THE MARCH OF THE WOMEN

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A REVISIONIST ANALYSIS OF THE CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE 1866–1914

MARTIN PUGH

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFL	Actresses' Franchise League
CUWFA	Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association
EFF	Election Fighting Fund
ELF	East London Federation
ICW	International Council of Women
ILP	Independent Labour Party
NEC	National Executive Committee
NLF	National Liberal Federation
NLOWS	National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage
NMF	Northern Men's Federation
NSWS	National Society for Women's Suffrage
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
WCG	Women's Co-operative Guild
WFL	Women's Freedom League
WLF	Women's Liberal Federation
WLGS	Women's Local Government Society
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

The March of the Women

Composed and Dedicated to the Women's Social and Political Union by
Ethel Smyth, Mus. Doc.

(1)

Shout, shout—up with your song,
Cry with the wind, for the dawn is breaking;
March, march, swing you along,
Wide blows our banner, and hope is waking.
Song with its story, dreams with their glory,
Lo! they call, and glad is their word!
Hark, hark, hear how it swells,
Thunder of freedom, the voice of the Lord!

(2)

Long, long—we in the past
Cowered in dread from the light of heaven,
Strong, strong—stand we at last,
Fearless in faith and with sight new given.
Strength with its beauty, Life with its duty
(Hear the call, oh hear and obey!)
These, these—beckon us on!
Open your eyes to the blaze of day.

(3)

Hail, hail—ye who have dared
First in the battle to strive and sorrow!
Scorned, spurned—nought have ye cared,
Raising your eyes to a wider morrow.
Ways that are weary, days that are dreary,
Toil and pain in faith ye have borne;
Hail, hail—victors ye stand,
Wearing the wreath that the brave have worn.

(4)

Life, strife—these two are one.
Naught can ye win but by faith and daring.
On, on—that ye have done
But for the work of to-day preparing.
Firm in reliance, laugh a defiance—
(Laugh in hope, for sure is the end).
March, march—many as one,
Shoulder to shoulder and friend to friend.

Introduction

NOT since 1967 when Constance Rover's *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain* was published has there been an attempt to assess the entire campaign to secure the parliamentary vote for women. Since 1967 a great deal of primary material has become available and a number of studies of specific aspects of the movement have helped to change our perspective on the cause. However, in view of the importance of the subject and the popular interest it still engenders, it cannot be said that a great deal has been published. Several aspects of the topic remain neglected, and the treatment of it seems unbalanced in many ways. Some authors continue to approach it by attacking the straw men of the past—that is the accounts written by George Dangerfield in *The Strange Death of Liberal England* as long ago as 1935, and by Roger Fulford in *Votes for Women* as long ago as 1957, neither of which were, in fact, based on primary source material. It is easy to criticize such works, but this is to avoid the real issues involved in an analysis of the campaign.

Received impressions about the centrality of the Pankhursts took a dent when Andrew Rosen's *Rise Up Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903–1914* (1974) appeared. Indeed, much subsequent work has in effect modified the original interpretation bequeathed by the Pankhurst family. The marginalization from which the non-militant suffragists had suffered began to be revised first by Lesley Parker Hume's *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 1897–1914* (1982) and then by Sandra Stanley Holton's *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900–1918* (1986). We now have a far clearer picture of the ideas of the non-militants as a result of the valuable revisionist biography by D. W. Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (1991); the non-militants have also been brought into focus by June Hannam, *Isabella Ford* (1989); Jill Liddington, *The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel: Selina Cooper* (1984); Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (1992), which includes the important but neglected Frances Power Cobbe; and Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries* (1987). As a result of Olive Banks's *Becoming a Feminist: The Social Origins of First Wave Feminism* (1986), it is now possible to generalize about the kinds of political and social factors that lay behind the movement. Patricia Hollis in *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government* (1987)

remedied a major gap in our explanation for the development of the late Victorian movement, though Hollis herself doubted that local government materially advanced the suffragist cause. Susan Kingsley Kent argued for a reinterpretation of the movement as a radical attempt to overthrow conventional gender relations in her *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860–1914* (1987), a thesis difficult to square with Banks's empirical study. A much-needed attempt to explain the male role in the movement appeared in 1997 in Angela V. John and Claire Eustance (eds.), *The Men's Share: Masculinities, Male Support and Women's Suffrage in Britain 1890–1920*. For the first time the Anti-Suffragist movement was treated seriously by Brian Harrison in *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (1978); this is now complemented by biographical studies of leading Antis: John Sutherland, *Mrs Humphry Ward* (1990); Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action* (1991), which discusses Violet Markham; and Helen Jones (ed.), *Duty and Citizenship: The Correspondence and Papers of Violet Markham* (1994). Despite the general change of emphasis, the analysis of the suffragettes has continued. A pioneering essay by Brian Harrison on 'The Act of Militancy: Violence and the Suffragettes' in his *Peaceable Kingdom* (1982) was the first attempt to explain sympathetically what led certain women to adopt militancy; but it has been surprisingly neglected by other writers in the field. Although we are still lacking scholarly studies of suffragism at local level some valuable work has been published notably by Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause: The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland* (1991), and by Jill Liddington and Jill Norris on Lancashire in *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of The Women's Suffrage Movement* (1978); there is also an essay on Welsh suffragism by Kay Cook and Neil Evans in Angela V. John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History 1830–1939* (1991), and a more general survey in Leah Leneman's chapter in Maroula Joannu and June Purvis (eds.), *The Women's Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives* (1998). Surprisingly, there is still no good, scholarly biography of either Emmeline or Christabel Pankhurst, though Sylvia has attracted attention in Patricia Romero, *E. Sylvia Pankhurst* (1987) and Barbara Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst* (1996). Other militants have recently been studied by Angela V. John in *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life 1862–1952* (1995) which, like the local studies, demonstrates how individuals shifted between militancy and non-militancy; Lis Whitelaw, *The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton* (1990); and Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life: Charlotte Despard, Suffragette, Socialist and Sinn Feiner* (1980).

