

Cause and Effect: Advancements and Setbacks of the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1900-1918

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Introduction

'Some persons ask, "Why do women want the vote? What good will it do them?" It will do women the same good that it has done for men. But it will do more. It will put them politically on an equality with men' ('Representation of the People', 6 May 1913). The first part of the 20th century was a noteworthy period for the women's rights movement. This is when the fight for female suffrage reached its peak. With some suffragists feeling they had exhausted all other options, they turned to militancy to get results. This eventually led to breaking windows, arson and bombings. The militants eventually came to be known as the 'suffragettes' and their newly adopted actions gained copious amounts of media coverage for the Women's Suffrage movement. However, not everyone appreciated this use of extra force from the suffragettes and they often left their cause looking more negative than before. In this paper, with a focus on the Women's Social and Political Union, I will argue that despite contributing to the creation of a negative view of the women's suffrage movement, the militant efforts weren't entirely misguided as the suffragettes still aided the movement in the end by restarting the discussion on female suffrage. In this paper, I will go over some historical background to create context for the analysis portion. Following this, I will go over which sources I have used, why I have used them and how they are relevant for the subject I am examining. Finally, I will do an analysis of why the WSUP chose to adopt militancy and which effects this approach had on the view of the women's suffrage movement.

History of women's suffrage, 1900-1918

The fight for the women's suffrage is one that spans over several decades, starting in the middle of the 19th century. It involved multiple strategies, employed by the suffragists to gain women the right to vote. Over time multiple organisations were formed to advocate for women's suffrage in the UK. The

biggest and most influential of these included The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, NUWSS, and The Women's Social and Political Union, WSUP. NUWSS, which was formed in 1897 by uniting various pre-existing suffrage societies, wanted to gain suffrage through peaceful and legal means, 'such as bringing petitions and Bills to parliament, and distributing literature for their Cause' (Myers).

The WSUP eventually came to be associated with militant approaches in the fight for suffrage. However, 'Initially it was involved in educational work, campaigning at trade union meetings and organising marches' (Monaghan 69). To spread the word of the suffrage movement, the WSUP used various forms of propaganda tactics in their campaign. Some of these involved the distribution of pamphlets and the sale of trinkets made with Suffrage colours- and messages sold by 'Votes for Women' shops that came to be situated several places in the country (Mercer 294, 'Shopping for Suffrage'). After having exhausted other peaceful tactics to get results, the WSUP came to adopt militancy to call attention to their cause under the slogan 'Deeds not Words' (Myers). According to Rachel Monaghan these acts of militancy consisted of: '... disruption of political meetings, heckling of politicians, clashes with the police, attempts to enter the House of Commons, seeking arrest, refusal to pay fines' (Monaghan 71) and eventually even more drastic measures: '... "militancy" came to describe attacks on public buildings, arson campaigns and bombings' (Monaghan 68).

The efforts of the suffrage movement managed to grab the attention of the media as expressed in Katherine E. Kelly's article on the Suffrage movement's relationship the media: '... suffragettes and their constitutionalist counterparts wove themselves into the visual fabric of the metropolis' (Kelly 329). The suffragettes also created their own newspapers to put a sympathetic spin on their acts of militancy, one of these were *Votes for Women*: 'The heroic and martyr elements of the Union's campaign were amplified in this coverage, so offering a sympathetic representation of the militants and inspiring further militancy among suffragettes' (Mercer 474, 'Media and Militancy').

The campaigning of the Suffrage movement was interrupted in 1914 with the outbreak of the first World War, when their attention was drawn towards helping in the war efforts, 'the NUWSS suffered greatly from the war, dividing its ranks into the majority (under Fawcett) who dropped their work for women's suffrage to support the war effort ... WSPU, in the meantime, dropped nearly all of its suffrage work, focusing completely on the war' (Myers). The strategies of the Suffrage movement were plentiful and had different effects on the opinion of Britain.

