

The Suffragette Propaganda

Abstract

In this essay I look at the kind of illustrated propaganda the suffragettes used in order to gain supporters for their cause. In particular I look at means of propaganda such as postcards, banners and posters and the effect they had on the public eye and also politics. I decided to focus on this particular topic because I was curious to see exactly how art could be used in politics and as a propaganda tool. I found out, that suffragists were not the sort of people whom those against them portray. The anti-suffrage movement aimed at mocking suffrage campaigners making them appear unintelligent, ugly and as neglecting their duties as wives and mothers.

Although most of us know that British women got the vote in 1918, the debate over a women's right to vote, had been on-going since the early 19th century. Crawford (2003) points out that, in 1866, John Stuart Mill, a Member of Parliament, was the first to present a petition in Parliament in favour of women's suffrage. Already, at the beginning of the 1900s women had begun to gain a voice by becoming employed at many different work places. For example: they worked in factories, as typists and bookkeepers, they were also requested as nurses or staff in department stores, offices and schools. Moreover, graduate women had become accountants, lawyers and doctors. As a result of women joining the work force, their social and economic status had improved. This economic independence did not reflect political power: women remained without the vote at parliamentary elections and they were not seeing as much progress in their campaigns for women's vote. Some women were becoming impatient.

Already in 1897, Millicent Fawcett (1847-1929) had founded the National Union of Women's Suffrage. Millicent Fawcett strongly believed that women should not turn to violence in their protests to have the right to vote, as doing so would only make matters worse and damage their image and potentially take away any chance of getting the vote. However, she strongly believed that if women were asked to obey to the laws made by parliament, women had to take part in making those laws and therefore get the vote. Unfortunately, Fawcett's progress was slow and women were getting increasingly angry and in 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) and her two daughters, Christabel and Sylvia, founded the Women's Social and Political Union, which later became known as the suffragettes.

Since peaceful protests were not working, the suffragettes, whose motto was "Deeds not Words", decided to resort to strong actions which could shock the public in order to gain the vote. In fact, Christabel Pankhurst was arrested after interrupting a political meeting, showing her banner which had "votes for women" written on it, and she also shouted at two politicians. For her actions, she was given a fine which she refused to pay and as a result was sent to prison. There was an increase of violence in suffragettes' protests, suffragettes chained themselves to Buckingham palace in sign of protest, they also broke all the shop windows along Oxford Street, burnt down churches and attacked politicians, all in order to make themselves heard, to the point of not minding about going

to prison and going on hunger strike so pushing the government to force feed them. Emmeline herself was arrested on numerous occasions and went on hunger strike herself.

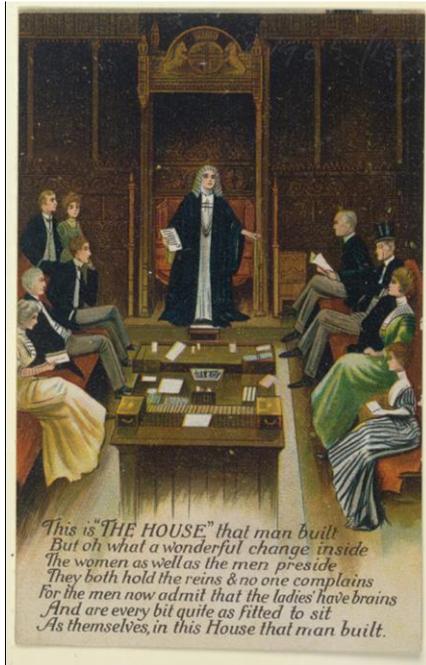
Over the years the violence in protests dramatically increased and, in 1913, matters were made worse, by the death of Emily Wilding Davison, who threw herself under the king's horse. However, in August 1914, Britain and Europe was plunged into World War one, Emmeline Pankhurst asked women to stop campaigning and support the government instead, in order to help the war effort and show themselves "worthy of citizenship." (Tickner, 1988 p, 229). In 1918 eventually, the Representation of the People Act was passed in Parliament, giving the women of property over the age of thirty the right to vote. In 1928, the act was amended and both men and women over the age of 21 were allowed to vote.

According to N.Watson "Art was an important medium for suffrage campaigners, who believed it had the power to shape thought, focus debates and stimulate actions". The audience of the images were not only the supporters but also those who were against the vote for women. In 1907 the Artists' Suffrage League was established followed by another group called the Suffrage Atelier (1909.) Both groups used a series of posters, banners, postcards and cartoons, all in order to support the cause (Sheppard 1992). The Artists' Suffrage League was made up by women, professional artists, who gave their talents to help the cause. The Atelier, on the other hand, included professionals as well as non-professional artists and aimed at training members in skills and techniques necessary for the productions of art materials and regular meetings were held in order to demonstrate the drawing methods required for the production of cartoons, posters, etc. (Sheppard 1992). Both groups used religious symbolism and cited powerful women from history like Joan of Arc, to promote the idea that suffrage meant virtue, saintliness and honour.

