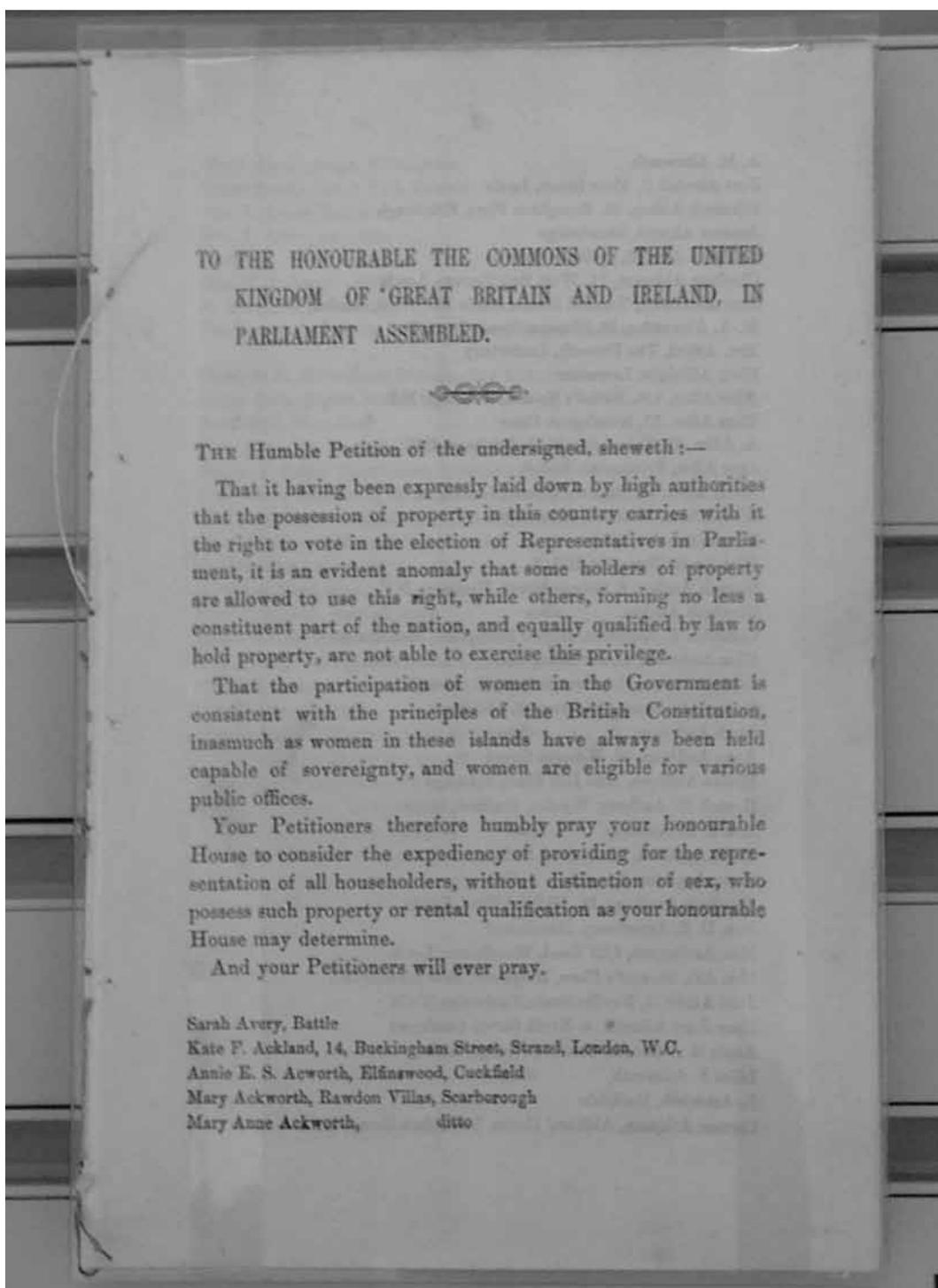


Votes for women

2016 marks 150 years since a petition written by the Liberal women Helen Taylor and Barbara Bodichon kickstarted the women's suffrage campaign. By Tony Little.

'Women who wish for political e



The pamphlet used to capitalise on the 1866 petition calling for votes for women

enfranchisement should say so'¹

THESE MODEST WORDS, drafted by Barbara Bodichon and Helen Taylor (John Stuart Mill's stepdaughter), on a petition, are credited with starting the organised women's suffrage movement in Britain:

'To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom ...

