



**Suffragettes protesting outside Duke Street Prison, c 1914.** These women were members of the Women's Social and Political Union. (Glasgow City Council, Glasgow Museums)

# The Conciliatory Suffragette

**Sarah Pedersen**

It is not perhaps the first place you would look for correspondence from the likes of Mrs Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel, but Aberdeen Art Gallery houses a small collection of letters dating from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and written by and to Caroline Phillips, the honorary secretary of the Aberdeen branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The Watt Collection – so called because it was donated by a family member named Watt – throws some interesting light on the relationships between Scottish suffragettes and their leadership in London.

## Who were the WSPU?

The first committees to campaign for the enfranchisement of British women were formed in London in 1866, and by January 1871 the National Society

for Women's Suffrage had formed a committee in Edinburgh, with branches in Aberdeen, Glasgow, St Andrews and Galloway. The city of Aberdeen saw its first public meeting to support the claims of women householders for the vote in April of that year. This was held at the Music Hall with Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, the pioneering women doctor, as one of the main speakers. However, despite enthusiastic petitions and meetings in favour of woman suffrage held all over the country, the Third Reform Act of 1884 enfranchised many more men, but no women. A woman suffrage amendment had been moved, but did not pass.

From this period until 1903 around a dozen petitions, resolutions and private members' bills for woman suffrage were presented to the House of Commons, but none were success-

ful. In 1897, twenty London and provincial societies amalgamated into the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (the NUWSS) with Millicent Garrett Fawcett, younger sister of Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, as President. The NUWSS was the most important and numerous of what became known as the 'constitutional' or suffragist societies, who believed that petitions, meetings and lobbying members of Parliament would eventually win the day for the cause through the education of the electorate. Although the Edinburgh and Glasgow and West of Scotland Associations for Women's Suffrage had become affiliated to the NUWSS by 1903, it was not until 1905 that the Aberdeen society, by then numbering some 60–70 members, joined the national union.



Caroline Phillips (left) and her cousin Agnes Simpson (right) c.1900. (Rosemary Watt).

By this time, the constitutional societies had gained a more militant competitor for membership. In 1903, growing frustrated by the apparent lack of success of the constitutional societies, Emmeline Pankhurst, widow of a socialist politician from Manchester, formed the Women's Social and Political Union to campaign for women's right to the vote. She was supported in this by her three daughters, Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, and also her son Harry, who tends to be forgotten and who, always a sickly youth, died before the outbreak of the First World War. The first act of 'militancy' occurred in October 1905 when Christabel and Annie Kenney, a working-class factory girl from Oldham, disrupted a party political meeting in Manchester by heckling the speakers. They were arrested after Christabel spat at a policeman. Faced with the payment of a fine or a short prison sentence, both opted to be

imprisoned. The resulting publicity was an educational experience for the leadership of the WSPU and they adopted these new 'tactics' of interrupting meetings and refusing to pay fines, inspiring their followers with the slogan 'Deeds Not Words'. Further newspaper publicity followed, and it was at this time that the *Daily Mail* coined the term 'suffragettes'.

At the beginning of 1906, the Liberal party came to power under the leadership of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, and the WSPU moved its headquarters to Clement's Inn in London to continue its militant campaign in the capital. It might have been expected that a Liberal government would lend a more sympathetic ear to the demands for votes for women. Indeed, Millicent Garrett Fawcett calculated that the 1906 parliament contained 400 members pledged to the *principle* of women's suffrage, and the cabinet contained several pro-suf-

fragists, including David Lloyd-George. However, other members of the cabinet, in particular the Chancellor Asquith, were opposed to woman suffrage and even those Liberal MPs who had indicated their support in principle were concerned that widening the suffrage to include women property-owners would only benefit the Conservative party. It must be remembered that, at this time, most suffragists and suffragettes were campaigning for access to the vote on equal terms with men – and that not all men had the vote. It was at this time that the WSPU formed its policy of opposition to all government candidates, irrespective of their views on the subject of woman suffrage, a policy which, as shall be seen, was a difficult one to implement in a Liberal heartland such as Aberdeenshire. Scotland featured prominently in suffrage campaigns. Asquith, Haldane and Churchill, leading members of the Liberal government which came to power in 1906, all held Scottish seats at one point or another and Scotland, in particular Aberdeenshire, was a great stronghold of Liberalism in the UK.

