The Campaign for Women’s Suffrage in Britain

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Abstract

This essay gives an overview of the campaign for the parliamentary vote for women in Britain from 1865 to 1928, focussing in particular on the ‘suffragists’ of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), formed in 1897, and the ‘suffragettes’ of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), established in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst and her eldest daughter Christabel, together with some local socialist women. The mixed sex NUWSS, led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett, advocated legal, peaceful means of campaigning whereas the women-only WSPU, with its slogan ‘Deeds, not words’ engaged in more assertive, unladylike tactics such as heckling MPs, processions to parliament, hunger-striking when imprisoned and enduring the torture of forcible feeding. As the Liberal Government of the day refused to yield on the women’s question, the notorious WSPU even engaged, from 1912, in attacks on property. In 1918 certain categories of women aged thirty and over were granted the vote, equal parliamentary voting rights with men being finally won in 1928.

The struggle for women to be granted the parliamentary vote in Britain was long and hard and is usually dated from John Stuart Mill’s campaign to be elected to Westminster, although the subject had been discussed for some years. Votes for women was part of Mill’s election address and three pioneers of the infant feminist movement – Barbara Bodichon, Emily Davies and Bessie Rayner Parkes – campaigned on his behalf. The following year, in the context of the debates about a Second Reform Bill, these three women together with Jessie Boucherett, Elizabeth Garrett and Jane Crow formed a small committee to promote a petition which Mill, newly elected to parliament, was prepared to present. The petition, which was not successful despite collecting 1,499 signatures, had called for ‘the representation of all householders, without distinction of sex, who possess such property or rental qualifications as your honourable House may determine’ (Crawford 1999, 756). Nonetheless, other women’s suffrage committees were soon established with Lydia Becker and Millicent Garrett Fawcett becoming central figures in the Victorian women’s suffrage movement. Both were ‘constitutional suffragists’ who advocated legal, peaceful means of campaigning, such as the holding of public meetings and lobbying MPs. In 1897 the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), which included both male and female members, was formed from a number of the smaller district societies and ten years later Fawcett became its president.
The aim of the NUWSS was to win the parliamentary vote for women on equal terms with men which under existing franchise laws required a property qualification. This goal was also adopted by the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), founded in Manchester in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst and her eldest daughter Christabel, together with some local socialist women. Emmeline and Christabel had been members of the NUWSS and were impatient that all its efforts had not brought success. The women-only WSPU, with its slogan ‘Deeds, not words’ became the most notorious of the groupings campaigning for votes for women and its members known as ‘suffragettes’. In its early years the WSPU engaged in peaceful agitation, but all to no effect: there was little newspaper coverage of their events and the issue did not grab the eye of parliament. In 1905 after another women’s suffrage measure, introduced as a private member’s bill, had been talked out of the House of Commons by anti-suffragists who told silly stories and jokes that were greeted with laughter, Emmeline and Christabel decided that more assertive ‘militant’ methods were appropriate. On 13 October 1905, Christabel and Annie Kenney, a recent working-class recruit to the WSPU, attended a Liberal Party meeting at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester and heckled a leading Liberal politician with the question, ‘Will the Liberal Government give women the vote?’ (Purvis 2002, 75). In the disturbance that followed, both women were ejected from the hall. Once outside, Christabel deliberately committed the technical offence of spitting at a policeman in order to court arrest. Charged with disorderly conduct, both women chose, as they had prearranged, short prison sentences rather than pay a fine. Such militant action had the desired effect in that women’s suffrage suddenly attracted the attention of the press in a way it never had before – and many women joined the WSPU. From now on, heckling of parliamentary candidates became a common tactic of the suffragettes as well as other forms of civil disobedience, such as demonstrations to parliament and the holding of Women’s Parliaments.

In contrast to the NUWSS, the WSPU opposed Liberal candidates in by-election campaigns and, from October 1906, also Labour candidates. Emmeline and Christabel, members of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), had become disillusioned with its lukewarm attitude to the women’s question and finally resigned their membership during the autumn of 1907. By now WSPU headquarters had moved to London, the centre of parliamentary democracy, and continued to advocate its ‘anti-party’ strategy.