Your petitioners therefore humbly pray your honourable house to consider the expediency of providing for the representation of all householders, without distinction of sex, who possess such property or rental qualifications as your Honourable House may determine. ...'

The petition signed by some 1,500 women was presented in parliament by Mill 150 years ago, on 7 June 1866. The Fawcett Society take this petition as their foundation² and the London School of Economics, now the home of the Women's Library, marked the 150th anniversary of the presentation of the petition with an exhibition and public lecture at the LSE library.³ The petition was organised by women with strong Liberal connections and impeccable Liberal values, yet these women are not much celebrated or commemorated by the Liberal Democrats. Why?

The popular view, reinforced by the recent Helena Bonham Carter/Carey Mulligan movie *Suffragette*, appears to be that women won the right to vote through the violent suffragette campaign directed by the Pankhursts, at the beginning of the twentieth century, overcoming the opposition of a Liberal government led by a bone-headed Asquith and duplicitous Lloyd George. Because, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are so at ease with the *idea* of equality in politics for women it is too easy to assume that it was always obvious that women *should* have the vote. But the campaign for voting equality took more than sixty years from that petition in 1866 and faced significant opposition from women as well as from men. Perhaps a greater understanding of the context of the 1866 petition would encourage Liberals to better appreciate their contribution to the suffrage campaign and why it took so long to achieve its objectives.

The intellectual case for equality between the sexes was famously made by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, at the time of the French Revolution. However, desultory attempts between the 1830s and the 1860s to win the suffrage succeeded only in clarifying that the law precluded women from voting in parliamentary elections. But an inability to vote did not prevent the bolder female spirits from participating in election canvassing or deter them from identifying injustices and agitating for reform. In the early Victorian period women played a part in the anti-slavery campaign, Chartism and the Anti-Corn Law League.

More significantly, discrimination against women was institutionalised. Most middle-class women received little formal education and were prevented from entering university examinations. On marriage, women lost most rights over their property and had no rights even over their children. When the divorce laws were reformed in the 1850s, women had to meet tougher tests than men to secure separation. Career choices were limited, yet even for many single and widowed women of middle-class origins, earning a living was an inescapable necessity. By the 1860s campaigns had been organised to fight each of these wrongs, though with varying, limited, degrees of success.

Probably the greatest success had been in the admission of women to the university local exams and the establishment of a London college providing for education beyond secondary schools which helped professionalise the role of women in teaching. The National Association for the Promotion of Social Sciences (NAPSS) allowed women to submit essays to the annual conference and the more intrepid read their own papers, though some preferred that a man undertake this public function. The NAPSS went beyond academic debate and sought to lay the intellectual foundation for the progressive reform of society, playing its part in the suffrage campaign and the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Building on its example, a group of women formed the Kensington Society, an invitation-only discussion group, whose members were invited to submit papers for discussion and to

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make responses, even if they could not attend in person. The Kensington Society provided the intellectual base, the organising cadre and the process by which the 1866 petition was created.⁴

Second Reform Act

If it was generally accepted in 1866 that women were not entitled to vote, it was also generally accepted that not all men should vote. The 1832 Reform Act had increased the electorate to 652,777 or less than one in five of the adult male population.⁵ Democracy was viewed with considerable apprehension. The most prominent democracy in the world, the United States had just endured a devastating civil war ending with the assassination of its president. Despite its careful qualification, W. E. Gladstone had provoked outrage with his 1864 statement that 'every man who is not presumably incapacitated by some consideration of personal unfitness or of political danger, is morally entitled to come within the pale of the constitution'.⁶ By 1866, most Liberal MPs were signed up to further reform but many harboured doubts about any practical plan suggested.⁷

The death of Palmerston, in the autumn of 1865, brought into office Earl Russell, who was determined to push a new reform bill. The bill, devised by Russell and Gladstone, was designed to extend the franchise – but only to the more skilled artisans able to pay a rent of £7 per annum in a borough seat. The rent level was calculated to leave working-class voters still in a minority in most seats.⁸ The proposal was submitted to the House in March 1866. Among those supporting the bill during the second reading debate at the end of April, was John Stuart Mill, who looked 'upon a liberal enfranchisement of the working classes as incomparably the greatest improvement in our representative institutions which we at present have in our power to make', anticipating that it would lead quickly to the introduction of schools for all, as indeed followed in Forster's 1870 Education Act.⁹ Mill had been elected for the Westminster constituency in 1865. In the course of his campaign Mill attracted the notice of a *Punch* cartoon by mentioning that he favoured votes for women and featuring women on his platform at campaign meetings. Among those who supported Mill were Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, the artist and illegitimate daughter of the Liberal MP, Ben Smith, and Emily Davies, the founder of Girton College and later an early elected school board member.

