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FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM 100 Years of Suffrage

As Britain celebrates one hundred years of voting equality, **Alice Barnes-Brown**, explores the political and personal history of the suffragettes and their extraordinary fight to turn the political tide

Long before an age of unequal BBC salary scandals and the #metoo campaign, women were calling for equality and their right to be represented, even in the harshest of climates. At a time when women were viewed as second-class citizens, they persisted in fighting a gruelling, slow battle for voting equality with men. This year marks the centenary of the 1918 *Representation of the People Act*, which granted all men – and some women – the

right to vote for the first time. To mark this momentous occasion, a series of events, exhibitions and other exciting things will be happening up and down the country under the 'Vote 100' banner. But how did women win the vote in the first place?

For most of history, women were kept firmly 'in their place'. Members of the female gender have been forcibly, or coercively, confined to their homes. Meanwhile, their male counterparts were at liberty to go out alone,

work, and wield positions of power.

Although women's voices from the past are often lost - or not thought to be worth keeping - there is evidence of women expressing their desire to vote from as early as the French Revolution. During this tumultuous time, when change was rapidly afoot, European women saw an opportunity to make themselves heard. Outraged by the deliberate omission of the female gender in the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (a key product of the upheaval happening across the Channel), British pioneer Mary Wollstonecraft responded with the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1791.

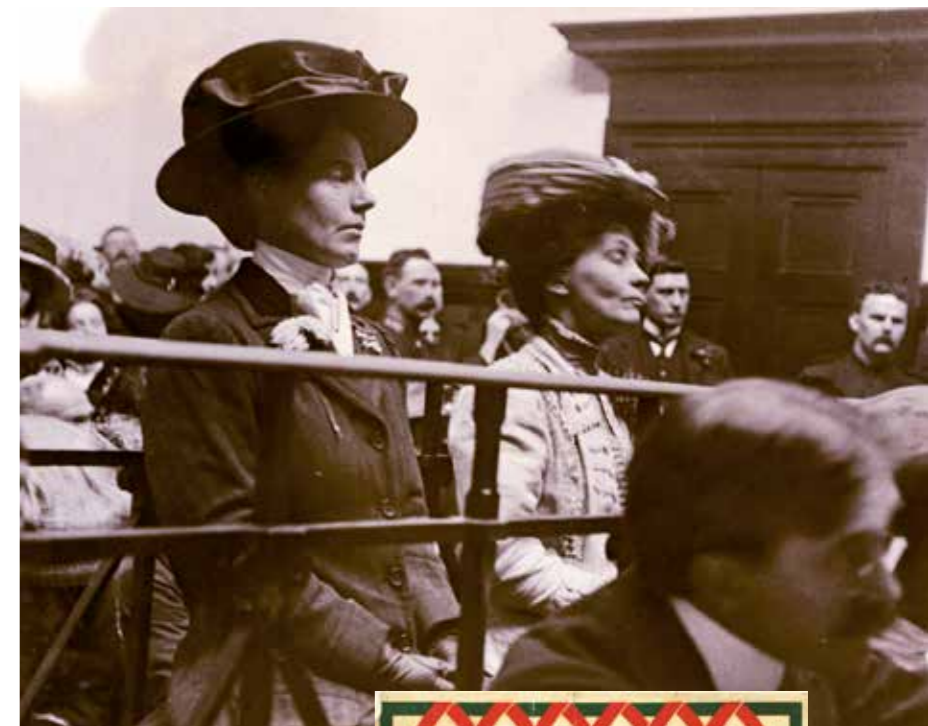
Wollstonecraft passionately argued that women were, in fact, not naturally superior to men - it was just their lack of education and opportunities that prevented women from taking charge over their own lives. "When I call women slaves, I mean in a political and civil sense", she said, perfectly summing up women's position in society. Her works were hugely controversial, so her male critics portrayed her as an aggressive harridan, and made a cruel mockery of the fact she was a single mother.

Despite the reactionaries' best efforts to turn back the tide, women had had a taste of liberation, and weren't going to give it up that easily. Over the next century, the cause for female suffrage grew in support, becoming one of the top political issues of the day. Also, rapid industrialisation across Britain had helped working-class men to build a political consciousness, and women wanted a piece of the action too.

