

# Universal Suffrage - The True History

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*He who controls the past, controls the future (Orwell, 1984)*

## 1. Introduction

I have not conducted a poll but I feel fairly sure that to most people the phrase "universal suffrage" would be taken to mean "votes for women". The popular belief may be summarised thus,

- Before the suffragette movement women did not have the vote;
- Before the suffragette movement men did have the vote;
- The suffragette movement was the main reason that women won the vote.

In this short essay I will argue that these three statements are, (i)not entirely true, (ii)grossly misleading, and, (iii)just plain wrong, respectively.

The key parts of the argument will be as follows,

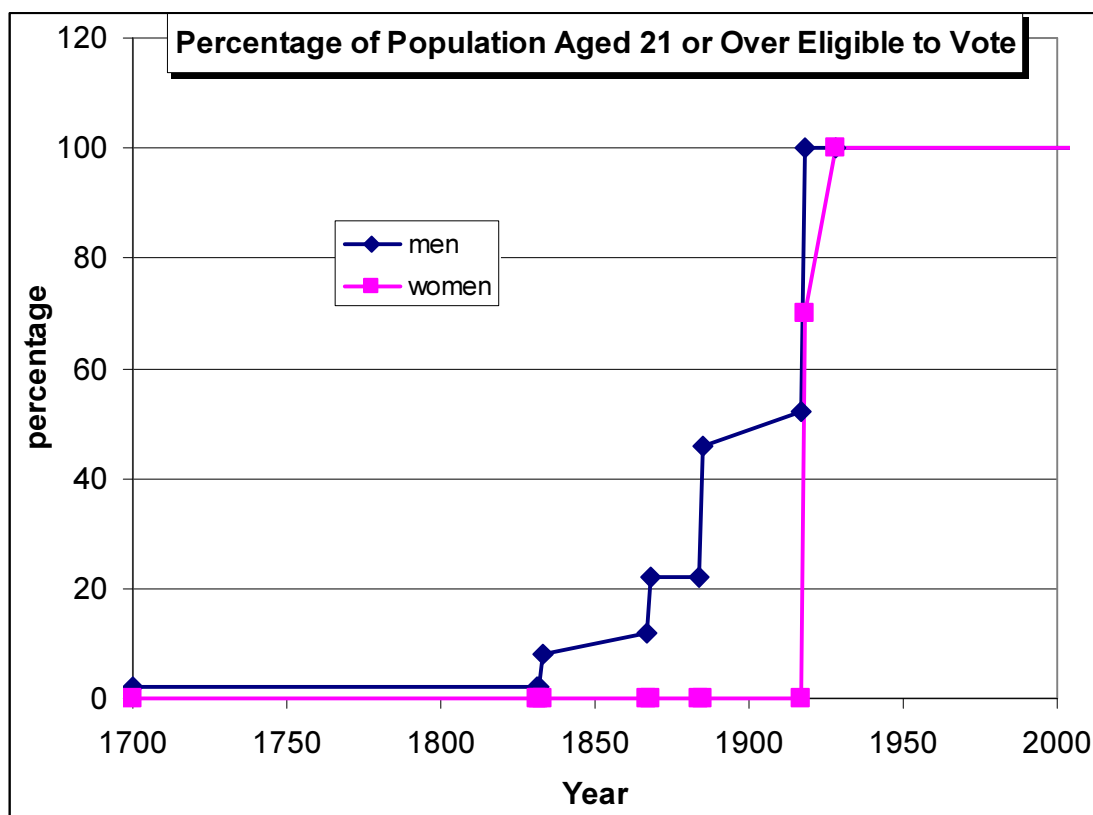
- Parliamentary elections, which is what people invariably mean when discussing "having the vote" are only half the story. Arguably more important were the local parish elections. Women voted in parish elections, and held local office, as far back as the early Victorian era (and perhaps earlier though evidence is scant).
- Prior to the Representation of the People Act in 1918 the right to vote in parliamentary elections was based on wealth, principally land or property ownership. This meant that most men did not have the vote.
- The conditions which resulted in the passing of the Representation of the People Act, 1918, which gave the parliamentary vote to women, arose as a consequence of the Great War (World War 1), the suffragettes' protests being largely irrelevant.

To quote Sean Lang, "Parliamentary Reform, 1785-1928": "*The standard version of the story of the fight for female suffrage sees it as a straight contest between the suffragettes and a chauvinistic male establishment, headed - not to say embodied - by the prime minister, Asquith, and encompassing blinkered politicians, burly policemen and brutal prison warders. This [traditional] version has the merit of simplicity, with obvious heroes and villains, which makes it well suited to general public consumption; unfortunately it ignores some of the important paradoxes of the story.*"

The principal paradox which I wish to expose is this: that before World War 1 the main barrier to women being granted the vote was not the absence of support for the idea amongst (male) politicians. On the contrary, there was widespread support within the Liberal and Labour Parties. The main barrier to female enfranchisement was the fact that *men* had not yet achieved universal suffrage. There was simply no political route to passing a Bill to give the vote to women without first having enfranchised working class men. The true history of universal suffrage is therefore the history of the working class struggle. It is now presented to us purely as a gender issue. But in reality there was little difference in the acquisition of universal suffrage by men and women when viewed on an historical timescale (see graph).

With the centenary of the Representation of the People Act looming in 2018, I feel confident that it will be celebrated as the event which gave the vote to women. Whilst true, this is also seriously misleading. The Act should primarily be celebrated as

having over-turned the class-based franchise and granted universal suffrage to both sexes. That the Act is now presented to us purely as "votes for women" says more about present day political bias than it does about historical truth.



## 2. The Parish

These days we think of real power lying in the central Westminster government, whilst local government has relatively few powers. But in the Victorian era, and before, there was no welfare state, no state education, no national health service and most people did not pay tax to central government. The business of parliament was far narrower than it is today. Much of its business was war, conquest and empire. On the other hand those issues which touched more directly on ordinary peoples' lives were addressed locally, primarily at the parish level. The parish electorate in England and Wales was generally broad and inclusive. There was the potential for elections for a range of parish officers including constables, highway surveyors and overseers of the poor. Of greatest importance was administering the poor law, upon which most of parish funds were expended. This involved parish assistance to widows or abandoned women with children as well as help for the sick and elderly. These are the issues in which women would be most interested, rather than parliamentary issues. Appropriately, it would seem that women always had the vote at parish level. Not only that but women also held office within the parish. Although there were attempts to reform and codify this system in the early nineteenth century, in reality, in many parishes, democracy was in the ascendant.

Women's close involvement in local government, even in the early Victorian era, has been widely unappreciated. This has given rise to the false impression that women were disenfranchised. In truth, women's enfranchisement differed little from that of men - at this local level - though both were subject to wealth (property ownership, being a ratepayer, etc). However, modern historical scholarship is revealing the truth.

