

No doubt much of this was wounded male pride, yet there are grounds for thinking that the patrols homed in on innocent behaviour which was easier to tackle than the real crime of the urban areas. Resignations by women from the WPV during 1917 suggest that the experiment was not always the success it was officially claimed to be. Certainly one can see in the outraged reactions of men one important strand in the upsurge of hostility towards feminists in the post-war years. Many girls shared their feelings. After long hours at work the attentions of young soldiers were by no means unwelcome to them; and they too began to see the patrols as the work of frustrated spinsters or men-haters. Much of the explanation for the hostility of the younger generation towards feminism between the wars has its origins in this experience.

Women's Enfranchisement and the Separate Spheres

Under the terms of the Representation of the People Act of 1918 parliament bestowed the vote upon women aged 30 and above who were themselves local government electors or who were married to local government electors. This measure enfranchised some 8,479,156 women in the British Isles as against 12,913,166 men, giving the women a 39.6 per cent share of the total. Great as this advance clearly was one should notice the two qualifications: the age limitation and the decision to tie most women's rights to their husbands. The historian therefore has to explain both why this concession was made and why it took the peculiar form that it did; the apparent illogicality of the compromise seems almost to echo that of 1867 when householders in boroughs, but not in counties, received the vote, thus inviting a further reform in a few years.

As in most historical questions a number of explanations present themselves, and though historians disagree about them they are not all mutually incompatible by any means. Nonetheless there are grounds for attributing much more importance to some than to others. The first part of one's explanation for women's enfranchisement in 1918 is that the ground for it had been so thoroughly prepared before 1914. As is evident from the experience of a country like France, in the absence of a well entrenched campaign even the mass participation of women in a life-and-death war failed to make women's votes a matter of concern. But to draw attention to the pre-war build up is not simply to note the urgent political need for Asquith and his colleagues to resolve a question which posed a growing threat to their position. It is also to see

that before the outbreak of war the lines of the *precise* solution to the problem had already emerged. The question was one of detail: on what terms were women to be enfranchised? The answer emerged in W.H. Dickinson's 1913 bill which included the vital proposal to enfranchise *wives*. This was the element incorporated into the 1918 Act which removed the fears of Liberal and Labour politicians about the potential danger of creating more Conservative votes by confining the qualification to single or propertied women. With the solution to the dilemma in sight what was needed by 1914 was a bill in a form which could pass – that is in a government measure.

The second part of the explanation is that during the war the opportunity for enfranchisement of women was created by the concern of the politicians to give votes to *men*. This arose because the war took many men away from their normal residences to the armed forces or to new jobs. As a result of this they disrupted the 12-month residence requirement which was necessary for the majority of electors who qualified as householders and lodgers. These movements interrupted the work in 1914 on which the new register of voters for 1915 was to be based. Thus from an early stage governments faced the prospect of massive disfranchisement of existing male voters. This they could not tolerate because of the very real prospect of having to conduct an election during the war, as had been done in 1900. For political reasons, therefore, they felt more or less obliged to find ways of changing the registration system to bring male voters back onto the lists. This was not, perhaps, technically a franchise reform but it was so close to it that advocates of the women's case in cabinet, notably Arthur Henderson, Lord Robert Cecil and Sir John Simon, inevitably raised wider questions. Now it was generally assumed, especially in view of the frustrating experiences over franchise reform before 1914 and the rivalry between the parties, that it would be impossible to resolve the issues during wartime. This of course was the judgement made by Mrs Fawcett among others. And for some time it seemed that this would prove to be correct. However, by the summer of 1916 the Conservatives, now partners in Asquith's Coalition, had grown increasingly restive about the whole conduct of the war. They anticipated a change of government which might well require an election. Therefore some solution to the shrinking register of voters had to be found. In the end the solution was what in retrospect looks simple. An all-party conference under the Speaker of the Commons, J.W. Lowther, was appointed to devise a comprehensive set of proposals.⁵⁴ Working expeditiously during the autumn of 1916 it reached a broad agreement by January

