

Votes for Women: The Longer Term Perspective

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to put women's enfranchisement into a wider and longer term historical perspective. In this sense it is much more about the history of the development of democracy in the UK than about the specific impact of the Great War. The paper outlines the ways in which the demands for women to have political rights and the franchise – at both parliamentary and local government level – were gradually attained. The major Reform Acts of the nineteenth century, and the Representation of the People Acts of 1918 and 1928, provide a framework for my discussion. To this will be added the parallel reform of systems of local government and the municipal electorate. It should be noted here that the systems of local government in England and Wales and in Scotland were different in various respects – and thus reforms required separate legislation. It should also be noted that local government in the nineteenth century was very different from the forms of local government we now have. Indeed, with industrialisation and urbanisation in the nineteenth century it became necessary to introduce new systems of regulation and governance at local level – this included such things as police forces, sanitation, public health, changes in administration of the poor law, education being taken on by the state instead of churches and private providers, and so on. So, while the story of the vote for women has usually focused on the campaign for the parliamentary franchise, what was happening at local level had great importance to people's lives and women also wanted to be involved at this level.

This paper makes use of mostly Scottish evidence and examples in telling the story of women's entry into public and political life, but it should be understood that similar developments were going on in England and Wales, and to some extent internationally. There are two main reasons for the emphasis on Scottish evidence: firstly that this forms part of a Scottish historical narrative, although has often gone unrecognised; and secondly that it helps to illustrate how widespread women's campaigns were – they were not limited either to a small minority of women or a small number of places.

Women's demands for the vote

Perhaps a conventional starting point for the timeline for women's enfranchisement is the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Rights of Women* in 1792 (see 'Timeline: The Extension of the Franchise and Women's Demands for Political Rights'). In this work, published at the time of the French revolution, Wollstonecraft asserted women's equality with men, and criticised the defective education given to women. By the 1820s and 1830s a discourse of political rights for women was beginning to emerge. One important influence on this was the anti-slavery movement, which made claims for the equality of all human beings and their right to be free from enslavement, and by the 1840s female anti-slavery campaigners were beginning to demand equal rights for women. This is illustrated by the publication of Scotswoman Marion Reid's, *A Plea for Women*, published in 1843, which explicitly demanded the franchise for women.

The Reform Act of 1832 had, in England and Wales, explicitly excluded women from the franchise. However, this exclusion did occasion a petition to Parliament for the right of women, who had the necessary qualifications, to vote – a petition that was rejected. While making significant reforms to the franchise in Scotland, it does not seem to have given rise to any petitions from women. However, the limitations of the 1832 Reform Act provoked a working-class response in the form of the Chartist movement. The People's Charter was launched in 1838 (see 'Timeline' for the demands of the Charter)

and agitation around the Charter continued into the 1850s, although reached a peak around 1848, a year of revolutions across Europe. The movement included Female Associations, with at least twenty in Scotland. Some demanded female emancipation, such as the Gorbals Female Universal Suffrage Society, established in 1839.

The next significant phase of activity around extension of the franchise came in the 1860s. In 1867 and 1868 Reform Acts were passed respectively for England and Wales and for Scotland. This extended the male franchise by reducing property qualifications, although still excluded many working-class men. At this time efforts to gain the vote for women really began to take on momentum. Philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill, then Liberal MP for Westminster, introduced an amendment to replace 'man' with 'person' – and thus to include women – but this amendment was defeated. In 1867, Mill and his stepdaughter, Helen, had set up a provisional women's franchise committee, and in 1868 this became the London National Society for Women's Suffrage; in 1867 societies were also founded in Manchester and Edinburgh.

While the 1867/1868 Acts denied the parliamentary franchise to women, it was immediately after this that women began gaining access to the local government franchise. The position in England and Wales and in Scotland differed somewhat, and it was not until the 1890s that there was a broadly similar position across Britain. The main point, however, is that women in England could vote for and stand as poor law guardians from 1869 and for school boards from 1870, while women in Scotland could vote and stand for school boards from 1872. The franchise was still restricted and dependent on a property qualification, so it was middle-class women who gained this right. It marked their entry to public elected office as poor law guardians in England and Wales, and as school board members both in England and Wales and in Scotland. In 1894 women in Scotland gained the right to vote and stand for Parish Councils, the bodies responsible for administering the Poor Law in Scotland.

There was again an attempt to amend the 1884 Reform Act to extend the franchise to women – again rejected. This Act extended male householder voting rights and enfranchised a greater proportion of the working-class male population, although continued to exclude the poor. In 1900, for example, only 57 per cent of the adult male population in Scotland were registered as electors. However, a significant impact of the extension of the franchise to a greater number of working-class voters was the shift towards new forms of political party organisation; parties began to take on the form with which we have become familiar in the twentieth century. These new party organisations attracted women members as well as men, and by the 1890s women were becoming increasingly visible in political organisations such as the Primrose League (associated with the Conservative Party; by the early 1900s Women's Unionist Associations were being set up), the Scottish Women's Liberal Federation, the Independent Labour Party and the Fabian Society.

The late 1880s and 1890s witnessed further extensions of the municipal franchise to women, albeit remaining linked to property qualifications. In 1907 women gained the right to stand for town and county councils, and in the same year Lavinia Malcolm was the first woman to be elected to a town council in Scotland. In 1913 she became the first woman to be elected as provost of a town council, in Dollar, Clackmannanshire.