There has always been some indirect references in local newspapers from the Victorian era suggesting that some women must have had a vote (such as cartoons bearing the caption "canvassing a woman voter"). Recently, though, clearer evidence has come to light. The publicity blurb for the book *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914* by Patricia Hollis (Oxford University Press, 1989) reads as follows (slightly abridged to fit the present context), "*This is a pioneering study exploring the world of women who held office some fifty years before they had the parliamentary vote. It is based on the records of some 20 towns and 10 rural districts in England. Fifty years before the suffragettes fought to have the parliamentary vote, women in England were able to elect, and be elected to, local district councils, school boards and Poor Law boards. This pioneering study explores the world of those women who held office on behalf of other women, children, the old and the sick....Local government offered that conjunction of compulsory philanthropy, municipal housekeeping and local responsibility which made it a sphere suitable for women*".

Direct evidence of women voting in the early Victorian era is rare. But this is because records of parish elections seldom survive (unlike parliamentary elections). However, occasionally poll books for parish elections surface in the archives. One example is discussed in *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (2013) by Sarah Richardson, Associate Professor in History at the University of Warwick. This relates to St Chad's parish in Lichfield in May 1843. The poll book can be found in the papers of the solicitors who were the Conservative party agents and was probably used to canvass local opinion in-between parliamentary elections. 30 women voters are listed including one plural voter, Grace Brown, who had four votes because of her wealthy status.

In 1869 single women ratepayers got the vote in municipal elections and in 1870 in elections to the new School Boards; women could also vote under the 1888 Local Government Act and in 1894 they were allowed to sit on local councils. By 1900 there were something like a thousand female elected Poor Law Guardians, including Mrs Pankhurst.

The reason that women were able to vote was due to the fact that many local franchises were based upon payment of poor rates, irrespective of the sex of the person paying those rates. This was effectively a household franchise, and single or widowed women who owned or rented eligible properties were able to exercise the vote. In other words, local voting rights were gender neutral (although the bias of property ownership by men resulted in a *de facto* bias in voting rights). The organisation and powers of local government had arisen from immemorial custom and incorporated elements of the common law as well as combinations of by-laws and private and public parliamentary acts. It seems likely, then, that women had enjoyed local voting rights, and the holding of local office, perhaps since Anglo-Saxon times.

### **3. Parliamentary Votes for Women**

When did women get the parliamentary vote, subject only to an age limit? The answer is at the same time as men - 1918 - although the age limits were different for men and women (21 and 30 respectively). Women had to wait another 10 years, until 1928, to achieve full equity with men when the voting age became 21 for both. Here is the timeline from the early Victorian era,

- In theory, women could vote in parliamentary elections before 1832 as county, and many borough, franchises were based on property ownership.
- However, The Great Reform Act of 1832 put a temporary stop to women's parliamentary vote. Furthermore, in 1835, the Municipal Corporations Act also excluded women, disenfranchising from parliamentary elections many who had previously voted for town councils. However, women continued to vote and to hold office for a range of local bodies.
- The Municipal Franchise Act of 1869 enabled female ratepayers to vote for local municipal councils.
- In 1872 this right was restricted to single or widowed women, but in 1894 the Local Government Act extended these rights to married women and allowed women to serve as councillors.
- The Representation of the People Act of 1918 extended the parliamentary franchise to all women over 30 years of age providing some minimal property criteria were met.
- Finally, in 1928, the parliamentary vote for women was applied from age 21 onwards, as for men (at that time - the voting age was not reduced to 18 until 1969). All property criteria were removed, for both sexes. The requirement to be a local government rate payer remained, for both sexes equitably, in 1928.

Hence, the situation as regards the parliamentary vote for women is complicated, but for much of the Victorian era, and probably before, *certain* women did have such a vote. The proportion of women enjoying this right would have been very small, but then the same was true of men until ~1884. Whilst it is true that the act of 1918 was the first to give the vote to *all* woman over a certain age, the same is true for men (though subject to different, but minimal, property criteria). The 1918 Representation of the People Act was also the first time that all men (subject to age) had been given the parliamentary vote, as we shall see below.

Some have argued that restricting the vote in 1918 to women over 30, together with some remnant property criteria, was discrimination on gender grounds. Of course it was, but with good reason. It would have been insupportable to make the voting age for both sexes the same at that time. Why? Because women outnumbered men before the war, and outnumbered them considerably more by 1918 as a consequence of those who died in the trenches. To put men in the minority by virtue of their comrades' deaths in battle would have been unconscionable. And the inequity was short lived, being corrected in 1928.

Incidentally, the suffragist representative at the Speaker's Conference in 1916, Millicent Fawcett, put forward the suggestion that women should get the vote at 18, whilst that for men would remain at 21, apparently on the grounds that women mature earlier. This was a flagrant attempt to grab the majority.

As it was, men remained the majority of voters in 1918 - and until 1928. Data compiled by F.W.S. Craig in *British Electoral Facts 1832-1987* (Parliamentary Research Services, 1989) indicates that after the 1918 Act the number of men on the electoral register was 12,913,166 compared with the total of 21,392,322, so I conclude there were 8,479,156 women, substantially fewer than men. These figures imply that women were 40% of the electorate after the 1918 Act. Be that as it may,

the situation was corrected, and equality in voting rights was finally made indubitable, by the 1928 Act.

#### 4. Parliamentary Votes for Men

The property-based right to vote goes back at least to King Henry VI in 1432 when it was established that only people owning property worth 40 shillings or more could vote. The resulting system was largely unchanged until the Great Reform Act of 1832. Successive reforms then occurred throughout the Victorian era and the early 20th century. A gradual increase in the percentage of men who could vote in parliamentary elections arose over this period, partly due to these legislative Acts and partly as a result of inflation bringing more men within the property value threshold. A timeline is,

- The Reform Act 1832 extended voting rights to adult males who rented propertied land of a certain value.
- The Reform Act 1867 extended the franchise to men in urban areas who met a property qualification, further increasing male suffrage.
- The Representation of the People Act 1884 addressed imbalances between the boroughs and the countryside and again increased the number of men eligible to vote.
- The Representation of the People Act 1918 removed the property restrictions for men and thus provided universal suffrage for men for the first time in history. All women over 30 and meeting certain minimal property restrictions were also given the vote. This was the single most significant advance for women as regards the parliamentary vote. But this Act also resulted in the largest single increase in the number of men who could vote - and more importantly - broke for the first time the previous class-based franchise.
- The Representation of the People Act 1928 made women's voting rights equal with men, with women being eligible to vote at 21 with no property restrictions.
- The Representation of the People Act 1948 removed the right of certain privileged people (the very wealthy generally) to have more than one vote. For the first time parliamentary voting was genuinely democratic, with one person one vote and everyone aged 21 and over permitted to vote (excluding those in prison).