1917 on wide-ranging reforms including a simplified residence qualification for men giving them virtually full adult suffrage, a big reduction in plural voting, special measures to enable servicemen to vote, a sweeping reform of the boundaries of the constituencies and many other innovations. Towards the end of their work they dealt with women's suffrage, anxious not to throw away their achievements by disagreement over this one item. By 15 to 6 the members voted in favour of the principle of giving some votes to women; they rejected equal suffrage with men by 12 to 10; and finally voted narrowly in favour of W. H. Dickinson's proposal to enfranchise women local government voters and wives of such voters. Yet, fearful about the dangers of women becoming a majority, they also thought it prudent to add a further control in the form of a maximum age limit, suggesting either 30 or 35.⁵⁵ This was the scheme which was subsequently accepted by the House of Commons by a vote of 387 to 57 and by the Lords by 134 to 71.

These developments should be taken into account when assessing a third explanation for women's enfranchisement put forward by Sandra Holton, that it was due to the campaign and pressure exerted by the women's movement during the war.⁵⁶ The argument here is not unlike that over the role of the popular agitation during the 1866-7 crisis; and the obvious flaw in Holton's view is that parliament evidently took up the issue primarily to enfranchise men, not women. Moreover, as we have also seen, there was virtually no campaign by the women during 1914 and 1915; indeed this period undoubtedly made it easier for politicians to climb down without too much loss of face by 1916. In 1916 the women's campaign did revive somewhat - stimulated by parliamentary initiatives as had been the case in 1866-7 - but whether the campaign was significant in the sense that it actually influenced politicians is debatable. Clearly the WSPU had all but ceased to function. In the critical year - 1917 - Christabel Pankhurst spent six months in the United States while Mrs Pankhurst prepared for a propaganda trip to Russia. The National Union kept an eye on the cabinet, and by May 1916 Mrs Fawcett judged it time to send Asquith a letter on the suffrage; she was much encouraged by his response in which he insisted that there was no intention of introducing franchise legislation but that if it were done it would be 'without any prejudgements from the controversies of the past.'⁵⁷ Thereafter the NUWSS and the WFL encouraged their members to write to ministers pressing for the vote, and there were meetings between the women and sympathetic MPs including W.C. Anderson, Sir John Simon, W.H. Dickinson and

Lord Robert Cecil. But even now the NUWSS offered to accept any purely registration reform the cabinet proposed, provided that no franchise measures were included; this would have allowed them merely to bring back men onto the register if a practical way could be found. Nor did Asquith feel obliged to meet any of the deputations Mrs Fawcett tried to press upon him. This scarcely amounted to very strong pressure on the government. This is not surprising since, as a number of observers commented, there was no head of steam in the country over the issue. As the War Emergency Workers National Committee had told Sylvia Pankhurst in 1915, 'the public mood is far too much centred on war matters to concern itself very much about suffrage'.⁵⁸ Even in 1917, when the issue had gained much more public attention, apathy still reigned. Selina Cooper and another NUWSS organiser, Annot Robinson, who believed in the complete enfranchisement of working women, decided to try to arouse the women munitions workers in Lancashire and Yorkshire to sign a petition for women's suffrage. But Cooper soon admitted it was a 'thankless task' as most girls were quite happy to accept whatever parliament offered.⁵⁹

Once the Speaker's Conference had been appointed the initiative passed out of the women's hands. Although Mrs Fawcett had two allies on the Conference in Dickinson and Simon, she was apparently kept in the dark about its progress. At length Dickinson revealed the decision taken on women's suffrage merely by saying it was 'something substantial upon which to build'. He strongly urged her to:

do all you can to induce women to see that it will be bad tactics to fall foul of the Conference because it may not have done all that they expected. The whole matter will need the most careful handling so as to avoid the risk of the Government having an excuse for saying that as it [is] impossible to satisfy the advocates of W.S. they refrain from dealing with W.S. at all.⁶⁰