Benjamin Disraeli, in summing up for the opposition against the bill, attacked the views of Mill. In the course of his onslaught he argued:

Now, I have always been of opinion that if there is to be universal suffrage, women have as much right to vote as men. And more than that – a woman having property now ought to have a vote in a country, in which she may

hold manorial courts and sometimes acts as churchwarden.¹⁰

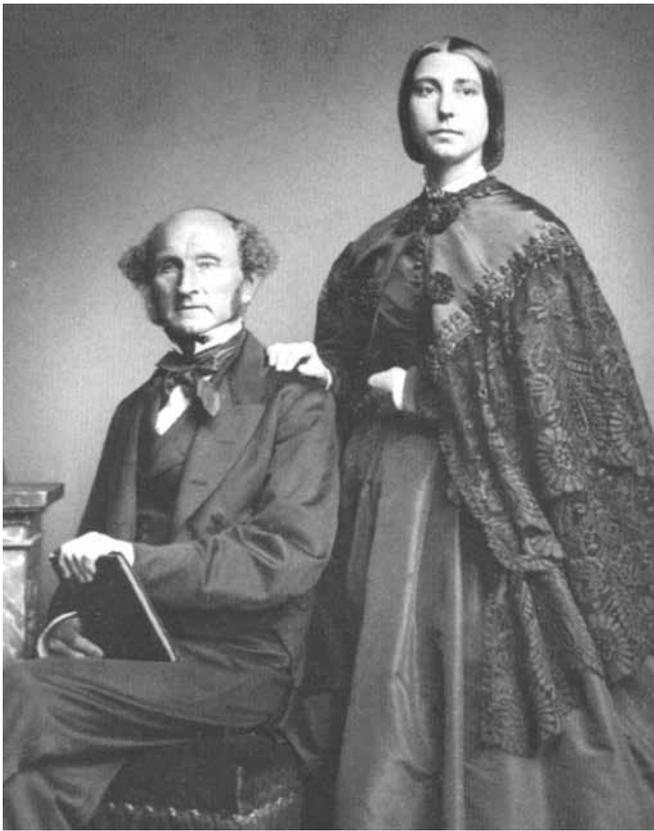
This statement is sometimes mistakenly seen as the spark for the 1866 petition.¹¹ The rest of the speech indicated that Disraeli was by no means in favour of universal suffrage and the rest of his statement, read carefully, has its ambiguities. But it does point to a central dilemma for women's suffrage campaigners. When only a minority of men had the vote, which women should be empowered to vote?

On 9 May 1866, twelve days after the second reading of the Russell/Gladstone Bill, Barbara Bodichon wrote to Helen Taylor seeking her views and those of her stepfather on the expediency of starting a petition for 'getting women voters', offering £25 for expenses and asking Helen Taylor to produce a draft. Helen Taylor responded the same day that 'it is very desirable that women who wish for political enfranchisement should say so. ... I think the most important thing is to make a demand and commence the first humble beginnings of an agitation. ... If a tolerably numerous signed petition can be got up my father will gladly undertake to present it'. She offered a further £20 towards expenses, suggested that the petition focus on propertied women householders to play on the established link between taxation and representation rather than the 'much more startling general proposition that sex is not a proper ground for distinction in political rights', and stipulated that more than 100 signatures were needed. In addition, Mill offered to ask parliament for the appropriate electoral statistics.¹²

Reassured, Bodichon shortened and strengthened the Taylor draft and set about assembling the signatures. She and her colleagues, including Elizabeth Garrett (later Anderson), Bessie Parkes, Jessie Boucherette, Jane Crow and Emily Davies, were experienced political campaigners, principally through the Married Women's Property petition and the campaign for the admission of women to university examinations. They had a network available to them through the Kensington Society and the Langham Place group, the home of the campaign for better work opportunities for women and the offices of a feminist magazine. The signature collection proceeded, partly on the basis of a chain letter and partly on the choices made by the recipients of the central letter. Some asked family and friends, some worked door to door; appropriate local tradespeople were approached or church groups exploited.