Methodology

I have chosen to focus mainly on the period from 1900 to 1918, when the militant suffragettes were most active, as this is the period most relevant to examine the methods employed by the suffragettes and the following effects and responses to these methods. To answer this question, I will use various sources to attain general background information on the subject and create an overall picture of the progress of the suffrage movement during this period of time. I will use an article from *The Independent* to form general knowledge of the suffrage movement and different organisation involved. To establish further explanation of the militant Women's Social and Political Union, I will use journal articles that goes in depth with their approaches to the campaign. These journal articles consist of: one focusing on the militant campaign as a whole; another that investigates 'Votes for Women' shops and propaganda; and a third that focuses on the suffragettes and their relationship with the media. I will use a speech by Christabel Pankhurst to give insight into the motives behind the militant campaign. I will use records from parliament to illustrate when the debate on women's suffrage was most prominent and when it wasn't. By further use of these records, I will compare House of Commons debate excerpts from different years to show how political opinion of the suffrage movement evolved through this period of time. The first debate from 1904 will establish the political opinion in the beginning of the century, the second from the 5th and 6th of May in 1913 will show opinion before World War 1 and the third from 1916 will show how opinion changed during the war, Based on these sources, I will do an actor-oriented analysis focusing mainly on The Women's Social and Political Union and the outcome of their campaign for equal suffrage for women. To support this analysis, I have chosen to use statements from this time period to give an impression of the contemporary opinion and its development.

Cause and effect: Analysis of the militant campaign

In the beginning of the 20th century the debate on women's suffrage was at a standstill and hardly any progress had been made on the matter in Britain, even though suffragists had campaigned for the vote for almost four decades. When looking at records from the House of Commons from the beginning of the 20th century ('Find References - Women's Suffrage'), the subject of women's suffrage was barely being discussed and when it was it consisted of a lot of recurring arguments and statements. This eventually always resulted in the motion for further female suffrage being denied, despite some members of the House arguing for it. A concern shared by the majority of the House of Commons was whether women could handle the responsibility of suffrage, which can be seen in this quote by Mr. William Redmond: '... women were by instinct, nature, and everything else, unfitted to exercise

the rights of citizenship, and that they ought not for a moment to be placed upon terms of anything like equality with men' ('Women's Disabilities'). So, despite the efforts of many Suffragist, hardly any progress had been made for their cause over the past 40 years. Opinion didn't shift much, as is evident in Mr. Cremer's frustration of the repetitive nature of the suffrage debates 'It was about eighteen years ago since he listened to the first debate on this question; he had listened to every debate on the subject since; and he had heard the same kind of arguments used again and again' ('Women's Disability').

Suffragist had tried to gain the politicians' favour through legal and peaceful means and despite their cause being discussed in parliament on several occasions, these efforts didn't seem to have enough of an impact. While some members of the suffrage movement wanted to keep at their old campaign tactics, others, most notably the members of the WSUP, had grown frustrated and decided new measures had to be adopted. While the WSUP still used peaceful means of advertising such as the distribution of literature on their cause and sales of merchandise in their 'Votes for Women' shops, they decided to adopt more radical and disruptive methods to grab the attention of the public eye. Christabel Pankhurst explained why the WSUP felt that militancy came to be a necessary tool in their campaign in this quote from a speech in 1908: 'The reason of this failure is that women have not been able to bring pressure to bear upon the government and government moves only in response to pressure. Men got the vote, not by persuading but by alarming the legislators. Similar vigorous measures must be adopted by women' (Pankhurst). These words depict the frustration the Suffragettes felt with the absence of real progress and explains why they felt the next step was militant action. This use of militancy worked to some extent as the suffragettes gained attention from the media and thereby managed to be a constant image in the everyday lives of the public, 'Visibility became the cornerstone of their representational strategy, a strategy that shifted in response to the political fortunes of various franchise bills' (Kelly 329). Their militancy also captured the attention of the politicians whose opinions they were trying to sway. Therefore, even though these militant tactics didn't bring women immediate suffrage, it did bring their cause publicity and an increase in the political discussion of women's suffrage, as can be seen in records from Parliament (Find References - Women's Suffrage'). The members of the WSUP forced the public to acknowledge their cause by creating a constant nuisance in their daily lives. In the following years the women's suffrage question was discussed more frequently in the House of Commons and in 1913 the politicians brought 'The Representation of the People's Bill' into question with the focus on women's suffrage. However, these militant measures didn't always gain positive responses for the Suffrage Movement but was often met with outrage and even put into question women's ability to handle the responsibility of suffrage. The militant actions did make the