The WSPU organised meetings and established branches all over the country, including Scotland. One of the leadership, Teresa Billington, spoke in Glasgow in the autumn of 1906, where she inspired Helen Fraser, a local illustrator, to join the organisation. Having campaigned in England for the suffragettes for a year, Fraser was asked to return to Glasgow in 1907 to become treasurer of the Glasgow WSPU and an organiser for the union in Scotland. Teresa Billington-Greig (she married around this time) was an important figure for the establishment of the WSPU in Scotland, and so it was badly damaged when she led a break-away group to form the Women's Freedom League. Horrified by what they saw as a lack of democracy in the WSPU and frustrated by the new personality cult of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst as the leaders of a WSPU 'army', Billington-Grieg and Charlotte Despard broke away from the WSPU in October 1907. While Helen Fraser remained loyal to the Pankhursts, her importance to the Scottish branches and her establishment of a *Scottish Women's Social and Political Union* with a headquarters in Glasgow soon meant that she too was seen as a threat to the leadership in London and, when



**The Suffragette Leaders, WSPU.** (from left to right) **Miss Christabel Pankhurst, Mrs Pankhurst, Miss Adela Pankhurst and Mrs Pethick Lawrence.** (The Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)

she publicly disagreed with the new militant tactics such as stone-throwing in 1908, she was asked to resign. A skilled and committed organiser, Fraser was immediately snatched up by the constitutional NUWSS in Scotland. This ousting of Helen Fraser was merely the first instance of a Scottish woman being removed from leadership in the WSPU when she seemed to offer an alternative, and critical, figurehead to the London-based Pankhursts.

#### Mutiny in Aberdeen

Most of the letters in the Watt Collection are written by or addressed to Caroline Phillips, honorary secretary of the Aberdeen branch. Her correspondents in the letters included members of the WSPU such as Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst, but she also corresponded with Helen Fraser, both before and after her removal from the WSPU. As the affectionate tone of this letter to Caroline

Phillips shows, Fraser did not allow political differences to separate her from her former comrades.

My dear

I have thought of you often lately but have been away 'caravanning' for the cause – and it seems utterly impossible to get letters written when one is leading that simple but strenuous life. The National Union of WSS asked me if I would go and help so I went and we had



splendid meetings.... That is Mrs Fawcett's Society and I have promised to work for them for some time later on – I am glad to get working for Suffrage, of course – and am happy doing so. I had a very worrying time before I resigned and felt very tired and ill when I did. I still could do with more rest but feel much better and as if I saw things clearer. It doesn't seem true, even yet, that I am no longer connected with you all – I feel sure somehow we shall still work together for Suffrage....

Una Dugdale has been asking me if I can come up for September 2<sup>nd</sup> (she thinks of having a meeting) and I have written and said 'Yes'. If I come I shall see you and have a talk I hope....

*Helen Fraser*

The Una Dugdale referred to in the last paragraph of the letter was also a member of the WSPU, which she had joined when in London from Aberdeen for 'the season' in 1907. A young member of the upper classes, whose family kept a town house in London as well as Gordon Lodge in Aboyne, Una Dugdale accompanied Mrs Pankhurst on several tours of Scotland. In January 1912 her marriage to Victor Duval, the founder of the Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement, caused scandal when the bride tried to insist on the removal of 'obey' from the marriage service. The fact that such a radical member of the WSPU was still in correspondence with the outcast Helen Fraser and was inviting her to a meeting shows the inter-connectedness of suffrage activists in Scotland at this time, despite the heavy-handed action of the Pankhursts. Incidentally, the caravan referred to in the first paragraph of Fraser's letter was owned by Louisa Innes Lumsden, leader of the Aberdeen NUWSS, which she loaned for campaigning purposes during the summer months.