Although the present volume follows a broadly chronological pattern, it is not designed as another narrative account of the campaigns of suffragists and suffragettes; it is instead organized in ten essays which focus on specific

questions of interpretation or aspects of the topic. Chapter 1 begins the examination of suffragist tactics and methods by emphasizing the initial difficulties involved in pushing the issue to the fore even within the context of the women's movement itself. By implication it suggests, contrary to received opinion, that the early emphasis on a parliamentary approach was both rational and successful; but the chapter also highlights some of the inherent weaknesses in the movement—its loose federal structure, the lack of inspirational leadership, the avoidance of party political commitments, the narrow nature of suffragist demands, especially the reluctance to incorporate married women, and the broader issue of adult suffrage. Chapter 2 analyses the *debate* over women's enfranchisement—a key theme but surprisingly neglected, perhaps because scholars traditionally accepted the Pankhursts' claim that no progress had been made before the 1900s. The chapter aims to remedy the deficiency by demonstrating how the debate fluctuated over time as suffragists varied their case in order to take advantage of changing conditions; it also identifies those areas of debate in which Anti-Suffragist views became discredited or redundant. This leads to the conclusion that by the turn of the century the suffragists had largely won the debate; little of any significance was added during the Edwardian period. Following on from this Chapter 3 challenges the traditional view that the suffragist cause entered a decline or at least stagnated between the 1880s and 1900. It suggests, on the contrary, that the 1890s proved to be the decade of breakthrough for the suffragists as demonstrated by the shift of parliamentary support in their favour, a trend not hitherto recognized. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 develop and substantiate this broad theme by examining aspects of the change in more detail. The implication is that the traditional chronology of the suffrage movement in Britain no longer fits the facts. The achievements of the Victorian suffragists have been underrated. Since their success *preceded* the militant phase it obviously has major implications for the significance attributable to it; when the WSPU was founded in 1903 it was in some ways a *symptom* of the improving fortunes of suffragism rather than simply a cause. Chapter 4 complements this thesis by putting the domestic movement in the context of *international* suffragism. In particular it seeks to demonstrate how the enfranchisement of women in New Zealand and Australia, and to a lesser extent the United States, advanced the cause in Britain by discrediting some of the alarmism of the Antis and lending credibility to the suffragist case. The political dimensions to the problem are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 which emphasize, on the one hand, the fluctuations in Liberal support for the cause and, on the other, the significant rise in sympathy amongst Conservatives from the 1880s. It is argued that traditional accounts fail to take account of this latter aspect.

Indeed, while some more recent writers claim that the movement has been seen as too conservative, the argument here is that, on the contrary, we have underestimated the conservatism and the Conservatism in women's suffrage, and thereby lost an important part of the explanation for the eventual success of the cause. Chapter 7 approaches suffragism through the perspective of its opponents. It shows among other things the fitful nature of organized Anti-Suffragism and emphasizes that its chief efforts came too late in the day to offer any effective check to the long-term social and political trends which worked in the suffragists' favour. It also underlines the fundamental flaws in Anti-Suffragism, notably its attempt to combine male Antis with female Antis who were often *feminists*. In Chapter 8 the book moves on to an analysis and evaluation of militancy which is designed to show it as a far more varied and in some ways subtle movement than is usually thought. Militancy is revealed as involving a wide spectrum of participation including purely nominal and temporary involvement by many women. Emphasis is placed on the extent to which suffragettes and suffragists crossed the supposedly clear line between militancy and non-militancy, which suggests that the divisions over tactics assumed far less significance at local level than they did in London and among the leadership ranks. Some fresh light is also thrown on the character of the WSPU by juxtaposing the radicalism of its methods and its reputation with the reality of its members' position within the economic and social establishment, and by highlighting the inconsistency involved in attacking private property while simultaneously exploiting private wealth to sustain the campaign. The chapter concludes by explaining, partly with neglected PRO material, that the WSPU had decisively failed and had entered a decline by 1914. In Chapter 9 an attempt is made to assess one of the central claims made by the Pankhursts to the effect that they had mobilized the force of public opinion against the government of the day. *Inter alia* this involves for the first time an analysis of the Edwardian by-election record which the WSPU flourished as proof of its success. Finally, Chapter 10 completes the re-evaluation of suffragism by examining the extent to which the non-militant campaign expanded into a mass movement, the significance of the alliance between the Labour Party and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and the latter's attempt to develop a working-class base during the last two and a half years before the outbreak of war. It is here, rather than in the better-known suffragette campaigns, that the central explanation for the eventual success of the women's movement lies.

