

A Vote of Their Own

by Charlotte Bergeron

The passage of the Representation of the People Act in 1918 in England was the culmination of over seventy years of women's suffragist work. Though the act enfranchised only women over thirty who were "householders, the wives of householders, university graduates or occupiers of property worth L5 per year" <1> as well as men over twenty-one, it was the first legal affirmation of the parliamentary rights of women in England. The timing of the introduction of the bill into parliament was during a critical time for both the nation and the women's suffrage movement. 1917 marked England's third year of battle in World War I. The war forced the suffragists to alter their strategy from the militant tactics of the Pankhurst family to the more moderate war relief espoused by Millicent Fawcett. The war proved to be the single greatest factor in the enfranchisement of women over thirty and all men over twenty-one.

The debates, as reported in the London Times, reflected the contradictory perceptions of women as well as the many concerns faced by a country in a time of war. Until the act was passed, only male heads of households had the vote. The women suffragists challenged the hierarchical and patriarchal structures by demanding equal political rights in the form of the vote. Though suffragists appealed to the mandates of justice, the arguments of expediency -- women's war work and "higher moral character" -- proved more successful in the fight over calls for human dignity. The attitudes and ideas expressed in this national debate paint a fascinating portrait of women's lives before they were granted the vote in England.

Most historians view World War I as crucial to the acceptance and broadened support of the suffrage movement. ". . . the War shook conservatism out of people and made change, both political and social, seem less threatening." <2> The war aided the suffragists in two ways. First, the war created a need to reform the franchise laws as millions of men lost their voting qualification while fighting. The old laws required voters to inhabit a residence for fifteen months prior to election. "In order to make it possible for members of the armed services abroad to vote, the government was forced to revise the franchise laws, and thereby to resurrect the dormant issue of women's suffrage." <3> Before the laws could be revised, new parliamentary elections had to be called. Because elections had been suspended during the war, pressure for new ones was especially strong as the war was ending. The new elections presented the best opportunity for proponents of women's suffrage to make it an important campaign issue. The suffragists used this opportunity to advance the cause of the women's movement.

World War I also allowed women to prove themselves worthy of the vote. Women in great numbers entered jobs thought inappropriate before the war. Mrs. Millicent Fawcett, a leader in the suffrage movement remarked, ". . . it is no exaggeration to say that the whole of the women of the country of all classes, suffragist and anti-suffragist, threw themselves into work for the nation in a way that had never been anticipated by those who had judged women by pre-war standards." <4> In a speech delivered at the Queen's

Hall on April 23, 1917 Emmeline Pankhurst, a militant suffragist, asserted disappointment over the way women's war efforts had to be manipulated in order to secure the vote. "Women think of what we have done as simply doing our duty, and our regret is that it has taken so long for opportunities to be given to us." <5> The evidence of women's capability, if not equality, was irrefutable in the minds of most Britons after the success of women's war work. The Victorian ideals of feminine weakness and fragility were swept away as the machinery of war gathered strength. ". . . the ideology of separate spheres lost much of its former legitimacy as women provided essential support. . ." <6>

The suffrage societies ceased political activity in favor of relief work. Their work served two important functions for the success of the suffrage movement after World War I. It first showed the organized contributions women had to offer in terms of national service. Secondly, relief efforts kept the organizations intact and relevant. Relief work "provided the means for maintaining the National Union organization in some sort of working order until the time when the fight for the vote could usefully be taken up again." <7> Pro-suffrage rhetoric never let the nation forget the invaluable service women had performed for the country. Aside from physical labor in the munitions factories, women reminded the nation of an even graver sacrifice they had made for the way. In a letter to the Prime Minister Henry Asquith, suffragists cited a body of women often taken for granted by society, those women "who have given their husbands and sons ungrudgingly to its defense." <8>

Women's war work was only one resource in the suffragists' arsenal. The debate over women's suffrage drew on evidence from many locales throughout the Empire. Places as diverse as South Africa, Australia and India all played roles in winning acceptance for the bill. Lord Denham, former Governor-General of Australia, tried to reassure parliament with his experience. "He had never heard it suggested that the vote of Australian women had been given unwisely or indiscreetly on the important questions which had been submitted to them, nor had women banded themselves together against the opposite sex." <9> Asquith, as the Liberal Prime Minister of England, had been a strong opponent of women's suffrage before the war. Like many members of parliament who changed their position during the war, Asquith gave testimony in the House of Commons concerning women's help. He positively viewed the impact of women in the decision-making process in South Africa. "Everywhere they stimulated and supported the men; and if it had not been for their grasp of the great Imperial issue at stake in South Africa there would have been much more faltering on the part of the men." <10> Lord Robert Cecil, the eloquent and often witty supporter of women's suffrage, doubted the claims that India would "never submit to be governed by a House of Commons that was partly elected by women ... The point was that they [Indians] would not stand being governed by women. Then why on earth could they stand for sixty years being governed by Queen Victoria?" <11> Historical precedence and colonial experience were important indicators of the path England should take.

