

A History of the suffragettes

The suffragettes were a group of women-led by Emeline Pankhurst- in the late 1800's and early 1900's that fought for women to have equal rights to men. Their actions were influenced by Russian protest methods, such as hunger strikes.

The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was the leading militant organisation, in the early 1900's, that campaigned for women's suffrage in the UK. The policies of the WSPU were controlled by Emmeline Pankhurst and her two daughters, Christabel and Sylvia. It was best known for hunger strikes and breaking the windows in prominent buildings, as it's moto was 'deeds not words'

Some of the motivation for their protests came from several other countries around the world giving women the right to vote; in 1893, New Zealand became the first self-governing country to allow



women over the age of 21 to vote in parliamentary elections. South Australia shortly followed in 1895 and women there gained the right to stand for parliament. White women over the age of 21 had already obtained the right to vote in the western territories of Wyoming in the USA in 1869. But when women in England hadn't been given the right to vote by 1903 Emeline Pankhurst decided the campaign would have to become radical to get a result.

In 1868 the first public meeting on the subject of the women's suffrage in the UK was held in Manchester's Free Trade Hall. One speaker there, Lydia Becker, wrote an article in March of 1867, in which she stated:

“It surely will not be denied that woman have, and ought to have opinions of their own on subjects of public interest, and on the events which arise as the world wends on its way. But if it be granted that women may, without offence, hold political opinions, on what ground can the right be withheld of giving the same expression or effect to their opinions as that enjoyed by their male neighbours.”

Becker also helped to gather signatures around Manchester for John Stuart Mill’s petition for women’s suffrage. Mill had been elected to parliament in 1865 and supported the women’s suffrage. The petition was presented to parliament in 1866 with 1499 signatures. Some of the signatures included: Florence Nightingale, Harriet Martineau, Josephine Butler and Mary Somerville.



Also to attend the meeting in 1867 was a young Emeline Pankhurst—though at the time being only 15 and having the surname Goulden. She later went on to marry Dr. Richard Pankhurst (who also attended the meeting and supported the campaign) in December 1879.

Emmeline Pankhurst

15 July 1858-14 June 1928



In 1913 protests reached new heights when Emily Davison, a member of the WSPU, walked onto the track at Epsom derby, during a race, and was consequently killed when hit by King George V’s horse.

Davison had a track record of fighting nobly for her cause; she was arrested nine times, went on hunger strike seven times and was force fed on forty-nine occasions. As a child she had a very normal life. She grew up in a middle class family and studied at Royal Holloway College, London, and St Hugh's College, Oxford. She then later went onto take jobs as a governess and a teacher. She joined the WSPU in November of 1906 and some became an officer of the organisation. Davison was also a chief steward during marches. Protest methods included: property damage and hunger strikes. These methods were countered by the government with force feeding and jailing. However the campaign would later become suspended due to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

Emily Davison

11 October 1872-8 June 1913



The women's suffrage finally became successful in 1918, when Women in Britain over the age of 30, meeting certain property qualifications, were given the right to vote. The government went on to further change the law in 1928; to all women over 21.

Opinion today is split, as to whether the militant tactics of the suffragettes helped or impeded their cause.