Part I

The Issues

1

The Tactical Dilemmas

'IN the years that I have passed in Government offices,' Florence Nightingale told John Stuart Mill in 1867, 'I have never felt the want of a vote.'[1] Nightingale's comments, from the standpoint of a pro-suffragist it should be remembered, underline the fundamental, but easily overlooked, tactical issue that faced the early suffragist campaign: how much significance attached to the parliamentary vote in relation to all the other goals and grievances of the Victorian feminist movement? Though the question was never formally resolved, over time the vote gradually assumed greater priority until it became the central object.

Initially the franchise represented no more than one amongst a range of goals tackled by the single-issue pressure groups which had emerged between the late-1850s and mid-1860s, largely inspired by the so-called 'Ladies of Langham Place' in London. The leaders of this early women's movement—Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon), Bessie Rayner Parkes, Jessie Boucherett, Frances Power Cobbe, Emily Davies, Maria Rye, Adelaide Proctor, Elizabeth Garrett, and Elizabeth Blackwell—followed a pattern well-established in middle-class, mid-Victorian Radical circles. They founded the Society for Promoting Women's Employment in 1859, tried to extend higher education for women, promoted female emigration to the colonies, and demanded entry into the medical profession; they established the Married Women's Property Committee and the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts.[2] Only in the aftermath of John Stuart Mill's election at Westminster in May 1865 did the parliamentary vote emerge as a significant goal. Barbara Leigh Smith, who had

[1] Florence Nightingale to J. S. Mill, 11 Aug. 1867, Nightingale Papers, British Library, Add. MS 39927, fo. 62.

[2] See Candida Ann Lacey, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and the Ladies of Langham Place* (Routledge, 1987); Sheila Herstein, *A Mid-Victorian Feminist* (Yale University Press, 1985); Olive Banks, *Becoming A Feminist* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986); Ray Strachey, *The Cause* (G. Bell & Sons, 1928).

campaigned for Mill but wondered whether she was doing him more harm than good, joined with Davies, Boucherett, and Garrett, to form a committee in Kensington; they collected signatures for the women's suffrage petition which Mill subsequently presented to the House of Commons in 1866.

The Status of the Vote

However, for some time the significance of the franchise amongst this congeries of ad hoc pressure groups remained unclear. The very range of issues inevitably spread the efforts of the small stage army of activists thinly, thereby limiting their impact. On the other hand, the wider the variety of issues the more women were likely to become involved. Some preferred to focus on one cause, for example, Emily Davies on higher education and Josephine Butler on the repeal of the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts. But the analysis of 'first wave' feminists by Olive Banks has shown that the activists were likely to be involved in anything up to five campaigns. Significantly she found that 89 per cent of her sample participated in the suffrage movement, a much higher level than that for any other cause.[3] Moreover, participation was distinctly lower amongst the older women, which underlines how, over time, the vote became increasingly central to the women's movement.

What determined how much emphasis was given to the different feminist causes? In the first place, success and failure frequently dictated changes in the level of activity. For example, the passage of the divorce law reform in 1857 had the effect of depriving the campaign for married women's property of its momentum for several years at least. Conversely, when the Ladies National Association achieved the final repeal of the CD legislation in 1886, its activists diverted their efforts into related campaigns dealing with moral conduct. Tactical considerations were also important. Barbara Leigh Smith made shrewd judgements about which goals were attainable and thus worth concentrating on; she calculated, for example, that the issue of married women's property could be resolved without unduly antagonizing male opinion, whereas female enfranchisement seemed to her an ambitious aim unlikely to be achieved except in the long term. As Nightingale put it: 'it will be years before you obtain the suffrage for women. And in the meantime there are evils which press much more hardly on women.'[4] Despite this, feminists such as Lydia Becker and Millicent Fawcett concentrated their efforts largely on the vote, and took a strict line on the association between this

[3] Banks, *Becoming*, 50–2. [4] Nightingale to Mill, 11 Aug. 1867.

campaign and other causes. Though they sympathized strongly with Butler's attack on the CD Acts, they avoided public involvement with it because it seemed certain to detract from the respectability of their campaign. Indeed, the London suffragists refused to be represented in parliament by Jacob Bright because of his links with Butler.[5] The preoccupation with respectability featured prominently in the case of Elizabeth Wolstenholme (later Mrs Wolstenholme Elmy) who was known to be living with a man, Ben Elmy, to whom she was not married; Becker, Fawcett, and others insisted that she could not be secretary of the Married Women's Property Committee without damaging the cause.[6] Nor was this untypical. Banks found that only 13 per cent of first wave feminists became involved with Butler's campaign, and only 19 per cent with the issue of birth control. Whether this sprang from disapproval or from tactical considerations, it underlines the perceived need to present the case for the vote in the best possible light.