House of Commons discuss the question of women's suffrage, but many members found it difficult to be in favour when contemplating the suffragettes' disregard for law and order. This is evident in this quote by one member of the House: 'The militants have been no friends of the suffrage cause' ('Representation Of The People', 5 May 1913). This sentiment was also evident in members of other non-militant suffrage societies who felt the suffragettes gave their cause a bad name: 'Militancy was originally supported by Mrs. Fawcett [president of NUWSS], but as the nature and level of violence increased, the NUWSS eventually passed a resolution in 1909, which "strongly condemns the use of violence in political propaganda"' (Monaghan 68). The militant strategies had both positive and negative consequences for the suffrage movement, as it managed to get them an outlet for their cause but also painted an image of women that many didn't want to support with the right to vote.

Members of the House of Commons claimed that they had discussed women's suffrage thoroughly before and that the surge of militant activity didn't affect their decision to bring up the question of women's suffrage once more ('Representation Of The People' 5 May 1913). However, something must have caused the House of Commons to bring the motion back for further discussion after half a century of peaceful measures by the Suffragists without results. One member of the House, Mr. Harold Cawley, made this statement: '... if we are going to vote against this measure now and vote against it until militant operations cease, we are going to condemn ourselves to vote against it for ever. The question is, Are we prepared to go on doing that? For my part I am not' ('Representation Of The People', 6 May 1913). Therefore, according to some of the members of the House the militants apparently did put pressure on the politicians. The new visibility of the suffragettes was bound to affect the political course of Britain with the disturbances they caused. Even if it wasn't a positive way to stay visible, it kept the suffrage movement fresh in people's mind. It affected both the general population and the politicians who had to deal with the spectacle of illegal activities. Eventually, the suffragettes' militancy made some members of the House see that changes needed to be made to keep the peace.

Nevertheless, these changes wouldn't come for another five years. Shortly after the 'Representation of the People'-debate in 1913, World War 1 broke out and members of the suffrage movement focused their attention on helping in the war effort. This pause in suffrage activities didn't hurt their cause, as their work during World War 1 wasn't wasted on public and political opinion and shed a new light on women and their capabilities. Precisely this is touched upon in a House of Commons discussion on 'Special Register' in 1916, '... soldiers and sailors should have votes because they are brave men, but where a very large part of the House of Commons and the country would feel that exactly the same argument shows that women should have votes because they have been brave

women' ('Special Registree Bill'). Women's effort in the war shed a whole new light on what they could do for their country. It can be discussed what eventually won women the right to vote, but it can't be denied that the militant actions of the suffragettes played a huge part in revitalising the debate for women's right to vote. In the end, whether it was the tireless effort of peaceful lobbying, the use of militancy or the war efforts, it all affected the fight for women's suffrage and it all played a part in the eventual outcome in 1918 and 1928.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the cause of the WSUP's change in attitude emerged from frustration over the lack of results for almost half a century. The suffragettes thought it necessary to show that they were serious and felt the best way to do this through militancy, something that had been used previously by many other male-led movements. These strategies didn't always produce the best outcome for the reputation of the suffrage movement, causing some to be left with the impression that they didn't deserve suffrage based on violence. Although the Suffragettes' methods didn't always create an ideal outcome for the movement as a whole, their militant prominence speeded up the progress which had previously almost completely halted. The radical approaches undeniably played a part in the eventual outcome of decades of work for the right to vote. The spectacle the suffragettes caused, and the media coverage they got, forced the politicians as well as the public to consider what they had to say. Then, through war efforts during World War 1 women got to prove what they had to offer and that they deserved the right to have a say in the politics of their country. The various efforts of the suffragists and suffragettes called for the attention of the people to give women a voice and see them as citizens on equal footing with their husbands, brothers and fathers. Eventually the fight for female suffrage lead to the debate of 'Representation of the People Bill', which lead to women getting the vote in 1918 and full female suffrage in 1928.

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