‘A SYMBOL AND A KEY’
The suffrage movement in Britain, 1918–1928

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When we strove with most passion for the vote, we sought it not for itself only, but as a symbol and a key.'

INTRODUCTION

In February 1920, the first issue of a journal The Woman’s Leader was published. The paper was the successor to The Common Cause although it was not the official organ of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), the renamed and reconstructed National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). The leader in this first issue, under the title ‘The Woman’s Leader and the Task before It’, looked back at the years 1900–1914 when the whole of the women’s movement was concerned with the ‘breaking down of one especial barrier’, a barrier so powerful that the movement became ‘a strong and at moments a torrential stream’ which had in the end loosened that barrier. The concentrated effort required to break down the barrier against the women’s parliamentary vote meant that the movement had flowed in those years in a single channel, but, the leader asserted: ‘Now, again, the women’s movement is a double stream.’ The first of these two main streams, ‘which sometimes flow separately and often intermingle’, was ‘an effort to break down barriers, the other an effort to expand into fresh life’. The first stream included ‘the struggle for the vote’ and ‘the struggle for equal opportunities in the professions and in industry’; to the second belonged the ‘development of women’s education, of women’s citizenship, and of women’s work’. The challenge now was to ensure that women working in different ways ‘did not lose sight of one another’. The writer of the article also identified a new generation of young women with a different perspective whom the paper intended to help, not only in ‘making their own lives, but in doing good service to their country and to humanity’.

Contained within this article were the principal strands of thought and
activity in the continued suffrage movement in the 1920s: the pressure for equality in a male-dominated world of work, and a redefinition of the public sphere now that women were officially recognised as part of that world. (These two strands would be referred to as 'New' and 'Old' Feminism later in the decade.) There was no sense that the struggle was over, but a distinct perception that the nature of the struggle would change.

Suffragists were fully aware of the way that the struggle for the vote, suffragism, had eclipsed the other aspirations of the women’s movement before 1918. They were also aware of the problems that might occur once this central focus had been at least partially removed. Articles in The Freewoman just before the war had criticised the suffrage movement for its emphasis on the vote which, it was argued, had restricted the scope of analysis of the oppression of women and prescriptions for change. Yet if we read the words of suffragists it is apparent that for them the vote was so profoundly associated with the oppression of women that it was impossible to speak of one without the other. As Sandra Holton has cogently expressed it: ‘votes for women carried a psychological, ideological and cultural significance that went well beyond its formal political meaning, or practical utility.’ The achievement of enfranchisement in principle had momentous symbolic meaning; it also released the energies of women in other directions. In a reflective and discerning article in March 1920, The Woman’s Leader took a long-term view of the history of women on a world scale, concluding that the oppression of women had been ‘modified very little’ since ‘the dawn of history’. Turning to ‘this particular country’, the writer asserted: ‘the possession of the vote . . . is a finer weapon than we have ever possessed; even before we actually held it in our hands we were made to feel its power, and at the moment our consciousness of that power is almost overwhelming.’ Yet she also maintained that the ‘triumphous and outstanding victory’ of the suffrage ‘carries with it a peculiar danger of its own . . . It compelled us to concentrate all our force, all our hope, all our enthusiasm, upon a single, narrow front. It immensely simplified the women’s movement.’ Suffragists during this intense period, she argued, had not had to make any ‘effort of thought beyond that which was necessary to secure the best possible straightforward campaign’. As a result it seemed to such women — and she reckoned they would be the younger ones who had known no other period of suffrage activity — ‘it seemed the battle had been won. It hadn’t, of course, it was only the immediate objective that had been won; a brilliant strategic position.’ Now suffragists had to make choices as to where to put their energies, and two dangers loomed. The first was that ‘the fighting forces of the women’s movement may fail, owing to the vastness and diversity of their front, to see that front as a whole: the danger that a section may become isolated and in its isolation make a separate peace’. The second danger was greater: ‘that this precious weapon of the franchise, upon whose organisation so many years of concentrated force may have been spent, may lose its significance’.

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Did the suffrage movement in the 1920s fall victim to these perils? Some historians have described the interwar women’s movement in terms which would suggest that it did. Susan Kingsley Kent has contended that while the ‘legal barriers excluding women from public life were being dismantled, the institutional practices enforcing separate spheres came to be replaced by psychological ones’. Hilda Kean has described ‘feminist groups’ in the 1920s as ‘small and completely separate from each other’, and Martin Pugh has taken a lofty view, cautioning against making judgements concerning the impact of women’s enfranchisement too soon, but using terms such as ‘stagnation’, ‘loss of momentum’ and ‘organisational diaspora’. In contrast, Cheryl Law, Clare Eustance and Maggie Morgan have studied the ‘diaspora’ and have found women’s organisations to be both thriving and collaborative.