The following Table gives the number of people eligible to vote in UK parliamentary elections as a percentage of the total population aged 21 and over.

<b>Period</b>	<b>Electorate as percentage of population aged 21 and over (men and women)</b>
Before 1832 (from time immemorial)	~1%
1832 - 1867	~4% rising to ~6%
1867 - 1884	~11%
1884 - 1918	~23% rising to ~26%
1918 - 1928	78%
1928 onwards	100%

These data were taken from *The History of the Parliamentary Franchise*, House of Commons Research Paper 13/14 by Neil Johnston (March 2013). This paper gives

the electorate as a percentage of the total population. I have adjusted the data to give the electorate as a percentage of the population aged 21 and over by dividing by 0.63, an estimate for the proportion of the population aged 21 and over obtained by ensuring that the above Table gives 100% after the 1928 Act, as it should. The only approximation is that this method implicitly assumes that the proportion of the population aged 21 and over was close to 0.63 throughout the whole period.

An independent check of the data given in the above Table was made using the absolute figures for the size of the electorate given in *British Electoral Facts 1832-1987*, compiled and edited by F.W.S. Craig (Parliamentary Research Services 1989). Population data was taken from *Focus on People and Migration: 2005 - Chapter 1: The UK population: past, present and future* by Julie Jefferies, and this was converted to an estimate of the population aged 21 and over assuming the same 0.63 factor as above. In 1880 this gave ~16%, in the period 1884-1918 it gave 28%, and in the period 1918-1928 it gave 80%. These figures are a little larger than in the above Table, but are close enough to serve as confirmation sufficient for our purposes.

Prior to 1918 if the small number of women eligible to vote is ignored, and if the number of adult men and women in the population is assumed the same, then the percentage of men aged 21 and over permitted the parliamentary vote can be estimated simply by doubling the numbers in the Table, i.e.,

Period	Percentage of men aged 21 and over eligible for the parliamentary vote
Before 1832 (from time immemorial)	~2%
1832 - 1867	~8% rising to ~12%
1867 - 1884	~22%
1884 - 1918	~46% rising to ~52%

Note that all these data refer to the UK, i.e., England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland combined.

It is worth noting that until 1872 most men regarded the possession of the vote as more of a liability than a blessing. The reason is that voting was not secret until the Ballot Act of 1872 made it so. Powerful local dignitaries could see how men had voted and consequently pressure was exercised upon men to vote in accord with those whose patronage was crucial to their livelihood. If a man was under pressure from opposing camps he could not avoid angering one or the other, hence possession of a vote was not an unalloyed joy.

### **5. Early Campaigns for Universal Suffrage - The Chartists**

The suffragettes did not invent campaigning for suffrage. Working men's movements had been campaigning for votes for men since the end of the 18th century. From the early Victorian era, disparate groups of men agitating to be enfranchised were known collectively as Chartists. Amongst other aims their principal objective was votes for all men over 21 and a secret ballot. They also called for any man to be eligible to stand for Parliament and for MPs to be paid so as to enable working men to take up the post. These demands were put in the form of a People's Charter, giving the movement its name.

The Chartists rather lacked cohesion in their early years. From the start there was tension between those advocating physical force and those who were against it. By

1842, however, they were organised enough to produce a petition of three and a half million signatures which took several cabs to transport to Downing Street. The movement was also organised enough to have its own newspapers, such as *The Northern Star* which ran the following article in May 1842 after the petition had been rejected by Parliament: "*Three and a half millions have quietly, orderly, soberly, peaceably but firmly asked of their rulers to do justice; and their rulers have turned a deaf ear to that protest. Three and a half millions of people have asked permission to detail their wrongs, and enforce their claims for RIGHT, and the 'House' has resolved they should not be heard! Three and a half millions of the slave-class have holden out the olive branch of peace to the enfranchised and privileged classes and sought for a firm and compact union, on the principle of EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW; and the enfranchised and privileged have refused to enter into a treaty! The same class is to be a slave class still. The mark and brand of inferiority is not to be removed. The assumption of inferiority is still to be maintained. The people are not to be free.*"

The depression of 1841–1842 led to a wave of strikes in which Chartist activists were in the forefront, and demands for the Charter were included alongside economic demands. Hundreds of Chartists were arrested and either imprisoned or transported to Australia. In 1848 the Chartists organised a mass meeting on Kennington Common attended by ~150,000 people, a testament to the degree of popular support. The government was nervous about the revolutionary precedents being set in Europe in 1848, as they would be again in 1917. Accordingly the Chartist's convention was met by an emphatic display of the establishment's power in the form of 100,000 special constables recruited specifically to bolster the police force. In the event the meeting was peaceful. But emergency planning had extended to the military standing by in case the Chartists made any attempt to cross the Thames.

In the second half of the 19th century the Chartist movement gradually gave way to the trade union movement as a voice for the working class. The Chartist movement was in some ways the male equivalent of the suffragette protests, but the working class Chartists attracted a far larger number of active participants.

## **6. Suffragettes, Suffragists and the Big Snag**

Towards the end of the Great War and before the 1918 Representation of the People Act, only about half of men aged 21 and over could vote. To put this another way, during the most active period of the suffragette movement, only half of men had the vote. It is reasonable to ask why the suffragette slogan was "votes for women" rather than "votes for all". The answer is that the suffragettes were not at all concerned that working class men did not have the vote. The suffragettes were not concerned with working class men at all. But they should have been. They failed to appreciate that the only way through the political thicket to achieve votes for women was via votes for working class men too. Here we collide head on with the class issue. The true history of universal suffrage should be seen in terms of the working class struggle, not as a gender issue at all.

The suffragettes, typified by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, were the ones whom history has mostly remembered. They were the ones who indulged in what we would now call direct action, including violence and arson. The suffragists, on the other hand, eschewed such actions. Their main group was the National Union of Woman Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) led by Millicent Fawcett.

