

Votes for women

Report: The Liberal Party and Women's Suffrage

Conference fringe meeting, 9 March 2018, with Krista Cowman and Jo Swinson MP; chair:

Elizabeth Jewkes

Report by **Astrid Stevens**

THIS YEAR MARKS one hundred years since the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed under Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George, beginning the enfranchisement of women. However, while the vast majority of Liberal MPs supported the change, this support was not unanimous. The party had been divided for many years over the issue, and the previous Asquith government had obstructed reform. Opponents argued both that politics was not the 'proper sphere of women' and that women, if enfranchised, would be more likely to vote Conservative. The divisions within the Liberal Party over votes for women, the stance taken by the Asquith government and the impacts on the party of the debates over women's suffrage, were the subject of the Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting on Friday 9 March, 2018, at the spring Liberal Democrat conference in Southport. With Elizabeth Jewkes (vice-chair of Liberal Democrat Women) in the chair, speakers were Krista Cowman and Jo Swinson.

Krista is professor of History at the University of Lincoln, where she researches women's political activism in the twentieth century; she was also historical advisor for the 2015 film *Suffragette*. Jo is deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats, MP for East Dunbartonshire, a former government minister, and author of *Equal Power: And How You Can Make It Happen* (which examines the extent of gender inequality and how we could become a truly gender-equal society).

Krista Cowman opened by discussing women's role in the Liberal Party at around the time when the women's suffrage campaign was at its height, from the perspective of grass-roots politics and women's activism. A key

date in the history of women's political involvement in Britain was related not to women's suffrage, but to the capping of electioneering expenses introduced by the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act in 1883. Election work increased because 60 per cent of adult men now had the vote (and therefore needed to be identified, registered and canvassed), and new constituencies had been created. More women were drawn into the donkey work of elections and campaigning.

In 1884, the Conservative Party opened the Primrose League to women, appealing to the values of Empire, Queen and Country. For the Liberal Party, the independent women's Liberal associations across the country united into a Women's Liberal Federation in 1887, more specifically party-oriented than the Primrose League. The Women's Liberal Federation prioritised political education, aiming to enlist women's sympathies on the side of Liberal principles. It developed a wide range of educational literature, and facilitated a network of skilled speakers, who promoted such ideas as that politics was a womanly as well as a manly duty, and that women should learn about politics to defend themselves against laws that interfered with their lives. At its peak in 1912, the Women's Liberal Associations collectively represented 133,215 women across 837 local branches.

Increased political education and activism led Liberal women more overtly into public life. By the end of the nineteenth century, women did have local votes for some councils, as well as for the Poor Law and School Boards. Women's candidacy for election had been assured from the 1870s and proved in law, but women councillors were rare before 1919, and party-endorsed women councillors even

rarer. Most women at this stage stood as independents, and even when a local party began to endorse women candidates, there were reservations.

As the pro-Liberal *Liverpool Review of Politics* argued: 'Women have also been, in some cases, elected to School Boards and other public bodies, and have discharged the functions associated with such with gentleness, intelligence and tact. However, while woman nobly plans to warm and comfort and command, maybe of the most beneficent services as representatives of the Poor Law system to women and children, petticoats and street-paving politics are strangely incongruous. Neither in municipal administration nor in the conduct of affairs of local District Councils is the feminine element countenanced.'

Divisions over whether or not women could be party candidates reflected a deeper divide in the Women's Liberal Associations over the question of women's suffrage. In 1889, the Federation had voted down a motion to make suffrage part of its aims, by 173 to 90 votes, because they felt it was too contentious, but the motion kept coming back, promoted by a progressive group on the National Executive. Suffrage was finally adopted as an objective of the Women's Liberal Federation in 1892 – the year in which Emmeline Pankhurst withdrew her candidacy for the committee of the Executive because she had just joined the independent Labour Party.

The next problem was whether or not suffrage should be a 'test question', with Federation support withdrawn from any candidate who openly opposed women's suffrage. The issue was contentious, and became even more controversial when the militant suffrage campaign kicked off. During the election campaign of 1905–6,

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Christobel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney were arrested following their interruption of a Liberal Party meeting in Manchester. Christobel campaigned in a by-election with the policy slogan 'Keep the Liberal out', and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) campaigned against any government candidate, regardless of that individual's stance on suffrage. The emergence of militancy in the suffrage campaign coincided with the election of a Liberal government.

