Votes for Women

Did you know that, unless you are a member of the House of Lords, serving a prison sentence or under 18, you are eligible to vote in this year's general election? We are very lucky to live in a democracy where everyone is allowed a say in who governs our country. However, this was not always the case.

The 19th Century

Before 1918, women were not allowed to vote or stand as members of parliament. This was because women at this time were viewed as homemakers and it was presumed that their husbands would take care of political and financial matters for the family. However, these traditional roles began to change when the industrial revolution meant more women went out to work and met in large organised groups to discuss social and political matters.

Votes for Women!

Organised groups campaigning for women's voting rights started to appear from 1866. By 1888, women could vote in many local council elections – but still not in general elections. In 1867, John Stuart Mill proposed a bill to give women equal voting rights to men. This was rejected by 194 votes to 73. Consequently, the movement for women's suffrage (the right to vote) began to take shape.

The Suffragists and the Suffragettes

The suffragists came into being after Mill's rejected bill and campaigned into the late 19th century. In 1897, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was formed under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett. They fought for voting rights for middle-class women who owned property. They used peaceful methods such as lobbying MPs, organising petitions and nonviolent demonstrations. Millicent Fawcett strongly believed that law-abiding, behaviour was vital if the group was to convince parliament that women were intelligent enough to vote.

By 1900, the group had made great progress. A number of bills proposing votes for women gained a great deal of support in parliament – though not quite enough to be passed. By 1903, some women had become impatient with the law-abiding tactics of the suffragists and decided to break from the NUWSS and form their own more extreme group. This was led by Emmeline Pankhurst. The group became

Emmeline Pankhurst

known as Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and its members were referred to as 'suffragettes', a name disparagingly given to them by the London Daily Mail newspaper. The suffragettes, however, gladly took on this

name. They were mainly young, working-class women who lived up to their motto of 'deeds, not words' with their increasingly violent action.

Desperate Measures

From 1912, their campaign became more extreme as they increased their use of methods like law-breaking and hunger strikes to further their cause. The women disrupted political meetings, attacked politicians, broke windows and committed acts of arson. One woman, Emily Wilding Davison, threw herself in front of the King's horse at the 1913 Derby. She died five days later without regaining consciousness. To deal with hunger strikes, the government passed a law which became known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act.' This allowed women to be released from jail when they were in danger of dying from starvation, but allowed them to be re-arrested as soon as they regained strength.

Girl Power

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 prompted the suffragettes to suspend some of their protests to help the war effort. This gained them more support and proved that the women were rational enough to be able to vote.

In 1918, the Representation of the People Act allowed some women over the age of 30 who owned certain types of property to vote. However, it was not until 1928, when the Equal Franchise Act was passed, that all women over 21 were able to vote, giving them the same voting rights as men.

In 1969, the voting age for both men and women was lowered to 18. It remains this age today.