An organised movement for women's suffrage was beginning to form. The 1860s saw the birth of many civil societies for women, such as the Ladies Discussion Society, which argued for greater female participation in politics. For the first time, collectives of women were seeking to change the system, and improve their lamentable position in the world. By petitioning the powers that be and campaigning within socially respectable, peaceful boundaries, these early "suffragists" helped raise awareness of the cause.

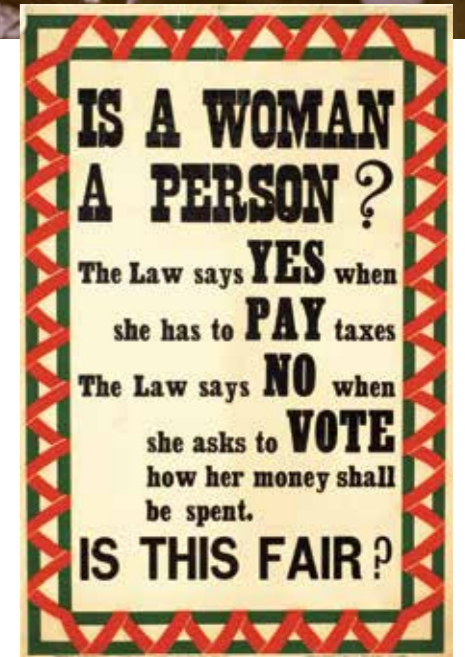
Indeed, many male policymakers and public figures were sympathetic to their plight. Parliament was ablaze with heated discussions on women's rights, while well-connected women watched from the Ladies' Gallery, a stuffy ventilation shaft high above the chamber. Sadly, Queen Victoria was not keen on helping her fellow women. In 1870, she even wrote "Let women be what God intended, a helpmate for man, but with totally different duties and vocations".

By the end of the 19th century, although some improvements had been made to improve women's lot, many were frustrated with the



lack of progress. A number of women felt that the suffragists had not achieved enough using their demure methods, and to bring about real change, drastic action was needed. One such woman was famed Emmeline Pankhurst, whose *Women's Social and Political Union* (1903) was the first group to operate en masse. Based in Manchester, it organised huge parades and public marches, giving a range of women a chance to get involved. Anyone who took part in these demonstrations was mocked and labelled a "suffragette" by the *Daily Mail*, but the name stuck, and the group reclaimed it as their own. The impetus for change was, by now, unstoppable. Every success gave the suffragettes more confidence to act in an increasingly revolutionary manner. In 1908, they invited members of the public to help them invade the House of Commons. A massive 60,000 people turned up, but the police prevented anyone from gaining access into Parliament.

However, the public and press responded with outrage when in 1913, the suffragettes bombed an empty house belonging to David Lloyd George, then the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Pankhurst, the leader of the attack, claimed responsibility. "We wanted to wake him up", she said. Her daughter, Christabel, told the newspapers that while Lloyd George claimed



Above left: Emmeline Pethick Lawrence and Christabel Pankhurst, circa 1908.

Above right: Inspiring women's suffrage poster, circa 1909.



Above: Lady Astor's Election Campaign 1919.
Above right: Meeting of Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU) leaders, c.1906 - c.1907.
Right: Christabel Pankhurst holding a Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU) flag and waving from the window of a house.

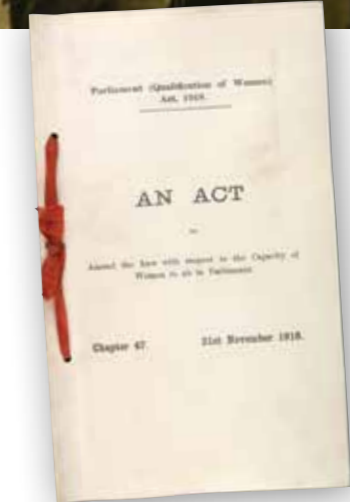


to support women's suffrage, he was always "betraying us" – so therefore, he was targeted. Those inside Westminster's palatial walls were getting increasingly nervous. Conservative and reactionary factions decided that to stop the suffragette movement, the authorities must come down on it with unrelenting force. Women were brutalised in the streets, and jailed for protesting. Perhaps the most famous clampdown was the so-called 'Cat and Mouse Act'. After a scandal about the painful force-feeding of hunger-striking suffragettes in prison, the 1913 "Prisoners' Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Act" allowed starving suffragettes to be released, only for them to be put back behind bars once they had recovered. One suffragette, who found herself constantly in and out of prison, thanks to this act, was Emily Wilding Davison. Davison, who had been forbidden to graduate from university because she was a woman, believed the cause for women's suffrage was the calling she had been waiting for all her life. Despite numerous incarcerations, she was only spurred on to do more radical acts, guided by the suffragette motto "deeds not words". In 1913, she became

the first martyr of the suffragette cause, when she was hit by King George V's horse at the Epsom Derby.