Other pro-suffragists stressed the need for women's superior moral character in post-war decision-making. The Bishop of London based his support for woman suffrage "on the ground that the services of women would be needed in the reconstruction of the world

after the war." <12> In a letter to the editor of the London Times, women did not "presume to claim the right of citizenship by virtue of service rendered... [Their] claim is based rather upon future needs and upon the practical urgency of representing women's interest and experience in the task of social healing and industrial reconstruction which must follow the conclusion of peace." <13> This letter was important for its message, as well as for the list of seventy-seven aristocratic women's signatures which accompanied it.

The activism of upper-class women was essential for maintaining broadbased appeal for the suffrage movement. These women ". . . were tangible proof that politics and intellectual pursuits did not unbalance or unsex women; their championship of the women's suffrage movement made the cause itself less threatening and offered one more piece of evidence that the boundaries of the public sphere could be redefined without altering the structure of the private sphere." <14> The presence of upper-class women in the movement convinced conservative opinions that society would remain largely unchanged once women got the vote.

The attention of educated women was especially focused on women's suffrage as they had received equal access to education, but continued to lack political equality. Their abilities, proven by obtaining the equivalent of university degrees, made the political disparity between the sexes painfully obvious. Lord Haldane cited the "unmistakable demand of educated women" for the vote. He argued "that the change was desirable on the ground that it would broaden the basis of the Constitution and exercise a tranquilizing and steady influence." <15> The last part of his argument would appeal to those supporting suffrage out of fear of past militant strategies.

Others argued that women must have a voice in government, especially in terms of "women's issues" like marriage law reforms. The entrance of women into the labor force revealed problems of gender-based wage differences and other unfair practices. Some politicians wanted suffrage to pass for fear of a return of the aggressive measures taken by the more radical suffragists before the war. In response to a Lord's anti-suffrage stance, Lord Crewe warned the House that "if the vote was refused to women the old violent atmosphere of the question would return." He also argued that " women had taken a far greater share in the service of the nation and the Empire during the war than anybody had previously thought possible." <16>

Though the arguments for expediency had more weight than those of justice, some supporters of suffrage continued to express the natural right of women to the vote. According to Lord Cecil, "The grant of the suffrage to women would be a reasonable act of justice; it would be an act of policy; it would remove legitimate discontent, and could do no possible harm. In principle it seemed to him a Conservative measure." <17> Lord Lytton asked bluntly "if women were to be told again that they must remain in the same category as lunatics and children" <18> as they were the only other groups without the vote.

Lord Cecil followed the arguments for and against women's suffrage to their logical conclusions. He remarked that "the only justification for such a state of things was a disbelief either in representative government or in the fitness of women to vote." <19> Mrs. Fawcett points to the practical assistance of women in the electoral process as evidence of women's ability. ". . . if women were fit (and they obviously were fit) not only to advise, persuade and instruct voters how to vote but also to conduct election campaigns from start to finish, they were surely fit to vote themselves." <20>

In the June 1917 edition of the Contemporary Review, Aneurin Williams, M.P. wrote favorably of the proposed legislation. "The Bill is a great step forward in popular Government, because it gives representation to great numbers hitherto deprived of the suffrage, and above all, to women." <21> He critiqued the proposals that kept women from the vote as oppressive methods of those in power. "It is not democracy that is at fault, but our present system, which falsifies the voice of democracy." <22> He warned those opposed to women's suffrage of the continued problems the nation would face if the bill was not passed. "If they [parliament] act in a narrower spirit the outlook is black indeed; there will be no step forward in democratic government; no appeasement of class and sex warfare." <23>