Each of these historians offers a different perspective on the women’s movement of the 1920s: their words echo those of contemporary voices which will be heard in this chapter. We can hear Susan Kingsley Kent in Cicely Hamilton; Cheryl Law in Winifred Holtby; Martin Pugh in Ray Strachey; Maggie Morgan in Margery Corbett Ashby. Here I will tell another story of postwar suffrage. I will place the viewpoints of a number of active feminists in the context of the landscape drawn by these historians. These are the women whose voices you will hear. Ray Strachey, who was born in 1887, was primarily committed after the war to the achievement of equality in employment for women, and was active in the NUSEC and the London Society for Women’s Service. (She was probably the author of The Woman’s Leader article quoted above, judging from her review of Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s history of the suffrage movement from 1911–1918 published by the paper a week later.) Helena Swanwick (born 1869) was the first editor of The Common Cause: during and after the war she devoted her time to organisations concerned with peace. Eleanor Rathbone (born 1872) had also been a leading member of the NUWSS before the war and was to become President of the NUSEC when Millicent Garrett Fawcett retired from that post in 1919. She worked closely in the twenties with Eva Hubback (born 1886), NUSEC’s parliamentary secretary. Cicely Hamilton (born 1872) had been a suffragette and active in the Women’s Freedom League: after the war she was a widely published writer and journalist. She and Margaret Rhondda (born 1883) had also been active members of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) and after the war were founder members of the Six Point Group. Rhondda financed Time & Tide, which was launched in March 1920. Margery Corbett Ashby (born 1882) had like Ray Strachey combined political activism with motherhood, and was President of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in the 1920s. The voices of a new generation of feminists will also be heard: Vera Brittain (born 1896), Winifred Holtby (born 1898) and Naomi Mitchison (born 1897), all three of them politically active novelists and journalists. Naomi Mitchison’s voice will be heard in correspondence with her aunt, Elizabeth Haldane (born 1862), who was also
a writer and had been active before and during the war in a variety of voluntary projects, including suffrage.

THE IMPACT OF WAR

The First World War did not destroy the suffrage movement. The general expectation that the war would be short led to a pause in suffrage activities in the last months of 1914 and in 1915, but 1916 saw a resurgence of activity and the establishment of a consultative committee of twenty-three suffrage societies in March of that year. The inclusion of women in the Representation of the People Act which was passed in February 1918 was, Cheryl Law has argued convincingly, the result of the ‘continuation of suffrage and women’s rights activities throughout the Great War’. Nevertheless, the widespread movement involving thousands of women did to some extent disperse, and for many activists the war replaced the suffrage as the central focus of their thought and effort. This was especially the case for women who brought the women’s peace movement into existence, and for those who worked as volunteers, civil servants, doctors, nurses, on the land and in the armed services. For many suffragists the peace movement became the central focus of their activities. For one of these, Helena Swanwick, the drive to dedicate herself to peace was as compelling as her sense when she joined the suffrage movement that ‘I could do no other’, but whereas in suffrage there had been ‘unquenchable hope and buoyant comradeship, there was now a rending pity, a horror of black darkness, and in my brain, almost physically audible at times and never ceasing, something like a monotonous bell for ever tolling: “Wicked! Wicked! Wickedly silly! Cruel! Silly! Silly! Silly!”’ When the war ended she was unable to celebrate: ‘I seemed to be crying all the time inside, and I had to hold myself tight.’ Enfranchisement did not lift this pall for her: ‘though, of course, I used my vote, it was with no hope and no rejoicing.’ In 1918, Cicely Hamilton was working in a hospital near the Western Front: ‘At the moment of official enfranchisement . . . I didn’t care a button for my vote; and, rightly or wrongly, I have always imagined that the government gave it me in much the same mood as I received it.’

Given the destructiveness of war, and the changes in the structure of women’s lives during wartime, it is not surprising that there followed a period of conservatism in the literal meaning of that word. The threat that war posed to the lives of men and women and to the social structures led to an intensification of pronatalist anxieties, and a widespread determination to ‘reconstruct’ society after the war. Although the ideology of reconstruction was to some extent informed by a desire to return to an ideal of prewar stability informed by nostalgia, it was also and at the same time an aspiration for change. As Margaret Rhondda wrote in her autobiography of the postwar period:
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We found ourselves in an utterly changed world . . . We could not, even had we wished, join this new, comparatively sane world on the jagged edges of the one that had broken off five years before – this new one was quite a different place. The war had broken down the barriers and customs and conventions. It had left us curiously free. 13

There was uncertainty about what the changes could and should be. Naomi Mitchison, who was twenty-one when the war ended, wrote to her aunt, Elizabeth Haldane:

You have still a balance for your life: all that incredible pre-war period when things seemed in the main still settled, just moving solidly and calmly like a glacier towards all sorts of progress. But we have had the bottom of things knocked out completely, we have been sent reeling into chaos. 14

The sense Mitchison expresses of the war creating a lacuna between generations of women may well be significant in the dispersal of feminists in the period after the war. All women experienced the war, but there appears in the writings of the younger generation an assumption that their own experience was categorically different. Mitchison’s correspondence with Elizabeth Haldane, that between Margaret Rhondda and Winifred Holtby, that between Ray Strachey and her daughter Barbara, bear witness to different generations of women struggling to understand each other. There is an awareness of different experiences, a sense of separation which often seemed to be rooted in the war. An acute awareness of the legacy of the older generation is captured in a letter from Vera Brittain to Evelyn Sharp:

You have always fought so bravely for all the things I care for most, that at times I felt almost moved to tears by the thought of how much my generation owed to the fighters of yours, and how little gratitude we generally show for it. 15

The younger generation of feminists recognised the valour of those who had campaigned for the vote over so many years, but they also asserted their own desires, their own responsibilities which could be different in a different historical context. Naomi Mitchison wrote to her aunt:

we have to learn to try and make a world for ourselves, basing it as far as possible on love and awareness, mental and bodily because it seems to us that all the repression and formulae, all the cutting off of part of experience, which perhaps looked sensible and even right in those calm years, have not worked. 16

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There is a hint in these words of the influence of the ideas of psychoanalysis, or those sexologists whose ideology has been seen as so destructive of feminism by Sheila Jeffreys and Susan Kingsley Kent. Jeffreys has argued that ‘feminist theory was undermined by the creation of a new prescription of correct female and male sexual behaviour with all the authority of science’. Kingsley Kent focuses specifically on the part played by the First World War:

War became, in many accounts, a metaphor for gender and sexual relations. The resolution of conflict through mutual, pleasurable sexual experiences within marriage was regarded by many sexologists and sex reformers as a means of reducing the threat of war by removing the sexual repressions and tensions that, as they often implied and sometimes asserted outright, helped to bring it about. This is a seductive story. Many women’s lives in the interwar period bear witness to the desire for peaceful, productive lives which included a satisfying sexual relationship with a man. The losses associated with war contributed to the intensity of this desire. The increasing emphasis on sexuality and the use of the concept of frigidity in such a way as to undermine the confidence of the spinster is well documented. But this process was not dependent on the war: sexology, as Jeffreys attests, was developing before the war. Moreover, it is only one story. The lives and writings of other women demonstrate resistance to pressures on them to conform. I will argue later in this chapter that the desire for independence was for feminists in the twenties as significant as and more durable than the desire to appease.

