

## **Moravian Women's Association**

### **Home & Overseas Paper – April 2015**

#### **Votes for Women!**

We will all be considering shortly how to cast our votes on 7 May, or even whether to vote at all. Statistics show that older women are more likely to vote than younger women, possibly because older women have more of a sense of how hard it was to gain the vote in the first place, and to appreciate how important it is. This paper is a reminder of how far we have come in 100 years!

Women in the UK could vote in local government, school boards, and health authorities from the late 19th century. Their successful performance on those bodies won widespread support for Parliamentary votes for women. However, full Parliamentary voting rights or “suffrage” for women was not achieved until the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1918, the coalition Government granted the vote to women over the age of 30 who were householders, the wives of householders, occupiers of property with an annual rent of £5, and graduates of British universities. About 8.4 million women gained the vote. Women could also be elected into Parliament. In 1928 the Conservative Government extended voting to all women over the age of 21, granting women the vote on the same terms as men.

#### **How did this remarkable change happen?**

Most people know about the militant campaign begun by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). It started in Manchester in 1903 as a women only campaigning organisation and comprised all types of women, who were impatient with the lack of progress achieved by existing women's organisations. The WSPU was led by Emmeline Pankhurst, with her daughters Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst, who were middle class and educated, but among other leaders was Annie Kenney. She was one of 12 children of a poor working class family and started part-time work in a local cotton mill at the age of 10, as well as attending school; turning full-time at 13, which involved 12-hour shifts from 6 in the morning to 6 at night. She was a weaver in a mill, and one of her fingers was ripped off by a spinning bobbin. She became involved in trade-union activities, furthering her education through self-study, and was also a regular church attender.

#### **The militant suffragettes**

Many women (and men) supported votes for women, but did not support the militant suffragettes of the WSPU. Militant women were treated with contempt and ridicule, and physically abused. Militants broke windows in prominent buildings, and set fire to unoccupied houses and churches. There was an escalation of violence on both sides, the militants who were imprisoned went on hunger strike, and the Government resorted to force feeding, which was a kind of torture. Another militant Emily Davison, ran out in front of the King's horse running in the Derby in 1913 and was killed (although it's probable she did not intend to kill herself).

## Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney



During the First World War which started in 1914, because of conscription and the horrific casualty rate, there was a serious shortage of able-bodied men to work at home, and women were required to take on many of the traditional male jobs. This led to a new view of what a woman was capable of doing. The WSPU stopped its militant activities in 1914, to support the war effort, and they were rewarded by the limited voting rights in 1918. Some people have argued that the militant suffragettes who turned to violence actually discredited and postponed votes for women, but they were the most visible and best remembered part of a general movement in British society.

### **The results today**

There are currently about 150 women MPs out of 650, and Margaret Thatcher was of course Prime Minister in recent memory. You may have the opportunity to vote for a woman in the coming election!

Women had been campaigning since the 19<sup>th</sup> century for equal rights in education and employment, to own property or obtain a divorce. They craved not just the vote, but to end their economic, cultural, and social powerlessness. The campaigners who won the vote for women also helped to establish the principle of equality between men and women at home and at work.

This has made it easier to outlaw discrimination in everyday life against anyone because of race, religion, age, sexual orientation, or disability. There has been a revolution in attitudes for example against bullying and harassment – but a great deal remains to be

done. Women are still hugely at risk of domestic violence, and it has to be said that traditional religions of all kinds were never at the forefront of the equality movement. Divorce, birth control, and abortion law reform, for example, were all been opposed by male dominated religious establishments. Women still earn less than men, although open pay discrimination is illegal, and at the end of their working life, they receive less pension than men. The vast majority of single parent families are headed by women, and those families are more likely to be economically deprived than two parent families.

Overall though, we have a great deal to be thankful for, to both the militants of the WSPU, and the women who did not break windows, but stepped quietly into mens' jobs in the First World War (and gave them up when the men came home), and one of the ways we can show our thanks, is by using our vote on 7 May.

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