In consequence, there is no consistent social, religious or geographical uniformity to the 1,499 signatures collected, though a quick glance through the list suggests a bias towards major cities such as London, Leeds and Manchester, areas of historic liberal strength. Signatures, collected in under a month, came from as far south as Brighton and as far north as Lerwick, from as

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far east as Aldeburgh and as far west as Honiton. From Conway and Swansea, Galway and Dublin, Dunbar and St Andrews, they flowed in with outliers from Calcutta and La Spezia. The campaign was hasty, to exploit the timetable of the reform bill against a background of the somewhat precarious existence of the Russell government. Consequently the numbers and types of signatory reflect the nature of the established female networks of the organising group rather than a national campaign. For the time available the geographical spread is impressive.

Ann Dingsdale and Elizabeth Crawford have been working to identify the women who signed the petition from a surviving copy of the pamphlet issued by the campaigners.¹³ The picture has not been completed but it seems fair to suggest that while there was a smattering of working-class women, the middle class is much more heavily represented, reflecting the background of the organisers. Some canvassers appear deliberately to have targeted women who would be expected to qualify even under a heavily restricted franchise such as widows and businesswomen. Reflecting the link to Emily Davies, teachers were much more represented in this than later petitions when they may have been deterred by the negative publicity for their schools.¹⁴ The pamphlet of the petition makes no attempt to single out well-known women, but the most prominent at the time would probably have been Lady Amberley, daughter-in-law of Earl Russell and later mother of Bertrand Russell, Mrs Alford, wife of the Dean of Canterbury, Harriet Martineau, the economist and positivist, and Mary Somerville, the scientist.

Others became famous later, such as Josephine Butler, the campaigner against the Contagious Diseases Acts and Elizabeth Garret (Anderson), the first female doctor and sister of Millicent Fawcett, all with strong Liberal connections. Dingsdale identifies seven women who were later members of the British Women's Liberal Association. Others from Liberal or Radical families include Kate Cobden, Harriet Grote, Priscilla (Bright) McLaren, Ursula Bright, Caroline Stansfeld, and Jane Rathbone. John Bright's family and Quaker connections led to a strong representation of Brights, Priestmans and Lucases. Although John Bright, himself, was not a wholehearted supporter, his brother Jacob proved more reliable.¹⁵

On 7 June the petition was carried to parliament by Elizabeth Garrett and Emily Davies; Barbara Bodichon was ill on the day. The event is commemorated by a painting in which Garret and Davies show Mill the stall of an apple seller in Westminster Hall where they stashed the petition under cover while they went to the central lobby to find Mill. After the petition was presented, the organisers had a pamphlet prepared giving the terms of the petition and listing the signatories in alphabetical order for circulation to MPs and the press in the hope of stimulating further debate. Only two copies of the pamphlet are known to survive but a digitised list of the signatories is readily available.¹⁶

A wide variety of newspapers such as *The Times*, the *Daily News*, the *Leeds Mercury* and the *Birmingham Post* reported the petition, probably from an agency filing, most giving the number of signatures as 1,550 and Mill's description of

Left: Helen Taylor (1831–1907) with her stepfather, John Stuart Mill (1806–73)

Above: Barbara Bodichon (1827–91)

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the ladies as originating in the middle and upper classes. The reception of Mill's call for the appropriate statistics may be judged from the report in the *Pall Mall Gazette*:

Mr Mill has apparently not abandoned his peculiar views as to the right of women to the franchise if we judge from the notice which, amid some laughter, he gave last night for a return of 'the number of freeholders, householders and others in England and Wales who, fulfilling the qualification required by law, are excluded from the franchise by reason of their sex.'¹⁷

As far as I can ascertain, only *The Standard* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* ventured on editorials. The *Gazette* took the opportunity to expound its views on women's schooling – 'an educated, intelligent, willing woman can learn to do almost anything with incredible swiftness, and under certain circumstances her natural instincts would aid her' – but failed to suggest any conclusion on the franchise.¹⁸

The Standard was more robust. Its opening gambit was to suggest that 'The real way to deal with such a demand, when made by persons of average sense and education, is to show that it is unreasonable'. It concedes that it 'will never do to tell the women who think this way to look after their nurseries and be careful of their husbands' dinners ... The truth is that the franchise for women is unnecessary; the social task they perform is already sufficiently onerous; it would involve them in necessities and positions utterly repugnant to their sex and their place and function in the community; and, above all they do not want it.'