This connection of class to gender unrest illustrates the social changes feared by conservatives. The arguments against women's suffrage exposed the paternal and elitist attitudes of English society. The feminine ideal of the Victorian era survived the onslaught of women's war work in the minds of some men. The debates in the House of Lords and in the House of Commons revealed the fears of the members of parliament. Viscount Bryce believed that ". . . the immense majority of women were not qualified by their way of life, by their knowledge, and by the interest they took in public affairs to use the vote to their advantage and that of the nation." <24> During a speech to the House of Lords, Lord Loreburn moved for omission of the subsections allowing women the vote "although he believed that women were better than men, he contended that it was not in the interest of the State or in that of women that they should have power. . . ." <25> Lord Sydenham agreed on the same grounds, but found further fault with the timing of the bill. He thought that "there were in the Bill germs of disease which might bring about the destruction of the whole Empire. It was the most revolutionary and controversial measure which had ever been before the House, and the time chosen for its introduction was that of the greatest crisis in the nation's history." <26> Lord Landsdowne persisted in his "most uncompromising opposition" as he believed that "six million women thrown into the wrong scale might do considerable harm. . . He called it a revolutionary departure, entirely unprecedented, and bitterly opposed by a large number of men and women." <27> Lord Bryce provided the origin of the conservative's assessment of women's rights. "He disputed the proposition that there was an abstract right in every human being to take part in the government of his country." <28>

The suffragists' historical alliance with the Liberal party faded as the Liberals failed to offer any substantial bills for women's suffrage. The suffragists steadily turned in favor of the Labour party and caused great concern in light of fast approaching elections. Labour party members wanted to address women's issues, but feared that the possibilities

for Labour candidate victories would be put in jeopardy. Conservatives played on the fears of the middle and upper classes by emphasizing the connection between women's suffrage and the Labour movement as signs of creeping Socialism. The ties between class struggle and women's oppression were believed to result in social and political upheaval. 'Some members of parliament wanted to postpone women's suffrage as they felt such a bill would rock an already shaky, war-torn Britain. Others connected women's gentler side with an attraction to pacifism. Their rhetoric cried for strong men in tough times in order to keep the West's ideals of freedom and democracy safe. The fact that the women protected by those ideals could not cast a single vote was ignored. <29>

Some parliamentary anti-suffragists tried to make their objections appear as merely the reflections of women's own concerns and doubts. Sir Cecil Hobhouse used this approach as he believed "that the capacity of women lay in other directions than that of public life and was best utilized when it was directed to domestic and local activities rather than to external and political considerations. " <30> Hobhouse felt sure of his stance as he had spoken "with many educated women on this matter, and they were clearly of the opinion that it was not possible during the period when women were capable of bearing children to place on them the additional burden of taking part either in Imperial or in the industrial and commercial life of the country." <31> The Lord Chancellor, claiming that women did not want the vote, quoted one woman as saying, "The first use I will make of it will be to vote for taking it away." <32> Lord Balfour, urging a referendum, similarly contended "that there was no certainty that the proposal was even demanded by women." <33> Sir Frederick Banbury believed women had not suffered from not having the vote. This was supported in his belief that "women were constitutionally averse from taking strong action." <34> This idea buttressed Viscount Chaplin's statement that "it was well known that women invariably voted with their male relatives." <35> Giving women the vote, those men argued, would merely duplicate what men wanted anyway.

The manner in which the bill was developed in parliament illustrates the limited abilities women were thought to possess. Sir Frederick Banbury expressed concern over the practical aspects of women's voting. "She will not understand all the intricacies of voting... and if the registration clerk has to explain to every woman the precise meaning of the question it will take ten minutes or a quarter of an hour." <36> Mr. Gulland seemed to have been guided by a concern over the weakness of the female mind. "I am afraid that the effect on a woman, who will be quite sufficiently agitated when she comes to vote, will be enough to frighten her away altogether." <37>

The decision to make an age requirement of thirty for women whereas it was twenty-one for men was used by both sides to advance each point of view. The limitation was especially at odds with the heavy, industrial labor performed by women under thirty. The age clause caused considerable consternation for Major Gerald Hunt. In his address to the Commons, he pointed out that the women so lavishly praised for their work were mostly under thirty. The law, in effect, would prohibit the targeted recipients for the vote. "You could not do without these women at the front. You cannot do without the women to help you in this great War, and yet the women who have helped you voluntarily and done their best, under this Bill are not going to have any say in the government of the country."

<38> After two dramatic motions for an amendment making the age the same for men and women veterans the same, the Major was not seconded.

All antagonists recognized the age chosen as completely arbitrary. But suffragists accepted it as a necessary compromise in order to get some women represented in government. Anti-suffragists saw it as illogical and "believed women would exploit the fact and have the age lowered to that required of men." <39> But most believed the inclusion of women should be gradual. "The differentiation of age between the sexes was due to the desire of the legislature not to put women voters, from the outset of the experiment, in a majority, but to give men representation in the proportion of 3 to 2." <40> Lord Syndenham stated his fears "that with the first admission of women it must entail within a few years the concession of the vote for all adult women, who would then command an enormous majority in determining the destinies of the Empire -- and were women really fit to govern a great Empire?" <41> Syndenham expressed the fears rooted in visions of a world dominated by women.

