THE LIBERAL
WOMEN'S SUFFRA

. PARTY AND
AGE, 1866 – 1918

It is no exaggeration to say that the Victorian women's movement grew out of the ideas and campaigns of early-to-mid nineteenth century Radical Liberalism: temperance, anti-slavery, peace and the repeal of the Corn Laws. **Martin Pugh** traces the relationship between the Liberal Party and the various campaigners for women's suffrage from the 1860s until women finally won the right to vote in 1918.

WSPU leader Emmeline Pankhurst arrested in London, 1914

Among the leaders of the early women's movement were Barbara Leigh Smith, daughter of Benjamin Leigh Smith, the free trader, Unitarian and Liberal MP, Millicent Fawcett, the wife of Henry Fawcett, the Liberal member for Brighton and Gladstone's Postmaster-General, and Josephine Butler, an inspirational Liberal feminist who campaigned for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts.[1] The movement also enjoyed the active support of many male Liberals including John Stuart Mill, philosopher and briefly MP for Westminster (1865–68), Jacob Bright, who was elected for Manchester at an 1867 by-election when a woman, Lily Maxwell, found her name accidentally on the register and voted for him, and Dr Richard Pankhurst, who tried to become Liberal member in Manchester at an 1883 by-election and whose wife, Emmeline, attempted to get elected to the Women's Liberal Federation executive in 1892 – something usually overlooked in her later, anti-Liberal phase.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the parliamentary launch of the women's suffrage campaign in 1866 was largely a Liberal affair. In June Mill presented a petition to the Commons prior to introducing a women's amendment to Gladstone's Reform Bill. This was good timing, for although the 1866 bill failed and the Liberal government resigned, a bill introduced by the minority Conservative administration in 1867 was heavily amended by Liberal backbenchers, and enacted as the Second Reform Act. This extended the electorate from 1.3 million to 2.4 million, representing one in three adult males, and in the fluid parliamentary situation the inclusion of women was not impossible. In the event, Mill's amendment was defeated by 196 votes to 73 – of which 62 were Liberal. But at a stroke

he had given credibility to the cause and put the issue firmly on the agenda, although some Liberals had supported it more out of respect for Mill than from enthusiasm for women's suffrage.

Liberal suffragism

As Henry Fawcett argued, the opposition to enfranchising women was 'based on the fallacy that man possessed a superior kind of wisdom which enabled him to decide what was best for the other half of the human race.'[2] Extending the vote was part of the wider Victorian Liberal purpose – opening all institutions to individual talent, lifting people's horizons, and making government subject to the influence of informed citizens. However, this was qualified by the belief that voting should reflect personal fitness; hence neither Mill nor Gladstone proposed to enfranchise all men or women at one fell swoop. In this spirit two Liberals, Sir Charles Dilke and Jacob Bright, managed to add an amendment to the Gladstone government's 1869 Municipal Franchise Bill to include female ratepayers without provoking controversy. Liberals liked to argue that participation by women in local government was a continuation of an English tradition going back to Anglo-Saxon times, and, in any case, the duties handled locally, such as health and education, could be seen as a natural extension of women's domestic interests and thus not as a challenge to conventional ideas about gender. In fact, however, the municipal franchise had a wider significance. Dilke considered that it was 'only the first step towards adult suffrage', for women's suffrage would come by instalments just as men's did.[3] Also, as voters and candidates in municipal politics, women undermined Victorian male notions by demonstrating their skills and their enthusiasm for a public, political role.

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Married or single women?

In view of this happy beginning, it is necessary to ask: what went wrong? How are we to explain the paradox that a quintessentially Liberal cause was thwarted up to 1914 by opposition from prominent Liberals, including Gladstone and Asquith? Despite the suffragists' early reliance on Liberal support, tactics dictated that the campaign should be a non-party one. Several of the early suffragists, such as Emily Davis and Frances Power Cobbe, were Conservatives, and getting legislation through the House of Lords indicated that Conservative support was increasingly necessary. In any case, neither party had a formal policy on votes for women. Consequently all the bills to enfranchise women were introduced by backbenchers seeking support from both sides of the House.