When the suffragettes/suffragists carried slogans reading "votes for women", which women did they mean? The leading figures in both the suffragette and suffragist movements were middle class. Probably the majority of the foot soldiers were middle class too. However, Millicent Fawcett's more moderate suffragists, the NUWSS, also included substantial numbers of working class women. In contrast, the Pankhurst's WSPU were interested only in acquiring the vote for "respectable", i.e., middle class, women. Quoting again from Sean Lang, "Parliamentary Reform, 1785-1928",

*"The question of which women should get the vote, and on what basis, had an even more divisive effect on the already chronically divided women's suffrage movement. Millicent Fawcett's National Union of Woman Suffrage Societies ... comprised no fewer than sixteen separate suffrage groups, though at least it succeeded in holding them together - Mrs Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union went through seven bitter splits in the first ten years of its life. The key role of Mrs Fawcett's Suffragists in mobilising working-class support has been stressed by Jill Liddington and Jill Norris; by contrast the suffragette leadership, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, and Emmeline and Frederick Pethick Lawrence, were at best indifferent to working-class support and by 1912 increasingly opposed to it, to the point of expelling the socialist-sympathising Sylvia Pankhurst altogether... In 1907 the WSPU had changed its stated aim from 'Votes for Women on the same terms as it may be granted to men' to 'Tax-paying women are entitled to the parliamentary vote', which convinced Labour and the Liberals, not to mention the NUWSS, that the WSPU was, to all intents and purposes, a stooge for the Conservative Party<sup>1</sup>."*

But both the NUWSS and the WSPU were doomed to failure prior to WW1 for the following very simple reason. What is generally misunderstood today - but is crucially important to the history - is that because only the "upper tier" of men had the vote at the time, it was only possible to offer the vote to "respectable" women. There was simply no way of giving the vote to all women, regardless of class, if the same had not been done for men - and until 1918 it had not. This is where the class issue and the division along Party lines comes inevitably into the picture.

It is important to realise that this class issue was an insurmountable barrier to women getting the vote. Well before WW1, the Labour Party was in favour of women's suffrage, so were many Liberals, including Lloyd George. This had been the tendency following John Stuart Mill's celebrated motion to include women's suffrage in the 1867 Reform Act. And yet Lloyd George and others who were potentially in favour of women's suffrage voted down the Conciliation Bills of 1910, 1911 and 1912. The reason was that, before working class men had acquired the vote, giving the vote to women must needs be confined to propertied, "respectable" women. So this is what the 1910, 1911 and 1912 Bills called for. But this meant predominantly Tory women. By giving the vote to millions of new voters, virtually all Tories, the Liberal and Labour Parties would, to put it bluntly, be shafted. So they voted it down despite being largely in favour of women's suffrage!

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<sup>1</sup> Given this historical background it is a delicious irony that left-leaning feminists have adopted the Pankhursts as their heroes - stooges of the Tories! However, perhaps it does make sense. The Pankhursts "became stridently anti-male, ruthlessly dropping even the most loyal of their male supporters from the WSPU, and claiming, as Christabel did in 1913 in *The Great Scourge*, that men were little more than carriers of venereal disease", Sean Lang, "Parliamentary Reform, 1785-1928".



For this reason it was impossible to give the vote to women - any women at all - until the vote had first been extended to all working class men. This very simple snag to the adoption of female suffrage is rarely mentioned, but it is crucial to the history. And this is why WW1 was key to women acquiring the vote - because it was WW1 which resulted in the vote being given to working class men, the essential precursor.

### **7. The Suffragettes and Hypocrisy**

During the Great War most suffragettes and suffragists suspended their campaigning activities. Many, including Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, took to speaking at recruiting drives for the war. The potential recruits would be largely from the working classes and hence would not have the vote. It surely is just to accuse the Pankhursts of hypocrisy. They were insistent on their own right to have the vote whilst remaining safely at home, but at the same time they were happy to send to their deaths men whose right to vote they did not recognise as significant. This must surely rank as one of the most flagrant pieces of political hypocrisy of all time.

But there was worse: the white feather campaign. The suffragettes would patrol the streets looking for any male in civilian dress who might be of fighting age - and shame them by pinning a white feather to their chest. The suffragettes would turn up in force at public meetings, such as at Hyde Park Corner, carrying banners reading "Intern Them All". They were very keen to remind men of what, in their opinion, was a man's duty. They were not so keen on recognising that these same men might also deserve the same rights they claimed for themselves.

It is perhaps difficult in our modern times to appreciate just how vehemently determined the women of Britain were to send men - all men - to fight in WW1. These are the words of Emmeline Pankhurst, "*The least that men can do is that every man of fighting age should prepare himself to redeem his word to women, and to make ready to do his best, to save the mothers, the wives and daughters of Great Britain from outrage too horrible even to think of*". As if such exhortation was required in that age, when men would gladly self-immolate rather than be called a coward. And as for the requirement upon a man to "*redeem his word to women*" this speaks volumes for the pervading sense of obligation to which men were subject - obligation, not privilege.

That the man or boy in receipt of their white feather might be genuinely ill or genuinely under-age did not concern the suffragettes. In fact, many were under-age - because they were the ones that had not yet joined up. It is largely due to the suffragettes that so many under-age boys died in the trenches. If you are inclined to disbelieve the white feather campaign, get hold of the 2014 BBC 2 video "I Was There: The Great War Interviews". This is a collection of interviews with WW1 veterans, filmed in 1963/4. In one of them the man describes how he was 'white feathered'. Then ask yourself: who was oppressed, and who was privileged?

### **8. Why Did Parliament Pass the 1918 "Representation of the People" Act?**

Unbelievably, this question appears never to have been given a clear answer - not, at least, one that has achieved a broad consensus. This has not stopped sources on the internet making authoritative-sounding statements on the matter. Make no mistake, this bill was a radical break from the past, hugely changing the extent of enfranchisement for both men and women. It brought about changes "more comprehensive and far-reaching than any kindred act in English history" (*The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Aug., 1918), pp. 498-503). To

pass such a momentous bill, both the houses of commons and Lords must have had an equally momentous reason. Before examining some proposed reasons, there are two key points to bear in mind.

- Firstly, why on earth did the government decide to take on such an overhaul of the political system when they had more than enough on their plates with World War 1? There must have been, not merely a good reason, but a reason which was urgent and imperative. According to a near contemporaneous review in *The American Political Science Review* (Vol. 12, No. 3 (Aug., 1918), pp. 498-503): "*It was not by choice that the ministry and the two houses turned their attention to electoral questions while the nation was yet fighting for its life within hearing of the Channel ports. Rather, they were compelled to do so by the sheer breakdown of the electoral system, caused by wholesale enlistments in the army and by the further dislocation of population incident to the development of war industries. The situation was bad enough in county, municipal, and parish elections. But a parliamentary election under the new conditions would have been a bald anomaly.*"
- Secondly, it should not be forgotten that by the time the 1918 bill was passed it had been more than seven years since the last general election. The reader will note that this exceeds the maximum term of a British elected government, which is five years. There would not be a general election until the war ended, though they were quick about it when it did. The war ended on 11th November 1918 and the election was held on 14th December 1918, the government being by then of nearly 8 years duration. It is not hard to understand why parliament, and all due process, agreed to these extraordinary arrangements. With millions of men away at the war a general election would have been insupportably undemocratic. (Similar arrangements were in force during the second world war, that government enjoying ten years in office). The same *American Political Science Review* cited above opined (writing *before* an election was ultimately held), "*By general consent the life of the Parliament chosen in December, 1910, has been prolonged, in order to defer, and perhaps to avoid altogether, a war-time election. A general election, however, there must eventually be; and whether before or after the cessation of hostilities, it would demand, in all justice, a radically altered system of registration and voting, if not new franchises and other important changes*".