As well as holding the position of honorary secretary of the Aberdeen branch, Phillips worked for her living as a woman journalist at the *Aberdeen Daily Journal*. Established in 1748, the *Journal* is one of the oldest newspapers in Europe and, notwithstanding Phillip's progressive views, was the more conservative of the two daily newspapers in Aberdeen, the other being the more liberal *Free Press*. Although the editor of the *Aberdeen*



*Helen Fraser. (The Common Cause, 1909)*

*Journal*, Robert Anderson, did not approve of Caroline Phillips' involvement in women's politics, he does appear to have allowed her to use the *Journal's* offices as her correspondence address for such activities, despite complaints. In January 1908 she received a letter from the newspaper's management warning her that she was identifying herself too closely with the woman suffrage movement and thus imperilling her position at the *Journal*. Despite this warning, Phillips continued her association with the WSPU and since she continued to use the *Journal* address and stationery for at least another year it does not seem to have forced her to change her behaviour very much. This behaviour included chaining herself to railings in the centre of Aberdeen, window-breaking and the overnight replacement of all the flags on the golf course at Balmoral with WSPU colours. While the raid on Balmoral was done anonymously, Caroline's exploits in Aberdeen were very public ones – made more so by her relationship with the conservative *Journal*. Indeed, the first that her brother James, also a journalist with the *Journal*, knew of some of her stunts was when he was sent to report on them for the paper!

One reason that the collection of Phillips's letters is so interesting is because of the light it throws on the relations between local political societies in Aberdeenshire and with the WSPU leadership based in London. Phillips's correspondence shows that, during the period of her secretaryship, she was attempting to negotiate between the official policies of both the WSPU and the local branch of the Women's Liberal Federation in order to achieve a compromise between the militant acts urged by Clement's Inn and her own desire for a more conciliatory position. However, no suggestion of such behind-the-scenes manoeuvring is given in the letters written to the Aberdeen newspapers by Phillips in her role as honorary secretary of the local WSPU branch.

To an outside observer, the relationship between the Aberdeen Women's Liberal Association (WLA) and the local branch of the WSPU did not look amicable. With a Liberal government in power, Liberal women were being urged by the WSPU basically to go on strike – to refuse to raise funds or work for Liberal candidates and MPs in any way until the government had agreed to support a Woman Suffrage Bill. Many of the leaders of

WPSU suffragettes  
with Mrs  
Pankhurst



the Aberdeen WLA, such as Mrs Black the President and Mrs Allan the honorary secretary, were also involved in the campaign for the vote through membership of the constitutional NUWSS. However, while most Liberal women were in favour of some form of woman suffrage, and the Association petitioned the party for action on this front, the official line was that it was not worth bringing down the government and that the Liberal government was far more beneficial for women than any Conservative government could be.

The battle for the hearts and minds of the women of Aberdeenshire was in full swing in the columns of the two daily newspapers, the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* and the *Aberdeen Free Press*. Again and again, members and officials of the Aberdeen Women's Liberal Association railed against the militant policies of the WSPU and swore to remain true to the Liberal government. Even more frequently, members and officials of the local WSPU vigorously defended their actions and poured scorn on the spineless acquiescence of the Liberal women to the dictates of their lords and masters.

Allow me space to express the opinion of a few of the Liberal women in Aberdeenshire on the tactics of these southern suffragists who think it their duty (when we

have any special meeting on to discuss politics) to come and fight our cause for us. Let me tell them at once, they would better stay at home, as we are quite able to look after our own interests, but we will certainly not do so in the way they act, a course of procedure which makes us women ashamed of our sex.

Member of the East Aberdeenshire Women's Liberal Association, Letter to the Editor of the *Free Press*, 27 December 1907.