Yet although this approach sounded very rational, it was not realistic to expect to draft a bill capable of satisfying both Liberals and Tories. As only a minority of women were to be given a vote initially, the question was one of what terms or qualifications to use that would not be seen as giving an advantage to one party or the other. Most of the Bills introduced in this period enfranchised women 'on the same terms as men', but this was far less radical than it sounded because it effectively meant women who were heads of households, that is, single women and widows, who numbered about 300,000–400,000 in the 1870s. Suffragists argued that single women had an unanswerable case because they paid rates and in many cases had no male relative to give them virtual representation.[4]

However, politicians in all parties were hostile towards unmarried women partly because late-Victorian society was subject to the fear that the birth rate was falling, thereby undermining Britain's role as a great industrial and imperial power in the face of new rivals such as Germany. In any case, giving single women a vote looked like punishing other women for getting married. In addition, throughout the period up to 1914 many Liberal and Labour MPs suspected that bills to enfranchise a small number of unmarried women were calculated to give the Conservatives an advantage by adding to the votes for property-owners, and, as a result, Dilke, Richard Haldane, Walter MacLaren and W. H. Dickinson were among the Liberals who introduced bills designed to include wives. However, this made for a much larger number of new voters, and was unpopular among Conservatives.

The problem was further complicated by a distinct waning of the reform impulse later in the century as Liberals became a little disillusioned by the popular revival of Conservatism which had enjoyed considerable success in mobilising women through the Primrose League founded in 1883. As questions of principle became increasingly entangled with considerations of party advantage, some Liberals began to examine more closely the arguments used for female enfranchisement in the 1860s. Although Radicals had traditionally believed that payment of taxation implied the right to representation, the argument appeared to be working rather too well. Conservative suffragists like Cobbe claimed that the most important reason for enfranchising women was the recognition it would give to property ownership; at a time when Parliament was giving the vote to comparatively poor, unpropertied men, as in 1867 and 1884, it was tempting to regard the inclusion of some women as a balancing factor

that would help the Conservatives. In this way Liberals began to suspect that a limited reform for women would be detrimental to their own party, some claiming that 'every woman was a Tory at heart'. As four out of every ten men were still not on the electoral register, even after 1885, some Liberals felt reluctant to start enfranchising women before men had achieved adult suffrage. As a result, by the 1880s Liberal support for the cause had reached a plateau and on several occasions more Liberals voted against suffrage bills than for them.[5]

Gladstone and home rule

Relations between the party and women's suffrage would have been far easier had Gladstone adopted a more constructive attitude. But he started from the conventional religious view that women had been designed by God for different roles and endowed with different qualities from men; to force a woman into politics would be to 'trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature'.[6] In 1884, when Gladstone was introducing the Third Reform Bill, a Liberal backbencher, William Woodall, introduced an amendment to include women which won a majority. Gladstone disapproved on the amendment on its merits, but he relied primarily on the tactical argument that its inclusion would provoke the Lords into rejecting the whole measure; he thus killed Woodall's amendment by threatening to abandon the whole bill unless it was dropped. The passage of the Third Reform Act was a setback for the women's cause because there were no more government bills until the abortive one of 1912; angry suffragists saw Gladstone's action as a great betrayal and several were alienated from the party as a result.

Despite this Gladstone repeatedly showed signs of changing his mind on the issue, as he had done over votes for men earlier in his career. He tolerated pro-suffragists such as Dilke, James Stansfeld and Henry Fawcett as ministers even when they voted against the Liberal whip on women's questions. Having argued that the disorder, drunkenness and violence attending elections made it inappropriate for women to participate, he removed the objection by introducing the secret ballot in 1872. 'Now the voting is as solemn as a funeral and as quiet as a Quaker meeting', as one Liberal put it with a little exaggeration.[7] Gladstone also conceded that the grant of a municipal franchise to women established 'a presumptive case' for the parliamentary vote; he agreed that Parliament had failed to treat women fairly over a number of issues such as divorce reform in 1857; and he recognised that some women, at least, had clearly demonstrated their political abilities. All this kept suffragists expecting Gladstone to come out in favour of the cause, but their hopes were always dashed. The explanation is that beneath his high-principled approach, Gladstone also made narrow calculations about party interest and shared the reservations of his colleagues about the electoral consequences.

After 1886, Gladstone's last great campaign for Irish home rule also complicated relations between the party and women's suffrage. On the one hand, it weakened Gladstone's control and elevated the status of the National Liberal Federation. It also helped the cause by leading to the withdrawal of the Liberal Unionists, whose parliamentary record shows them to have been the most hostile to women's suffrage.[8] On the other hand, women had not been prominent in the party organisation, and the NLF adopted a series of proposals for electoral reform dealing simply with men. However, in 1897 and 1899 the NLF did adopt women's suffrage, a sign of the long-term growth of support within the party in the country. More generally, home rule had the effect of keeping the Liberals largely out of office for twenty years, and it led some prominent Liberal women, including Millicent Fawcett, to move to the right out of a general disillusionment with Gladstonian Liberalism. It also led to a strengthening of Conservative support for the enfranchisement of women, many of whom had campaigned to save the union with Ireland under the auspices of the Primrose League.