With these points in mind, let us explore some possible reasons for the 1918 Act.

### **9. Was the bill passed due to the Suffragette protests?**

No.

Suffragette protests had calmed very significantly during the war period. In particular, the Pankhursts devoted themselves to sending men to die instead. In any case Parliament had much more pressing concerns in its prosecution of the war than worrying over a protest movement that was more than three years past its zenith. If the suffragette protests were to be truly effective in bringing a successful outcome then the 2010, 2011 or 2012 Conciliation Bills would have been passed - when their protests were at their height. They were not.

The only direct reference to the suffragettes in the 1917 Hansard record of the extensive debates prior to the 1918 Act being passed was this, from 28 March 1917, paragraph 470: "*And let me add that, since the War began, now nearly three years*

*ago, we have had no recurrence of that detestable campaign which disfigured the annals of political agitation in this country, and no one can now contend that we are yielding to violence what we refused to concede to argument."* This was spoken by Mr Asquith, the man who, as Prime Minister in 1916, prepared the ground for the 1918 Act by commissioning the Speaker's Conference and supporting its recommendations. He is stating clearly here that his change of heart, having previously opposed women's enfranchisement but now supporting it, was in part due to the **cessation** of the suffragettes acts of violence and criminal damage.

Of course, no MP was going to stand up in the House and suggest that they should give in to pressure. But the strength of feeling against the suffragettes' actions, not just in parliament but in the public at large, and even within the ranks of the moderate suffragist movement, should not be under-estimated. This certainly played a part in the defeat of the Conciliation Bills of 1910, 1911 and 1912 - although they were doomed in any case, as we have seen. Evidence of the destructive influence of the suffragettes' violent acts are as follows. Firstly, from Lloyd George, who, you will recall, was a *supporter* of women's enfranchisement,

- *"The action of the Militants is ruinous. The feeling amongst sympathisers of the cause in the House [of Commons] is one of panic. I am frankly not very hopeful of success if these tactics are persisted in."* (Letter from Lloyd George to CP Scott, 29 November 1909. Lloyd George confided to Scott that talking to Christabel Pankhurst was 'like going to a lunatic asylum and talking to a man who thinks he is God').
- *"Haven't the Suffragettes the sense to see that the very worst way of campaigning for the vote is to try and intimidate a man into giving them what he would gladly give otherwise?"* (Lloyd George, speaking in 1913).
- *"But by far the most controversial and divisive aspect of the whole controversy over female suffrage was the suffragettes' use of violence... No other issue split the women's movement so decisively. The middle-class activists of the much larger NUWSS were dismayed to see the effects of their hard work jeopardised by the suffragette tactics; even stronger was the disgust of working-class suffragists. One suffragette activist emerged from seven days in Holloway to find she had to run a gauntlet of her suffragist workmates, who spat at her as she walked between them. It was all very well for middle-class suffragettes to get themselves arrested, knowing they had servants at home to see to their children and keep the household running; working-class women, for whom the suffragettes had little enough time anyway, could hardly afford to engage in that sort of behaviour - nothing alienated women from the suffragettes more than this insistence on violence."* (Sean Lang, "Parliamentary Reform, 1785-1928").
- *"These actions by the WSPU, while attracting huge amounts of publicity, had the opposite effect intended; the public began to disapprove of the suffragettes, as well as their cause. While most people, before the outbreak of rampant militancy, supported the cause of women's suffrage, once the new actions started, began to disapprove. Opponents of women's suffrage in Parliament used the terrorist actions the women were using to their advantage in debate, citing the insane actions as a very good reason why women should not get the vote. The Parliament and the suffragettes thus reached a stalemate. The more militant the WSPU became, the more reluctant Parliament was to grant women the vote, and the more firmly Parliament stood on the issue of suffrage, the more violent and*

*desperate the suffragettes became.*" (Marcie Kligman, *The Effect of Militancy In the British Suffragette Movement* (1996) from a Welsh Communist website).

However, what one must concede is that the suffragettes/suffragists did put women's enfranchisement on the agenda. Women would certainly not have got the vote if men had not known that they wanted it. But the suffragettes' violent actions were unnecessary. The suffragists' more moderate approach would have been sufficient. In fact, it was only Millicent Fawcett, leader of the suffragists, who contributed to the 1916 Speaker's Conference from which the 1918 Act flowed. The Pankhursts were not invited - precisely because of their militancy.

However, neither the suffragettes nor the suffragists caused the 1918 Act to be either tabled or enacted.

#### **10. Was the 1918 Act passed to raise taxes to pay for the war?**

Some have put forward the suggestion that the electoral changes were a ruse to acquire increased tax revenue (by increasing the number of tax payers) to fund the war and pay off war debts. It does have a ring of truth about it for those hopelessly addicted to cynicism. However, I have been unable to find any evidence to support the idea. I must pass over this suggestion.

#### **11. Was the 1918 Act passed as a reward for the returning heroes?**

Essentially, yes.

Although the heroes were not yet returning, the conditions they would meet when they did eventually return was clearly in the minds of parliament (as I have confirmed by reading Hansard). There is ample evidence that 'fair play' to the men who would soon return from the trenches was the major motivation.

I quote again from the near contemporaneous review in *The American Political Science Review* (Vol. 12, No. 3 (Aug., 1918), pp. 498-503): "*Parliament acted wisely.....in entrusting the preliminary consideration of a new electoral law to an extraordinary commission, chosen by the speaker of the house of commons and presided over by him, and constituted with much care to represent in proper proportion not only the parties and groups in Parliament but the various bodies of public opinion on electoral questions throughout the United Kingdom. This 'Speaker's Conference' consisting of thirty-six members from both houses, began its work on October 10, 1916*". This Speaker's Conference included Millicent Fawcett as the representative of women's interests - *not* the Pankhursts.

The report produced by this Speaker's Conference led directly to the drafting of the 1918 Act. The extraordinarily egalitarian recommendations of this Conference are summarised by the same source as follows, "*The effort to adapt electoral machinery to the conditions entailed by the war early convinced the Speaker's Conference that the old practice of defining franchises in terms of relationship to property would have to be discontinued, and that in lieu thereof it would be necessary to adopt the principle that suffrage is a personal right inherent in the individual. In pursuance of this revolutionary decision, the act swept away the entire mass of existing intricate parliamentary franchises and extended the suffrage to all male subjects of the British crown twenty-one years of age or over, and resident for six months in premises in a constituency, without regard to value or kind.*"

During the debates in Parliament on the Representation of the People Act during 1917 there was virtual cross party unanimity on the need to extend the franchise to all men

over 21. The Home Secretary, George Cave (Conservative) introduced the Act as follows:

*"War by all classes of our countrymen has brought us nearer together, has opened men's eyes, and removed misunderstandings on all sides. It has made it, I think, impossible that ever again, at all events in the lifetime of the present generation, there should be a revival of the old class feeling which was responsible for so much, and, among other things, for the exclusion for a period, of so many of our population from the class of electors. I think I need say no more to justify this extension of the franchise."*

So there we have it. The principle purpose for the 1918 Act was the need to dissolve the previous class-based franchise - and the specific motivation was the recognition that *"If they are fit to fight they are fit to vote"*. The primary motivation was men.