In addition to tactical calculations the feminists' handling of the franchise also reflected the impact of a series of political contingencies. For example, the sudden death of the prime minister, Lord Palmerston, in 1865, which led to the introduction of a parliamentary reform bill in 1866 by Lord John Russell and W. E. Gladstone, suddenly elevated the whole question of reform and carried women's suffrage with it. Also, many women who had originally seen the vote largely as a symbol of female inequality came in time to regard it as a greater priority, partly because it appeared to be the key to further changes. By 1873 Josephine Butler recognized the greater urgency of the vote: 'We cannot always depend on the self-sacrificing efforts of noble men . . . to right our wrongs, and now that the labourers are going to be enfranchised, our case becomes the worse.' During the 1890s leading members of the Women's Liberal Federation reached the conclusion that they were wasting their time in passing annual resolutions and would be better advised to accelerate the whole process by focusing on the women's vote.[7] The post-1905 strategy of the Women's Social and Political Union represented a logical extension of this thinking; the Pankhursts argued not just that the vote should be the priority but that the government should be compelled to suspend all other business until the demand had been satisfied.

Above all, the significance attributed to the vote was heightened by the example set by other contemporary Radical movements. Throughout their

[5] Strachey, *The Cause*, 267–9; Barbara Caine, 'John Stuart Mill and the English Women's Movement', *Historical Studies*, 18 (1978), 59–62.

[6] Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[7] Ibid. 182, quoting J. Butler to Mrs C. M. Wilson, 12 Nov. 1873, Butler Papers; Women's Liberal Federation, *Annual Report*, 1899, 17.

campaign the suffragists reacted to the activities of the Irish Nationalists both in and out of parliament. From the general election of 1874 onwards the Home Rulers enjoyed direct representation in the Commons, and after the extension of the county franchise in 1885 they commanded at least eighty seats, a position which enabled them to obstruct legislation and occasionally to hold the balance of power. In Ireland they sustained a violent agitation, while in the English constituencies they mobilized the Irish vote and periodically withheld it from their Liberal allies in order to extract pledges on Home Rule from vulnerable candidates. All this made an indelible impression on the Pankhursts who attributed the defeat of Dr Richard Pankhurst at a Manchester by-election in 1883 to the obstructionism of Irish Catholics.[8]

The emergence of the Labour Movement also had a galvanizing effect. By enfranchising substantial numbers of workingmen the 1867 reform act raised the expectations of trade unions, especially those, such as coal miners, whose members now dominated some constituencies; as a result, from 1874 onwards several of their leaders sat as 'Lib-Lab' members, thereby creating direct working-class representation for the first time. Subsequently their activities provided not merely an example for feminists but a provocation, for the union representatives energetically promoted protective legislation designed to exclude women from employment, ostensibly on the grounds that it endangered their health or morals, but in reality because they wished to reduce competition between the sexes which, in their view, lowered wage levels. Thus, although women achieved some of their goals during the 1870s and 1880s, despite their exclusion from the electorate, the changing character of parliamentary representation appeared to put them at a greater disadvantage, and thus gave greater urgency to female enfranchisement. By the 1890s further advance for women appeared to be blocked or at least likely to be very slow until parliament became more representative.[9] Gradually the vote ceased to be merely symbolic and became the key to wider change.

Organization and Leadership

By comparison with the Edwardian suffragettes the Victorian suffragists have made little impact on popular perceptions; even academics have invariably minimized their role. This is symptomatic of their somewhat obscure organizational structure and the character of their leadership. The London

[8] E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement* (Virago, 1977), 63.
[9] Ignota, 'Women's Suffrage', *Westminster Review*, 148 (Oct. 1897), 365.

National Society for Women's Suffrage emerged in 1867 under Clementina Taylor, Barbara Leigh Smith, and Emily Davies. Shortly after, societies appeared in Manchester, led by Lydia Becker, and in Edinburgh, founded by Flora Stevenson and Priscilla, a sister of Jacob Bright, which affiliated to the National Society.[10] Similar groups emerged in Bristol under Annie Priestman and Lady Anna Gore, and at Birmingham under Mr and Mrs Osler, so that by the early 1870s clusters of suffragists in the regional capitals had created a loose federal organization which persisted throughout the life of the campaign.[11] While the London suffragists coordinated the parliamentary strategy it was largely left to the regions to take initiatives to promote the cause as they thought appropriate. Consequently, tension developed between provincial activists, who were more attuned to campaigning, and London which, to its critics, appeared cautious and reluctant to seek popular support. After 1900 this pattern offered an easy target for Mrs Pankhurst who, along with her husband, had in fact participated in the suffragist society in Manchester. However, the Pankhurst critique overlooked the fact that volunteer activists could not easily be dictated to; attempts to do so invariably resulted in breakaway factions as the Pankhursts discovered after 1903. This was all the more true since the early suffragists, men and women alike, tended to be classic liberal individualists, insistent on consulting their consciences on every issue.

As a result the central organization never exercised effective control over the movement. It was in any case handicapped by its limited financial resources, at least until the Edwardian period. During the 1870s, for example, central income amounted to around £1,000 to £1,300 per annum, but dwindled to only £300 to £400 during the 1880s. The resources of the constitutional movement remained largely concentrated at the local level. The Manchester Society, for example, attained an annual income of over £2,000 by 1872 and maintained it at around that level until 1885 when it declined.