A STRIP OF PAVEMENT OVER THE ABYSS

Kent’s argument about the impact of war is based on the presumption that the demand for the vote as expressed in the pre-war movement represented a radical critique of the gender system. This is only one way of looking at an immensely varied and complex movement. The complexity and the extent of the suffragist demands became more apparent after partial enfranchisement. Kent’s depiction of the feminist movement of the twenties as ‘circumscribed’, and characterised by an obsession with ‘maternity and motherhood’ and a ‘nervous hesitation between “equality” and “difference”’, so that it lacked the ability to ‘exist and operate effectively’ fails to recognise both the way the demand for the vote had simplified an intricate web of feminist demands, and the particular political context in which suffragists were living and campaigning in the 1920s.

In her autobiography Cicely Hamilton was to describe the postwar years as ‘years of reaction, often savage and insensate, against the discipline and
over-close union that the period of war had imposed on us; the years of disillusion and hope falsified'. Hamilton's sense of disillusionment is one that was not, of course, peculiar to feminists. The First World War undermined the confidence in Western civilisation of people throughout Europe: the image of life as a 'strip of pavement over the abyss' which Virginia Woolf used in her diary at the end of 1920, catches the sense of precariousness which is apparent in the thinking and writing of many at the time. It seemed that women had achieved a foothold in parliamentary politics just when that structure was ceasing to inspire confidence. On 25 June 1920 a leading article in The Woman's Leader was entitled: 'Is the End of Parliamentary Government at Hand?'

The sombre tone of articles in The Woman's Leader in 1920 reflects the sobering experience of the suffrage movement in the two years which had passed since the Representation of the People Act had granted limited female suffrage. The Act had rapidly been followed by an election in which only one woman candidate, Constance Markiewicz, was successful: she had gained a seat for Sinn Fein that she had never had any intention of taking. The 1919 Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act led to the rapid expulsion of women from jobs and, in the Civil Service, the demotion of women in order to reserve the better-paid posts for men. Lady Rhondda, President of the Women's Industrial League, who led a deputation to the Prime Minister in protest, pointed out that the women civil servants were better trained and more efficient than the men who were replacing them, and that many were widows with families to support. Unsatisfied with the efforts of existing feminist organisations, Rhondda joined with others to form the Six Point Group in February 1921. The manifesto of the new group referred to 'a period of stagnation' which had followed partial enfranchisement, and urged women 'to use their newly won power with energy and vigour to achieve a set of overdue reforms'.

There was a crucial enmeshing of anxieties over the postwar economic instability with the uneasiness about women's newly established place in the political world. Billie Melman's study of the discourse on women in the Rothermere Press provides an astute analysis of this process. The terms in which the Daily Mail had welcomed the prospect of women's partial enfranchisement on 26 November 1918 are revealing:

The need for association of women in the deliberation and government of the national affairs was never greater than now... The protective instinct of women is equally at enmity with all those disruptive and destructive tendencies which may seek to introduce a new social order.

Women were thus expected to prevent disruption and destruction: it is not surprising then, that when political instability occurred, this was also seen as

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the responsibility of women. It was young women who bore the political
brunt of the resulting hostility in the paper’s opposition to the enfranchise-
ment of the ‘flapper’, but the source of the anxiety which emerges most
forcefully in the early 1920s, is the numerical imbalance between the sexes.
As the demobilisation of four million men took place, so women active in the
public economic sphere were seen by the Daily Mail as a threat to men:

The human race is going through an evolutionary process which
some hundred years ago or more was taken by that highly organised
society of hive-bees. Mankind is going to move towards a state in
which there will be a small proportion of mother-women to maintain
the race, and a host of male drones. They will be supported by the
labour of an immense number of sterile female workers. Men will
be utterly ousted.25

The reference to ‘sterile women’ was part of the particular hostility to the
spinster which was such a visible feature of the interwar years. This hostility
was intensified by the disquiet arising from knowledge of the way war had
physically mutilated and psychologically damaged many men. In contrast to
the deformed male, young women were described as fit, muscular, verging
on the androgynous and threateningly confident. The ‘unnatural’ appearance
of such women was seen to be the cause of infertility: ‘this change to a more
neutral type . . . can be accomplished only at the expense of the integrity of
her sexual organs’.26 Young women were described as refusing to ‘undertake
the proper and natural employment’ that was awaiting them.27 Their unnat-
ural employment was seen to be threatening men’s employment and their
masculinity.