Her death was met with little sympathy. Newspapers were quick to question Davison's sanity, and the King's wife apparently wrote that Davison was a "horrid woman". However, at her funeral, 50,000 supporters came to line the route her coffin would take through London. Her death marked a watershed in dealings between suffragettes and the government – when the First World War broke out just over a year later, all imprisoned suffragettes were released, as an amnesty deal. The war would upset many long-held beliefs, not least that women were only capable of domestic duties. With many of the working-age male population away at war, women were reluctantly called into the workplace. Holding down jobs ranging from bus conductors to munitions makers, women kept Britain running smoothly, proving that females were perfectly able of having roles in the public sphere. Meanwhile, the Pankhursts' WPSU had suspended all its activities so it did not obstruct the war effort. However, other suffrage societies continued to lobby the government, demanding that women be included in a proposed, 'Representation of the People' Act.

Finally, one glorious June day in 1918, suffrage supporters won a victory they had waited decades for. The *Representation of the People Act*, which stipulated that some women over 30 could vote for the first time, had been passed. Though the initial reaction was jubilant, the war for suffrage had not yet been completely won. While the Act granted all men over the age of 21 the right to vote,



Above left: Flora Drummond and others under arrest, 1914.
Above right: Processing suffragettes, c.1908.
Left: Emmeline Pankhurst speaking to a crowd, c.1910.

women had to be over 30, and meet certain qualifications – be property owners, university graduates, etc.

Later in the year, women were allowed to be elected as MPs – the first of which was Constance Markievicz. However, because she belonged to the Irish Republican party Sinn Fein, she refused to take her seat at Westminster as a political statement. So, the first woman to actually sit as an MP was Lady Astor, who took over the constituency her husband resigned. Astor would represent this constituency right up until 1945. Still, female voters needed to be considerably older, and meet more criteria, than the male electorate. It would be another decade before women finally achieved voting equality, with the 1928 *Representation of the People Act*. Now females made up the majority of the electorate at over 52 per cent – a staggering achievement, considering their complete lack of power and agency just one decade earlier. Finally, women were able to cast their vote on the issues that affected them, after having been denied this

"Her death was met with little sympathy. Newspapers were quick to question Davison's sanity..."

right for centuries. Nonetheless, obstacles still persisted. For instance, women were not permitted to sit in the House of Lords until 1968, and until the late 1980s, women were never more than 5% of total MPs. The legacy of the suffragettes has been mixed, but their impact on British society was profound. Their tireless campaigning on behalf of disenfranchised women meant they were finally able to break free of domestic shackles, and influence the world they lived in. If the suffragettes could see Britain in 2018, they may be proud to see how far the country has come – but they may also lament that female representation in Parliament still has a long way to go. ▶



Q+A with Mari Takayanagi, Curator of the Vote 100 Exhibition in Parliament

Historian Mari Takayanagi, one of the curators of the Vote 100 Blog and the 'Voice and Vote: Women's Place in Parliament' exhibition in Westminster Hall, describes what we can expect in 2018, what she's most excited about - and where to go to find out more on the Vote 100 project

How would you describe the Vote 100 blog (ukvote100.org)

It's a place to find all sorts of snippets of history relating to women, Parliament and the vote. We started it way back in 2014 when we began working towards Vote 100, and wanted a place to share our stories and research. We also wanted to build an audience for our exhibition in 2018 - which seemed a long

way off! The most popular post we've ever had was by Sumita Mukherjee on 'Votes for Women in India', and recently we've enjoyed Tom Walsh's 'Wigan Man Stands for Women!' about Thorley Smith, the first Parliamentary candidate to stand on a women's suffrage ticket in 1906.

What can audiences expect from the Voice and Vote exhibition in Parliament?