The combination of opinionated members and a weak centre inevitably made the history of Victorian suffragism a history of splits. As early as 1872 the London Society refused to join the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage because some of its members were associated with the campaign to repeal the CD Acts, though it retracted in 1877. A major split occurred in 1888 when a majority, which called itself the Central National Committee for Women's Suffrage, agreed to allow the affiliation of

[10] Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1991) discusses the development of the movement in Scotland.

[11] See Kirsten Seltorp, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in Bristol, 1868–1906', unpublished MS, Fawcett Library.

women's party political organizations; the minority objected so strongly that it withdrew to form the Central Committee of the National Society. It is symptomatic of the introspection of the dispute that the successor bodies adopted such confusing and unmemorable titles! In 1889 another splinter group emerged in the form of the Women's Franchise League which wanted to include married women in suffrage legislation rather than restrict it to single and widowed women. The Women's Emancipation Union, formed in 1892, also aimed at a more democratic appeal. However, by 1897 most of these groups had been reunited in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies under the Presidency of Millicent Fawcett.[12]

In spite of this record it would be a mistake to exaggerate the significance of internal divisions within suffragism. At the grass roots the disagreements over legislation were not of great practical importance. Virtually all suffragists agreed about the use of constitutional methods in this period, and in London their campaign operated efficiently enough. In her capacity as Parliamentary Agent Lydia Becker coordinated the efforts of politicians and local societies, and she took the initiative in forming a parliamentary committee of suffragist MPs in June 1887. Though Mill believed that men ought to be excluded from the suffragist organization, his view did not prevail. Nonetheless, men's role was kept under control; at a demonstration in Edinburgh in 1884 the press complained that men had been confined to the gallery and 'made to pay half-a-crown for the privilege of hearing themselves abused!'[13] In effect women occupied all the officers' positions in the organization but maintained an element of male representation. In 1889, for example, the National Society's executive included three MPs (Leonard Courtney, Captain Edwards-Heathcote, and T. W. Russell), while the much larger general committee included twenty-eight politicians.

The other unifying element in the movement lay in two journals, the *Englishwoman's Review*, founded by Barbara Leigh Smith in 1866, and the *Women's Suffrage Journal* which Lydia Becker started in 1870. The former adopted a cautious and conservative approach, while the latter came closer to being a campaigning journal in that it reported extensively on local activities. Both suffered from precarious finances. Leigh Smith sustained the *Englishwoman's Review* from her own private income and with help from Jessie Boucherett who reportedly sold her diamonds for the cause.[14] So dependent on Becker

[12] See Lesley P. Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 1897–1914* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982).

[13] Leneman, *Guid Cause*, 27.

[14] Theodora Bostick, 'The Press and the Launching of the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1866–67', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 13/4 (1980).

was the WSJ that on her death in 1890 it promptly folded. Not until the Edwardian period were these early papers effectively superseded by the more successful journals—*Votes for Women* (1907) and *The Common Cause* (1909).

The impact of Victorian suffragism was also hindered by the fact that, although it attracted some very able women, it lacked a single charismatic leader. Indeed, for much of the pre-1900 period there was no real leader at all, but a collection of leading figures. Although Mill gave vital inspiration and intellectual weight to the cause, he never became important as an active participant in the campaign outside Westminster.[15] At best he remained aloof, apparently believing that the vote could be won comparatively easily without requiring an elaborate campaign. After 1867 he performed little further service to suffragism, and his death in 1873 was thus of no great significance for the cause. Unfortunately, Mill suffered from the academic's inability to recognize his own organizational deficiencies, and his stepdaughter, Helen Taylor, who proved to be an intransigent and divisive element, exploited his authority in her attempts to dominate the London Society in its early years. Helen variously objected to the inclusion of men, to the exclusion of married women from suffrage legislation, and to any links with Josephine Butler's campaign; she even jibbed at the title—which at one stage was the London Society for *Woman* Suffrage—on the grounds that she could never join an organization that was ungrammatical![16] As a result Helen and her father quit the London Society in order to work with the Manchester suffragists; but they found Becker and Bright no more to their liking. Fortunately, Taylor soon diverted herself to other activities, but in effect several years had been absorbed with attempts to keep the two Mills happy which vitiated any concerted leadership in London.

Up to 1890 the most influential single individual in the movement was probably Lydia Becker, an indefatigable, intellectually tough but slightly academic advocate of the vote. Her thorough grasp of parliamentary procedure, mastery of detail, and persistence in dealing with politicians made Becker formidable. But like her successor, Millicent Fawcett, she was not flamboyant. Fawcett also enjoyed close familiarity with Westminster, not least because her husband, Henry, had sat in Liberal cabinets under Gladstone. Calm, measured, and very well-informed, Fawcett's forte was the systematic rebuttal of ill-supported Anti-Suffragist arguments. However, she lacked the

[15] See Caine, 'Mill and the Women's Movement'.