The election of a Liberal Government in 1906 did not bring success for the women’s cause. Over the next two years, two further women’s suffrage bills, introduced as private members’ bills, were again talked out. Herbert Asquith who had become Liberal Prime Minister in April 1908, was an ardent anti-suffragist and one of his ministers, David Lloyd George, a cynical wheeler-dealer. The WSPU in particular took exception to the ‘dishonourable double-faced Asquith’, as they called him in one by-election poster. After Asquith failed to be moved by a WSPU procession of some 40,000 women in Hyde Park in June 1908, Emmeline Pankhurst felt that the suffragettes had ‘exhausted argument’. From now on, militancy which had largely involved civil disobedience and peaceful demonstrations gradually broadened to include more violent, law-breaking deeds, initially in the form of uncoordinated acts such as window breaking. Fawcett believed such tactics were damaging to the women’s cause and publicly distanced the NUWSS from such militant acts, including the hunger strike which was introduced in July 1909 by Marion Wallace Dunlop, a member of the WSPU rank-and-file.

Wallace Dunlop had been sent to Holloway for printing an extract from the Bill of Rights on the wall of St. Stephen’s Hall, the House of Commons. She went on hunger strike as a protest against the refusal of the authorities to recognise her as a political offender rather than a common criminal. Political offenders were entitled to be placed in the First, rather than Second and Third Divisions, where they enjoyed considerable privileges. After ninety-one hours of fasting, Wallace Dunlop was released (Rosen 1974, 120). Other suffragettes soon
adopted the hunger strike, seeing it as a way to secure early release. However, within a short time the Liberal Government began forcibly feeding the women.

Forcible feeding was a brutal, life-threatening and degrading procedure carried out by male doctors on struggling female bodies. The hunger-striking suffragette was usually held down on a bed by wardresses or tied to a chair which was tipped back. Two male doctors performed the operation, one pushing a rubber tube some three to four feet long up one of the nostrils or down the throat, into the stomach, the most painful method since a steel gag that cut into the sides of the lips was inserted into the mouth and screwed into place in order to keep the mouth open. Although the word ‘rape’ was not used by the suffragettes to describe their experiences, the instrumental invasion of the body, accompanied by overpowering physical force, suffering and humiliation was akin to it and commonly described as an ‘outrage’ (Purvis 2009, 38).

Suffragette militancy was suspended for much of 1910 in order to allow a cross-party group of MPs, who formed a Conciliation Committee chaired by Lord Lytton, draft another private member’s women’s suffrage bill. The move was welcomed by the NUWSS which now had 200 branches and a membership of about 22,000. It also had its own journal, The Common Cause, edited by Helena Swanwick while Votes for Women, edited by Fred and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, was the weekly newspaper of the WSPU (up until October 1912 when it was replaced by The Suffragette). The Conciliation Bill was narrowly drawn up, based on the existing local government franchise laws under which women had been voting since 1870. It passed its Second Reading with a majority of 109 and would have enfranchised about one million women. However, Asquith was determined not to allow this First Conciliation Bill proceed any further and it was killed off. On 18 November 1910, as the news filtered through, the WSPU sent a deputation of over 300 women, divided into detachments of twelve, to the Commons. As the women tried to push past the police, they were treated with a brutality they had not experienced before – faces were punched, legs were kicked, arms were twisted, breasts were pinched, and knees thrust between legs. The violence the women experienced on ‘Black Friday’ as it became known, much of it of a sexual nature, was frequently cited by the suffragettes as justification for the more violent forms of militancy they adopted from 1912 (Cowman 2007, 135).

Two further Conciliation Bills, in 1911 and 1911–1912, also failed to bring in votes for women (Bartley 2007, 105–106). Given the structure of party politics, the Conciliation Bills were doomed from the start. The two main political parties – the Tories and the Liberals – could not agree on what basis women should be enfranchised and sought party advantage from any such measure. A narrowly based women suffrage bill, based on property qualifications, would bring propertied women onto the electoral role and benefit the Tories. A wider women’s suffrage measure that included non-propertied women would bring in working-class earners who were more likely to vote Liberal. Additionally there were widespread social and cultural fears, shared by many of the MPs – who were all men – that giving women the vote would upset the traditional gender order. If women were granted the parliamentary vote, would they want to stand for election to parliament, and even aspire to the role of Speaker in the House of Commons? If women were granted the parliamentary vote, would they challenge the traditional power of a husband within ‘his’ own home?

