

GALLERY BACKGROUND

THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE VOTE

The campaign to achieve women's suffrage went back many years. Its origins were said to lie in 1832. In that year there was a Parliamentary Reform Act, which extended the vote to a larger number of men (though still not very many, and you had to own a certain amount of property to qualify to vote). A woman called Mary Smith handed in a petition to Parliament asking that women who qualified for the vote should also be given the vote. The campaign developed through the 19th and into the 20th century. Many different groups and organisations supported women's suffrage. There were political parties, especially the Labour Party, which committed itself to full equality in 1912. There were also many individual politicians within the three main political parties (Liberal, Conservative and Labour). There were organisations of women workers, especially in the textile mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire. There were also many women's suffrage groups like the Women's Freedom League, which worked with other female suffrage groups. However, the best-known campaigners were:

- The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), formed in 1897 and led by Millicent Fawcett
- The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), formed in 1903 and led by Emmeline Pankhurst

You can find out more about these groups and their campaign for the vote in Gallery 4.

THE CASE FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

This was based on a number of arguments. The first was simply that women and men should qualify for the vote on the same terms. Many women's suffrage campaigners pointed out that wealthy, educated women were unable to vote while poor, uneducated workmen could vote. To them, this seemed to be unfair and unreasonable.

Other supporters of women's suffrage wanted the measure because they believed that all adults should have the vote. Groups like the Labour Party supported giving the vote to all men and women over 21 whether they owned property or not. This sometimes brought disagreements with some of the women's

suffrage groups. Critics claimed they wanted 'Votes For Ladies' and not 'Votes For Women'.

There were many other arguments in favour of women's suffrage. One of the points made most often was that working conditions and laws in Britain discriminated against women. For example, women worked long hours in factories, especially in Northern England. By the early 1900s men could vote in order to change this, but women could not. In 1901 Selina Cooper, a Lancashire textile worker, led a delegation of women workers to Parliament with a huge petition demanding the vote. Another complaint was that government measures helped sick or unemployed working men, but left women and children without protection.

Female suffrage campaigners also pointed out that laws relating to marriage were often unfair to women. Many women suffered domestic violence but sentences for men were usually very light. When a marriage broke down, it was generally assumed that the woman was to blame. There were also many laws relating to child welfare that were unsatisfactory. For example, there was very little protection for young working class girls from sexual abuse or being forced into prostitution.

Women pointed out that men were supposed to look after them, but the laws in Britain proved that they had failed to do so. This meant that they should be given the vote so that they could get laws passed which would protect them properly.

Finally, by 1913 many states in the USA and countries in the British Empire had given the vote to women. This had not caused the disasters that had been predicted. In fact, most countries believed giving women the vote had helped them.

THE CASE AGAINST WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

The arguments against female suffrage were not simply about men denying women the vote. There is no doubt that this was a factor. Many of the opponents of female suffrage believed that men and women belonged in different 'spheres'. The men's sphere was politics, government, work, war, trade and business. The role of the woman was as wife and mother and in running the home. It was felt that

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getting involved in politics was not right for women. For one reason, it would put too much strain on them! Second, men saw politics as a hard and dirty business, and they genuinely wanted to keep women out of this arena.

It is important to remember that many women felt this way. Opponents claimed that the majority of women were opposed to women's suffrage, though it is virtually impossible to know whether this was true. There certainly were many female opponents of women's suffrage.

Some of the opposition to women's suffrage was political. The Liberal Party feared that giving votes to women would be politically disastrous for them. Most of the women who would get the vote would be from wealthier families. They were most likely to vote Conservative. Labour wanted completely equal voting, rather than simply giving the vote to some better off ladies.

Another reason for opposition was that the issue was simply not seen as important. In the early 1900s Britain was facing many challenges. Relations between trade unions and employers were very bad and there were many bitter and violent strikes. There was conflict in Ireland that looked as though it might turn into a civil war. The Liberal government was

busy with welfare reforms to help the unemployed, the old and children. Finally, the situation in Europe was very worrying, with the possibility that Britain might end up at war with Germany. Compared to these issues, many people felt that female suffrage was simply not an important issue.

WIDER ISSUES RELATING TO WOMEN

It is important to remember that women were involved in many other issues apart from the vote. By 1900 women could vote in local council elections and serve as councillors. They often served on School Boards, helping to run schools. Organisations like the Salvation Army did a lot of work with the poor in Britain's cities. The Women's Temperance League campaigned to reduce or even ban the drinking of alcohol. The Women's Labour League campaigned for better working conditions for women and also better health care and sanitation.

Women were very active in areas other than politics. For many, this was enough and they had no interest in the vote. However, many women felt that they should be involved in charitable and social work and they should campaign for the vote. They felt that the work of the Salvation Army helped the worst off people in society. They also felt that if they had the vote they could stop the worst off people getting into hard times in the first place.