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The Women's Liberal Federation and the changing agenda

Despite these complications, the traditional view that the suffrage movement went into a decline during the later 1880s and 1890s now seems mistaken. Especially among Liberals the cause was making significant progress, but more by indirect means than through formal changes in the party's position. Many suffragists, and this was especially true of those who were Liberals, diverted their activity into promoting women's entry into local government. The late-Victorian period offered growing opportunities in this area because in addition to a role as poor law guardians, women became eligible as voters and as candidates in several new elective authorities including School Boards (1870), County Councils (1889), and Parish, Rural District and Urban District Councils (1894). James Stansfeld and Walter MacLaren amended the 1894 Act to include married women as voters, though they could not be registered for the same property as their husbands. By the late 1890s women comprised 729,000, or 13.7 per cent of the municipal electorate.

The only setback was in county councils. In 1889 two women, Jane Cobden and Lady Margaret Sandhurst, were

elected as Liberals on the new London County Council, and Emma Cons was appointed as an Alderman. However, the defeated Tories challenged the right of women to sit on county councils in court and won their case; subsequently Liberals in both houses of Parliament repeatedly introduced bills to give them this right, until in 1907 the Liberal government corrected the anomaly. By the Edwardian period three women were serving as mayors, the most important example being Sarah Lees, a member of Oldham's leading Liberal family.[9] Their work in local government led Liberal women to become some of the pioneers of social reforms such as free school meals, which contributed to the wider agenda of the New Liberalism and were to be adopted nationally by the post-1906 Liberal government.

Another tactic for Liberal suffragists lay in the formation of the Women's Liberal Federation in 1887. Local initiatives had already been taken to organise women Liberals, for example at Bristol by Anna Maria Priestman, but after 1886 the success of the Conservatives in threatening the party's traditional advantage in local organisation made the case for an equivalent Liberal body unanswerable. However, from the outset the WLF was a Trojan Horse, designed ostensibly to help the party by mobilising volunteers, but also intended as a means of promoting women's causes from *within* the party. Thus the WLF sponsored an overtly feminist programme, including equal pay, equal divorce law, women police and repeal of the protective legislation that excluded women from certain types of employment. The Scottish Women's Liberal Federation's objects were 'to secure just and equal legislation and representation for women especially with reference to the Parliamentary Franchise and the removal of legal disabilities on account of sex.'[10]

By 1892 the WLF claimed 367 branches and 51,000 members, and by 1895 there were 448 branches and 82,000 members. As a result candidates became increasingly dependent on women's voluntary work in canvassing, checking on removals of voters and even writing election addresses and delivering speeches on behalf of male relatives. Even John Morley, previously an anti-suffragist, conceded that in the light of their election work 'it is absurd … to pretend either that women are incapable of political interest and capacity, or that the power of voting on their own account must be injurious to their womanhood.'[11]

Meanwhile, a struggle was being waged within the WLF for the promotion of votes for women as a formal party objective. Hoping to exercise some control, Gladstone had initially introduced his wife, Catherine, as its President, but by 1892 this had failed; in that year the WLF adopted Lady Carlisle's proposal to promote women's suffrage within the party, though it stopped short of making it a test case for Liberal candidates. In 1893 it was agreed that 'the time has now come when the extension of the Parliamentary Franchise to women should be included in the programme of the Liberal Party'.[12] As a result Mrs Gladstone resigned and was replaced as President by Lady Aberdeen, who was very loyal to the party but also completely determined to promote female suffrage. Gladstone then appointed Lord Aberdeen as Governor-General of Canada, which was a neat way of removing the troublesome Aberdeens, but this backfired because the next President was Lady Carlisle, who was much more militant. As a result a minority withdrew from the WLF to form a loyalist organisation for Liberal women. However, this left the WLF itself even more committed to the cause, so much so that in 1902 it agreed to a tougher policy of withholding assistance from Liberal candidates who opposed women's suffrage.

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Edwardian militancy

This growing assertiveness by the WLF was symptomatic of a feeling that the cause was advancing by the turn of the century. In 1897 a backbench bill received 230 votes against 159, with Liberal, Conservative and Irish members all giving it a majority, although it did not proceed for lack of parliamentary time. This proved to be a turning point, in that up to 1914 the House of Commons included a consistent majority for women's suffrage, enhanced by the elections of 1900, when the newly elected members favoured the suffrage by seven to one, and 1906, when 200 new Liberal and 29 Labour members were returned. The National Liberal Federation voted overwhelmingly for women's suffrage in 1905, 1907 and 1908.