Suffrage came to dominate the agenda of local and national Women's Liberal Association meetings, and militancy began to affect the Federation's relationship with the Liberal Party. Some, such as Nessie Stewart-Brown, were strong advocates for party loyalty, while one woman resigned from council saying 'I'm tired of working for Liberals when Liberals will do nothing for women'.

The Federation finally split on the issue in 1913, and a Liberal Women's Suffrage Union was set up. Some women joined that; others left the party altogether to move into the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, many of them going into the Labour Party after the war. When the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies decided to help the Labour

Party at elections, many women Liberals moved to the Women's Citizens Associations, which aimed to keep women's suffrage prominent in the minds of women municipal voters by focusing on political education. Between 1912 and 1914, sixty-four local associations and 10,000 members left the Women's Liberal Federation.

After reduced activity during the First World War, the Federation and the local associations ceased to be separate auxiliary organisations, and women were allowed to become equal party members for the first time. In 1927, the Liberal Party appointed an official women's organiser, with a desk at headquarters. Of the six women who sat as Liberal MPs in the party's history, four of them (Margaret Wintringham, Vera Terrington, Hilda Runciman and Megan Lloyd George) were elected before 1929. Unfortunately, the party's electoral fortunes began to decline at precisely the point when women got their equal position, with women in the Liberal Party who were really at ease with their position as women and as political activists.

Jo Swinson opened her presentation by observing that history is largely written by men, and that this has always been the case. In the course of researching her book, Jo had learned of

a recent proposal to the BBC for a story about prominent women throughout history, which the BBC had dismissed because they said it would be a 'succession of kings' mistresses'. Aside from the fêting of a few warrior women, very often the stories of women have not been told at all. Looking at our public infrastructure, the pages of our history books, the people commemorated in statues and paintings, or the obituaries in the press, these are predominantly male, and that sends out a very clear signal. If we think that history is gender-neutral and objective, we are missing a point.

One argument suggests that men have just been doing more things of significance, and that the imbalance will change with time. But Jo thinks we shouldn't kid ourselves that this is the case. Who is deciding what is significant? Women have played unsung roles throughout history, and in politics, but those stories have not been told in the same way as for men. Some recent Hollywood films about wars in the twentieth century have been controversial because of the 'whitewashing' of history; we are not telling the stories properly if we do not recognise the contribution made to the armed forces by people from all around the Commonwealth, with all different

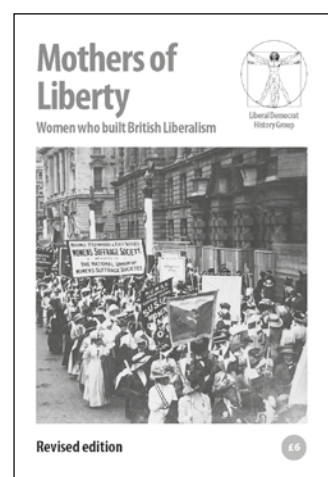
Mothers of Liberty

Women who built British Liberalism

Even before they gained the right to vote and to stand for election, women played many key roles in the development of British Liberalism – as writers and thinkers, campaigners, political hostesses, organisers and, finally, as parliamentary candidates, MPs and peers.

The new edition of this booklet from the Liberal Democrat History Group contains the stories of the women who shaped British Liberalism – including Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, the suffragist leader Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the first woman Liberal MP Margaret Wintringham, Violet Bonham Carter, Megan Lloyd George, Nancy Seear, Shirley Williams and many more. With a foreword by Jo Swinson MP.

Available at a special discounted rate for *Journal of Liberal History* subscribers: £5 instead of the normal £6. Order via our online shop (www.liberalhistory.org.uk/shop/) or by sending a cheque (to 'Liberal Democrat History Group') to LDHG, 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN (add £1.25 P&P).



types of coloured skin. It is the same with women.

The Liberal History Group has produced pamphlets to make sure that those stories have been told about women in our party. But a recent Twitter exchange highlighted that an article on the party website outlining the history of the party didn't mention Kirsty Williams (our current serving government minister) nor key by-election winners, and that few women were mentioned there at all.

A hundred years ago, women got the right to vote. But legal rights are only the beginning of creating a change within society, because attitudes take much longer to change. It is understandable that when women were given the vote, there was a unit set up in the party specifically to campaign to them, and to find the 'woman aspect' to every bill. No doubt if we get votes at 16, we'll do the same: 'How do we appeal to 16- and 17-year-olds, and what are the youth issues?'

