

# Suffrage and Political Activity

Dr Laura E. Nym Mayhall, Catholic University of America

## Women's suffrage movement prior to August 1914

Women's suffrage emerged as a political issue in Britain in the 1860s when Parliament voted against an amendment proposed by John Stuart Mill that "person" replace "man" in the bill that would become the 1867 Reform Act. That failure to include women in an expanded electorate resulted in the creation of the organized campaign for women's suffrage. The nineteenth-century women's suffrage movement drew ideas and personnel from a number of earlier political campaigns, including the anti-slavery movement and Chartism, to name only two. Characterized by loose groupings of suffragists working together in national organizations, no single organization or individual dominated the nineteenth-century women's suffrage movement. Around the turn of the century, new groupings of suffragists emerged from within domestic opposition to Britain's prosecution of war with the South African Republics. These suffragists, who would come to be known as "militants," continued to use the methods developed by nineteenth-century suffragists, including lobbying members of parliament and gathering signatures on petitions, but they advocated the use of more confrontational tactics as well. In the first decade of the twentieth century, militants garnered both more attention and more controversy for their campaign through their new tactics, which included resistance to payment of income tax and registration for the census, various forms of property damage (arson, window-breaking and painting slashing), and the hunger-strike as a protest against their imprisonment for political activism [Hall, et. al., pp. 119-78; Mayhall, pp. 12-62].

By 1914, the organized campaign for women's parliamentary enfranchisement was in turmoil over how best to conduct a political campaign devoted to acquiring political rights for women. Militants existed along a continuum, from those who believed that women held a responsibility to resist passively the government's operation so long as women remained un-enfranchised, to those who believed that forms of terrorism like arson were justified as long as women could not participate in choosing their government. Numerous other suffrage organizations advocated forms of resistance to government authority, with some implementing violence, and others promoting non-violence. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) [Suffrage 1], with over 50,000 members, vehemently rejected the use of violence. An impasse of sorts had been reached by late 1914 as members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) escalated their use of violence, and the government increasingly clamped down on all women suffragists, imposing longer prison terms and

prosecuting suffragists, publishers of suffrage newspapers, and even financial supporters of the militants.

### **Women's suffrage movement and the war**

The impasse between the government and suffragists was broken in August 1914 when Britain declared war on Germany, and the great majority of women's suffrage organizations declared "a political truce and ceased all propaganda" [Suffrage 5/3]. The NUWSS led the way, with its president, Millicent Garrett Fawcett exhorting its members: "Let us show ourselves worthy of citizenship whether our claim is to be recognized or not" [Suffrage 1/8]. The WSPU also ceased all suffrage activity and began aggressively to champion the British cause, both at home and abroad. Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst, leaders of the WSPU during the war, travelled to the United States and all over Britain, encouraging the active engagement of men and women, civilian and non-combatant, in the war effort. Suffragists in the National Liberal Federation, the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association, the Church League for Women's Suffrage, and the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage similarly ceased propaganda work on the issue of women's political rights and worked to support the nation during the war.

Other suffragists, most notably those belonging to the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) and the Women's Freedom League (WFL), however, refused to abandon their suffrage activism, and struggled throughout the war to define their work on behalf of women's political rights as being in the national interest. Those WSPU members critical of the Pankhursts for abandoning suffrage work formed new organizations, including the Suffragettes of the WSPU (SWSPU) in October 1915 and the Independent WSPU (IWSPU) in March 1916. The United Suffragists, a group of former WSPU members formed in February 1914, assumed ownership of the WSPU paper, *Votes for Women*, and used it to promote its work for suffrage and other feminist causes. The WFL, SWSPU, IWSPU, and United Suffragists joined forces on numerous issues during the war. They held large public, as well as members-only, suffrage meetings, and while these meetings rarely received coverage in the mainstream press, open-air meetings in London parks, as well as summer and special campaigns, continued throughout the war. Other suffrage organizations active during the war included the Free Church League for Women's Suffrage and the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society (later, St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance).

A minority of suffragists worked actively against the war. Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, and other former WSPU members, joined former NUWSS and active WFL members in forming the Women's International League of Great Britain. Many of these anti-war suffragists attended the International Women's Peace Congress at the Hague in 1915 that led to creation of the Women's International

League for Peace and Freedom, which continues to work against war to this day [Suffrage 12]. Members of the ELFS (later Workers' Suffrage Federation) also protested the war, holding antiwar meetings at London's East India Dock Gates. Members of the League of the Church Militant combined activism in favour of equality for men and women in the church with protests against the use of force in settling international questions [Suffrage 3].

All suffragists embraced some form of service to the nation during the war even though they defined that service in strikingly different ways. At one extreme was the WSPU. Under the leadership of Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst, the WSPU's wartime activism emphasized anti-Bolshevik and anti-German propaganda and endorsed government conscription of men and women in combat and industry. Numerous other organizations, including the NUWSS [Suffrage 1], Catholic Women's Suffrage Society [Suffrage 4], Liberal Women's Suffrage Union [Suffrage 5] and Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association [Suffrage 6], the WFL [Suffrage 9], and the ELFS [Suffrage 1.2/30 and Suffrage 8], provided forms of relief to soldiers' dependents, refugees in Britain, and women and children at home. These included providing work and housing for women displaced by the war effort, supplying low cost meals and milk for nursing and pregnant women and their children, and contributing to the creation of support networks for the dependents of soldiers and sailors.