As regards women's suffrage, if the electoral system was indeed to undergo wholesale revision by basing the franchise upon equality of personal rights then inevitably this must extend to women. Votes for women were a collateral effect of extending the franchise to working class men. Moreover, if the new mood to recognise even the rights of working class men was the result of the slaughter going on in the trenches - and it was - then this perspective suggests that the vote for women was bought by men's lives.

No blame automatically attaches to women for this. It is merely one of those horrible twists of fate by which we are taunted. Where blame does settle, however, is on those present day feminists who - even with the leisure to put the history into proper focus - still insist on regarding the suffragettes as triumphing over the hegemony of men. This is the "woman good, man bad" world view which is generally false, and, in this context, is flagrantly heartless.

## **12. So what was the reason for the passing of the 1918 Act?**

The 1918 Act became necessary because the electoral roll was completely trashed by the war and it was unanimously agreed that the gallant men from the trenches - and all other war zones - must have the vote. In the Appendix I give a few extracts from the parliamentary debates in Hansard about the Act in 1916 and 1917 which make the motivation clear.

## **13. But why were women included in the 1918 Act?**

It should be clear to the reader by now that the 1918 Representation of the People Act was primarily about the enfranchisement of working class men. It was not *primarily* about the enfranchisement of women. That the opportunity was taken to enfranchise women too was because,

- This was the first time that enfranchisement of women had become a political possibility - because, as discussed above, it was necessary for working class men to have the vote before it could be extended to women.
- But also, in giving the vote to working class men it became *obligatory* to give the vote to "respectable" women. (Because, in the social pecking order, respectable women were above working class men).

This was the simple compelling logic. Women got the vote because men did!

If you forget that the 1918 Act was really about giving working class men the vote, you will inevitably misunderstand the reason that women got the vote - and perhaps even commit the folly of thinking it was something to do with the Pankhursts.

It is popularly asserted that it was women's war work which won them the vote, turning around those MPs who were previously against female enfranchisement and persuading them otherwise. And this, too, is correct - at least superficially. Reading the 1916-1917 Hansard records it is clear that women's war work did indeed figure very large in their motivation. It is mentioned time after time by many speakers (see the extracts in the Appendix).

But women's war work as a motivation for the male MPs changing their mind over female enfranchisement has been challenged. Consider women in France. They did just as much war work but failed to receive the vote after the war.

And recall that there were already many MPs in the Liberal and Labour parties, years before the war even started, who were in favour of votes for women. With the enfranchisement of working class men now being offered in the same Bill, the previous threat to the Liberals and Labour - that enfranchising women would increase the Tory vote - was neutralised. By the same token, the Tories, previously the main opponents to female enfranchisement, were now happy to accept them as their new supporters - thus balancing the working class men whose enfranchisement they were obliged to accept.

But these purely political reasons were not to be said out loud, I suppose. It was convenient to be able to point to women's war work as a motivating factor, all the more so for being true, if not exactly the whole truth. And you will forgive my cynicism - governments are not noted for their generosity in rewarding past favours - especially those provided by manual workers. If this were truly the motivation, it rather missed its target. Most female munitions workers were under 30 years old, the very women who were still excluded from the vote by the 1918 bill.

But whatever the motivation for giving women the vote, we can be sure that making the most sweeping change to the electoral process - and arguably to the whole political process - that these islands have ever seen was not simply to satisfy women. The motivation for that was an absolute need due to the breakdown of the old system due to the war. But perhaps this motivation, compelling though it was, might have been augmented by a further consideration.....

#### **14. Was the 1918 Act passed to avoid revolution?**

Just how spooked was the political establishment of Britain by the Russian revolution? In the earlier version of this essay I suggested that they were very spooked indeed and that this formed the key motivation for wishing to extend the franchise to working class men - to avoid violent revolution. I rehearse the argument again below. I am not the only one to have made the claim. However, I am obliged to de-emphasise this hypothesis because, having sought evidence for it, I have failed to find any. This is the hypothesis.....

The British Establishment had been preconditioned to be twitchy about the prospect of revolution in Britain. Immediately prior to WW1 the period 1911-1914 has been called "The Great Unrest". The working class had responded to the terrible conditions imposed on them by taking mass industrial action. The inspiring strike action of the organised working class, in many cases in defiance of their national leaders, had demonstrated their political muscle. It was the breadth and spontaneity of the action

throughout 1911 and 1912 that shook the political establishment to the core. Combining concession with coercion, the government had been forced to deploy troops against striking workers. The union leaders struggled to regain authority and control over unofficial action as workers rejected their attempts to reach shoddy agreements with the employers. Thus, over the immediate pre-war period it had been bolshevik working class men who had been giving the establishment their major headache. The suffragette protests were a side-show.

On top of this, the pre-war government had been beset with the crisis looming over potential civil war in Ireland and mutiny at the top of the armed forces over Home Rule.

While the Speaker's Conference was deliberating its policy recommendations, along comes the Russian revolution against this pre-war backdrop of leftist militancy and insurrection. The timeline is as follows,

- October 1916: The Speaker's Conference is formed
- March 1917: The first Russian revolution occurs. This took place in the context of heavy military setbacks during WW1 which left much of the Russian army in a state of mutiny.
- June 1917: The Representation of the People Act was passed by a massive majority of 385 to 55 in the House of Commons.
- November 1917: The second (Bolshevik) Russian revolution led by Lenin occurs.
- February 1918: The Representation of the People Act (1918) becomes law, having also passed through the House of Lords with another huge majority of 134 to 71. This is against the background that, before the war, Acts attempting to extend suffrage to women had been tried three times (in 2010, 2011 and 2012) and failed to negotiate the Lords.

I previously assumed that the British government would have been in a state of high anxiety over the possibility of revolution. This would have provided a pressing motivation for the enfranchisement of working class men, via the 1918 Act: a motivation commensurate with the enormity of its constitutional change. The government feared giving working-class men a political voice, but feared the consequences of not doing so even more. To give them the vote was, perhaps, an attempt to defuse an inflammatory situation.