A hundred years on, there is still much discussion about women's issues. There *are* some women's issues (for example, period poverty affects women and girls more than it does men), but there are similarly some men's issues which have been overlooked in parliament. We should be thinking about men's issues *and* women's issues, but we don't – we generally think there are issues, and then there are women's issues. We were in that mindset when women got the vote, and we still are. Men's issues have not been championed by MPs because for many men, gender is invisible. But if you are a woman experiencing gender inequality on a regular basis, then it isn't invisible.

For a long time in politics, certain subjects were deemed appropriate for women to speak about, such as health or education, and these would be the ones given to women ministers. We have never had a woman as Chancellor, nor as Defence Secretary. When the post of Defence Secretary last became vacant, despite there being a very well-qualified woman who had been junior minister in the Department for the Ministry of Defence, the position went to somebody without that background or experience, who was deemed more appropriate because he was a bloke.

When men are appointed to the position of Lord Chancellor without having a background of legal experience, few objections are raised – but when Liz Truss was appointed, this was suddenly an issue.

Jo recalled being shocked in 2005 by reading of the overt sexism experienced in the House of Commons by women MPs. Many had been elected in 1997 (when the number of women MPs exceeded one hundred for the first time). Eight years on, the sexism seemed less overt than it had been in the 1990s. But Jo and her fellow women MPs concluded that there is no meritocracy, and no sense of putting people with the right talents into the most effective positions. Reshuffles are more haphazard, based on who has the ear of the leader and where the political power is, so they are quite hard to navigate. And this leads to women being overlooked, time and again. When the Liberal Democrats were in government, we didn't appoint a single woman to Cabinet, despite having plenty to choose from. That kind of message does tell you something. We weren't even appointing women to Cabinet in the same proportion as in the parliamentary party. And a lot of politics is done in informal circles of advisers, who can be more homogeneous than even a parliamentary party in terms of gender, race and opinion. 'Group-think' is no better for political decision-making than it is for business decision-making.

A hundred years on from the suffragettes and suffragists, much work is needed to unpick more than a century of assumptions, stereotypes and pigeonholing of women's issues and women's committees. Looking at the challenges of history shows where we've come from, but also helps us to recognise how far we have to go in the future.

A comment from the floor raised the point that, despite a limited number of women in the party being active in senior formal posts, a large number have been staggeringly influential. This reminded Jo of the 2001 conference debate on all-women shortlists, when a group opposed to the idea had concluded that spokespeople against such shortlists needed to be women in the party, and not men. Jo herself summarized the amendment that ultimately

stopped the party from adopting such shortlists. But after the decision had been made, she was disappointed to find that quite a few of the men who had argued against all-women shortlists were also not prepared to contribute to alternative efforts aimed at getting women more involved, such as training, mentoring, getting women to stand for parliament, or encouraging them to speak at conference. Krista commented that women's lives tend to get struck from the historical record, and that there are large numbers of politically active women whose stories we just don't know – even for some very prominent women politicians: 'People can, mainly, name Nancy Astor at a push, but they struggle to name Margaret Wintringham (who was the second woman, and the first British woman, elected), and there are numbers of these pioneering women who just never figure.'

Asked whether the methods used by the suffrage campaign a hundred years ago still apply today, Krista said that rights are very rarely given by the privileged and the powerful, so you can't just expect that things will get better; you have to organise to *make* things better. And sometimes rights have to be taken. Pardoning the suffragettes now (as some have called for) would be wrong, because it was a very deliberate political choice that those women made, and they knew what they were doing. The campaign for a pardon, well meaning though it is, takes all the fire out of the suffragettes' actions. Jo agreed, adding that it would also be better to campaign for something that would result in improvement in the lives of women today. From the women's suffrage campaign, Jo picked disobedience as something we could learn from. We should remember that the suffragettes were hated by many, including many women; they were beaten, groped, and force-fed in a way that we now recognise as torture. When you speak out for equality, and for people to have rights that they are not currently afforded, it feels uncomfortable, and it attracts vitriol, but that doesn't mean that you're wrong. Pushing the boundaries of the rules is necessary in order to provoke change. And you need to remember that misrepresentation of your efforts in the press is

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a deliberate tactic, either conscious or culturally embedded, to make you look stupid and your ideas ridiculous.