In the mid-1920s, the conflict which came to a head in the General Strike
of 1926 shifted the focus of the right-wing press from gender to class. The
hostility to younger women again surfaced in the period from April 1927 to
the autumn of 1928 as the threat of woman’s full enfranchisement and thus
her numerical supremacy in the electorate became a reality. The headlines of
the Daily Mail on 16 June 1928 read:

Flapper Issue Resumed
Election Swamped by Women
Conservative Alarm at Flapper Vote Results
Men Outnumbered Everywhere28

The potential threat from women was enmeshed with the threat of socialism.
The two threats to the status quo were brought together by Marion Phillips in
her editorial for the May 1929 issue of Labour Woman in a powerful exten-
sion of the discourse of women as conservers of the race. She wrote of the
new woman voter in the election of 1929:

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You can, as I say, call her a flapper if you want to be petty and stupid. I should prefer to call her the ruler of our destinies, for that is what she is today. In her small, strong hands rests the future of us all. She is, this new citizen of ours, the arbiter of fate in the coming General Election.39

LOSING SIGHT OF ONE ANOTHER

The increasing diversity of images of women to be found in this period provides an antidote to the tendency in the nineteenth century to place women in one category under the umbrella title ‘the woman question’. Sandra Holton has argued persuasively that within an agreed framework, prewar suffragists put forward largely unexamined claims for the vote ranging from those based on essentialist views of women, to those which were deliberately humanist.30 I will argue here that the different bases for claims were to become crucial when women were choosing where to put their energies, or advocating priorities in public policy.

After 1918 women did indeed, as Cheryl Law puts it, seek ‘to improve their lives, as wives and mothers, as workers, and by extending their scope of involvement throughout society’.31 But, as they knew, the interests of the paid woman worker did not necessarily coincide with those of wives and mothers, and extending their scope was neither simple nor easy. The two most crucial divergences of interest revolved around the issues of protective legislation and equal pay. Legislation which gave women shorter hours of work, and prevented women from doing night work and from working, for example, underground in mines or in contact with toxic paints, was seen by equalitarians as treating women as lesser beings, and in the same category as children. As one contributor to a debate in NUSEC put it, ‘the moment a woman engages in a “gainful occupation” she becomes as fragile as a humming bird’s egg’.32 Defenders of such legislation were to be found particularly among women in the labour movement who saw it as recognising women’s particular needs, but also defended it on the grounds that protection should be given to all workers, and it was better to make a start with women if that was what was politically possible.33

No suffragist argued against equal pay, but for Eleanor Rathbone, one of the most articulate of those whose views would in the mid-1920s be termed ‘New’ feminist, demands for equal pay ignored the needs of wives and mothers, and she pressed for the prior introduction of what was then known as family endowment. The campaign for the introduction of family endowment assumed that many, even most, women were dependent during the years in which they brought up children on a man’s wages. But it also challenged the idea of the family wage, the assumption that a man’s pay should include sufficient for the support of his family. The removal of this aspect of pay would make the demand for equal pay feasible and fair.34

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Susan Pedersen has demonstrated what happened to such 'difference-based' arguments when they were 'pitted against the male-breadwinner norm as an organizing vision for social policy'. The social policy initiative Pedersen examines is the introduction of the Widows', Orphans' and Old Age Contributory Pensions in 1925. The pressure groups had wanted pensions for all widows, but the Act which emerged was based on the premise that a woman's access to benefit was mediated through her husband's insurance benefit. Pedersen describes the resistance of the government and the Civil Service to any idea of a 'separate but equal' status for women, and hence the continued growth of a welfare state system which was 'profoundly gendered'.

Contemporary suffragists were aware of the limitations of the Act, but, as with suffrage, they hoped it would be a first step. Moreover, they did not have our awareness of the way social reform could mitigate against women's wider interests. Perhaps, as Susan Pedersen has said of Eleanor Rathbone, their perception of the state was naive. Rathbone tended to conflate the concepts 'community' and 'society' with 'the state'. Certainly suffragists had an optimistic faith that the gaining of political power by women would bring with it remedies to social evils. One of the roots of nineteenth-century suffrage was women's recognition of their duty and responsibility to others, especially the disadvantaged, but this did not mean that they were unable to make the distinction between social reform and feminism. Mary Stocks, who was a 'New feminist', acknowledged later that the measure for Widows' Pensions was part of a 'tide of social reform'. But the other measures achieved in the first half of the twenties were, in her view, feminist reform.

The most significant of these measures were the Married Women's (Maintenance) Act which gave women a legal claim to maintenance under a separation order; the Law of Property Act which placed husband and wife on equal footing in the inheritance of property from each other; the Matrimonial Causes Amendment Act of 1923, which allowed a wife grounds for divorce equal to those of a husband; and the Guardianship of Infants Act of 1925, which provided for equal rights between male and female guardians. These measures can be seen as social reform, but they were also concerned with equality: suffragists at the time were happy to take credit for them. Martin Pugh concludes of this 'record of legislation' that it was 'formidable', and that 'it is difficult to escape the conclusion that it is attributable to the effect of women's enfranchisement in altering the priorities of the politicians'. Pugh reckons that the range of topics covered by the legislation is partly explained by the 'redployment of efforts that had previously been focussed almost exclusively on the franchise question'. However, it is also the case that the achievement of these reforms was unopposed by all three political parties precisely because they did not challenge the prevailing and arguably strengthening ideology which saw women as primarily if not exclusively wives and mothers. Legislation for which feminists pressed which did not
get on the statute book concerned women as workers, as members of the House of Lords, as taxpayers. It was awareness of the continued resistance to equal status which led to the resignation of the majority of the executive committee of the NUSEC in 1927. Anxiety that social responsibility would become the predominant concern of the NUSEC was expressed by those who resigned. One of them – Dorothy Balfour – went further and accused her opponents of accepting the ‘theory of Equality only in so far as it will help towards the achievement of the particular Social Reforms advocated by its supporters’. 41

Eleanor Rathbone had been arguing since the achievement of partial enfranchisement that feminism was not limited to demands for equality, where equality meant ‘identity’. 42 Accusations of not being properly feminist have been levelled against her by historians: she has been described as furthering ‘those discourses which insisted upon motherhood as women’s primary and even exclusive function in life’, 43 and accused of promoting family endowment in order ‘to ensure women did not work in certain industries’. 44 I see Rathbone’s position differently. Differences in wages, she believed, were the result of ‘the arrangement’ which led the ‘male parent’ to bear ‘the cost of raising future generations’. 45 Only if that perspective was shifted by the introduction of family endowment would it be possible to argue successfully for equal pay. She was also aware of the strength and depth of resistance to any move which would make women no longer economically dependent on their husbands, which for her was the main motive behind the introduction of family endowment. 46 It was indeed partly the feminist challenge inherent in family endowment which meant that it was accepted wholeheartedly by no political party, despite the efforts of many women who were politically active between the wars.