Women's suffrage organizations also remained politically active during the war in their attempts to monitor the status of women at home. Most worked against the government's attempts to erode women's civil liberties during the national crisis. The NUWSS held "a watching brief against any interference with [women's] personal liberties" [Suffrage 1/9]. The WFL, Catholic Women's Suffrage Society, British Dominions Woman Suffrage Union (BDWSU) organized against proposals by the government to re-introduce the Contagious Diseases Acts in port towns, which would have resulted in the government regulating, and thereby condoning, the services of prostitutes for servicemen. Other suffrage organizations, including the WFL, ELFS, Northern Men's Federation for Women's Suffrage, and the United Suffragists, fought government attempts to restrict women's consumption of alcohol and to control women's behaviour in exchange for financial compensation for combatants' dependents.

Suffragists fought during the war to improve the status and working conditions of women. The London Society for Women's Service lobbied on behalf of women in the trades and professions [Suffrage 1.2/1-25], while the Professional Women's Patriotic Service Fund worked in support of white-collar workers [Suffrage 2/1-4]. When the government announced its intention in 1915 to require women to register for industrial service, a number of suffrage organizations, including the WFL, ELFS, US, and Irish Women's Franchise League undertook campaigns to ensure that women received equal pay for equal work and that they be considered after the war for jobs they held during the war [Cowman, pp. 139-63; Gullace, pp. 117-41; Holton, pp. 116-50; Mayhall, pp. 117-34].

## **Women's war service and the parliamentary franchise**

The relationship between women's war service and passage of legislation granting a limited measure of women's enfranchisement in 1918 has been hotly contested by historians. Constance Rover and Arthur Marwick, writing in the 1960s, argued that women's work for the nation during the war led directly to their enfranchisement in 1918 [Marwick, pp. 95-105; Rover, p. 205]. More recently, however, historians have pointed out that those women enfranchised in 1918 were not the same women performing industrial and military service to the nation during the war. Further, women's own political work prior to the war cannot be discounted as a factor in their eventual enfranchisement [Holton, p. 130-50]. A consensus has emerged in recent years that women's demands were not instrumental in shaping the legislation on enfranchisement produced during the war [Grayzel, p. 214; Gullace, p. 196; Pugh, p. 286]. Far more important to the government was the status of the nation's fighting men, many of whom had remained without voting rights because their military service abroad kept them from fulfilling the residency requirements of the Reform Act of 1884. In August 1916, the issue of electoral reform was handed to a special conference chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons, James W. Lowther. The committee reported in January 1917, recommending the enfranchisement of women who held the household qualification in their own right or who were married to men who did. Parliamentary enfranchisement was thus granted to those women over the age of thirty who already possessed the local government vote, or to those who were married to men who already possessed the local government vote. Men, however, were enfranchised at the age of twenty-one. Significantly, this legislation looked very much like a bill proposed by a member of parliament in 1913, a bill that suffragists had rejected because under its provisions, men would hold the vote from an earlier age than would women. The bill that became the Representation of the People Act (1918) thus granted a form of female suffrage that would have been unacceptable to suffragists prior to the war and which was, on the whole, greeted with little enthusiasm by suffragists in 1918 [[Suffrage 1.3/14-22](#)].

## **Women's political activity leading up to the General Election of 1919**

Passage of the Representation of the People Act (1918) resulted in significant changes in the structure and organization of the women's suffrage societies after the war. The NUWSS became the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) in 1919. Under the leadership of Eleanor Rathbone, its new program included campaigning to extend the vote to men and women from the same age, and expanded to include legal equality for married women in the areas of the guardianship of children, nationality (when married to men not of British nationality), income tax, and property [[Suffrage 1.3](#)]. The Women's Freedom League maintained its name and defined its agenda in ways similar to the NUWSS. In November 1917, remaining members of the WSPU formed the Women's

Party [[Suffrage 13](#)], which would underwrite Christabel Pankhurst's unsuccessful parliamentary campaigns for the 1918 and 1919 general elections. A number of other former suffragists ran, also unsuccessfully, for parliament after the war. Many of these former suffragists, regardless of political affiliations, campaigned for the League of Nations and self-determination for all peoples, equal citizenship for women with men, and the welfare of children. A group of women constituting the Women's Municipal Party (founded 1913) sought to unite women citizens into an independent party and voting bloc, but were unsuccessful in attracting large numbers of women to join them [[Suffrage 16/1](#)]. Ironically, the first female Member of Parliament, Nancy Astor, was an American. Married to Waldorf Astor, Conservative member for Plymouth, Nancy Astor ran for and won his seat upon his elevation to the House of Lords.

### Bibliography

- Cowman, Krista. *"Mrs. Brown is a Man and a Brother!" Women in Merseyside's Political Organisations, 1890-1920*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004.
- Hall, Catherine, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall. *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Holton, Sandra Stanley. *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Grayzel, Susan R. *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
- Gullace, Nicoletta F. *"The Blood of Our Sons": Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the First World War*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Marwick, Arthur. *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1965.
- Mayhall, Laura E. Nym. *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Pugh, Martin. *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866-1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Rover, Constance. *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866-1914*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967.

© *Women, War and Society*, Cengage Learning, 2005