In short she was advised against bargaining over the terms of reform. Now although Mrs Fawcett resented both the age limit and the effective exclusion of daughters living at home, she did in fact acquiesce, as did virtually all suffragists with the exception of Sylvia Pankhurst, who continued to argue for full adult suffrage. Thus, when she led a deputation of some 22 suffrage societies to meet Walter Long, the minister responsible, she concentrated not on the *terms* of enfranchisement but on the *form* that the legislation would take. She offered to cease all agitation for a wider franchise if the cabinet would include the Speaker's proposals in its bill.⁶¹ At this point the suffragists were exercising some effective pressure in the sense that Long undoubtedly

desired to settle the whole question and thereby avoid the reappearance of a women's agitation after the war. Even so, the government adamantly refused to do any more than include a women's suffrage clause in the bill. No whips were to be brought out in its support, and if the Commons were to reject the clause the cabinet would go ahead with the rest of the measure. Since Lloyd George refused to move from this position, and even the Labour MPs declined to insist on the inclusion of women⁶² Mrs Fawcett gracefully backed down: 'we should greatly prefer an imperfect scheme that can pass'. Thus when all the evidence is added up the pressure from extra-parliamentary forces looks meagre, especially by comparison with some of the earlier reform crises in British history.

A fourth line of explanation for enfranchisement is the most obvious one of all: people had simply changed their minds in the sense that male prejudice against women had melted in the face of revelations about their capabilities during wartime and their contribution to the war effort. Though superficially attractive this is much harder to demonstrate than one might suppose and was, moreover, disparaged by several women activists including Helena Swanwick, Cicely Hamilton and Elizabeth Robins.⁶³ It is scarcely sufficient to point to the flattering comments made by politicians about women's work – which were often contradicted privately. It has to be shown that the re-evaluation of women's role was fundamental and lasting. Yet, as has already been noted, as early as 1917 a reaction against women workers was under way; any delay in granting women the vote would have left their cause exposed to the unsympathetic climate of 1919. Thus even at its height the shift in attitudes towards women was a fragile phenomenon. Traditional prejudices continued to flourish in spite of, or even because of, the unusual wartime roles performed by women. Indeed for many people the war seems to have had the effect of reawakening conventional notions about the separate spheres: 'we women were brought back to the primitive conception of the relative position of the two sexes', wrote Catherine Hartley, 'again man was the fighter, the protector of woman and home. And at once his power became a reality.'⁶⁴ Clearly the glorification of the fighting man was not simply an expedient of anti-suffragist males, anxious to hold the line against reform. Even amongst women it was commonly considered that men deserved priority treatment because they had fought. In 1916 when Sir Edward Carson proposed to make military service the qualification for voting Mrs Pankhurst authorised a Tory MP to announce in parliament that she would accept a measure to enfranchise servicemen even if

women were still excluded: 'Could any woman face the possibility of the affairs of the country being settled by conscientious objectors, passive resisters and shirkers?'⁶⁵ This is why 1916 was such a dangerous year for the suffrage cause; for politicians did, indeed, give priority to the men, as is abundantly clear from three specific innovations they subsequently made. They disfranchised conscientious objectors for five years, enfranchised 19-year-old boys who had seen active service, and introduced schemes for absent and proxy voting for servicemen still abroad at election time.

Women's own attitudes towards their ability to contribute to national defence are particularly interesting, in that they show a remarkable continuity before, during and after the war. For example, as Anne Summers has pointed out, if women's part in the war effort led to the granting of the vote one would expect to see some signs of conversion to suffragism on the part of those involved in VAD and similar work before 1914. In fact there appears to be an inverse relationship between the two since the female leaders of the VADs such as Lady Tullibardine, Lady Wantage, Lady Jersey and the Duchess of Montrose remained markedly anti-suffragist. Similarly, the male politicians who were aware of the importance of women nurses in wartime seem not to have been influenced; they assumed the women would volunteer whether enfranchised or not.⁶⁶ During the conflict itself women often found it impossible to see their own role as equal to that of men. Katherine Furse, in spite of her major contribution, admitted, 'there was always a queer haunting feeling in my heart that as women we were profiting by the sacrifice of men.'⁶⁷ Such sentiments were echoed well into the 1920s by Lady Tullibardine, then Duchess of Atholl, when she opposed equal franchise for women:

