# ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF PROTEST:

## Everything You Need to Know

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12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
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First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2015.



A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-1517-6

Typeset in 10.75/15.75 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd.

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Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

# SUFFRAGETTES AND VOTES FOR WOMEN

(1903–1920 and Beyond)

On December 5th 1908 the fiery Welsh radical David Lloyd George addressed a packed meeting, mainly female, in London's great Royal Albert Hall. The venue was full, since Lloyd George was also the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, the man in charge of the budget, and one of the most important politicians in Britain.

Many of his audience were *suffragists*, women who passionately supported the right of women to vote, but who rejected completely the campaign of the *suffragettes* to use violence and civil protest to bring attention to the cause. One of the suffragists in the audience was an intelligent Welsh schoolteacher, whose husband was Lloyd George's eye doctor. Also present and fearing trouble was their ten-year-old daughter, dreaming one day of becoming a medical student.

The child's worst fears were realised. Along with the suffragists who wanted to use argument and reason to further the goal of votes for women were numerous suffragettes who were looking for trouble. One of the latter, a woman named Helen Ogston, had come prepared. Over 70 suffragettes started to heckle David Lloyd George, and when the stewards tried to expel them, she brandished a whip! Eventually all the hecklers were removed and the Chancellor of the Exchequer – who supported votes for women – was able to finish his speech. But it turned out to be a very memorable and symbolic evening, one that the ten-year-old girl, who fulfilled her dream of being a doctor, could recall vividly for the remaining eighty-three years of her life. She was my grandmother, and as we shall see, it would take her another twenty years before she and my great-grandmother achieved the longed-for right to vote.

Slow but steady progress or the sudden use of violence to force the pace – this is always the dilemma of any protest movement. There is a division between those who favour a gradualist approach and those who want instant action by whatever means necessary, whether legal or not. This is a common thread through many of the protests we shall examine in this book, and the supporters of votes for women – the *suffrage*, to use the political term for voting rights – were no exception.

In our study we are looking at the past century or so, but the women's suffrage movement was the beneficiary of over a hundred previous years and more of the slow emancipation of the female half of the human species. In 1908, for instance, women in New Zealand had already enjoyed equal voting rights with men since 1893. However, in Switzerland it took decades more

for women to be able to vote in federal elections. Not until 1971, in the lifetime of many of us today, did Swiss women get equal suffrage with men. By this time countries such as India, Israel and Sri Lanka had already had women serve as prime minister.

It is not just, therefore, in strongly patriarchal societies, such as in much of the Arab world, that women are still waiting. Indeed one should say that in many Muslim countries women have had the vote for decades, with female prime ministers or presidents in the world's largest Muslim nations such as Indonesia and Pakistan. In many regions the struggle for equal political rights is not history but an ongoing struggle against centuries of oppression and ill-treatment.

In the nineteenth century women in Britain had steadily accumulated a number of equal rights. A woman's property no longer automatically became her husband's upon marriage. Clever girls could go to university, and where my female ancestors attended, University College London, women not only received equal degrees to men (at Cambridge it was not until the 1940s that women became full graduates), but could study alongside them in subjects such as medicine. Women were slowly gaining the intellectual respect hitherto reserved for men. It was against this background, none of it associated with violence, that the suffragists began the campaign to get the vote for women. And one should remember that not all men could vote in, say, 1908 – many poor and socially disadvantaged working-class men did not possess the franchise either.

So when we think of the protest movements for female suffrage we must remember that there were two distinctive strands, each with a strategy of their own. And in addition, many

men supported the suffragists, such as the future Labour Cabinet minister, Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, and indeed many members of the Liberal Cabinet, in power in Britain since December 1905.

The great Victorian intellectual John Stuart Mill, whose 1859 book *On Liberty* was one of the most significant works on that subject during that century, was a keen supporter of votes for women, advocating it as early as 1865–66. But it was not for another thirty years, until 1897, that the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was formed. The leader of this was Millicent Fawcett, one of the founders of Newnham College in Cambridge (one of the first for women) and the sister of the distinguished medical pioneer Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. The NUWSS contained many women like this – intellectual, educated, middle class and with excellent social connections to the London political elite, not least to the Liberal Party, which won an electoral landslide over the Conservatives in the 1906 General Election.

However, this gradualist approach did not appeal to everyone, and in 1903 a Manchester widow called Emmeline Pankhurst founded her own group, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Her late husband Richard Pankhurst had long been a supporter of votes for women, and Pankhurst herself had close links with the then infant Labour Party and *its* founder, Keir Hardie. It was to this new group, the WSPU, that the *Daily Mail* gave the nickname that would stick: the '*suffragettes*'.

These campaigners spurned gradualism, and decided on the direct approach. As early as 1905 suffragettes were using militant tactics, smashing windows, demonstrating in public, setting fire to Royal Mailboxes and the like. In 1905 Christabel Pankhurst,

Emmeline's daughter, was imprisoned for such offences, and altogether well over a thousand women spent some time in jail for their militancy.

This was to cause no end of a problem to the Liberal government, some of whom supported the overall cause, but with plenty that did not. Psephologically, women in Britain have tended more to vote Conservative than Liberal and then Labour, so Liberals fearing votes for women were doing so on electoral grounds as well as out of misogyny.