However, I now doubt this interpretation of history. The reason is that I have examined the contemporary Hansard records and found no evidence in favour of it. On the contrary, and to my surprise, in 1917 the reaction of the UK parliament to the Russian Revolution seems to have been congratulatory. I had forgotten just how suspicious parliament was of the Czar, particularly in his foreign policies. Quite simply, the UK parliament initially regarded the revolution in Russia as having got rid of a problem ruler. In time to come, of course, they would cease to regard the Bolshevik government in Russia as being such a blessing. But all that is pertinent to our purposes is the view prevailing in 1917 and the first two months of 1918. I found no direct evidence in this period of concern regarding the spreading of revolutionary fervour to the British working man. (Though I suspect this did indeed happen later).

Nevertheless, I retain this hypothesis here as a background possibility. That I have found no explicit evidence for it in Hansard may be misleading. Sometimes

politicians are coy about their true motivation. Perhaps it was just not done to mention potential revolution in the House. Perhaps discussion of such things was confined to the bars of Westminster, and would not appear in Hansard. I don't know.

What is not in doubt is that, in extending the vote to working class men, it could not be withheld from respectable women from the upper tiers of society. Parliament and their Lordships were thus obliged to consider the implications of votes for women.

## **15. Conclusion**

Throughout most of the 19th century only a tiny fraction of men had the parliamentary vote. At the start of 1918 working class men still did not generally have the vote. On an historical timeframe, the enfranchisement of men and women was almost contemporaneous (see graph).

The correct perspective on the enfranchisement of women is the working class struggle. The correct perspective is gender neutral. The historical Big Picture is that the enfranchisement of men and women was a single process. The suffragette movement did not bring about the enfranchisement of women, just as the Chartists had failed to bring about the enfranchisement of working men before them. The suffragettes and suffragists failed to realise that their enfranchisement was a political impossibility unless working class men were also enfranchised. This Big Snag was unsnagged by the war.

Universal suffrage came about due to the breakdown of the old electoral system due to WW1. There was unanimous agreement that the men at war must have the vote on their return. The only credible option was to adopt enfranchisement as a right for all men over a certain age. The motivation was genuinely egalitarian, a spirit engendered by the war. Once votes for all men was an agreed principle, votes for women followed virtually as an automatic consequence - because the disenfranchisement of working class men had been the political barrier to the enfranchisement of women.

Hence, that women got the vote owes more to the Kaiser than to the Pankhursts.

Whilst the suffragettes' perspective was the gender-specific "votes for women" this was only because they did not recognise the equal rights of working class men who were also largely disenfranchised. The irony is that universal suffrage was ultimately achieved thanks to the slaughter of these same working class men in the trenches. For this motivated the enfranchisement of working class men, which had been the barrier to women's enfranchisement. Monstrously, the one action of the suffragettes which really did assist with gaining votes for women was their involvement in sending men away to war. The orthodox feminist narrative is not only inaccurate but disguises a horrible, if unintentional, truth.



## APPENDIX - Extracts form Hansard 1916 / 1917

In reading these extracts be aware that Mr Asquith was Prime Minister in 1916, but by the time the Representation of the People Act proper was being debated in 1917 Lloyd George had become Prime Minister. However, both were instrumental in proposing and supporting it.

### 14 August 1916 vol 85 Paragraphs 1447 - 1449

#### *The PRIME MINISTER (Mr. Asquith)*

In asking leave to introduce the Bill which stands in my name, I may remind the House that the present position as respects election and registration is as follows: First, the life of the present Parliament has been prolonged until the end of next month—September. On that date, unless further provision be made, Parliament must come to an end and a General Election must take place..... unless statutory provision is now made, on the expiration of next month the present Parliament will expire, and you will have to face the necessity of a General Election on a register which is now nearly two years old. The Bill which I am now asking leave to introduce proposes to prevent that possibility by further extending the life of the present Parliament..... it is clear that provision should also be made in the meantime for bringing into existence some kind of register of a fresher and more representative character than that which now exists, which can be resorted to for the purpose of an election when the extended life of this Parliament—to whatever date this House sees fit to extend it—comes to an end.....

The register which is now in force, and which, if an election were to take place next month or the month after, would control the qualifications of the electors and describe those who were and those who were not entitled to vote, is a pre-war register. It came into force, as I have said, on the 1st January, 1915, but it embodied qualifications the latest of which must have matured before the beginning of the War—that is to say, in the month of July, 1914. I am therefore accurate in describing it as a pre-war register. What has happened since that register came into force, or at least since it was compiled? The War has caused the greatest displacement of population in our history. Some millions—I am not exaggerating when I say some millions—of our best men are out of the country, fighting abroad in the various theatres in which operations of war are carried on, and they are fighting on land and sea—some in France, some in Egypt, some in Mesopotamia, some in East Africa; there in hardly a quarter of the globe in which they are not to be found.....

Everyone must be anxious, and no one is more anxious than I am that, as far as possible, men should not be disfranchised, should not be disqualified from voting because, in this supreme crisis of our history, they have responded to the call of the country, whatever form that call may have taken. I think we are all agreed about that....

#### *§ Mr. W. THORNE*

If they are fit to fight they are fit to vote.

#### *The PRIME MINISTER* paras 1451, 1452

My hon. Friend puts it in a nutshell.

...If you were to create a new, or what I may call a military and naval franchise - that is, that a special right to vote be granted to those gallant men who are serving their

country on sea and land in all parts of the world, - you would have to give a voice to all the other men. Take the munition workers. They have left their homes at the invitation of the State in large numbers; they have severed their old family ties and their old residential ties, and have gone into places hitherto unknown to them, and crowded there in enormous numbers, and I do not hesitate to say that, after the appeals addressed to them on behalf of the Government and the State, they are rendering equally important and effective service in the conduct of the War as are our soldiers and sailors.

And, further, the moment you begin a general enfranchisement on these lines of State service, you are brought face to face with another most formidable proposition: What are you to do with the women? I do not think I shall be suspected—my record in the matter is clear—that I have no special desire or predisposition to bring women within the pale of the franchise, but I have received a great many representations from those who are authorised to speak for them, and I am bound to say that they presented to me not only a reasonable, but, I think, from their point of view, an unanswerable case. They say they are perfectly content, if we do not change the qualification of the franchise, to abide by the existing state of things, but that if we are going to bring in a new class of electors, on whatever ground of State service, they point out—and we cannot possibly deny their claim—that during this War the women of this country have rendered as effective service in the prosecution of the War as any other class of the community. It is true they cannot fight, in the gross material sense of going out with rifles and so forth, but they fill our munition factories, they are doing the work which the men who are fighting had to perform before, they have taken their places, they are the servants of the State, and they have aided, in the most effective way, in the prosecution of the War.

*I am, of course, only reproducing here an extremely small portion of the exchanges. The above sentiments were repeated by others, but there were also dissenting voices, as an example, this one,*

[Sir E. CARSON](#)

...you can draw no comparison between any person claiming the franchise and the man who is risking his life and health in the trenches, and who is daily rendering himself liable to be shot on behalf of this country. I do not believe there is any comparison between that and, say, the women's franchise question. The question of whether females should or should not be enfranchised is a question apart; it has nothing to do with this question, nothing whatever.....