I was born and bred a Liberal, and I have never seen cause to change the political faith of my girlhood. I believe still in Liberalism, but my faith in my Liberals is being shaken. I cordially agree with Miss Philips, the hon. secretary of the WSPU, that the time has come when every woman who really wishes the vote ought to put the question of woman suffrage before attachment to any political party.

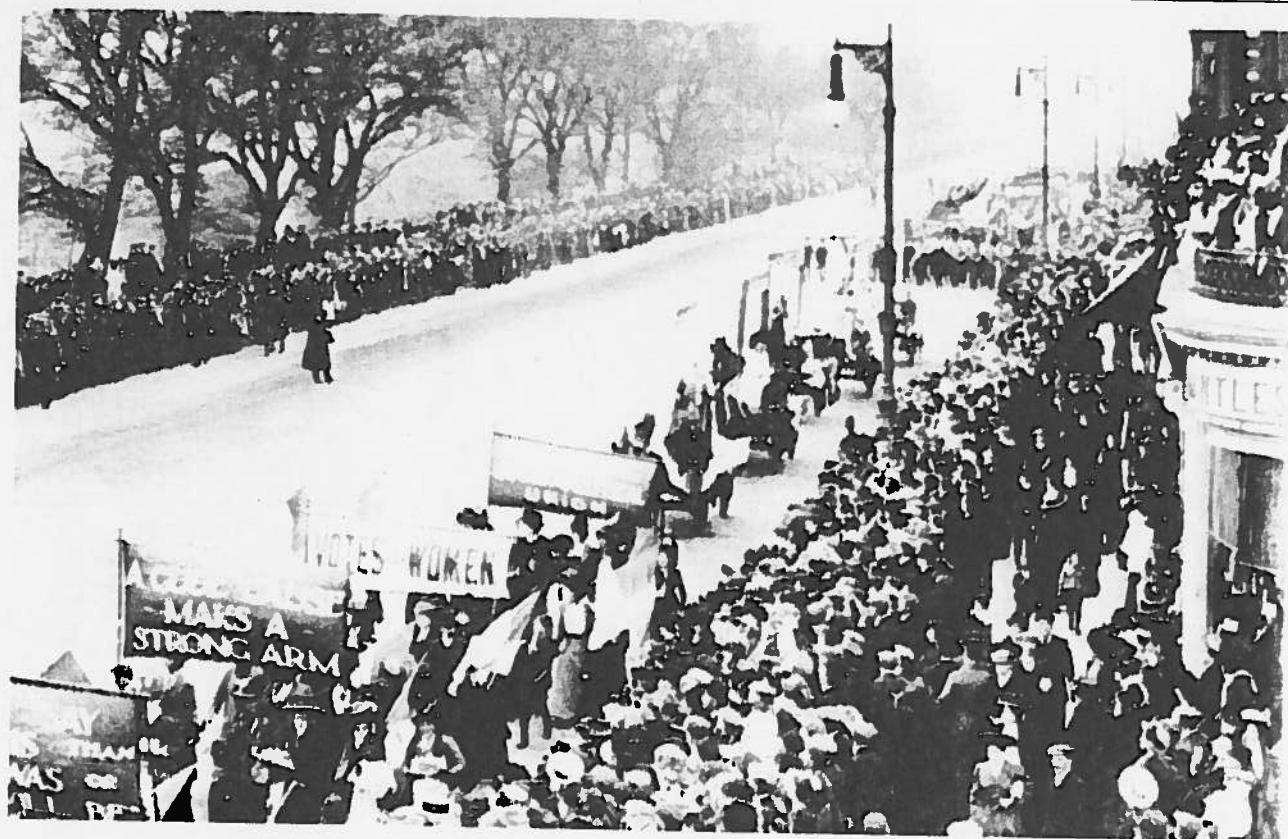
Would-be Elector, Letter to the Editor of the *Aberdeen Free Press*, 25 December 1907.