It will tell the story of women and Parliament over the last 200 years using immersive and interactive technologies. We'll display rare and previously unseen historic objects and pictures from the Parliamentary collections and elsewhere. The idea behind it is to give visitors the experience of women's historic place in Parliament, by recreating three lost spaces of the Palace of Westminster. These are the 'Ventilator', the loft space above the House of Commons where women watched and listened to Parliamentary debates before 1834; the 'Cage', the nickname for the Ladies' Gallery closed off by brass grilles; and the 'Tomb', the small and cramped office space created after 1919 and used by early women MPs of all parties.

How will the exhibition help visitors to get a sense of the exclusion of women from politics?

By their very names, the Ventilator, Cage and Tomb give a sense of the attitudes to women in Parliament over the last 200 years. At first, women were banned from public galleries and instead had to go up to an attic, stick their heads through ventilator holes and peer down into the House of Commons. A Ladies' Gallery was finally created, but with metal grilles over the windows to stop the MPs being distracted by women. This made the whole space very



hot, stuffy and difficult to see and hear from. The early women MPs were expected to share an office regardless of their differing politics, with one coat hook and not enough desks for them all! Things are very different today, but it's important to understand how recent this is and how far we have come.

What's your personal favourite exhibit?

My favourite exhibit is a suffragette banner unfurled from the Ladies' Gallery and lowered into the House of Commons on 28 October 1908. This was part of a demonstration by the Women's Freedom League, during which two suffragettes, Helen Fox and Muriel Matters, chained themselves to the grille covering

the Ladies' Gallery windows. The authorities had to remove the grille from the windows, frogmarch the suffragettes out, and cut them off in a committee room nearby.

If one wanted to learn more, where would you suggest their first port of call be?

There are Vote 100 related events happening all over the country. A good first port of call is www.vote100.uk which is a hub website run by Royal Holloway (University of London), and you can use it to find out what's going on near you.

Voice and Vote at Westminster Hall runs from 27 June to 6 October 2018. Find out more information at www.parliament.uk/

Left: Left: Suffragette sketch of the Ladies' Gallery windows. Middle: Bust of Nancy Astor MP. Right: Women's Freedom League banner, 1908. Bottom right: WSPU brooch owned by Mary Ann Rawle.

Women's suffrage worldwide

The votes for women campaign in Britain was an important part of global changing attitudes. While some nations around the world were ahead of their time, others took longer to catch up.

1893: NEW ZEALAND

The island nation becomes the first place in the world to offer full suffrage to women, on an equal basis with men, after a calculated campaign by Kate Sheppard.

1902: AUSTRALIA

The vote was granted to British women over 21 in the Commonwealth of Australia in 1902, but individual states took a few more years to ratify this. Aboriginal women (and men) could not vote until 1962.

1905: FINLAND

The cold Nordic country was the first to allow women to both vote on an equal basis with men, and run for office at the same time.

1917: RUSSIA

After overthrowing the Tsar, the leaders of the Russian Revolution included the women's right to vote and hold office in their new constitution.

1920: USA

While some states had already granted women the vote, others were reluctant.. The US Constitution was amended to include a women's suffrage clause, meaning all states now had to allow women to vote.

1922: IRELAND

A number of Irish women had gained the vote as part of Britain, but their rights were still unequal to men. After winning independence, Irish women were granted the vote on an equal basis.

1930: SOUTH AFRICA

White women were granted the right to vote in South Africa after J.B.M Hertzog pledged to raise the issue in exchange for political support. Black women were

denied the vote until 1994.

1944: FRANCE

French women won their right to vote at the end of the Second World War. Previous attempts to gain suffrage had been blocked by the French Parliament's upper house, the Senate.

1952: GREECE

Greece granted women the right to vote in 1952. However, this proclamation was made too late for women to register to vote,

so women missed out on their first election.

1956: EGYPT

After taking power and reclaiming the Suez Canal, Gamal Abdel Nasser includes female suffrage in the new Egyptian Constitution of 1956, and they cast their first ballots the following year.

1971: SWITZERLAND

The Swiss hosted a national referendum on the issue of women's suffrage, and over

65% of male electors voted in favour. However, some regions continued resisting until the 1990s.

1984: LIECHTENSTEIN

Switzerland's neighbour Liechtenstein became the last European nation to grant women the vote in 1984, after a narrowly won referendum.

2015: SAUDI ARABIA

The latest country in the world to enfranchise females, the previous

King of Saudi Arabia allowed women to vote in municipal elections, saying women "have demonstrated positions that expressed correct opinions and advice".

Countries where women still cannot vote: Vatican City