...I say that the men who, either voluntarily or through the laws of this country, are ordered out to present themselves to be shot, and suffer what they do suffer in war, have a claim paramount above everybody.

**HC Deb 28 March 1917 vol 92 para 468 - 470**

[Mr. ASQUITH](#)

During the whole of my political life I have opposed the various schemes which have been presented from time to time to Parliament for giving the Parliamentary vote, whether piecemeal or wholesale, to women, while it is only right I should say I have as consistently advocated, and done my best to promote, the opening-out to women of other spheres of activity, which have been in the past confined exclusively to men. Why, and in what sense, the House may ask, have I changed my views'?...

My opposition to woman suffrage has always been based, and based solely, on considerations of public expediency. I think that some years ago I ventured to use the expression, "Let the women work out their own salvation." Well, Sir, they have worked it out during this War. How could we have carried on the War without them? Short of actually bearing arms in the field, there is hardly a service which has contributed, or is contributing, to the maintenance of our cause in which women have not been at least as active and as efficient as men, and wherever we turn we see them doing, with zeal and success, and without any detriment to the prerogatives of their sex, work which three years ago would have been regarded as falling exclusively within the province of men. This is not a merely sentimental argument, though it appeals to our feelings as well as our judgment. But what I confess moves me still more in this matter is the problem of reconstruction when the War is over. The questions, which will then necessarily arise in regard to women's labour and women's functions and activities in the new ordering of things—for, do not doubt it, the old order will be changed—are questions in regard to which I, for my part, feel it impossible, consistently either with justice or with expediency, to withhold from women the power and the right of making their voice directly heard. **And let me add that, since the War began, now nearly three years ago, we have had no recurrence of that detestable campaign which disfigured the annals of political agitation in this country, and no one can now contend that we are yielding to violence what we refused to concede to argument.**

*This is one of the very few references to the suffragettes' activities.*

[Mr. SALTER](#) para 473

Then it brings to us the question of women's suffrage. I have always myself been an advocate of moderate suffrage for women. [An HON. MEMBER: "Rich women !"] The proposals of this Conference on that subject are very welcome to me. I am told that the opposition to women suffrage is shrinking. [HON. MEMBERS: "No, no!"] Well, I hope it is; but I am sure of this, that if it is shrinking in volume it is hardening in quality. It is an intense and bitter opposition.....

The Resolution recommends the immediate introduction of large measures of controversial domestic legislation. That demand is made under no compulsion of military necessity. The times are very grave, and in our humble judgment it is unspeakably essential that for the next few months, during which this legislation will be proceeding, there -should be the utmost concentration of every thought and energy and fibre of the mind and muscle of this country inside and outside this House upon the prosecution of the War. After the best consideration we can give to the matter, it seems to us that the course proposed would perturb our Allies.

Whereupon an un-named Honourable Member shouts out, "**What about the Russian revolution?**"

*This is the only mention that the Russian Revolution gets.*

[The PRIME MINISTER \(Mr. Lloyd George\)](#) paras 487 - 493

487: We were confronted with the fact that we had a stale register. It is the War that has put us in this position. It is common ground that by some means or other you must bring that register up to date. The whole point is, what is that register going to be? We attempted, first [488](#) of all, to deal with it on the basis of merely a Registration Bill. Every effort-was made to eliminate anything in the nature of a franchise proposal. Why? Because we were afraid of provoking controversy. We found it impossible. The

moment it was introduced on the floor of the House both parties started condemning our proposal on the ground that you were excluding men who had an absolute right to pronounce upon the kind of settlement you are going to make in England after the War. There are two reasons why you cannot merely have a renewal of the old register. The first is this. The War has forced us to confront questions; the War has compelled us to decide questions practically in a single Parliament after the determination of the War which in the ordinary course might have taken a generation to settle. There is no doubt that the Parliament that is elected after peace is the Parliament which will have to settle questions which will practically determine the course of things, not merely in Great Britain and in the British Empire, but very largely throughout the world for generations to come.

The trade of this country, the industries of this country, the relations of capital and labour in this [489](#) country, the relations—and this is very important in reference to one of the recommendations of Mr. Speaker's Conference—of one class of labour to another class of labour, questions of the conditions of life in this country, the health of the people, the housing of the people, the education of the people, the relations of this country to the whole Empire, and the relations of the Empire to the rest of the world. These are gigantic problems which will have to be settled by the Parliament which is elected on this register. You cannot have the old register. Why? Because by taking the old register you would be excluding the men that had made the new Britain possible.

***An HON. MEMBER***

And the women!

[§ The PRIME MINISTER](#)

The men and the women that had made the new Britain possible.....

My hon. and learned Friend mentioned the sailors and the mine-sweepers. Their perils are great and incalculable. Of course, they have the same claim as even our gallant soldiers, whether they are sailors of the mercantile marine or sailors in the Navy; but that is not the end of it. Come to our miners and our munition workers. What is the position there? They are not in the mines, instead of being in the trenches, of their own choice—a very considerable number of them. What happened? When you had voluntary recruiting in this country, because the mines had been depleted and because the great engineering works had been depleted, we had practically to warn the recruiting officers on these places, and we had to make an appeal to them not to recruit, otherwise hundreds of thousands of them would have gone to the front. As a matter of fact, hundreds of thousands were going. It was becoming a serious matter. The first thing I had to do, as Minister of Munitions, was to appeal to Lord Kitchener to use all his power to get back men who had already gone. Otherwise, our engineering works would have been crippled. How unfair to say to them, "If you had only volunteered, if you had only fought I It is true you are rendering greater services where you are, and that you remained where you are at the request of your country because you are serving your country better there, but we cannot recognise that. Therefore, we refuse you the vote." That is absolutely indefensible....

I come to the other proposal—that with regard to women's franchise. Here, differing from my right hon. Friend (Mr. Asquith), I have always been a supporter of women's franchise, but what he said about the effect of the War is absolutely true. There is no doubt that the War has had an enormous effect upon public opinion so far as this question is concerned. I can see that in the effect of some of my colleagues who are

not above being influenced by public opinion. And rightly so. The facts have altered public opinion completely, and between facts and public opinion their views have been altered. Women's work in the War has been a vital contribution to our success. It would have been impossible to produce that overwhelming mass of ammunition which we had at the Somme had it not been for the work of these women...

**HC Deb 19 June 1917 vol 94 para 1648**

*And finally, for fun...*

[Sir F. BANBURY](#)

I think it was in "Punch" only the other day that a charwoman was supposed to ask another charwoman whether men would be in the future allowed to vote, and the answer was: "Yes, my dear—at first."

[Lord H. CECIL](#)

We are told they will become Members of Parliament. Nothing could be more untrue than that that follows logically.