The rising expectations thus engendered help to explain the adoption of militant tactics during the Edwardian years. Although militancy is conventionally associated with the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903, it is worth noting that her organisation did not adopt militancy until 1905. But before then, the WLF had embarked on this path as a result of its decision in 1902. All by-election candidates during the Edwardian period were subjected to scrutiny of their views on votes for women and on the state regulation of vice, with the result that some were found wanting.[13] During 1904–05, for example, only thirteen out of twenty candidates were endorsed as worthy of support, sometimes after the extraction of written pledges.[14] Even so, some candidates proved to be slippery, such as Winston Churchill who managed to win endorsement

when standing at Dundee in 1908 despite being a very wayward suffragist.

This friction within the party helps to explain why many Liberal politicians reacted so angrily towards the Pankhursts when they subsequently adopted militant methods. For their part the Pankhursts insisted that as backbench legislation was a waste of time, they intended to make life intolerable until the government introduced its own bill for women's suffrage. The new Liberal Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, was pro-suffrage and told a deputation led by Charles McLaren that women had made out an irrefutable case. However, women's suffrage was not a priority for a party that had been out of power for a long time and was focusing on other issues. In any case, Liberals argued that the legislation was unlikely to get through the House of Lords. Relations deteriorated after 1908 when Campbell-Bannerman was replaced as Prime Minister by Asquith, who was easily influenced by the prejudices of London society, showed little sympathy with female aspirations, and regarded his female friends such as Venetia Stanley as sympathetic companions rather than thinking people. Although his cabinet now contained a majority of suffragists, led by Lloyd George and Sir Edward Grey, Asquith and the minority of antis, including Reginald McKenna, Lewis Harcourt, J. A. Pease, Herbert Samuel and Sir Charles Hobhouse, thwarted the cause by denying parliamentary time for a women's bill.

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The mild militancy of 1905–08 involved heckling cabinet ministers, which led to counter-measures such as issuing tickets to approved women for Liberal meetings and a refusal to answer anything but written questions. These tactics caused resentment among many Liberals who thought that ministers were over-reacting. One elderly Liberal, George Cooper, the member for Bermondsey, recalled the protests and heckling used by Radicals in 1867: 'I own it is a rough weapon, but cabinet ministers do not recognise antagonists using any other.'[15] But in July 1909, militancy entered a second phase when Marion Wallace Dunlop went on hunger strike. After 37 prisoners had been released the authorities resorted to forcible feeding. This culminated in the passage of the notorious Prisoners' Temporary Discharge Act of April 1913, known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act', which allowed the release of suffragettes from prison for specified periods, usually a week or fortnight, to recover their health before being re-arrested to continue serving their terms. By this time militancy had entered its third and climactic phase, involving window-breaking, arson and other attacks on property. Moreover, during 1912–14 the Home Secretary, McKenna, was effectively suppressing the WSPU altogether by raiding its headquarters, opening its post, cutting its telephones and seizing copies of *The Suffragette* from the printers. By 1914 he had amassed information – which can be seen today in the huge files at the Public Record Office – on the suffragettes' biggest donors, and he was ready to prosecute them for the costs of suffragette actions.

Although such illiberal methods appalled and demoralised many Liberals of both sexes, the government felt justified partly because it was clear that by 1912 public opinion had turned against militancy. Since 1906 Christabel Pankhurst had abandoned the original alliance with the Labour Party and devoted much of her effort to interventions at by-elections designed to secure the defeat of Liberal candidates. These tactics offered huge scope, as dozens of by-elections were fought each year, and as a result many of the seats gained in the1906 landslide were lost by Liberals. Although there is little evidence that these losses were due to voters' support for women's suffrage, from the party's point of view the Pankhursts appeared to be another pro-Tory pressure group trying to exploit the government's difficulties. The two general elections of 1910 exacerbated these concerns because, although Asquith retained office, the competition between the parties had become much tighter, with the defeated Conservatives polling over 46 per cent of the vote. To the party organisers this meant that Liberals could not afford to risk an electoral reform that might give their opponents any further advantage. Consequently when the Commons voted 255 to 88 for a women's suffrage bill in 1911 ministers looked very hard at its likely consequences. The party's regional agents were consulted and gave it the thumbs down, while Lloyd George, though a suffragist, insisted it would 'on balance add hundreds of thousands of votes to the strength of the Tory Party.'[16] Eventually the cabinet decided to sink the bill by introducing its own reform bill and allowing Parliament to add an amendment to enfranchise women, in the belief that the Liberal–Labour majority would make it democratic enough to avoid helping the Tories. However, as the original bill did not include women's suffrage the Speaker unexpectedly ruled amendments out of order and the whole thing was abandoned.