[16] Ibid. 20; A. P. W. Robson, 'The Founding of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, 1866–67', *Canadian Historical Journal*, 8 (Mar. 1973).

inspirational qualities of a real leader. According to one account, when asked to sign a petition which described the vote as passionately desired by women, she demurred: '*must* I be passionate?'[17] An ideal leader actually existed in Josephine Butler who possessed the essential ability to articulate the women's case in moral terms. Indeed, Butler brought the kind of inspirational qualities later associated with the Pankhursts as well as their shrewd sense of the visual impact that could be made, for example, by women's prayer meetings. 'Never was there such an exhibition of silent power as Mrs Butler gave,' wrote Florence Fenwick Miller, 'her presence, her beautiful saintly face, her magnetic inspiring power, were felt throughout.'[18] Butler was also a better Liberal than either Becker or Fawcett, and as such she was more likely to have mobilized the party support which the others alienated. However, she concentrated on the Ladies National Association up to the 1880s, and remained marginal to the suffragist campaign, an unrealized asset.

The Parliamentary Strategy

Following the example of Victorian single-issue pressure groups, the suffragists focused their efforts around parliament; they compiled detailed records of their supporters in the House of Commons and cultivated members willing to introduce bills, present petitions, and arrange deputations to ministers. With the benefit of hindsight it was easy for the Pankhursts to disparage this approach; indeed, historians have often implicitly endorsed their critical view. Yet the virtues of the parliamentary strategy—in the early stages at least—were compelling. Parliament proved to be invaluable for getting over the immediate problem: how to launch the campaign. For many Victorians a political cause was simply not to be taken seriously unless it had been debated in parliament. In fact the suffragists capitalized brilliantly on the parliamentary situation so as to promote what was, after all, a very novel issue, into the forefront of debate. The death of Palmerston led to the introduction of a Liberal reform bill in 1866 whose defeat stimulated popular demonstrations organized by the Reform League over a period of several months. This suited the women because it kept the whole question of franchise reform topical and gave them time to organize. By persuading John Stuart Mill to present a petition to the Commons in June 1866 they contrived to

[17] See Joan E. Parker, 'Lydia Becker: Her Work for Women', Ph.D. thesis (Manchester University, 1990); H. M. Swanwick, *I Have Been Young* (Gollancz, 1935), 185.

[18] Quoted in Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, 173.

provoke a debate in the press. Emily Davies drew up a list of some five hundred newspapers to whom articles and copies of the petition were sent.[19] The lectures delivered by Barbara Leigh Smith to the congress of the Association for the Promotion of Social Science at Manchester in October 1866 also gained publicity partly because of the status of the host organization. Newspapers such as the *Pall Mall Gazette* agreed to print summaries of the suffragist petition and the names of leading signatories; others simply criticized women's suffrage editorially which was almost as useful at this stage; the worst response was that of *The Times*, a consistent antagonist over many years, which decided to ignore the question altogether. Much depended on the accident of editorial or proprietorial preference; for example, the *Fortnightly Review* suddenly became interested in 1867 when John Morley took over as editor.

Yet despite these efforts it was not easy for a handful of middle-class suffragists to force the issue into the limelight. Fortunately, the resignation of the Liberal Government and its replacement by a vulnerable minority Tory administration under Lord Derby and Benjamin Disraeli in the summer of 1866 created a fine opening for them. Not until February 1867 had the new government decided to introduce a reform bill of its own. For the suffragists the advantage lay in the fact that, as a minority administration, the Tories could not hope to remain in office for long unless they could maintain the divisions among the Liberals; consequently Disraeli was obliged to accept a series of amendments proposed by Liberal backbenchers which had the effect of turning the bill into a far more radical measure than intended. In this situation, with the bill changing from day to day on the floor of the House, Mill's amendment to include a franchise for women was a far less quixotic effort than it would otherwise have been. Though novel, it was scarcely more so than the amendments designed to incorporate large numbers of workingmen in which Disraeli's backbenchers, contrary to all expectations, acquiesced.

In the event Disraeli decided, despite his personal sympathy for female enfranchisement, that Mill's amendment would be a bridge too far; and it was defeated by 196 votes to 73, which was rightly regarded as more than satisfactory by his supporters. The choice of Mill had been shrewd. Though not a major politician—he had first been elected in 1865—he was an intellectual heavyweight who gave credibility to the new cause. It emerged subsequently that a number of Liberals had agreed to support the proposal more out of personal regard for Mill than because of any enthusiasm for female suffrage; and

[19] Bostick, 'The Press and the Women's Suffrage Movement', 125–7.

although suffragists complained bitterly for many years that MPs treated the issue frivolously, the fact remains that at a stroke votes for women had become a serious question. The initial debate in parliament gave the campaigners a base on which to build and a focus for wider efforts. Though Mill lost his seat in 1868, they found a suitable alternative champion in Jacob Bright the brother of John Bright, famous for his success over the repeal of the Corn Laws. As a result debates on women's suffrage took place in the Commons almost every year for the next decade and a half: 1870 (twice), 1871, 1872, 1873, 1875, 1876, 1877, 1878, 1879, 1883, and 1884 (twice). At a time when the national and provincial press used parliamentary material to fill its columns, this was an excellent expedient for keeping the issue in the public eye. The debates created a focus for local petitions and the formation of new societies, and helped to obscure the fact that the campaign was being run on the basis of minimal resources.