THE POLITICAL FEVER

Cheryl Law has argued convincingly that ‘in 1919 there was an impressive network of organizations marshalled to promote and protect women’s rights during the years of reconstruction’. 47 She and Clare Eustance have also demonstrated that these organisations co-operated with each other. Nevertheless, they were not, unlike the prewar suffrage societies, agreed on a single goal. Unsurprisingly, given the broad front of the demands of the women’s movement, the number of members active in the successor bodies to the old suffrage societies dropped after 1918. One of the reasons for this was that women who were intensely interested in the practice of politics were more inclined to concentrate their activities in the political parties than the suffrage organisations after 1918. Before 1918, women’s lack of the vote, together with the distinctive appeal of the suffrage movement, gave those organisations the edge over political parties. There had been links between
suffragists and the political parties; perhaps most notably a bond had developed just before the war between the NUWSS and the Labour Party through the Election Fighting Fund (EFF) established by the former body. Although in 1920 there was an initiative by Jim Middleton, secretary of the Labour Party, to persuade suffragists who had been heavily involved in the EFF before 1914 to work for the Labour Party after the war, this was within the context of an increasingly antagonistic situation. The links between suffragists and the political parties had always been tense and in the postwar situation this tension was exacerbated by the new political potential of women as voters.

Women were vitally important to the main political parties as voters and as workers, but this did not, of course, mean that they were able to achieve power within the parties or easily become MPs. The Labour Party constitution which was drawn up in 1918 allowed for individual membership and constituency parties which gave women considerable scope for active participation. At the same time, a separate organisation for women within the party, with its own separate hierarchy, was instituted. By 1929 over 1,800 women's sections had been created with over a quarter of a million members. The women's sections and the separate Women's Conference constituted both a space for women to develop their own political agenda, and a way of marginalising women within the party. Pat Thane has described the struggle that went on within the Labour Party between men and women, making it clear that there was a fundamental division between their views, and that the reason why 'the male vision usually won' was that women's views were 'blocked by the crude exercise of male power'. By the late 1920s the Conservative Party claimed to have 4,000 women's branches with a million members: it both encouraged women's membership and controlled them in much the same way.

When it came to selecting parliamentary candidates, women were rarely chosen, the largest number before 1928 being forty-one (less than 3 per cent of the total). Even then four out of five selected stood in constituencies where there was no prospect of their being elected. There were strongly held views among women as to how this situation could be improved. Marion Phillips believed that the most effective way for women to use their vote was through existing political structures and that this implied working exclusively in those structures and alongside men. As Labour Party Women's Officer, she discouraged party members from joining suffrage societies. Women, in her view, had to be patient. The prevailing view expressed in Time & Tide was opposed to this, with increasing force as the decade progressed. In 1923 the paper had forecast that it was the 'strength of non-party women's organisations which is likely to decide the amount of interest taken by the parties in women's questions'. In 1927, the paper asserted:

One subject of vital importance to women is almost completely ignored by all parties - equal pay and equal opportunities for
women. Next to equal franchise it is, in fact, the most important question affecting women, and yet the party-woman seems hardly aware of its existence.32

This judgement demonstrated ignorance of the debates within the Labour Party but does reflect the failure of Labour women to get their demands on to the party’s agenda.

Individual women struggled throughout the decade to represent women’s interests within the political parties. Women such as Margery Corbett Ashby, who was active both in the NUSEC and the Liberal Party, were often stretched to the point of exhaustion. Corbett Ashby stood for parliament and was one among many women who experienced at first hand the difficulty women had in becoming MPs. Experience of this frustrating process was not such as to encourage many women to become politically active. Ray Strachey, however, revelled in political activities, unable to ‘shake off’ the ‘political fever’ as she put it, and was an enthusiastic candidate in 1918, 1922 and 1923. She stood as an Independent, unable to take on board the tenets of any of the political parties, and her candidature was doomed in the increasingly polarised politics of the postwar period. Another of Ray Strachey’s handicaps was that she was the mother of small children. She was accused of neglecting her children in the 1922 election campaign, and in 1924 expressed relief not to be in parliament because her hands were so full with the children. Her letters to her mother bear witness to the push and pull she experienced between the pleasures of motherhood and of political activism and writing. In 1916 she pondered in a letter to her mother whether she would ‘retire from public life when we get the vote. I hope so I’m sure, & yet, its extraordinarily interesting, & chockful of wickedness which is such fun.’ Later she wondered: ‘if I didn’t have to attend to children & house & all the other distractions, I should enjoy the snatched moments of work so much? It is obvious I could have more of them; but would they be so precious? Its impossible to tell!’33

Strachey had the means to pay other women to look after her children, and later to send them away to school, leaving her with the freedom to be a political activist and writer. It was generally true that the division of labour between the sexes in the care of children was rarely challenged during this period and there is some justice in Dyhouse’s judgement that this was at least partly because the middle classes could rely on paid labour to ‘black their stoves for them’.34 Certainly the responsibility of women for the domestic space, whether that meant working there or organising the work that took place, remained unchallenged as women continued to move into public spaces.
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INDEPENDENT CITIZENS