no one will dispute that the proposal means that women will be in the majority on the Parliamentary register. When I reach that point I cannot forget that the preponderance ... will have been largely due to, or at least greatly increased by, the fact that we lost 740,000 precious lives of men in the Great War and that that war is still taking its toll of ex-servicemen ... to propose a great extension of this kind looks like taking advantage of the heroic sacrifices of those men.⁶⁸

Ultimately the decision lay with male politicians. Yet ascertaining their real opinions about women is no easy matter. It must be remembered that it was quite possible for men to accept votes for women, if the implications appeared to be limited, without necessarily abandoning their basic beliefs about the role of the two sexes. Several prominent anti-suffragists such as Walter Long have been identified as wartime

converts; yet Long's private correspondence shows that his underlying hostility towards women's enfranchisement remained unchanged – he was simply making a tactical retreat in the face of a limited reform in order to avoid the possibility of something worse as generations of reluctant Tories had done before him.⁶⁹ On the strength of two parliamentary speeches in 1916 and 1917 Asquith appears to be the outstanding example of a politician who had fundamentally revised his views on women. In fact his opinions, as opposed to his political judgement, were unwavering. His comments on the women electors at Paisley in 1920 might have been written in 1885:

There are about fifteen thousand women on the Register – a dim, impenetrable, for the most part ungettable element – of whom all that one knows is that they are for the most part hopelessly ignorant of politics, credulous to the last degree, and flickering with gusts of sentiment like a candle in the wind.⁷⁰

Yet Paisley's male voters he considered to be 'among the most intelligent audiences I have ever had'! What makes these remarks so striking is that they were made at a point when Asquith's political comeback was being accomplished by means of the acclaimed political talents of his *daughter*, Violet. If this failed to inspire a revision of his ideas on women in politics or to induce a more generous view, nothing would. In this light the historian cannot but look rather critically upon the bland compliments freely bestowed by politicians such as Asquith upon women's wartime work. The inescapable fact is that when faced with the necessity of effecting an embarrassing retreat from his long-held position of opposition to women's suffrage Asquith invoked fashionable patriotic eulogy as a reasonably dignified expedient; but it was little more than that.

Most MPs of this period have left no clear record of their views on the issue except, perhaps, in the form of their votes in the House of Commons. It is therefore possible to gain an approximate indication of the shift of opinion by comparing the parliamentary division on the women's clause on 19 June 1917 with members' behaviour on the Conciliation Bill in 1911. Both divisions took place in circumstances that were comparatively favourable for the women, for in 1911 the suffragettes had also suspended militancy, albeit briefly, in order to give the bill a fair chance. It transpires that of the 387 members who voted in favour of women's suffrage in 1917 only 169 had voted in 1911, 151 in favour and only 18 against the bill. Of the 57 members who voted against women's suffrage in 1917, 25 had participated in the

1911 division of whom 21 had opposed and 4 supported the bill. Thus in a total of 194 members involved in both divisions 18 had moved in favour and 4 against women's suffrage, a net gain of 14. While this corroborates the view that political opinion moved in favour of the women's cause during the war, it suggests that the shift was of very modest proportions. However, this is not surprising, for the parliament of 1917 was basically the one that had been elected in December 1910, modified somewhat through by-elections; like its predecessors the 1910 parliament already enjoyed a *suffragist* majority. The change that did occur after 1914 is to be explained, especially on the Liberal side, by the fact that the *terms* of the 1917 measure reflected their wishes much more closely than those of the Conciliation Bill. For the Conservatives, who had recorded pro-suffrage votes on a number of occasions since the 1880s, the objection to franchise extensions had been a matter of *class* rather than sex. Once they had been led to accept a vote for nearly all working-class men there was no strong reason of party interest to deny it to women. At worst they were expected to vote as their husbands did, and at best to be rather more inclined towards Conservatism.

