

Ciara McGrath, Comberton Village College

Abstract

In my speech I ask and try to answer the questions “What stopped parliament giving women the vote?” as well as “Was militancy helpful or harmful to the suffrage movement?” I look at many aspects of the movement such as Law making, the men and women who changed voting forever and parliament. I used many different sources including letters, newspaper extracts and speeches from the time to look into individual’s (such as Churchill and John Stuart Mill) views on suffrage.

Bibliography

Parliament.uk - used for researching about how parliament worked as well as how laws are passed in the UK.

Suffragettes.org- general research into the topic of suffragettes as well as key individuals and how they helped the cause

BBCbitesize.co.uk – the opinions and views of women at the time

Nationalarchives.gov.uk – timelines and specific dates as well as the sources of Churchill’s letter, Mill’s speech and the Times Newspaper article.

What stopped women’s suffrage and why?- Vote 100 project

In my speech I will address the question “what stopped parliament giving women the vote?” as well as whether militancy was helpful or harmful in achieving women’s suffrage.

Nowadays in the UK every person over the age of 18 has the right to vote in political elections, this right is called suffrage and before 1918 this only applied to two thirds of men over the age of 21. To change this, many groups across the UK were formed, either suffragette or suffragist groups. The latter were peaceful constitutional protestors who used petitions to help get the vote; their main group was the NUWSS (national union of women’s suffrage societies) and Millicent Fawcett led this group. Where as Suffragettes were militant activists who’s slogan was “Deeds not words”, their main group, led by Emmeline Pankhurst, was the WSPU (Women Social and Political Union). Despite the fact they both had very different ideas of how to resolve the problem, their aim was the same: give women the vote.

There were many people involved in the suffrage movement, key names include Millicent Fawcett who further developed not only women’s right to vote but right to an education as she founded one of the first womens colleges: Newnham College in Cambridge. Emmeline Pankhurst one of the founders of the suffragette group WSPU, her daughter Christabel who also helped establish the WSPU, John Stuart Mill the philosopher and ‘radical’ MP who supported women’s rights and there were many others involved too. Some key dates throughout the struggle to give women the vote were 1832, the first parliamentary reform bill was proposed to parliament, 1897 when NUWSS was formed, 1903 when the WSPU was formed, when the first women were allowed to vote in 1918 due to the Representation of the People Act (despite having to be over thirty and either own property or be married to a man who did) and finally in

1928 the Act was extended to include all women with the same voting rights as men had, after nearly a century of working towards this, eventually women had the vote!

Women were viewed by most at the time as incapable and unworthy of the vote, here are some examples of these opinions; women would be changed if they “went out into the rough world of politics”, “many women don’t want the vote and therefore wouldn’t use it anyway”, “women don’t fight in wars”, “women are too ignorant of politics to use their vote properly” and “it would not be the gentle intelligent women who will stand for parliament, but the violent suffragettes” this will be further explained later. These are the excuses from people at the time and part of the mentality that deprived women the right to vote. Furthermore there was an anti suffrage league that shared this mentality, both women and men were involved in this organisation just as both women and men were involved in the suffrage societies as well. Obviously, this way of thinking applied to the majority of members of parliament because otherwise women would have been given the vote sooner.

One example of an MP who was against women’s rights and suffrage was William Cremer, one of his speeches was reported in an article in the Times Newspaper April 1906. The report explained how he expressed in parliament that there were more women than men in the country, so giving women the vote would lead to the majority of the electorate being female, to which there was laughter. He had “too great a respect for women” to ask them to vote as it was something “they didn’t understand, and, what was more, that they didn’t care for”. However this report cannot be totally relied upon due to the fact it is not a primary source meaning that it could have been biased (as newspapers often are), on the other hand, it must retain some credibility and validity.

This evidence epitomizes the reason the suffrage movement was so desperately needed: to prove to the world that women are equal to men and should always be treated as equals. Another reason for needing suffrage is because women’s work was deemed less valuable than men’s for doing the same job; this led to the gender pay gap which is an on going issue today. The perception of women at the time was unacceptable and it became imperative that something was done to change it, many viewed this ‘something’ as militancy.