Anyone reading the above letters and the many more on the subject of the behaviour of the WSPU that were published in the Aberdeen daily newspapers during the winter of 1907-08

would be forgiven for believing that the local branches of the WSPU and the Women's Liberal Association were at daggers drawn. However, away from the mud-slinging of public pronouncements, a more complex picture can be uncovered. The whole truth is that the local leaders of both the WSPU and the Liberal ladies were in far better accord than their public statements revealed. They were in fact engaged in private negotiations throughout that winter which eventually led to all three leaders – Caroline Phillips, Mrs Black and Mrs Allan – being removed from their positions by the following spring.

One of Caroline Phillips's first letters to the press on the subject of the Liberal women and their timidity was printed in the *Journal* in November 1907. Referring to a planned visit by Asquith to Aberdeen that December and his apparent willingness to meet with a delegation from the Women's Liberal Association, she warned:

Let the Women Liberals of Aberdeen therefore try their luck with him if they are really in earnest about the matter. They may find that when they attempt to put such principles into practice, they are tackling the strongest prejudices the world has ever known; and if they really want jus-



tice granted to their sex, the treatment they receive will assuredly bring them to the 'tactics' [ie militant tactics] frame of mind.

However, on 28 November 1908, a few days after the appearance of this letter in the press, Caroline Phillips wrote a more conciliatory private letter to Mrs Allan, honorary secretary of the Aberdeen WLA, concerning Asquith's visit. It was planned to hold a Liberal party meeting at the Music Hall, and there were fears that the suffragettes would disrupt the meeting, as they had elsewhere in the country. For this reason, there were rumours that all women would be banned from the Music Hall, which obviously would not suit the Liberal women any more than the suffragettes. Caroline Phillips wrote privately to Mrs Allan suggesting that 'Mr Asquith has been dealt with so very effectively by the WSPU in various centres of political activity that our Aberdeen WSPU are in the mood to leave him severely alone'. She admitted that 'I am not speaking with complete authority, but I think that we as a Union will readily agree to keep away altogether, if other women here are to be thus punished on our account.' She most definitely was *not* speaking with complete authority, and a few days later had to defend her actions in a letter to the leadership of the WSPU in London.

We agree with the efficacy of Mrs Pankhurst's tactics and we should, acting completely under her instructions, likely be asked to go to Mr Asquith's meeting and make it impossible for him to speak – a perfectly justifiable proceeding. On the other hand one prefers to regard him, on this occasion, as Mr Murray's guest and we believe that any strong action on our part would be a wanton insult to Mr Murray [the local Liberal MP] and might make it difficult for him to help us so openly in the future. We are prepared to take extreme measures like the others but we must, as the independent Aberdeen WSPU be the judges as to when and where that action is politic... In London at a distance – local matters cannot be appreciated but they are often the things that matter a great deal.

Rebellion indeed! A letter arrived at the local WSPU branch on 11 December announcing that Mrs Pankhurst would be arriving in the city on 12 December to lead a raid on Asquith's meeting. There apparently was still some agreement that Asquith would be given an uninterrupted hearing if Mrs Black, the women Liberal's President, was allowed to put one question to him regarding woman suffrage. When she attempted to do so,

however, she was told that she was out of order. However, the main protagonist in disrupting the meeting was an elderly local Unitarian minister, Alexander Webster, who rose from the platform and attempted to move a woman suffrage rider to the official resolution. There was uproar – two stewards rushed forward to attempt to eject him while Mr Webster defended himself vigorously in the orchestra pit until the MP James Murray ordered the stewards to withdraw. Mrs Pankhurst then rose on to her seat at the back of the hall and was dragged off by stewards.