Ultimately the politicians' behaviour in 1917 seems to reflect, if anything, the strength of traditional ideas about women as housewives and mothers rather than any radical re-evaluation of their role. If domesticity did not exactly help it at least moulded the final form which the women's franchise actually took. The heightened awareness was to have political implications for women in the sense that motherhood was held to constitute war service too. Indeed Earl Grey actually urged the Speaker's Conference, of which he was a member, to bestow an additional vote upon all married men and women who had produced four children on the grounds that such people had had 'an additional experience of life and their vote is therefore of more value. Further they have rendered a service to the state without which the state could not continue to exist.'⁷¹ Such remarks were, of course, only consistent with the long-standing preference expressed by Liberal and Labour reformers for including the wives of workingmen in whatever changes might be made, and the traditional hostility towards bestowing the vote upon spinsters. Moreover, these preferences are reflected in the decisions actually made by politicians in 1916–17. Historians who wish to place the emphasis on women as wartime workers have to explain why parliament deliberately chose to *exclude* the young women who had performed such conspicuous service in the munitions factories. They of course were largely single; politicians tended to equate the flapper with

feminism – incorrectly as it turned out – and feared that she might well use her political influence to defend her footing in industry and to retreat further from marriage and motherhood. On the other hand politicians felt much more comfortable about the woman over 30 to whom they gave the vote; she was more likely to be married, to have children and to have no lasting interest in employment or a career. In short she appeared to be a stable element in a changing world, one who was unlikely to seek to promote radical, feminist issues in parliament if enfranchised. As the history of the inter-war period shows, this judgement was not without some shrewdness. What makes this explanation of political motivation ultimately credible is that it follows very much the pattern of thought and behaviour exhibited in connection with the enfranchisement of men. In 1866, for example, Gladstone had reached the conclusion that certain carefully chosen workingmen were responsible individuals whose inclusion within the political system would tend to strengthen rather than destabilise it. In much the same spirit the politicians of 1918 took a finely calculated risk.

Chapter 3 Strategy and Tactics of the Women's Movement in the 1920s

Looking back from the perspective of 1928 the equal rights feminist, Ray Strachey, admitted that in 1917–18 suffragists had been too exhausted and distracted to realise that the tide was turning decisively in their favour.¹ Until a very late stage the life-and-death struggle with Germany absorbed their thoughts. After the comparative ease with which parliament granted the vote came a greater surprise: in October 1918 MPs conceded, almost without debate, the right of women to sit in the House of Commons, preferring to settle the issue rather than leaving it to Returning Officers to decide whether to accept women's nominations as valid. Hard on the heels of this coup came the December general election. There followed a scramble to find a few women candidates, and constituencies willing to take them, but there was no time for a serious effort to place women in winnable seats.

This period of confused and hectic activity allowed little real opportunity for the feminist leaders to think through the new situation. What should be their next step? Up to 1914 the movement had been, in effect, held together by concentration on the franchise; now it seemed logical to try to realise the broader goals of feminism. But feminists found themselves in a dilemma often faced by successful radical movements in British history. In the aftermath of a victory the forces of reform were easily dissipated unless some alternative means could be found to rally support and thus maintain the momentum. The reform of 1918 certainly invites comparison with the 1867 Reform Act. Both were illogical measures, sustained at the time by a certain ephemeral political rationale, which positively invited further legislation. Thus by 1884 the householder and lodger franchises had been extended from boroughs to counties. Similarly after 1918 the anomaly of the 30-year age limit provided one clear target to aim at. Yet it was insufficient as the basis for a great campaign. Those feminists for whom the vote was essentially symbolic grew complacent, thinking the struggle for women's emancipation effectively over but for the details. But many recognised that the immediate question was whether to concentrate on achieving equal suffrage or to widen the range of demands. The latter was naturally attractive both because it was more likely to inject fresh enthusiasm and because, in view of the 8 million new women voters, it