Another question asked about the experience of women in other political parties, in the immediate aftermath of 1918. Krista explained how the Conservative Party did exactly the same thing constitutionally as the Liberal Party, allowing women to become full and equal members of the party, but keeping their separate organisation. However, the Conservative Party's organisation was much smaller than the Women's Liberal Federation. The Primrose League was on its way out by 1918, looking and feeling very Victorian, but the Women's Tariff Reform Association and the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association meant that the Conservatives had large groups of women who were already organised, and they appointed a women's organiser (with a desk at central office) round about 1920. The position in the Labour Party was different, because until reforms during the First World War, membership of the party had been through affiliate organisations and it had not been possible to join the Labour Party as an individual member. Larger, male unions therefore tended to be represented rather than women, although there were associated groups such as the Women's Co-op Guild and the Railway Women's Guild. Once individual membership was allowed, greater numbers of women joined, but even then their activism within the party was limited by union involvement and the block vote. Despite that, the Labour Party had appointed a women's organiser by 1918. So the Liberal Party was slower to appoint an organiser than the other parties, but had potentially the largest group at the end of the war.

In summing up, Krista commented that although the world was very different a century ago, with many changes over the course of the intervening decades, we are still fighting some of the same challenges today. In the 1920s, Margaret Wintringham's main interests in the House of Commons were equal pay, equal suffrage, and the broader participation of women in public life – and with the exception of equal suffrage, we are still talking about those topics now. Krista pointed out that before 1919 women

could not become lawyers, architects, magistrates or jurors, and it was not until the '70s that women got equal pay. Jo highlighted the slow progress towards eliminating other inequalities: rape within marriage was recognised only in 1991, and even today it takes Wera Hobhouse's current bill in order to make upskirting an offence. Jo agreed that Margaret Wintringham's primary issues were still current. On the topic of equal pay, Jo was previously responsible for securing the government agreement to bring in gender pay gap reporting, and she sees votes at 16 as today's ongoing battle for equal suffrage (although not specific to

women). Representation continues to be an issue, with only a third of Liberal Democrat MPs being women (approximately the average in the House of Commons), and only the Conservative Party ever having elected a woman leader. 'It's absolutely spot on that a History Group meeting considers history, but also follows that through to what the lessons are for today.'

Astrid Stevens works in the software industry, but has also been a technical author and freelance writer. Her leisure interest in history has been pursued through studies with the Open University and Dundee University.

Reviews

Diane Atkinson, *Rise Up Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Jane Robinson, *Hearts and Minds: The Untold Story of the Great Pilgrimage and How Women Won the Vote* (Doubleday, 2018)

Review by **Krista Cowman**

FEBRUARY 2018 MARKED 100 years since the Representation of the People Act finally gave parliamentary votes to some British women. The centenary has been marked in numerous ways – television and radio programmes, statues, local and national exhibitions, a multi-site participatory artwork – 'Processions' – in the UK's four political capitals and a relisting of several listed buildings to emphasise their suffrage connections. Unsurprisingly there has also been a publishing boom bringing new interpretations of the suffrage campaign.

These two books, published as part of the centenary events, present different facets of Edwardian women's struggle for the vote. Diane Atkinson's *Rise up Women!* is a formidable work, cramming a wealth of detail over almost 700 pages. Atkinson's sympathies lie unapologetically with the flamboyant suffragettes whose eclectic militancy spanned the decade before the First World War. A suffrage historian of thirty years experience, Atkinson was excellently placed to write

this book, which goes beyond a formal organisational history of the largest militant society, the Women's Social and Political Union. Her approach is more of a collective biography, making full use of the wealth of recently digitised material also released to mark the centenary. The impact of these sources on the field cannot be underestimated. When Atkinson began suffrage research in the 1990s, revealing the names of the elusive tier of activists below the national leadership was a painfully lengthy process. The local reports columns of the WSPU's weekly journals *Votes for Women* and *The Suffragette* had to be scanned on microfilm or crumbling hard copy, and extracted names cross-checked in the local press. Searching the non-digitised census required an address (often not available) and the 100-year closure rule was outside the timeline of the militant campaign. The digitisation of local and suffrage newspapers, of birth, death, marriage and divorce records and of the census has transformed grass-roots suffrage research, bringing many more