The Standard's great concern was involving women in politics, posing the questions 'how many brothers would care to have their sisters exposed to the appeals of candidates, and the paid civilities of professional agents' in the canvass? How many women of refinement and delicacy would like to go to the hustings amid a stormy contest, through a vociferous crowd, when the atmosphere is laden with squibs, and the rivalry waxes hot, to be cheered or hooted according to their colours, or hustled to and fro by the mob? The editorial concludes, 'only the most fanciful of miniature minorities ever dream of regarding themselves wronged because the Constitution does not label them Blue or Yellow, Orange or Purple, and summon them, amid shouts and jests and beer-inspired enthusiasm, to flutter their bonnet-strings at the polling booths.'¹⁹ At a time when voting was open, not secret, and election contests frequently decided by bribery, booze and bullying intimidation, *The Standard's* fears had at least some merit, as readers of Trollope's autobiography and novels or Dicken's *Pickwick Papers* would recognise. But, as Barbara Bodichon noted, the 1872 secret ballot act 'mended this evil'.²⁰

Despite its modest ambitions the Russell/Gladstone reform bill was destroyed by the lacerating speeches of Liberal MP Robert Lowe and the fears of the more timid government supporters, labelled Adullamites by John Bright.²¹ The government had resigned by the end of June 1866 and had been replaced by a minority Conservative administration led by Lord Derby, who was assisted by Disraeli as Leader in the Commons. Mass demonstrations ensured a further reform bill. Disraeli demonstrated his 'dexterity as a tactician'²² when he betrayed both his own supporters and the Adullamites by accepting more radical proposals than any contemplated by Gladstone and thereby 'Dishing the Whigs'. While still restrictive – less than one-quarter of adult men in the counties and less than one-half in the boroughs received the vote – the householder franchise nearly doubled the size of the electorate.²³

Disraeli's 1867 reform bill (later Act) gave a further opportunity to advance the women's cause, when Mill moved an amendment in committee to replace the word 'man' by 'person' in the qualification for the franchise, and this allows an assessment of the arguments used on both sides at an early stage in the franchise campaign. On 20 May 1867, Mill rose to move his amendment at about 7.45 pm. Mill spoke shortly after Lowe had accused Disraeli of 'bringing in the dregs of the house-occupying class to control the respectable householders' and 'handing over to new and untried persons the institutions of this country, and everything which is dear to us as Englishmen'.²⁴

Mill was apparently sufficiently distracted by Lowe's speech to forget his own, standing silent for 'near two minutes or more ... only his eyebrows worked fearfully'.²⁵ Encouraged by the cheers of his supporters, he argued the case for justice and equal treatment for women asking, rhetorically,

Can it be pretended that women who manage an estate or conduct a business – who pay rates and taxes, often to a large amount, and frequently from their own earnings – many of whom are responsible heads of families, and some of whom, in the capacity of schoolmistresses, teach much more than a great number of the male electors have ever learnt – are not capable of a function of which every male householder is capable? Or is it feared that if they were admitted to the suffrage they would revolutionise the State – would deprive us of any of our valued institutions, or that we should have worse laws, or be in any way whatever worse governed through the effect of their suffrages?

before answering 'No one, Sir, believes anything of the kind'. He sought to answer the claims that

Politics are not women's business, and would distract them from their proper duties; women

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The exhibition at the LSE library to mark the presentation of the women's vote petition, including pages from the list of signatories.



do not desire the suffrage, but would rather be without it; women are sufficiently represented by the representation of their male relatives and connections; women have power enough already.

He argued that women had a right to say on the education of girls, on domestic violence and on the discrimination against married women

controlling their own property and against women being prohibited from pursuing most professions. He concluded,

We ought not to deny to them, what we are conceding to everybody else – a right to be consulted; the ordinary chance of placing in the great Council of the nation a few organs of their sentiments – of having, what every petty trade

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or profession has, a few members who feel specially called on to attend to their interests, and to point out how those interests are affected by the law, or by any proposed changes in it.