An infuriated correspondent, describing herself as a Woman Liberal, wrote to the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* the next day to complain:

I was deeply grieved to see the unseemly struggle in the orchestra, particularly as the individual concerned was an old man, and, had I been near, I should at once have gone to his assistance. I must confess, however, that, while standing on Union Street after the meeting, this kindly feeling received rather a rude shock, when who should pass, looking quite trim, alert and happy, but our friend Mr Webster, hand in glove with the Suffragists.... It was perfectly obvious to any observant eye that the bulk of the audience really enjoyed the

**(left) Demonstration,  
Edinburgh October  
1909.**

(People's Story  
Museum, Edinburgh)

**Women's Freedom  
League demonstration on Glasgow  
Green in 1914.**

(Glasgow City  
Council, Glasgow  
Museums)



Suffragist affair – and assuredly the ladies (?) themselves did. Their conduct, I am sorry to say, was by no means lady-like; but these tactics seem to pay, thanks to the usual blundering stupidity of the sterner sex. ... The Press, I need hardly say, have greatly magnified the absurd affair. Men again!

This incident unleashed a storm of letters to the editor on the subject to both Aberdeen daily newspapers. A letter from Christabel Pankhurst to Caroline Phillips in December 1907 stated that she was 'very glad to hear that the correspondence still goes on'. Again, in her public role as honorary secretary of the WSPU branch, Caroline Phillips staunchly defended the actions of the militants, and gave no hint in her letters to the *Journal* and *Free Press* of any disagreements behind the scenes – indeed she stated that the whole event had been stage managed by herself and Mrs Pankhurst.

Despite the events of December, Caroline Phillips continued her private attempts to persuade at least some of the Liberal ladies as to the justice of the suffragettes' cause. In January 1908 a letter from Mrs Black, while noting that she could do nothing *officially*, cordially invited Phillips to a private meeting in her home in order to speak to some of the 'more ardent reformers on our committee'. This was followed by an invitation for Mrs Black

and Mrs Allan to sit on the platform at a forthcoming suffrage meeting where Christabel Pankhurst was to speak. The meeting took place on 22 January and Mrs Black and Mrs Allan were joined on the platform by Mrs Milne, the Acting Vice-President for Scotland of British Women's Temperance Association and Mrs James Murray, wife of the Liberal MP. Heated debate about their presence on the same platform as Christabel broke out in the Aberdeen newspapers' letters column the following day. Some correspondents deplored their association with such a notorious trouble-maker, feeling that they had made 'a sorry joke' of themselves, while others applauded their courage. One correspondent, signing herself 'A Woman Liberal', demanded to know whether the ladies on the platform had been acting for themselves or for their association, ending her letter with 'Feminine inconsistency and elementary lack of logic is, perhaps, charming in a drawing room, but applied to politics it certainly does not add "sweetness and light" to public affairs'. This last sally prompted a response from Mrs Allan herself. Claiming to presume that 'A Woman Liberal' was really a man in disguise, she defended the decision of herself and Mrs Black to attend the meeting while pointing out that their record of active support of the Liberal party during elections was second to none. However, 'This is a

woman's question, and we must be loyal to our womanhood'. She ended by threatening the resignation of both Mrs Black and herself should their actions not have the support of the committee of the Aberdeen WLA.

Despite her strong words in the *Free Press*, Mrs Allan was obviously privately very annoyed at the way the meeting had been run. This is evident from the letter she sent to Caroline Phillips on the subject on 5 February:

I have no hesitation in saying I do not think the WSPU 'played the game' in connection with 'The Suffrage Demonstration'.... I object strongly to Miss Pankhurst taking up the whole hour in a defence of tactics pursued, we went to hear an educative address on Suffrage not to hear the WSPU extolled all the time. It was not courteous.

