

The Women's Freedom League

Formation

In 1907 a split occurred within the Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU). The Women's Freedom League' was formed by some prominent WSPU members when they left the WSPU.

At a London meeting of the WSPU on 10 Sep 1907, Mrs Pankhurst announced that the Annual Conference fixed for 12 Oct 1907 would not take place and that she intended to take the leadership of the Union into her own hands. There was great resentment among many members at this loss of constitutional democracy within the Union, and led by Mrs Despard, several prominent figures such as Edith How Martyn, Dr Octavia Lewin, Anne Munro and Alice Schofield, decided to continue with the October Conference.

As a result of this Conference, a new organisation for Women's Suffrage was founded, its first Officers being:

President	Mrs Despard
Hon Secretary	Edith How Martyn
Hon Treasurer	Dr Octavia Lewin

At first the dissident members kept the name 'WSPU', but they soon drew up a new Constitution in November and chose the name 'Women's Freedom League', thus completing the breach with the Union.

Women's Freedom League's (WFL) Policy

The League's objective was

“to secure for Women the Parliamentary Vote as it is, or may be, granted to men.”

In contrast to the WSPU, the League confined its militancy to attacking the Government. Public protests were made in police courts against the trial of women by man-made laws, and other protests were made in the House of Commons during 1908 and 1909. In the latter year Miss Alison Neilans and Mrs Alice Chapin were indicted for pouring ink and pyro-gallol into a ballot box to deface the ballot papers in a by-election at Bermondsey. Unfortunately the eye of the officer in charge was splashed and temporarily affected by some of the liquid. This was the first indictable offence committed by a member of the League and Mrs Chapin was sentenced to four months and Miss Neilans to three months.

Women's Tax Resistance League

In 1908 Mrs Despard began the form of protest by withholding taxes on the principle of 'no taxation without representation'. This inspired others to form the 'Women's Tax Resistance League.' In 1909 and Mrs Kineton Parkes became its Secretary.¹

¹ see Introduction and List of Records, Women's Tax Resistance League.
Appendix 2.8 © The Women's Library, 20 March 2007

The Vote

At first the League was allowed as a forum, a page in the weekly *Women's Franchise*, which was edited by a member of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage. The members of the WFL decided that this did not provide sufficient publicity and information for its members, and in 1909 the League began its own journal, *The Vote*. This journal further established the position of the League, but the journal's survival was largely due to the hard work and business ability of Miss Marian Lawson.

Conciliation Bills

In 1919 the WFL joined with other Suffrage Societies to form a Conciliation Committee through which it was hoped to secure a successful franchise bill. For the time being a truce on militancy was observed which lasted nine months.

Mr Shackleton introduced the first Conciliation Bill in Jun 1910. The second was Sir George Kemp's Bill in 1911, but both, having passed Second Reading, ran out of time on being referred to a Committee of the whole House.

Mr Agg-Gardner introduced the third Bill in 1912, but it was defeated on its Second Reading by 14 votes. It was widely held that this had been successfully defeated by Mr Asquith's proposal that woman's suffrage should be dealt with as an amendment to his Manhood Suffrage Bill that he had introduced while this third Conciliation Bill was before the House. Both the Government's Bill and the Amendment failed and Mr Asquith was considered to have deliberately planned this defeat of the efforts for Women's Suffrage.

First World War

The League had increased in strength over the years to 1914, but fearing that there might be a War, it redoubled its efforts in 1914 on the ground that a War would necessarily lead to a call for women to co-operate in war work that should then be refused unless women were accorded suffrage on the same terms as men.

However, in the event the League participated in common with other Suffrage Societies in various aspects of social work as a contribution to the war effort. In particular, it co-operated with the Women's Emergency Corps formed by the Actresses' Franchise League and also lent its office to the National Aid Service run by Miss Parker, a niece of Lord Kitchener.

At one time, there seemed a possibility that some features of the Contagious Diseases Acts might be re-introduced, especially a move to restrict the movement of some women in Plymouth. Mrs Despard led a deputation to Mr Asquith in protest and the League organised a mass meeting of protest in Trafalgar Square.

Representation of the People Act, 1918

By 1916 a measure was in preparation regarding a revision of registration and at the same time some influential members of the Government thought that this presented an opportunity to consider granting women suffrage. All Suffrage Societies were immediately alert to the situation and began to bring their political activities once more to the fore. After a long battle, the Representation of the People Act that granted a limited franchise to women received the royal assent on 6 Feb 1918.

Post First World War Period

As the 1918 Act only gave a limited suffrage to women, the League continued its struggle to obtain the suffrage on the same terms for women as was granted to men. There were also other moves in the direction of equal citizenship of women with men. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1920 opened the legal profession to women and this was another step forward.

In common with other women's organisations that had been primarily concerned with the franchise, the League realised that it must rethink its policies in the changed circumstances. The obvious way forward for such societies was now to campaign for equal citizenship for women and men. Those Societies that did not disband after the 1918 Act reorientated their objects to this goal.

The League's new programme was –

1. Votes for Women on the same terms as men
2. Women as Commissioners of Prisons
3. All professions to be open to women
4. Equal Pay
5. Right of a woman to retain her own nationality on marriage
6. Equal moral standard
7. Women Peers in their own right to be allowed to sit and vote in the House of Lords

The League inaugurated a fund to help women to be elected to Parliament. Links with Trade Unionism and Labour party.

Equal Franchise

During the 1920s the League campaigned actively for the granting of Equal Franchise that was eventually obtained through the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act which received the royal assent on 28 Jun 1928. It had been piloted through Parliament by the then Home Secretary, Mr Joynson-Hicks whose name was popularly given to the Act. Now that equal franchise had been obtained, the broad aim of equal citizenship was now the League's policy together with the promotion of a greater number of women in public office, especially as members of Parliament.

Equal Citizenship

From 1928 onwards the League therefore concentrated on obtaining equality for women throughout society. It continued to have a special interest in promoting the candidature of women for Parliament, an interest that began with the inauguration of a special fund for this purpose in the early twenties. In the international field of its work, the League maintained a close connection with the International Alliance of Women.