Militancy is the use of violence for a political or social cause and although unlawful and dangerous, was also in some way necessary I think. Without militancy, suffrage would have been much less prominent in the news and everyday life in the late 19th and early 20th century. It gave them the much needed publicity, which in turn demanded attention and political reform. The government would not have been as concerned by petitions or peaceful marches; militancy demanded a solution. However there is also the view that militancy delayed women’s suffrage because parliament and authorities could not be seen to “give in” to such behaviour. As I previously mentioned, there are various accounts that explain how men believed women should not be MP’s because the suffragettes would stand, not the “gentle intelligent women” implying that the “violent suffragettes” were the limiting factor of suffrage. There is even evidence that Churchill thought militancy was not useful in achieving the aim of women’s suffrage; in a letter to a suffragette, who had asked for a public debate with him, he refused and wrote “I have always shown myself perfectly ready to receive deputations from reasonable and responsible bodies on this subject” therefore implying that militant suffragettes and the WSPU was an unreasonable and irresponsible body and to me, this suggested he would not come to agreements or even compromise with them. So was parliament feeling threatened by the strong, smart and courageous women fighting for their votes?

Henry Fawcett, Richard Pankhurst, John Stuart Mill and many other men were involved in promoting women’s rights and the suffrage movement. Many were authoritative and influential figures and some were even members of parliament. This shows that along with some other MP’s, not all of parliament was anti-women’s suffrage; for example one member, George Lansbury, resigned his seat so that he was able to support a bi-election on suffrage. He was later

arrested for making a speech at a WSPU rally that supported arson. Another male suffragette was Frederick Pethick Lawrence, the co-editor and creator (along with his wife Emmeline Pethick Lawrence) of Votes For Women Publication and was, just like other suffragettes at the time, imprisoned, went on hunger-strike and force fed. Due to the huge support for the cause it seems surprising that women weren't given the vote sooner but there was also a huge opposing force, as I mentioned previously the anti suffrage league, one specific group was the Men's league for opposing Women's Suffrage.

As I previously mentioned, we know that there were some members of parliament who were supporters of women's rights and getting the vote, unfortunately for a long time this was not how the majority of parliament felt. The suffrage in parliament mainly consisted of individuals speaking on the matter, but also defending suffragettes against Government Ministers. For example Keir Hardie (a pro-suffrage MP) questioned their treatment in prison. There are also many examples of public speeches, for example John Stuart Mill's, "... suffrage is needed for self-protection... The treatment of women is certainly no exception...They have neither equal laws nor equal administration of them..." he goes on to explain this further.

However it was not only that men supported suffragettes, but they also supported women in parliament for example the Rhondda Case where Viscount Rhondda requested that his daughter, Viscountess Rhondda, take his position in the House of Lords after he died. She was a suffragette previously imprisoned for setting fire to a letterbox and later went on hunger-strike. Unfortunately she was not allowed to take his seat so she used the Sex Disqualification Act 1919 which was an equality act that stated "a woman shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function" this was unsuccessful due to the opposition from the Lord Chancellor. Despite fighting with very good cause and legal explanation she was not permitted the seat; cases like this show exactly how sexist the views were at the time: purely because she was a woman she was not allowed a seat in Parliament. There was no valid explanation for why she was unable to stand because in the House of Lords your seat is inherited not elected.

Almost annually after 1870 the issue of votes for women came up in parliament and yet, year after year it was dismissed. Despite the perseverance from the suffragists and suffragettes, it took nearly a century after the first bill was given to parliament for women's suffrage to be finally be achieved.

The process to get a new law passed, begins with making a bill which is given to parliament, firstly the bill is introduced (called the first reading) , then debated (second reading), analysed and looked at in detail then amendments are made . After each change the bill is voted on by either the House of Lords or the House of Commons -the bill can begin at either, and then once it is approved by one house, it is sent to the other where the process begins again and if there are any problems, compromises must be made. Finally the law needs Royal Assent; the monarch needs to give consent for the law to be passed and once this happens it is officially a law.

The suffrage movement proposed around 19 separate bills to get the vote so why did it take parliament so long to pass it? Especially since some MP's were supporters of suffrage, not only should suffrage have been given with the first bill but even before that. In the UK in 1780 only about 3% of the population were given a vote but I think that from the very beginning of voting, women should have been given votes too so it was not only the anti-suffrage MP's at the time of the suffrage movement who inhibited women's voting, but for generations before that, this ignorance had existed from the very beginning of voting.

Some key examples of these bills were conciliation bills that were put before the House of commons for three consecutive years (1910, 1911,1912), and they would have allowed roughly 1 million (wealthy, land-owning) women to vote. This was still a huge issue because it wasn't

universal suffrage but would have been an improvement in women's suffrage campaigning progress.

I believe parliament had the biggest influence in delaying women achieving suffrage in the way that they were biased and had the out dated opinion of women's inferiority, it may have been an attempt to stop this change in society or they may have genuinely believed the common views of women, some MP's were clearly against women's suffrage and this could also possibly be due to militancy. In my opinion militancy was both harmful and helpful in reaching women's suffrage; without it I certainly think it would have taken much longer to get the vote, but in some way it may have given parliament an excuse for not giving them suffrage.