Firstly, women wanted political prisoner status, which the government refused to grant them. Second, from 1909 onwards many started going on hunger strikes, a tactic that would increasingly be used in twentieth-century protests, from the peaceful Gandhi in India to the more violent IRA activists in Northern Ireland. Then, as now, those in power were reluctant to create martyrs, so one of the first suffragette hunger strikers, Marion Wallace Dunlop, was duly released after 91 days by a nervous government.

However, both sides realised that if women were automatically released, simply going on hunger strike would be an easy way for those imprisoned always to escape sentence. So in 1913 Reginald McKenna (Winston Churchill's successor as Home Secretary) introduced the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act, popularly called the 'Cat and Mouse Act'. Once a hunger striker became dangerously emaciated and ill, she would be released, but re-imprisoned the moment her health restored itself on the outside. Already in 1909 violent force-feeding with tubes was often brought in, which sometimes caused much injury to those so treated.

Emmeline Pankhurst was a heroine for some women for her leadership of the struggle. For others she was a tyrant, since within WSPU circles her word was law. Some of her own family rebelled, notably Sylvia Pankhurst, one of the daughters. She became active in social work amidst the downtrodden and exploited of the East End of London, whether men or women. She enjoyed the family's ties with the growing Labour Party, which she saw as one of the best means of implementing a much wider social change than simply the issue of female suffrage. Christabel, by contrast, concentrated on the WSPU and the vote, spending some of her time beyond the reach of English law in Paris.

The anniversary of World War I has reminded us that in 1914 Britain was in a dangerously volatile political environment. Civil war was a real possibility in Ireland, with the Conservative Opposition at Westminster hideously close to a treasonous alliance with the Irish anti-independence Protestants. Labour relations were also bad, and the strife caused by suffragette militancy created much civil discord. But for the advent of war the situation could have become even more febrile, with catastrophic results for national stability.

As we know, the war brought its own disasters, with nearly a million slaughtered in the trenches of Flanders and elsewhere during 1914–1918.

Christabel Pankhurst became one of the war's most enthusiastic supporters, and many suffragettes decided to suspend the cause for the sake of patriotism and national unity.

And this brings us on to a natural question, posed by many historians ever since – such as by Trevor Lloyd in his book,

*Suffragettes International*. Did all the militancy help? Was violence worthwhile? Or did the aggressive tactics of the WSPU help indirectly? This issue is important, as it will apply elsewhere to many of the protests that are the subject of our book, as the same discussion comes up again and again.

In theory, women over thirty gained the vote in 1918 because of their splendid service to the nation during the war. Countless well-born women – such as, for example, the writer Vera Brittain – gave up their privileged lifestyle at home to serve as nurses at the Front. Countless poorer women became factory workers, especially in munitions, taking the place of men who had been sent to fight overseas.

But since the vote was for women *over* thirty, and with property qualifications, this meant in effect that the majority of women who had engaged in war service on the Home Front remained excluded from the vote. Either they were deemed too young (under thirty) or were of a lower social class (factory workers without property). Not until 1928 did women gain full electoral equality – the so-called 'flapper vote' – with *all* women over twenty-one being eligible to vote. And significantly, that right was given by the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin, the prime minister and cousin of Rudyard Kipling.

So did the slow tactics of the NUWSS or the violence of the WSPU carry the day? Or was it simply the case that by 1918 politicians of all stripes finally realised that women deserved the vote? It is hard to say.

In concentrating, as many books and articles do, on the United Kingdom, we forget that similar struggles were taking place elsewhere, such as in the USA.

The notion of votes for women in the United States was debated back in the 1870s, and in 1869 the frontier state of Wyoming granted them the right to vote. As in Britain, women differed on how best to gain the suffrage, with the NAWSA (the National American Women's Suffrage Association) taking the more moderate stand. In contrast, the National Women's Party (NWP) advocated more militant tactics, with riots and picketing. One interesting observation is that one of the key NWP supporters and funders was Louisine Havemeyer, the widow of the rich sugar baron H. O. Havemeyer, and now herself one of the wealthiest women in the country. She is principally best known for the purchases that she and her husband made of Impressionist art, with a collection now mainly in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. But she was also an active suffragette, addressing the multitudes in Carnegie Hall and burning an effigy of the president, Woodrow Wilson. So while the names of Susan B. Anthony and of Sojourner Truth are those linked most strongly to the cause of women in the USA, it is interesting to reflect how wide their support was, from the very poor to the fabulously wealthy.

The Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution was ratified on August 18th 1920, when the support reached the necessary thirty-six states for the Amendment to become law. Significantly its wording, reflecting the federal nature of the USA, did not grant women the vote *directly* but rather proclaimed that no state should have a law that forbade them so to do. Certain states held out their ratification for some while after 1920, but in essence that vote enabled the majority of American women to exercise their franchise freely.

As we saw with the Swiss example, it took a while for other democracies to catch up. Nonetheless, the right to vote now became the democratic norm. However, many nations still hold out, and in much of the world women remain second-class citizens. The struggle is not yet over.