

*'We owe them the vote'* by June Purvis (Published in The Guardian, 2008)

The Suffragettes struggled at great personal cost for equality - without them, the 1918 franchise act wouldn't have been passed

What was the 1918 franchise act?

Why did the WSPU believe the movement had to move away from ladylike tactics?

The campaign for the parliamentary vote for women in Britain was a long and bitter struggle that began in the mid-19th century. However, it really took off in 1903 when Emmeline Pankhurst founded the women-only Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). With the slogan, "Deeds, not words", the charismatic Emmeline, a brilliant orator, together with her eldest daughter Christabel, the key strategist of the WSPU, roused the women of Britain to abandon the ladylike tactics of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and to demand, not ask for, their democratic birth right.

Why is it seen as a birth right to vote?

Name 3 violent or militant acts that the WSPU carried out?

The Suffragettes engaged in daring and brave deeds, often putting their own lives at risk, even when engaging in peaceful demonstrations. But from 1912, more violent tactics were adopted including window-smashing raids in London's West End and the vandalising of pillar boxes. Such a change in strategy, which never endangered human life, was a response to the stubbornness of the Liberal government of the day that, over a long period of time, had debated women's suffrage bills but never passed them, and then prohibited women from protesting in public arenas.

What would militancy be helpful to the campaign? What could it do the government?

Why would women go on hunger strike for the cause? What impact would this have?

Many of the 1,000 women who were imprisoned adopted the hunger strike as a political tool, only to be forcibly fed by an unyielding government. At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the patriotic Pankhurst's called a halt to all militancy and urged their followers to take up war work as a way to win their enfranchisement. That wish was partly fulfilled when, on February 6 1918, nine months before the war ended, eight and a half million women over 30 years of age – householders, wives of householders, occupiers of property of £5 or more annual value and university graduates – were finally allowed to vote.

Why would women stop campaigning when WWI broke out?

Why would the actions of the WSPU lead to the downfall of the Liberal party who granted women the vote?

The Suffragette campaign was led by and for women who wanted not just the vote, but wider social reforms that would end women's subordinate roles in the family, education and employment, as well as the double standard of sexuality. Yet the many male historians who have written about the movement usually see it as a single-issue campaign and fail to capture the sexual dynamics of the drama.

Why would women campaign more for the vote than the wider social issues?

Of particular importance is George Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, published in 1935, which discusses the Suffragette movement as one of the forces in the downfall of the Liberal party. As the first male historian to treat the women's movement "seriously", his book was widely cited and reprinted well into the 1970s.

Why would the political elite have this view of the WSPU?

Writing from a perspective that sees the Suffragettes as a deviant and marginal aberration from the main business of male political elites, Dangerfield presents them as irrational even dangerous beings whose deeds cannot be classified as political. Mocking what he terms these "daring ladies" with their high starched collars and "corseted bosoms", he presents them as demented creatures who chose

Why would the action of the WSPU not be seen as political?

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the hardships of prison life, including forcible feeding, in a sado-masochistic way. Despite the gendered nature of Dangerfield's analysis, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* set the scene for many subsequent male historians who were unable to break free from the grip of his narrative, writing the Suffragettes out of winning the vote or diminishing their contribution.

Why could the WSPU be seen as terrorists?

As a feminist historian steeped in the primary sources of the WSPU, I have frequently challenged such masculinist accounts and got into arguments, most recently with Christopher Bearman in BBC History Magazine. As Bearman makes clear, he does not like feminists and believes that the suffragettes were lawless terrorists who delayed votes for women. Feminist historians, such as myself, he asserts, perpetuate a suffragette mythology – "that it was a mass movement, that militancy won the vote, that there was no threat to life, that forcible feeding outraged public opinion, and that they enjoyed popular support."

What is remarkable in Bearman's analysis is that nowhere does he listen to the suffragettes themselves. His "evidence" is based on newspaper accounts of the time, all filtered through a male gaze that thought the suffragettes – and their leaders - were irrational, even mad. Nor does Bearman consider his own standpoint, his own gendered interpretation of events.

Why do newspaper accounts of the WSPU have to be questioned?

What view of the WSPU does Purvis have? Where does your own knowledge support this?

That I should have been attacked in this way doesn't surprise me. Women's history is not just about finding women hidden in the past but about changing the way they have been traditionally represented, about letting their voices be heard. The Suffragettes contributed to the making of our modern democracy by bringing about a cultural change in the way in which women were seen. They aroused a passionate discussion about women's status and inequality in society so that men's ideological hold over women was never the same. No longer doormats but assertive, strong-minded women, without their struggle, the 1918 franchise act would not have been passed.

After reading the article by Purvis, answering the questions and thinking of the knowledge you have of the Suffragettes do you think that the Suffragettes were the main cause of women gaining the vote in 1918? Why/Why not? (Fully explain and justify your answer)