The drive behind middle-class women's determination to combine motherhood with work was fuelled by a combination of a desire for economic independence and a related sense that they could not fulfil their potential in the home. Eva Hubback's daughter reckoned that her mother worked because, as a widow, she had a family to support, but implies that her earnings were used to pay for 'things which made life significant for her, such as holidays and buying books'. She then adds that Eva 'needed to get outside her own home' because she disliked domestic tasks. Margery Corbett Ashby wrote to her husband and son from the USA:

I think of you both the whole time and miss you dreadfully. It seems wrong somehow to leave all the wealth of love you both shower on me and which makes me the happiest woman in the world. Yet on the other hand interesting work comes along and I am reluctant to lose the chance of seeing and learning new things from new people. I suppose like all of us I want to eat my cake and have it too.56

Liberal ideals such as economic independence and personal fulfilment crucially informed the thinking of Eleanor Rathbone. She had seen in the separation allowances paid to wives of serving men during the war the vital economic independence which women needed in order to be full human beings:

There can be no real independence, whether for men or for women, without economic independence. Few of us can realise how constantly and subtly this half-conscious, but ever-present sense of the economic dependence of the woman upon the man corrodes her personality, checks her development, and stunts her mind.57

Economic independence, Rathbone argued, conferred 'status'. But there was more to the concept of independence than economic self-sufficiency. The first step to this independence of public action was the vote, Time & Tide argued, since for suffragists 'every kind of status both social and economic rests at bottom upon the political status'. The autonomy which the economically dependent woman lacked could also be conferred on her by the vote. The rallying cry for the 1926 campaign for equal franchise was independence, and a leader in Time & Tide, considering the gaining of the vote in 1928, used the term parasite to describe all those who were unable to make unpopular decisions, something 'which neither men nor women find easy, but until people can do that they are not complete human beings'. Ten years earlier, Rathbone had asserted that the vote would lead married women to 'recognise they have become persons -- wholly, and not fraction-
ally, as before. It will matter what they think, and it will matter enormously what they should think." 61

In a pamphlet published in 1924 the NUSEC referred to the vote as 'the key to citizenship' and demanded full franchise to enable women to enter 'into their rightful inheritance of responsible citizenship'. 62 Although the nature of women's claim to citizenship was contested, it was central to the demand for the right of women to vote. The concept of citizenship carried with it a freight of meanings at the centre of which was a relationship to the wider society: this relationship was powerfully significant for the women who supported the struggle for the vote. For some women active in philanthropy in the nineteenth century, it seemed possible fully to satisfy their desire to act as dutiful citizens in such endeavour. Philanthropy linked women's role as guardians of the family, the heart of the social order, to the public domain. Those who became suffragists felt that the lack of the vote curtailed the opportunities and the responsibilities of women as citizens. Once women had been partially enfranchised, the demands of their responsibilities as citizens could be considerable, especially where they were combined with bringing up children and with paid work.

In Eleanor Rathbone's view citizenship required effort and commitment. Her speeches as President of NUSEC are full of exhortations to women to be politically active. 63 Rathbone was responsible for the setting up of the first Women's Citizen's Association (WCA) in Liverpool in 1913. The express intention of this and subsequent associations was the fostering of a sense of citizenship in women. In 1917 it was decided to establish the WCA as a national body with local branches. Some local suffrage societies in the following year transformed themselves into WCAs, and leading suffragists expressed concern that the National Union would lose its identity or its members to the newer organisation. In 1924 the two bodies merged: it is clear that they catered for very much the same constituency of middle-class activists. Eleanor Rathbone had hoped that the WCAs would be popular places for working-class women to learn about the responsibilities and possibilities of their citizenship. 64 Working-class women, however, were in much larger numbers exercising their citizenship and developing their political consciousness in other organisations than the NUSEC, the WFL and the Six Point Group.

INCLUSIVE FEMINISM

The largest women's organisation in the twenties was the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NWFI) which reached a quarter of a million members by 1925 and did not drop below that level. The establishment of the first institute in 1915 was a radical move, both because it involved rural women, who had arguably never been organised before, and because of
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the development of a democratic and stable structure which has lasted to this
day. Maggie Morgan has argued convincingly that the Wls successfully chal-
genged the perception of many women that the political process was alien to
their lives, and turned this recognition into political activity. She offers per-
suasive evidence that the women in the NFWI ‘struggled in national political
terms and locally to improve the material circumstances of women’s lives’,
and that they ‘provided a space for women to fight the internalization of male
domination and to adopt an alternative value system’. The NUSEC recog-
nised both the appeal to women and the political potential of the institutes
when discussing the future of their own organisation after the final achieve-
ment of the vote. In 1928 members of NUSEC were encouraged to form
‘guilds’ in small towns on the same lines as the institutes which were all
based on villages. The Women’s Co-operative Guild was smaller – num-
bering some 67,000 by 1930 – but even more obviously political and femi-
nist in its demands and its outlook. The guilds spoke for the consumer, and
aimed to translate the needs and demands of married women into political
programmes and campaigns. As in the nineteenth century, many suffragists
embraced such developments, taking an inclusive perspective, seeking to
‘address the needs of as wide a body of women as possible’. Naomi
Mitchison expresses this inclusive perspective vividly in a letter to Elizabeth
Haldane. Politics, she wrote:

is dealing with people and groups of people in relation to one
another and their material environment. What is wrong with that as
a living occupation? The moral basis of politics goes down to our
deepest roots, politics means danger and beauty, conversion and
rebirth. It also means a lot of small, ordinary things – more dustbins
and bathrooms for people who haven’t got them, more leisure and
more education for people who need them desperately.