None of his opponents answered Mill's points, suggesting instead that conceding the vote to single women would lead either to a decline in marriage or votes for married women and that women MPs would inevitably follow. At 10 pm, seventy-three MPs voted with Mill but the amendment was defeated by a majority of 123.²⁶ Kate Amberley described the speakers against Mill as 'silly and frivolous' but that 'Mill was much pleased and everyone was surprised at the number for him' although it was less than the 100 promised.²⁷ Russell informed Kate Amberley that he opposed Mill, Gladstone voted against the amendment and Disraeli did not vote.

While Mill might have been pleased at the level of support, the failure to achieve a victory and the flippancy of his opponents demonstrated the clear need for a more permanent campaigning organisation. In London, steps were initiated immediately after the presentation of the petition in 1866. Madame Bodichon wrote to Helen Taylor suggesting that 'an association should be formed, with an executive committee of five members' but the two women disagreed over the part that should be played by men. Bodichon was happy to include them on the committee; Taylor proposed that they should only be employed in a consultative capacity. Over the summer and early autumn Taylor made her regular visit to Avignon. While she was away Bodichon published a pamphlet answering the objections to enfranchisement and produced a paper, read in October, at the Social Science Association in Manchester. In the audience was Lydia Becker, an immediate convert who became the secretary of the Manchester Women's Suffrage Committee on its formation in January 1867.

In London a general committee was also formed, in October 1866, whose membership included men to the dismay of Helen Taylor, despite its smaller, women-only, working group intended as the executive. While the work of propaganda and petitioning progressed in advance of Mill's amendment in 1867, the organisational dispute remained unresolved. In June 1867, the original committee was dissolved and a new, women-only, substitute committee created under the control of partial absentee Helen Taylor, an arrangement that also proved unsatisfactory as Taylor quarrelled with Lydia Becker and also with Jacob Bright who replaced Mill as the parliamentary spokesman for the women's campaign.²⁸ Despite Liberal gains in the 1868 general election, Mill lost his Westminster seat to W. H. Smith, the retailer, partly in reaction to his advocacy of women's rights. He used his enforced leisure to publish *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. This, the fullest statement of his feminist views,

'We ought not to deny to them, what we are conceding to everybody else – a right to be consulted; the ordinary chance of placing in the great Council of the nation a few organs of their sentiments – of having, what every petty trade or profession has, a few members who feel specially called on to attend to their interests, and to point out how those interests are affected by the law, or by any proposed changes in it.'

had been written earlier and, he asserted, much influenced by his late wife. It became immediately and remains an influential text.²⁹

The dispute between Taylor and Bodichon weakened the London group but allowed provincial groups to flourish, for example, in Bristol, Dublin and Edinburgh as well as Manchester. By 1872 a votes-for-women petition attracted more than 350,000 signatures, half of them women.³⁰ However the disunity had a price, discouraging some activists and diminishing the prospects for a cohesive set of aims and methods. Which women should have the vote? How closely should the franchise groups be identified with other feminist crusades such as the highly controversial campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts? In 1872 a central committee was formed in London to provide coordination but the London suffrage society refrained from participation until 1878 because several central-committee members were associated with Josephine Butler's work.³¹ How closely should franchise campaigners identify with and work within the more sympathetic Liberal and later Labour parties and how far remain independent? And if these were not sufficient grounds for dissension, how should female activists align themselves on the wider issues of politics? The split in the Liberal Party over home rule separated hitherto united women. Millicent Fawcett, for example, having earlier helped unite suffragists, was one who sided with the Liberal Unionists in 1886, though she turned against Chamberlain in 1903 on tariff reform. 'She led the faction that split the National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1888 by refusing to allow branches of the Women's Liberal Federation to affiliate.'³²

The continued divisions and lack of cohesive central leadership were key factors delaying victory, but the campaigning was not without achievements. In 1869, Jacob Bright succeeded in gaining the vote for women at municipal elections, almost without debate, and the following year Forster's Education Act granted not only the vote but also service on school boards. In the 1880s women had quietly begun to stand and be elected to poor law boards as well as school boards, and some of the leading suffragists such as Lydia Becker, Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett served to act as example and encouragement to others. By 1900 around 200 women had been elected to school boards and nearly 1,000 were poor law guardians.³³ These were responsibilities which could be accommodated within conventional thinking on the appropriate role for women in society but carried less weight with opponents of female parliamentary voting than hoped.