In retrospect this emphasis on parliament came to be seen as misplaced partly because it necessarily involved relying on cooperative backbench members whose legislation stood little or no chance of passing into law. In fact, this was much less true in the nineteenth century than it was to be in the twentieth; but even so, the odds were not encouraging. In 1870, for example, only 26 out of 84 private members' bills succeeded, and in 1872 only 17 out of 109. As a result of the expansion of government business the only propitious time in the year for backbenchers was around February before the cabinet's programme was ready. Yet if backbench legislation offered a dubious option, what alternative was there? To wait for government reform bills, which appeared at very irregular and infrequent intervals, would have been bad for morale. In any case, in the early stages of the campaign it was not remotely likely that any government would have legislated for women's suffrage. But by repeatedly initiating debates on backbench bills the suffragists managed to build up their support in parliament and in the country which, in the long run, offered the best means of encouraging governments to take up the issue.

However, the parliamentary strategy certainly entailed certain drawbacks. It inevitably put the suffragists in the hands of a small number of politicians who were willing to devote the time and accept the risks involved in promoting feminist legislation.[20] For example, in 1874 the new spokesman, William Forsyth, took it into his head to modify the bill by explicitly excluding married women, a course which Lydia Becker violently opposed because she knew it would upset some MPs previously pledged to the bill. The dispute

[20] Sir G. O. Trevelyan told Lydia Becker (6 Mar. 1879, Manchester Central Library, Becker Correspondence, M50/1/2) not to expect more than his vote as he could not take on too many causes at once.

was a distraction, it meant the loss of a debate in 1874, and in the end Forsyth largely got his way.

There are also some grounds for thinking that the suffragists allowed their campaign to be dictated more than was wise by the exigencies of the parliamentary situation. To become immersed in the endless complications of parliamentary tactics and the management of MPs was to risk neglecting the mobilization of support in the country. Some suffragists certainly entertained a very narrow view of the campaign. When Mill addressed a meeting in Edinburgh in January 1871 it was the *only* occasion on which he ever spoke on women's suffrage outside London.[21] He made no secret of his distaste for what he called the 'common vulgar motives and tactics' of the Manchester suffragists, and he refused to believe that public opinion was really ready for female enfranchisement. Emily Davies, who shared his doubts about the value of popular demonstrations, wished to avoid following the example set by the Reform League's agitation.[22] She once accepted a donation to the Kensington Women's Suffrage Society on the understanding that the members would abstain from campaigning for the vote for a year! However, such caution was hardly typical. Most of the leading suffragists overcame their understandable hesitation about public propaganda. Becker, Fawcett, and others traversed the country addressing meetings; the chief limitation was physical—Fawcett eventually restricted herself to four speeches a week.

In time Becker and Fawcett accumulated a fund of parliamentary expertise. But playing the parliamentary game sometimes led them astray. During the early 1880s Becker attempted to take advantage of the Liberals' readiness to introduce a bill to enfranchise agricultural labourers. She argued that it was pointless to expect Tory suffragists to support a women's bill for fear that this would make it awkward for them to oppose the Liberal measure.[23] As a result no women's bill was introduced for several years, a gap which has often been interpreted as a loss of momentum for the cause but which actually reflected over-sophisticated tactics. Becker argued that once the Liberal bill had appeared the Conservatives should be encouraged to amend it by means of a women's clause; but this misfired because it offended the radicals and played into Gladstone's hands (see Chapter 6). Throughout the campaign the cause suffered from attempts to find a formula that would satisfy the interests of all parties, and one suspects that the suffragists would have done better to avoid clever parliamentary manoeuvres and concentrate on

[21] Leneman, *Guid Cause*, 19.

[22] Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days* (Routledge, 1996), 23, 37; Strachey, *The Cause*, 110–11.

[23] Lydia Becker to Mrs Ashworth Hallett, 2 Apr. 1880, in Helen Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage: A Record of the Women's Suffrage Movement in the British Isles* (Williams and Norgate, 1902), 149.

propagating their case. Of course, the validity of the parliamentary strategy changed over time. By the 1890s some suffragists had become restive about the traditional emphasis on Westminster. Valentine Munro-Ferguson complained that 'the result of patience so far has been that a less and less serious view is being taken of our cause. We are too cautious about offending either party in parliament.'[24] Such sentiments heralded the Pankhursts' initiatives in 1903.

But from the start it had been recognized that the parliamentary spokesmen for women's suffrage would carry more clout if they were seen to represent more than just a minority of disaffected women. In the early years the chief remedy for this was the presentation of petitions, a method traditionally employed by reformers in Britain. To some extent the petition was symbolic; in 1866 Mill had enthusiastically declared 'Ah, this I can brandish with effect', after receiving a petition containing only 1,499 signatures.[25] Subsequently petitions expanded to reach a peak in 1872–5 before falling off sharply, though during the 1890s the figures returned to the earlier high levels. Petitions were a useful form of local activity and could be used to embarrass MPs who claimed that the women in their constituencies showed no interest in the vote.[26]

TABLE 1.1. Women's suffrage petitions (number of signatures) presented to the House of Commons

1869	61,475	1872	355,806	1875	370,166
1870	134,561	1873	329,206	1877	266,263
1871	186,890	1874	430,343	1878	173,521
				1879	35,000

However, it remains doubtful whether these petitions tell us much about popular opinion. Since the suffragists employed canvassers, the figures are strictly an indication of the resources devoted to petitioning by the organizers as much as a sign of fluctuations in public support for the cause. Even Helen Blackburn admitted that petitions quickly lost impact because they were too easy to organize and were not regarded as a spontaneous expression of feeling.[27] In any case the Anti-Suffragists could easily spoil the effect by raising counter-petitions of their own. That petitions were deemed

[24] Valentine Munro-Ferguson to Millicent Fawcett, 12 Feb. 1896, Fawcett Library, Fawcett Letters, 89/1/20.