Caroline Phillips responded at once pointing out that Mrs Allan and Mrs Black had heard Christabel speak before and so were perhaps being slightly naïve to expect her to restrict herself to inoffensive generalities. Again, the letters in the Watt Collection help us to construct a more rounded picture of the affair than one seen purely through the letters published in the newspapers. While Mrs Allan was prepared to defend their actions in public, it is clear that in pri-



vate both she and Mrs Black considered themselves to have been used by the WSPU to make a political point. A short while later, both ladies resigned – probably under force – from the committee of the Aberdeen WLA. Caroline Phillips did not last as honorary secretary of the WSPU branch for much longer. In early 1909, she was ousted from this position by the arrival in Aberdeen of Sylvia Pankhurst and an activist called Ada Flatman. Ties between the London leadership and the Aberdeen branch were reinforced and the independence of action which Caroline Phillips had used to negotiate with the Liberal ladies was removed. From then on, the Aberdeen branch was organised by a

from bulky manuscripts. After mauling you beyond all recognition, they ... wiped up the floor with Sylvia Pankhurst.

Such an ousting of a local Scottish leader by the Pankhursts was to happen again in 1914 when Janie Allan, chief organiser and financier of the WSPU in Glasgow and a member of a wealthy socialist shipping family, was removed by the Pankhursts after an attempt at bargaining with the Glasgow Lord Provost. She had promised no militancy during a royal visit to the area if the suffragette prisoners at Perth were not forcibly fed. She was removed and both the militancy and the force-feeding went ahead.



Caroline Phillips age 75 (centre) with her cousin Mary Watt (right) and Rosina Watt (left). Kintore kirkyard is in the background of the photo c.1946-7. (Rosemary Watt).

succession of activists sent by the London headquarters and no home-grown leader was allowed the same independence of action again.

Ironically, Sylvia Pankhurst herself was later to be ousted from the WSPU by her mother and sister Christabel. Her East London Federation of the WSPU split from the WSPU in 1913 and renamed itself the East London Federation of the Suffragettes. Even as early as 1909 in Aberdeen, WSPU workers loyal to Emmeline and Christabel were turning against Sylvia. A sympathiser writing to Caroline Phillips described the goings-on at a committee meeting in Aberdeen:

An atmosphere of virtuous indignation pervaded the front benches, and there was something irresistibly funny in the solemnity with which the enormities of our secretary [Phillips] were reeled off

Caroline Phillips disappeared from the political scene in Aberdeen after her dismissal by the Pankhursts. In fact, she left Aberdeen and her life as a journalist altogether soon after. During the First World War Phillips inherited the Station Hotel in Banchory, Aberdeenshire, from an aunt, which she ran until her retirement in the 1940s to Kintore. She is buried in the cemetery in Kintore where her gravestone can be still be read: 'Caroline Agnes Isabella Phillips, journalist, died 13th January 1956, aged 85.'

The letters of Caroline Phillips are evidence that, at a local level, similarly minded women did try to work together over various issues despite political differences. The evidence from Aberdeen is that women from the militant and constitutional suffragist organisations, plus some from the Women's Liberal Association, were attempting to co-exist and even to

assist one another. Such a spirit of co-operation, however, was not newsworthy and did not promote the cause of the WSPU to its widest audience. Militancy and controversy did and thus it is understandable that the Pankhursts acted swiftly when the WSPU's united front against the Liberal party was threatened from within. The attempts of local Scottish leaders such as Helen Fraser, Caroline Phillips and later Janie Allan to compromise WSPU tactics for the sake of gaining a local advantage were perceived as a weakening of the WSPU army in its war against the government and were thus summarily disposed of. Caroline Phillips was in a particularly difficult position in the heartland of Liberal Aberdeenshire where support for the government was overwhelming. Thus acts that could smack of co-operation with the Liberal party were swiftly stamped out – if necessary, by the arrival of a Pankhurst in the city. The swift arrival of first Mrs Pankhurst to lead the locals in their disruption of Asquith's meeting and secondly her daughter to oust Caroline Phillips from her position, shows the importance they placed on a united WSPU toeing the line with the policies laid down in London. Any attempts at deviation from such policies, even in the far north of Scotland, and backed by appeals to take into account local difficulties, was to be stopped immediately.

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### Further reading

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The Watt Collection, Aberdeen Art Gallery.