In 1894, under Gladstone's last government, women gained the right to participate in parish/vestry and district elections. Two women were even elected to the first London County Council in 1889, including Jane Cobden, Richard

Cobden's daughter, and a third was appointed an alderman. But various Tory challenges to their right to stand or to participate in council decisions went against them, injustices which excluded women from the LCC after 1894 and which were not rectified until 1907. Both the Women's Liberal Federation and the parliamentary Liberal Party became progressively more in favour of women's suffrage as the old century ended and the new began but Gladstone and Asquith both harboured old-fashioned views on the female role and feared women voters would be predominantly Conservative. The frustration engendered led to the militancy of the suffragettes after 1905.³⁴

The pioneering feminists who contacted Mill in 1866 knew the depth of prejudice they had to combat within their own gender. Even Queen Victoria was against them, writing to a biographer of her husband, in 1870:

The Queen is most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write to join in checking this mad wicked folly of 'Woman's Rights' with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. Lady Amberley ought to get a *good whipping*.³⁵

They knew they were in for a long haul. Barbara Bodichon is reputed to have said to Emily Davies, 'You will go up and vote upon crutches and I shall come out of my grave and vote in my winding sheet.' Davies survived to vote in the 1918 election but Bodichon died in 1891.³⁶ Despite knowing the scale of the challenge, they started and persisted in a great constitutional crusade for change. The Suffragists deserve better recognition and as much credit as the Suffragettes.

Tony Little is chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group. He is a joint editor of British Liberal Leaders and a contributor to Mothers of Liberty.

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- 6 Hansard, 11 May 1864.
- 7 Kristin Zimmerman, 'Liberal Speech, Palmerstonian Delay, and the Passage of the Second Reform Act', *English Historical Review*, Nov. 2003, pp. 1176–1207.
- 8 H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874* (Oxford

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- 9 Hansard, 13 Apr. 1866.
- 10 Hansard, 27 Apr. 1866.
- 11 The error is explained in Evelyn L. Pugh, 'John Stuart Mill and the Women's Question in Parliament, 1865–1868', *The Historian*, May 1980, pp. 399–418.
- 12 Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon* (Pimlico, 1999 edn.), pp. 217–8; Pugh, 'John Stuart Mill', p. 406.
- 13 <http://1866suffragepetitionwomen.blogspot.co.uk/2009/06/petition-itself-and-petition-hanging.html>; <https://womanandhersphere.com/>
- 14 Dingsdale, 'Generous and Lofty Sympathies', passim.
- 15 John Bright voted for in 1867 and against in 1875.
- 16 The list of signatories is available at <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/parliamentary-archives/1866SuffragePetitionNamesWebJune16.pdf>
- 17 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 Jun. 1866.
- 18 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 Jun. 1866.
- 19 *The Standard* 9 Jun. 1866.
- 20 B. Bodichon, *Reasons For and Against the Enfranchisement of Women* (National Society for Women's Suffrage, 1872), p. 15, available at: <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/vwwp/view?docId=VAB7059&doc.view=print>
- 21 A biblical reference (I Samuel 22:1–2), to David's gathering in the Cave of Adullam 'every one that was in distress' and 'every one that was discontented' in opposition to King Saul.
- 22 Robert Lowe, Hansard 20 May 1867.
- 23 K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846–1886* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 253.
- 24 Hansard, 20 May 1867.
- 25 Bertrand and Patricia Russell, *The Amberley Papers*, vol. ii (Hogarth Press, 1937), pp. 36–7.
- 26 Hansard, 20 May 1867.
- 27 Russell, *The Amberley Papers*, pp. 36–7.
- 28 Hirsch, *Bodichon*, p. 221–4.
- 29 For an analysis of Mill's feminist views see Richard Reeves, 'John Stuart Mill: Liberal father of feminism', *Journal of Liberal History*, Spring 2009, pp. 12–15. Available on line at http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/62_Reeves_Mill_and_feminism.pdf
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- 31 Constance Rover, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain* (Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1967), p. 53.
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- 36 Hirsch, *Bodichon*, p. 224.

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