[25] Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage*, 55.

[26] See *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 2 Mar. 1874 (referring to K. Hodgson, Bristol and E. A. Leatham, Huddersfield), 49.

[27] Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage*, 198.

necessary at all was a tribute to the memory of the huge Chartist petitions, for however discredited they may have become, they almost dictated that a reform movement should demonstrate its seriousness in a similar fashion. But after the initial impact familiarity soon meant that they were simply laid on the table in the Commons and then rapidly swept away.

Militancy?

The Victorian suffragists are generally considered to have differed fundamentally from the Edwardian suffragettes because they adhered strictly to constitutional methods. This, however, oversimplifies considerably. Definitions of militancy naturally fluctuate over time. Between 1866 and 1869 when a small group of middle- and upper-middle-class ladies—Barbara Leigh Smith, Mrs Clementina Taylor, Lydia Becker, Millicent Fawcett, and Lady Amberley—first began to advocate female enfranchisement on public platforms, the tactic was described disparagingly as 'mixed speaking', since men were also present, and was widely thought to be rather shocking. One MP complained that two wives of members (Fawcett and Taylor) had disgraced themselves in this way, but he declined to add to their shame by naming them! Lady Amberley, of whom Queen Victoria memorably declared that she 'ought to get a good whipping', noted: 'people expressed surprise to me afterwards to see that a woman could lecture and still look like a lady!'[28] Naturally the sheer novelty of these occasions attracted large audiences; and by the 1880s ladies routinely addressed large meetings for the Girls Friendly Society, the Primrose League, the Mothers' Union, and the Women's Co-operative Guild. But in the late 1860s, one should remember, the suffragists who mounted public platforms were the *militants*.

It was not until 1905 when the WSPU's adoption of militant tactics posed a challenge to the existing societies that they felt obliged to clarify their position by claiming to be strictly law-abiding and non-violent. It comes as a surprise to find Lydia Becker writing in 1868: 'it *needs* deeds of bloodshed or violence before the British Government can be roused to do justice'.[29] Conversely Richard and Emmeline Pankhurst sat on the executive of the Manchester Society during the 1880s when constitutional methods were the norm. In view of the continuity of personnel between the two phases of

[28] Strachey, *The Cause*, 118, 121; Sir Theodore Martin, *Queen Victoria as I Knew Her* (Blackwood, 1908), 69.

[29] Lydia Becker to Esther Becker, 28 Apr. 1868, Manchester Central Library, Becker's Letter Books, M50/1/3.

suffragism it is hardly surprising to find that at least two of the tactics associated with Edwardian militancy were copied from the earlier period. For example, reports in the *Women's Suffrage Journal* suggest that as early as the 1870s women began refusing to pay taxes as a protest against their disfranchisement.[30] They quoted historical precedents in their support: Hampden's refusal of Ship Money, the late eighteenth-century American colonists, and the more recent resistance by Nonconformists to Church rates. In 1907 Margaret Ashton apparently persuaded the members of the Manchester Society that non-payment was justified in principle, though despite the widespread support, no attempt was made to coordinate this form of protest.[31]

A more troublesome form of militancy, at least for the politicians, involved intervention at by-elections usually designed to split the vote of Liberal candidates. As early as 1873 Lillias Ashworth promoted a pro-suffrage Liberal against an anti-suffrage Liberal at Bath, though this seems to have been an exceptional case.[32] In this period the technique was more associated with the Ladies National Association under Josephine Butler who used it controversially at by-elections in Colchester and Pontefract in 1870 and 1872. However, as a result of the lack of organizational strength and the non-party strategy of the suffragists, by-election interventions were infrequent before 1906 when the Pankhursts began to target Liberal candidates. They calculated that more was to be gained by working with the politicians than against them. Despite this, many members of the Women's Liberal Federation favoured applying women's suffrage as a test question for Liberal candidates before undertaking work on their behalf in the 1890s; they were, thus, halfway to Edwardian militancy.

There is also some suggestion that the tactics of Victorian suffragists varied regionally. The caution and gradualism characteristic of the London leaders has been contrasted with the more populist instincts of the Manchester suffragists for example.[33] The latter attempted to bypass the laborious legislative route by launching a legal challenge for the vote. Most of the early suffragists chose to regard women's exclusion from the electorate as an anomaly or legal disability that had arisen almost accidentally; and they hoped to exploit the legal and historical precedents which proved that women had previously been registered as parliamentary voters, especially as this was a form of argument to which politicians were susceptible. In 1867 a

[30] *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 1 Aug. 1872, 115; 2 June 1873, 103; 1 Dec. 1873, 175; 1 Aug. 1874, 115; 2 Nov. 1874, 151.

[31] *Annual Report*, Manchester Society for Women's Suffrage, 1907.

[32] *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 1 Nov. 1873, 158.

[33] This view is suggested in Parker, 'Lydia Becker'.