The lack of progress on a women’s suffrage measure led many suffragettes, from 1912, to engage in attacks on private and public property – including mass window smashing of shops in London’s West End, setting fire to empty buildings, destroying mail in post boxes, cutting telephone wires, and pouring acid on men’s golf courses. The aim throughout was never to endanger human life but to force the Liberal Government to act. As Emmeline Pankhurst frequently said, ‘Human life for us is sacred’ (quoted in Jorgensen-Earp 1999, 341). However,
it is important to remember that alongside these law-breaking tactics, the suffragettes also
continued in non-violent acts, such as interrupting theatre performances or services in the
Church of England. Nonetheless, the NUWSS distanced itself from the WSPU, refusing to co-
operate with it. In July 1912, Millicent Garrett Fawcett signed a public appeal to the WSPU,
on behalf of the NUWSS executive. ‘Our best friends … are convinced that militancy is doing
the greatest possible harm to the suffrage cause’ (Rubinstein 1991, 177).

The NUWSS now began looking for an alliance with the Labour Party which had passed a
resolution committing itself to supporting women’s suffrage. An Election Fighting Fund was
set up to support Labour Party members at by-elections, and this policy was followed over the
next two years (Holton 1986, 177). Additionally, Liberal Party candidates who had
consistently advocated women’s suffrage were not opposed. Such party political alliances
were not supported by the WSPU leadership which emphasised that women had to grow their
own backbone and fight for equality in all areas of life, including employment and the law. As
Christabel Pankhurst said when she supported the destruction of mail in letter-boxes, the
burning of letters had as its object the abolition of the sexual and economic exploitation of
women, including the stopping of ‘hideous assaults on little girls … [and] the sweating of
working women’ (Pankhurst, 1912, 114). The WSPU wanted a radical transformation of
women’s role in society.

In November 1912, Asquith announced that a Manhood Suffrage Bill would be introduced
which would allow of amendment, if the Commons so desired, for the enfranchisement of
women. However, in January 1913 the bill was withdrawn since the Speaker had ruled that a
women’s suffrage amendment was out of order. ‘It is guerrilla warfare that we declare’,
announced an angry Emmeline Pankhurst to enthusiastic crowds (Purvis 2002, 208). Later
that year, on 8 June, suffragette Emily Wilding Davison died, four days after being seriously
injured when she ran onto the race course at the Derby, trying to grab the reins of the King’s
horse. A deeply religious woman she did not, in my view, deliberately commit suicide but was
a risk taker who knew the consequences could be fatal (Purvis 2013b). Five thousand women
marched in her funeral procession which drew large crowds. The circumstances of her death
were related in all the newspapers of the day and caught on Pathe News so that people all
over the world could read about it.

The disapproving national leadership of the NUWSS refused to take part in the funeral or
even send a wreath. That summer of 1913 it organised a suffrage ‘pilgrimage’ from various
places in Britain that eventually converged on London (Liddington 2006, 283–284). Meanwhile hunger striking suffragettes in prison continued to be forcibly fed, a process that
became extended after the Liberal Government passed in April 1913 The Prisoners’
Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act, commonly known as the ‘The Cat and Mouse Act’. The Act allowed a prisoner (a ‘mouse’) weakened through hunger striking to be released into
the community on a license and nursed back to good health – only to be re-admitted to prison
once she was well enough to continue her sentence. The Act was a publicity gift to the WSPU
since many ‘mice’ evaded being re-arrested, often dramatically appearing at a WSPU meeting.

By 1914 the government’s response to hunger strikers had become more brutal with stories
emerging of imprisoned suffragettes being drugged to make them more docile. Numerous
accidents were recorded when feeding by tube. For example, Ethel Moorhead, in Calton
prison in Edinburgh, developed double pneumonia after her eighth forcible feeding when
some food entered her lungs. Kitty Marion, a fire starter, experienced such pain during the
232 times she was forcibly fed that she thought she was going mad and begged the doctor to
give her some poison.