The one demand for which women from a wide variety of organisations
worked together conspicuously was equal franchise. Efforts to achieve equal
franchise were made throughout the period between the 1918 and 1928 Acts.
By 1925, repeated rebuffs had led some suffragists to be exceedingly cau-
tious in their estimates of likely success. Eva Hubback warned that ‘Equal
Franchise’ was the reform advocated by the NUSEC which was least likely to
be achieved. She noted that although Prime Minister Baldwin had committed
himself to support for ‘equal political rights’ during the election campaign at
the end of 1924, he was leading a party of which a third at least was opposed
to equal franchise. In the following year, however, equal franchise was the
most urgent demand on the agenda of the NUSEC, the Women’s Freedom
League, the Six Point Group and the Women’s International League for
Peace and Freedom. Eva Hubback and Elizabeth Macadam, secretaries to the
NUSEC, wrote a pamphlet protesting against the ‘absurd anomalies which at
present prevent three million women under the age of thirty, just because they are women, and two million above that age, because they are poor in this world's goods, from entering into their rightful inheritance of responsible citizenship'. They urged women with the vote not to become so absorbed in their own work as to forget the unenfranchised, and to campaign 'with some of the zeal and enthusiasm which characterized the long pre-war struggle for the vote'.

Some of the prewar atmosphere of the suffrage movement was re-created in the years from 1926 to 1928. On 2 July 1926, 3,500 women from over forty societies marched from the Embankment to Hyde Park while Mrs Elliot Lyn flew over the marchers in an aeroplane. Speakers addressed the crowds from fifteen platforms, demanding equal franchise. An Equal Political Rights Campaign Committee with Margaret Rhondda in the chair was set up to co-ordinate the activities of the women's organisations. On 8 March of the following year, the Prime Minister at last agreed to see a delegation from the committee. Baldwin pleaded pressure of business from more urgent matters, so the lobbying by societies intensified. A letter from Eleanor Rathbone to Eva Hubback gives a taste of the pressure that was maintained on the government and MPs by women's organisations:

Dr. Jane Walker told us she had had a letter from Major Hill (most confidential) saying he knew for certain that the Government had decided on votes at twenty-one and that we had better do nothing . . . Lady A. is worried because we are pressing for twenty-one: I reassured her that it was only on the tactical point. I surmise that possibly the government has switched round to twenty-five and is going to push that through, giving as their excuse that the Labour Party have refused the Conference, so that they are free to drop the idea of an agreed measure. The tremendous barrage in the Press in favour of twenty-five makes this probable. If it should turn out to be true, what shall we do about it? My idea is not to protest at the age, but make it perfectly clear that the one thing which concerns us is equal rights and that provided we are satisfied that the Government means business about that, the age on its merits does not concern us. If that happens, send an immediate wire saying if you have any suggestions differing from this; or telephone if you have detailed suggestions. I should get on to Rhondda at once if that happened and try to make her take the same line.

On 13 April 1927, Baldwin announced that a Bill giving votes to women at the age of 21 would be introduced in the next session. The final debate in the House of Commons a year later was something of a celebration: there were just ten votes against the Bill which became law on 2 July 1928. *Time & Tide* acknowledged that it marked 'the end of an epoch', but added:
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What about the exclusion of women from the House of Lords? What about the barring of women from the diplomatic service? What about the dismissal of women on marriage, and equal pay for equal work in the Civil Service? What about the whole body of restrictive legislation? We are a long way from equality of treatment between men and women even so far as actual legal enactments go.72

THE POWER OF WOMEN

It is perhaps too easy to forget that women did achieve a measure of power in the 1920s. And here women’s experience during the war, as well as the winning of partial enfranchisement, is significant. Clare Eustance’s exploration of the activities of the WFL during the war, leads her to conclude that they ‘created an environment where women were able to take effective power particularly in community affairs and local government. Many of the initial moves in this direction had already been made prior to August 1914, and the war had served as a catalyst, rather than a cause, of these developments.73 Leading suffragists from all strands of the movement achieved positions at least of influence and sometimes of power during the war: for example, women volunteers involved in the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Family Association, notably Eleanor Rathbone, administered the separation allowances granted to the families of serving men as agents of the War Office. Marion Phillips and Mary Macarthur were leading members of the Central Committee for Women’s Employment and it was her experience on that committee which converted Violet Markham to suffrage. The Women’s Services and the newly instituted Women’s Police were run by women.

After the war, these women continued to be active in public life and some became, in the words of Mary Stocks, ‘statutory’ women who constituted ‘a kind of stage army appearing on one government assignment after another’. Stocks wrote: ‘The country as a whole teemed with able and public-spirited women, those who sojourned in the “corridors of power” did not know who or where they were and took little trouble to find out.’74 This was undoubtedly the case, but it is fair to acknowledge that women did enter those corridors, albeit in small numbers. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 granted general legislative freedom from disqualification by gender and, although it was later severely restricted by the continued power of local authorities to dismiss married women and by protective legislation which actually increased the limitations on women’s employment opportunities, did make it possible for women to become JPs. Most of those appointed were middle-class, and the job was a voluntary one, but twelve of the original appointments were of members of the Women’s Co-operative Guild. Again, the numbers of women involved were small and by 1930 women represented only 9 per cent of existing magistrates.
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The percentage of members of parliament who were women was, of course, even smaller, not even reaching 1 per cent before 1928. Cheryl Law has pointed out that not enough attention has been paid to the activities of women in Parliament in the 1920s. What is already apparent is that they made a distinctive – and varied – mark on parliamentary life. Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat, after a by-election in 1919, was cautiously welcomed by suffragists who had assumed that the first woman MP would be ‘one of ourselves . . . a woman of tried political experience, knowledge and wisdom’, but by 1923 was commended in the pages of The Woman’s Leader as ‘doing all the work that we had dreamed that our first woman in parliament would do.’ She was followed by Margaret Wintringham who also proved to be a supporter of women’s interests. In 1923, eight women were elected, including the first four Labour women MPs. Ellen Wilkinson, who had been a suffragist, was to prove a staunch feminist in and out of parliament, but the careers of Margaret Bondfield and Susan Lawrence, who became the first women ministers, demonstrate the desire of some women to act in parliament exactly as men did.

