieved this political goal; whereas there was no chance of the government acquiescing to threats from bombers and arsonists, even though there is no doubt that the WSPU did garner a great deal of publicity for the Cause– for good or ill. But, in the final analysis, it was the persistent campaigning of the suffragists over the previous half century that created the circumstances that made such a political change possible – 'At Last'.

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