The hopes of women suffragists came true on January 11, 1918 with a debate that "attracted the largest House which has been seen since the beginning of the war" <42> followed by the passage of the bill. A popular magazine of the era, Punch, "captured the moment in a cartoon of a St. Joan-like figure, eyes uplifted and holding a banner inscribed 'Woman's Franchise.' The caption read 'At Last.' " <43> Indeed the women's suffrage movement had passed the tests of time, culture and a nation at war. A movement which "had been mainly conducted by educated women in the interests of educated women" <44> had come to include women of more varied backgrounds and lifestyles.

The passage of the bill was achieved for very different and often conflicting reasons. The historian Sandra Stanley Holton identifies the suffragists' inclusion of other groups' interests as one of the bases for success. "Their goal was to ally their cause with more generalized movements for radical social change, and to give expression to their conviction that women's subordination was enmeshed with other structures of social inequality." <45> World War I was the impetus for the final victory. Women utilized the war as an opportunity to prove themselves as equal and capable citizens worthy of a voice in their government." . . The Suffragette became Britannia and appealed to all women to do their utmost in the cause of world freedom." <46> The length of the war forced new parliamentary elections to be called, thus giving women a strong chance at rallying the electorate's support. Ultimately, the war forced England to face a world where archaic ideals no longer had a place. Women's suffrage passed because reasons to oppose it were simply no longer valid in the twentieth century.

Notes

1 Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), p. 236.

2 Leslie Parker Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies 1897-1914* (London: Garland, 1982), p. 225.

3 Hume, p. 224.

4 Ida Husted Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage* (New York: Arno, 1969), p. 740.

5 Midge Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder* (New York: Knopf, 1975), p. 327.

6 Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986), p. 145.

7 Holton, p. 131.

8 Mackenzie, p. 323.

9 Lord Denham, as quoted in the *Times*, 16 Jan. 1918, 7d.

10 Lord Asquith, as quoted in the *Times* 11 Jan. 1918, 8e.

11 Lord Cecil, as quoted in the *Times*, 20 June 1917, 10b.

12 Bishop of London, as quoted in the *Times*, 10 Jan., 7d.

13 Letter to the Editor, *Times* 17 Dec. 1917.

14 Hume, p. 227.

15 Lord Haldane, as quoted in the *Times*, 10 Jan. 1918.

16 Lord Crewe, as quoted in the *Times*, 10 Jan. 1918.

17 Lord Cecil, as quoted in the *Times*, 20 Jan. 1917.

18 Lord Lytton, as quoted in the *Times*, 11 Jan. 1918.

19 Lord Cecil, as quoted in the *Times*, 20 June 1917.

20 Harper, p. 726.

21 Aneurin Williams, "The Reform Bill and the New Era," *Contemporary Review* 112 (1917), p. 16.

22 Williams, p. 18.

23 Williams, p. 17.

24 Viscount Bryce, as quoted in the *Times*, 18 Dec. 1918.

- 25 Lord Lorebun, as quoted in the *Times*, 10 Jan. 1918.
- 26 Lord Syndenham, as quoted in the *Times*, 18 Dec. 1917.
- 27 Lord Landsdowne, as quoted in the *Times*, 10 Jan. 1918.
- 28 Lord Bryce, *Times*, 18 Dec. 1918.
- 29 Hume, p. 227.
- 30 Sir Hobhouse, *Times*, 20 June 1917.
- 31 Sir Hobhouse, *Times*, 20 June 1917.
- 32 Lord Chancellor, as quoted in the *Times*, 11 Jan. 1918.
- 33 Lord Balfour, *Times*, 10 Jan. 1918.
- 34 Sir Frederick Banbury, as quoted in the *Times*, 20 June 1917.
- 35 Viscount Chaplin, *Times*, 11 Jan. 1918.
- 36 Sir F. Banbury, as quoted in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 99, 22 Oct. 1917.
- 37 Robert Gulland, as quoted in the *Debates*, Vol. 99, 22 Oct. 1917.
- 38 Major Hunt, as quoted in the *Debates*, Vol. 99, 22 Oct. 1917.
- 39 *Times*, 14 Jan. 1918.
- 40 J. A. R. Marriott, *Modern England 1885-1932: A History of My Own Times* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1934), p. 324.
- 41 Lord Syndenham, as quoted in the *Times*, 18 Dec. 1917.
- 42 *Times*, 11 Jan. 1918.
- 43 Frank Gloversmith, *Class, Culture and Social Change* (New Jersey: Humanities, 1980), p. 208.
- 44 Marriott, p. 324.
- 45 Holton, p. 7.
- 46 Marriott, p. 326.

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