The suffrage movement was concerned centrally to get women into Parliament. Its motives for doing so were feminist. However, not all feminist aims could be achieved through the gaining of the suffrage, although some prewar suffragists wrote and perhaps believed that they could; postwar suffragists were more realistic, whether, like Elizabeth Robins and Dora Russell, they wrote in terms of a sex war, or, like Eleanor Rathbone, concentrated on small battles. The article which opens this chapter demonstrates the knowing of the women of the period.

CONCLUSION

The activities of the interwar suffragists and feminists have been censured by historians from different angles. Susan Kingsley Kent believes that ‘“New Feminism”, by accepting the terms of the larger culture, by putting forward a politics of sexual difference, found itself severely constrained in its ability to advocate equality and justice for women.’ She mourns what she sees as the weakening in the interwar period of the prewar challenge to separate spheres of ideology. Martin Pugh, on the other hand, sees the roots of the failures of postwar feminism in the ideology of prewar feminists:

Women had capitalised effectively on the differences rather than the similarities between the sexes. Domesticity had been used as a Trojan Horse; but once inside the citadel it proved difficult to escape from the successful stratagem.

Claire Eustance and Cheryl Law give much more recognition both to the difficulties facing interwar suffragists and to their achievements. They draw

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attention to the way the sheer number of new women’s groups campaigning on specific issues which emerged in the twenties threatened the membership levels of the earlier women’s suffrage organisations. Eustance has also noted the ‘range and diversity’ of questions discussed in the WFL before the war, and looks at ‘the ways in which an environment was created which was firmly enmeshed in their understanding of the political process’. Her study crosses what has tended to be a boundary in studies of women’s suffrage: where other historians stop or begin in 1914 or 1918, she covers the period 1880–1930. She sees the period as a whole, and does not distinguish any marked change in strategy or ideology. From this perspective the twenties saw the continuation of a process which had begun before the war: women were continuing to move outwards from the suffrage issue to other campaigns, as indeed they had done since the 1860s. As Eustance points out: ‘It was a necessary process that in campaigning for their right to vote they also identified their interests and concerns in women and inequality. For many such interests did not only come out of the suffrage campaign, but had been present long before.’ She also identifies the cost of this diversity: ‘the development of a plethora of political identities among women who had seemed so united in their demands for women’s suffrage.’ Moreover, her analysis leads her to conclude that:

suffragists and feminists in the 1910s and 1920s called for and acted on perceptions of women’s unity, while at the same time acknowledging women’s diversity. Thus their attempts to change gender relations in political, economic and social life were fraught with contradictions. It is this process which provides a key to understanding how women developed their political identities in the enfranchised world.

At the beginning of this chapter I demonstrated that suffragists were well aware of the problems facing them after the partial achievement of the vote in 1918: the danger that the ‘vastness and diversity’ of the women’s movement would lead to a failure to see it as a whole. This is, perhaps, another way of describing what Eustance has identified as ‘the development of a plethora of political identities’. Certainly, the women’s movement was less circumscribed, and the dispersal of suffragists which resulted from the extension of their ability to choose the nature of their involvement in the public world makes it more difficult to write of a single movement. Whether diversity can be equated with a weakening of ‘the cause’ or its expansion is a moot point.

The second danger, that the vote ‘might lose its significance’, may also have loomed over the twenties in two senses. Women’s experience of politics in the ten years between the two Acts, while it did not necessarily lead to any lack of energy in total, took the edge off the optimism as to what could be
achieved by the vote. The hope that women’s right to equal pay and financial independence would be recognised was not realised, and the struggles to achieve equal pay and even equal franchise were frustrating and slow. Yet there is a ring of confidence, despite setbacks and continuing misogyny, and much agreement between feminists. Moreover, the nature of the changes demanded by feminists and suffragists contained within it what Carole Pateman has termed ‘Wollstonecraft’s dilemma’. They demanded full citizenship and its concomitant equality before the law, using the language of liberalism which asserted the need for independence and autonomy. But they also sought recognition of women’s difference, in particular their primary responsibility for children. In the interwar period more women came to feel that they must make a choice — at least of where they put their main efforts — between these two paths to citizenship. Pateman’s solution to the dilemma, to take as the starting point of democratic citizenship the assumption that the primary task of all citizens is to ensure the welfare of each living generation of citizens is secured, was, I would suggest, the position taken by the advocates of family endowment. The problems of developing such a proposal in practice are as intractable now as they were in the 1920s.

Suffragists in the twenties were well aware of the profoundly complex issues of gender and power which faced them and still face us. They were on the one hand determined that ‘women’s contribution to national life’ should be ‘a very distinctive contribution’ and should ‘make a very great difference’. And they were aware of the pressures which the struggle to attain this placed on the women’s movement. A member of the NUSEC wrote in 1927, when the executive was divided, of her recommendation for ‘securing unity in diversity’. The ‘various sides’ should ‘affirm . . . their own position’, but ‘refrain from denying the modicum of truth in their opponents’ positions. But do let us hold to our affirmatives [sic], and let us all be neither old nor new feminists, but just present day feminists with a glorious tradition to follow, to add to, and to hand on. 

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