By this time there were many women's suffrage societies throughout Scotland, from Shetland to Dumfriess and Galloway. There were also militant organisations: the

Women's Social and Political Union formed branches in Scotland in 1906, and in 1907 the Women's Freedom League set up branches in Edinburgh and Glasgow. More moderate organisations also continued to flourish: in 1912 the Scottish Churches League for Woman Suffrage was founded and in 1913 the Northern Men's Federation for Women's Suffrage was set up. Women's organisations such as the British Women's Temperance Association (Scottish Christian Union) and the Scottish Co-operative Women's Guild had also been supporters of women's suffrage since before the turn of the century. By 1914 then – the year of the outbreak of the Great War – there was a mass women's movement in Scotland, as in the rest of the UK. A key focus of this movement was the demand for parliamentary suffrage, but the scope of women's interests included a range of policy issues, such as education for girls, public health, maternal and child health, regulation of prostitution, housing conditions, sweated labour and women's work, temperance and regulation of licensed premises, and so on.

Although many women had obtained the local government franchise, because it remained dependent on a property qualification, women were disadvantaged compared to men, in particular married women, many of whom were not householders in their own right, and male electors formed a large majority. Similarly women were disadvantaged in their rights to stand for public office. Nonetheless, by 1914 women had already had forty years' experience of public office, starting with school boards in 1872, and extending to parish and town councils. In Scotland in 1912 there were 100 women serving on 930 parish school boards, 43 women on 930 parish councils, and 2 women on town councils. This length of engagement in political and public life and commitment to the governance of local communities serves only to emphasise the degree of prejudice against women demonstrated by the repeated denial of the parliamentary franchise.

1918 and after

This paper does not discuss women's experiences during the war, or their continuing efforts to gain the franchise during the war, but moves on to ask how women reacted to the partial enfranchisement of the Representation of the People Act 1918. This Act stipulated that women over 30 could register as electors, if they, or their husband if they were married, qualified for the local government franchise. This retained an element of property qualification, and was particularly biased against single working-class women, such as living-in domestic servants, and non-householder spinsters. Thus, by 1921, only around 79.2 per cent of Scottish women 30 years or more had the vote.

The campaign for full enfranchisement thus continued. Following the 1918 Act, some suffrage societies dissolved, while others became Women Citizens' Associations or Societies for Equal Citizenship. They campaigned for the full franchise alongside organisations such as the Women's Freedom League, the Scottish Co-operative Women's Guild, the National Council of Women, and the British Women's Temperance Association. These organisations were concerned with a range of issues, from women's rights to public policy issues, and they also campaigned for women's representation on elected bodies.

The numbers of women on town councils increased after 1918, and in the inter-war years women became a recognised presence in local government, if still a minority. Representation at parliamentary level was harder to achieve: the first woman to represent a Scottish constituency was Katharine, Duchess of Atholl, elected as Unionist MP for Kinross and West Perthshire in 1923. The next woman to be elected for a Scottish constituency was Jennie Lee, elected at the age of 24 as Independent Labour Party MP in

the North Lanark by-election of 1929. To what extent Lee gained the support of women voters is impossible to tell, but she was one of the newly enfranchised young women who benefited from the 1928 Representation of the People Act, which finally gave women the vote on the same terms as men. Lee herself was well aware of the long struggle for the vote, and at the 1928 celebrations in Edinburgh, paid tribute to the pioneers of the women's movement for 'having borne the brunt of the battle for us' (*Scotsman*, 1 November, 1928).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the long term perspective on women's campaigns for political rights emphasises how processes of social and political change often take a long time to happen, and that such processes are often incremental and evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. This perspective also serves to indicate the breadth of women's interests in representation in public and political life and the range of concerns they had, as well as the decades of experience they had gained before 1918. And in doing so it also emphasises the enduring resistance by propertied male elites to the extension of the franchise to working-class men and to women of all classes. Concession of the principle that the vote was a political right not a privilege dependent on wealth or property or ability to pay rates or taxes took many reform Acts to achieve. The 1918 Act represented the effective concession of that principle, but the denial of the vote to all women harked back to the previous rule of privilege, and marred the 1918 Act's status as a democratic franchise.

Given the longer term perspective outlined in this paper, what part can we judge the war to have played in women's enfranchisement? We can dispense with the argument that the vote was a reward for women's contribution to the war effort, since it was denied to so many who had made a contribution, as munitions and agricultural workers, as nurses and doctors in field hospitals, and as volunteers who had supported the war effort in a range of capacities. Some historians have argued that the compromise offered in 1918 was done so in the hope that full enfranchisement of women could be put off for decades. It was, however, going to come sooner rather than later. The international context makes that clear, and in particular what was happening in the English-speaking world, the Dominions of the British empire and the USA, in parts of which women had begun to be enfranchised from around the 1890s. For example some US states had enfranchised women at that time, and New Zealand became the first country to do so in 1893: women in Britain were fully informed of such developments through international networks.

However, it can be argued that wars can speed up or intensify processes of social or political change already under way, and it seems undeniable that the experience of war removed any plausible opposition to adult manhood suffrage, thereby effectively conceding the principle. The full enfranchisement of women could not long be resisted thereafter, although British parliamentarians continued to drag their heels. But to focus on the war as the key factor in women's enfranchisement is to distort and misunderstand the process of democratisation in Britain, and it obscures the actions of the many women and men who persistently supported the cause of democracy from the early nineteenth century onwards.

Esther Breitenbach, University of Edinburgh
January, 2014

Secondary literature: selected reading

Breitenbach, Esther, Linda Fleming, S. Karly Kehoe and Lesley Orr (eds), *Scottish Women: A Documentary History, 1780-1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), especially Chapter 7, 'Protest and Politics'.

Breitenbach, Esther and Pat Thane (eds), *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (London: Continuum, 2010)

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