While at the beginning these images were created to be published in public spaces, they soon became used in public campaigns which changed the way art was used to achieve political aims. The images were, in fact, among the first to be used by women with the goal of creating political change (Coplemen, 1990).

Three aspects of the use of postcard imagery are particularly important from 1905 to 1914. First of all, the suffrage organisations used the propaganda value of postcards to adjust the misleading image of their campaign created by anti-suffragettes, which they immediately needed to counter. The postcards were used to show the real personalities of the campaigns leaders and to also portray their achievements and position in society and what they actually stood for. Other cards were meant to demonstrate not just the strength of support for the cause but that their supporters did not pose any threat whatsoever to the society. This misleading idea was portrayed in the anti-suffrage campaign.

Second of all, postcards promoted by anti-suffrage campaigners showed women campaigners, as N.Watson said "Embittered spinsters" and not as strong as men. They were also portrayed as hysterical and physically and emotionally unstable. They were also said to be inferior to the male and that because they were the housewives they would change the house if given the vote, potentially proving family life and society a big problem.



Thirdly, the publishers of the postcards also independently documented, what exactly the daily life of a campaigning suffragist was like, from selling newspapers on the streets to interrupting meetings, they simply had it all. Moreover, through illustration and photographs, they made this whole process even better in overcoming the difference between militant and constitutional suffragists, which however caused confusion in the public and on the streets.

This particular example shows men and women sitting side-by-side in the House of Commons, depicting the women as upstanding counterparts to the male Members of Parliament.

Posters were printed or published by the Artists' Suffrage League and were produced in order to respond to a specific political issue. Many were also for Parliamentary elections.

They could be found in shops, railway stations as well as at meetings and exhibitions, and newsagents often displayed them. Posters parades also took place and women had to replace the wooden boards on which the posters were mounted with lighter cardboard sheets so that they could walk easily without carrying too much weight. The costs of producing these posters were, however, very high and the League did not produce posters after the first four years. The Atelier, instead, produced more posters since theirs were smaller in size, made on cheaper paper and in black and white printing. They also organised fairs to support the costs of producing such posters. The Government decided to put restrictions on where posters could be placed because they were so effective (Florey 2013).

However, the Suffragettes did not limit themselves to the use of postcards and posters, they started to organise the production of pro suffrage cartoons which, so far, had been used against them by the anti - suffrage movement. Sawyer (2001) thinks that nineteenth-century cartooning was almost uniformly hostile to women's rights. Cartoons produced by the suffragette supporters either portrayed women as weak, suffering from oppression and in need of the vote in order to get protection or they portrayed women as superior who could fight against the corruption of the government and therefore, needed the vote in order to protect the country.



In 1909 the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, ordered that imprisoned suffragettes who went on hunger strike should be force-fed. In this poster, produced in 1914 for the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), artist Alfred Perse captures the horror of the process.

Banners were also used in the suffragette movement, created for the suffrage processions and demonstrations. For example in the Procession of Great Women over 800 banners were used, but unfortunately only a small proportion has survived. As suffrage historian Elizabeth

Crawford (2014) writes, 'It was banners that were recognised at the time – and are remembered today – as the most significant visual element of that procession'. The majority of banners were designed by Mary Lowndes (1857-1929), a successful professional artist, who was specialised in the designing of stained glass. She wrote a book "Banners and Banner making" where she explained that banner making had always been a women's activity since mediaeval times. According to Mary the size of the banners was to be, 4' 6" by 6' 6" large enough in case of winds and they had to be decorated in rich combinations of colours. They were meant to float in the wind, to flicker in the breeze, to flirt its colours for your pleasure'. Each different town or region implemented their own recognisable emblem. There were also banners for women's diverse occupations such as: doctors, teachers, business and office workers, artists, actors, musicians, nurses, physical trainers, gardeners, farmers, foragers and homemakers. Many banners depicted well-known women of the past, including Marie Curie, Queen Elizabeth I, Boadicea, Queen Victoria, Joan of Arc, Jane Austen and Florence Nightingale. The strategic use of colours was significant: purple, white and green were used they chose white, purple and green as their colours: white for purity, purple for loyalty and courage, and green for youth or regeneration.

In conclusion, one of the main aims of the suffragette propaganda was to demonstrate the opposite of what men believed them to be. In the 19th century, the general view regarding women was that they were second class citizens, physically, mentally and inferior to men and therefore incapable of voting. It was believed men and women lived in different 'spheres' with different social roles – men were breadwinners and had a professional role in Government, while women should focus on home life and children.

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