The NUWSS, on the other hand, was having talks with those Liberal ministers who were
sympathetic to the women’s cause, and was prepared to place the women’s demand as part of
a general call for wider reform of the franchise. Lloyd George and like-minded Liberals argued that, if they were returned in the next general election, they would introduce a new reform bill that would be capable of women’s suffrage amendments. The outbreak of war in August 1914 interrupted such talks. Even so, it is highly doubtful, as Sandra Holton claims in *Feminism and Democracy: Women’s Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900–1918* (1986) that women’s suffrage was near resolution in 1914 and that the war may actually have ‘delayed’ the vote.

On the outbreak of war, both Emmeline Pankhurst and Millicent Garrett Fawcett patriotically supported their country in its hour of need and encouraged their followers to engage in war work. Their stand caused splits in both the WSPU and the NUWSS which had a number of pacifists and internationalists on its national executive. In 1916, a Speaker’s Conference was set up to examine the extension of votes for men who had served in the war and were not enfranchised, and votes for women became part of the agenda. After the House of Commons passed the clause giving the parliamentary vote to certain categories of women over the age of thirty, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst in the autumn of 1917 re-launched the WSPU as the Women’s Party. Whereas the WSPU had campaigned for the vote for women, the Women’s Party was to prepare women for their impending citizenship during wartime and after. With the slogan ‘Victory, National Security and Progress’, the Women’s Party conflated the winning of the war with the women’s cause (Purvis 2002, 302).

On 6 February 1918, when the Representation of the People Act received the Royal Assent thus finally becoming the law, it enfranchised not only soldiers and sailors aged twenty-one and above, but also young men of nineteen and twenty who had seen active service. Votes for women, however, was very much a conservative measure, limited to certain categories of women aged thirty and over the age of thirty – women who were householders, wives of householders, occupants of property of a yearly value of not less than £5, or university graduates. The eight million women who were enfranchised were disproportionately middle-class housewives rather than the young working-class women who had worked in the munitions factories (Smith 2007, 88–89). Although women were not granted the franchise on equal terms with men – the issue on which both the WSPU and the NUWSS had campaigned – the principle of sex discrimination had been broken.

The NUWSS, as the WSPU had done, now too had to rethink its role. Should it find a new cause or wind up its organisation? At a general meeting in March 1919 it decided it should become the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, Eleanor Rathbone succeeding Millicent Garrett Fawcett as president of the new body. Together with other groups, especially the small but vocal Six Point Group, it campaigned for an extension of the female franchise as well as other social reforms. Equal parliamentary voting rights with men were not granted to women until 1928, when women became about 52.7 per cent of the potential electorate.

Thus after a long struggle, the women’s suffrage movement came to a successful conclusion. It was a movement that politicised thousands of women in Edwardian Britain. On 5 August 1928, the Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, sent a letter to Millicent Garrett Fawcett, in which he stated that he never doubted that equal franchise would be granted and noted that it would be ‘for the good of our beloved country’. Fawcett died in 1929, Emmeline Pankhurst in 1928 just a few weeks before the Equal Franchise Bill became law. On 6 March 1903, Stanley Baldwin, now an ex-prime minister, unveiled a statue to Emmeline Pankhurst in Victoria Tower Gardens, close to the Houses of Parliament, praising highly her contribution to winning the parliamentary vote for women. ‘I say with no fear of contradiction, that whatever view posterity may take, Mrs. Pankhurst has won for herself a niche in the Temple of Fame which will last for all time.’ Although she did not ‘make’ the women’s movement, ‘it was she who set the heather on fire’ (quoted in Smyth 1934, 276).
Whether the militant tactics of the WSPU or the constitutional approach adopted by the NUWSS was key in bringing about votes for women is a matter of debate among historians. But one thing is certain. Despite the legislative, societal and cultural changes that have transformed British society 1865, equality for women has still not been achieved in the early twenty-first century. This in 2016, according to the Fawcett Society’s Equality Report, women form only 29 per cent of MPs, 39 per cent of senior civil servants and 21 per cent of high court judges. Women in our universities make up 49 per cent of the academic staff but only 23 per cent of the professoriate, of whom only eighteen are black women. The pay gap between men and women remains at 14 per cent for full time work while two women die each week at the hands of a partner or ex-partner. The high hopes of those who campaigned so hard for the right of the parliamentary vote for all women in Britain, a key aspect of any society that claims to call itself a democracy, have not yet been realised.

Bibliography


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