

Militancy shines on the big screen, but democratic tactics actually won British women the vote

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By Democratic Audit UK

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Dawn Langan Teele writes that although the recent film *Suffragette* bucks the elite perspective of the suffrage movement, any film which focusses exclusively on the militant wing ignores the key role played by the tens of thousands of non-militant suffragists. Her recent research focusses specifically on the alliance between the nascent Labour Party and the Liberal wing of the suffrage movement which was central to securing women's inclusion in the 1918 Representation of the People Act.



In 2018 Great Britain will celebrate one hundred years with women on the electoral registers.* The struggle for the vote was long – spanning more than five decades – and the movement, though officially contested by large anti-suffrage forces, grew to encompass women from many walks of life. In spite of this diversity, some strains of history have focused overmuch on the actions taken by the leaders of the suffrage movement: women who were often, though not always, aristocratic or bourgeois.

Bucking the elite perspective, the recent film *Suffragette*, directed by Sarah Gavron, casts much needed light on the role played by working women in the suffrage movement. Focusing on the mobilisation of laundry workers in London's East End into Emmeline Pankhurst's *Women's Social and Political Union*, the film nicely depicts the personal risks confronted by working women who joined the movement. Without resources to pay legal fees, post bail, or provide for the next meal, poor women who joined in the fight deserve our remembrance.

Nevertheless, the film – and any story that focuses solely on the militant wing of the movement – forgets that the militant “suffragettes” were not the only ones that mobilised for the vote. Nor were they the most numerous: the non-militant “suffragists”, with their 53,000 supporters spread over 480 branches across United Kingdom, dwarfed the militant movement by ten fold. More importantly, in my research on the women's suffrage movement, I find that it was the suffragists, and not the militant suffragettes, who brought victory to the cause.

Ordinary Democratization: the Electoral Strategy that Won British Women the Vote documents how a curious alliance between the nascent Labour Party and the Liberal wing of the suffrage movement led to women's inclusion in the 1918 Representation of the People Act. The suffragists I study were members of the *National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies*, famously led by Liberal feminist Millicent Garrett Fawcett. By 1912 members of the National Union had grown frustrated with the inefficacy of rallies and leafleting campaigns. After several private members' bills for suffrage failed to gain the government's attention, they decided to try a new tack.

Under the leadership of the brilliant young activist Catherine Marshall, the National Union convinced the Labour Party take suffrage on its platform. In exchange for Labour's commitment, the suffragists gave Labour access to ground forces and its deep coffers, allowing Labour to challenge the Liberal party in off-cycle electoral contests. To Arthur Henderson of the (then) Parliamentary Labour Party, Marshall wrote "We are prepared further to contribute largely towards the expense of contests against our more formidable Liberal opponents". Labour, whose economic position was limited by its members' class position, and whose geographical reach had been severely limited by a pact with the Liberal party, used the alliance and the resources it provided to begin to strike out on its own.

The key insight that emerges from my archival research into the Election Fighting Fund, as the alliance between Labour and the Liberal ladies was called, is that the suffragists tried to extract a credible commitment from the Labour party that would cement the party's loyalty even as political tides shifted. Although Labour was not a pivotal group in the pre-war WWI Parliament, with such a commitment any change in circumstances that elevated the status of the party would increase likelihood that votes for women would become a reality.

Several social historians have pointed out that women's enfranchisement in many countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands, coincided closely with the end of the First World War. The two issues are linked, it is claimed, because women's wartime participation moved public opinion toward a favorable position on women's suffrage. The close timing of the war's end and women's suffrage in the U.K. and elsewhere is undeniable. And it must be conceded that politicians and suffragists alike used women's efforts in the war – from charity and relief work, to filling jobs vacated by soldiers in munitions factories – as a justification for why women deserved the vote at the war's end.

But it is important to understand that suffrage activists in several other contexts had tried to justify electoral reform based on women's wartime participation to no avail. American women after the Civil War, British women after the Boar War, and French women after WWI each used the same justification but were denied the vote. (And women won the vote in several neutral countries, where wartime participation could not function as an argument.) What mattered in 1917 in the U.K. was not a massive change in public opinion ushered by the war but rather a change in political circumstances that brought Labour into a position of power for the first time.

Indeed, in the U.K. several private member bills for women's suffrage *passed* the House of Commons before the war erupted in 1914. Given the nature of parliamentary lawmaking in the U.K., what was needed for the bill to become law was not a massive shift in public opinion, but instead a government initiative for reform. This initiative could only come if the government itself had an incentive to change the law.

The wartime coalition government ran right into such an incentive after Arthur Henderson, a Labour leader, was appointed to the coalition cabinet. Henderson was the very first Labour representative to ever have a government title. Key for our story is that Henderson was a central architect of the Election Fighting Fund. Once the issue of a general electoral reform began to be discussed (because without such a change soldiers returning from war would not be able to register), Henderson ramped up his efforts to include women's votes on the measure.

Henderson's early and persistent lobbying prior to the 1916 Speaker's Conference on electoral reform, and his threatened resignation if women were not included, are critical for understanding how women's suffrage made its way into the 1918 Representation of the People Act. The stance he took reflected the relationship he had formed with the Liberal suffragists under the unique alliance of the Election Fighting Fund.

The story of Marshall, Henderson, and the Election Fighting Fund is both interesting and worth telling, not only in print but also in film. But moviegoers are fickle and probably more interested in watching windows break and houses burn than in the backroom strategizing of the mainstream suffragists. Yet even if militancy shines on the big screens, it is worth remembering it was ordinary tactics that won British women the vote.

*Women in the Isle of Man, which is run by the Tynwald, an independent government, could vote as early as 1881.

Note: This blog represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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