This fiasco brought Liberal dissatisfaction with Asquith's handling of the issue to a climax. The WLF warned the government of a complete breakdown in relations if it attempted to introduce a reform bill that excluded women. 'I think the conviction has been growing', wrote Catherine Marshall, 'that there is nothing to hope for from the Liberal Party'.[17] Between 1911 and 1914, 105

WLF branches lapsed, and the organisation lost 18,000 members, as activists looked elsewhere to achieve their aims. One opportunity appeared in 1912 when the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, led by Millicent Fawcett, abandoned its non-party stance in favour of an electoral alliance with the Labour Party, operating initially through by-elections. Although no Labour candidates won in these by-elections, the introduction of Labour candidates had the effect of splitting the non-Conservative vote and in several cases allowed Conservatives to be elected. If repeated at a general election this would have destroyed the Asquith government. The collaboration certainly presaged a wider withdrawal of middle-class women from Liberalism to Labour during and after the First World War.

This was the desperate situation to which Asquith's stubbornness had reduced the party by the outbreak of war in August 1914. Yet the way out of the deadlock had become perfectly clear by this time. In 1912 Sir Edward Grey and other Liberals had prepared amendments to the expected government reform bill to extend the vote to wives. In 1913 a backbencher, Willoughby Dickinson, introduced a bill along these lines which would have enfranchised six million women, but it was defeated owing to Conservative opposition and Liberal antagonism towards the suffragettes. However, the idea was incorporated in the proposals of the Speaker's Conference in 1916–17. This body had been appointed by Asquith to get the Coalition Government out of an impasse over the electoral register, which had become hopelessly out of date because many existing electors had moved during the war and thus lost the twelve-month residence requirement as household voters. This might not have mattered as Parliament repeatedly passed legislation to postpone its life and avoid the election due in 1915. However, as the Conservatives refused to extend Parliament's life for the whole war, an election was always a possibility.

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Consequently something had to be done to put voters back on the register and this effectively reopened the whole franchise issue for both men and women. As a result Dickinson's proposal to enfranchise women who were local government voters, or wives of local government voters, subject to an age limit of thirty, was included in the government's Representation of the People Bill introduced in 1917. The clause dealing with women was backed by 184 Liberals and opposed by a diehard rump of just twelve. As a result no fewer than 8.4 million women received a vote, representing almost 40 per cent of the new electorate in 1918.

This was such a democratic franchise that the Liberal members felt it was unlikely to give an advantage to the propertied classes. Herbert Samuel, repenting his anti-suffragist phase, introduced a proposal to grant women the right to stand as parliamentary candidates, and although only seventeen did so in 1918, the way was now open – the parties permitting – to full participation in politics. The first Liberal woman to become an MP was Margaret Wintringham, who won a by-election at Louth in 1921.

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1. The Contagious Diseases Acts allowed the military authorities to maintain brothels for their men and to confine any women suffering from venereal disease.
2. *Hansard,* House of Commons Debates, clxxvi, 20 May 1867, c. 835.
3. Dilke Papers: British Library Add. Mss. 43931, fols. 33–5.
4. It was widely believed that even among men it was not necessary for all to vote personally because others gave them 'virtual' representation – landowners voted for agricultural labourers, or employers for factory workers, for example.
5. Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 123–7.
6. W. E. Gladstone to Samuel Smith, 11 April 1892, *Female Suffrage: A Letter from the Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone to Samuel Smith* (1892).
7. *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, xccxxiii, 7 April 1875, c. 425.
8. Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition To Women's Suffrage in* Britain (1978), p. 28–9.
9. See Lees Papers, Oldham Local Studies Library, DLEES/152.
10. Scottish WLF minutes, Edinburgh University Library, 5 May 1891, 21 April 1892, 5 December 1893, 29 March 1895.
11. 'The Rt. Hon. John Morley on Women's Suffrage', NUWSS pamphlet 1905.
12. *Annual Report*, WLF 1893, p. 10–11.
13. *WLF News,* November 1902, April 1904; WLF executive minutes 30 June 1911, 31 October 1911.
14. *WLF News, 3, 1905.*
15. *Votes for Women,* December 1907, p.30.
16. Memorandum by Renwick Seager, 16 November 1911, PRO CAB 37/108/148; *Liberal Agents' Journal* Nos. 51, 52, 56; Lloyd George to the Master of Elibank, 5 September 1911, Elibank Papers: National Library of Scotland 8803.
17. *Annual Report,* WLF, 1912, p. 55; Catherine Marshall to F. D. Acland, 4 November 1913, Marshall Papers: Cumbria Record Office.