



## **Words and Deeds: Discord between the British Parliament and the Women's Social and Political Union relating to the First Conciliation Bill of 1910**

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*This article focuses on the question of women's suffrage in Britain by analyzing the interaction between the House of Commons and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) - the radical suffrage organization founded in 1903 and led by the famous Pankhursts. Central to this study are parliamentary debates relating to the Parliamentary Franchise (Women) Bill, better known as the first Conciliation Bill in 1910, as well as the writings published in 1910 in WSPU's periodical, Votes for Women. To give a fresh angle to existing research on the question of female franchise, the parliamentary aspect is emphasized and connected to the suffragettes, the members of the WSPU. The kind of influence the first Conciliation Bill had on the relationship between these two protagonists is of particular interest in this article. Consideration is also given as to how, on the one hand, Members of Parliament (MPs) justified their arguments both for and against female franchise, and on the other hand, how suffragettes validated their demand for the vote. This article proposes that there was a distinct interaction between the British Parliament and WSPU. This interaction not only consisted of arguments by MPs for and against women's suffrage and the pro-suffrage writings of the WSPU, but also of deeds, even violent ones. In 1910, the WSPU's motto, "deeds, not words"[1] was overturning to be "words and deeds" or even "words, not deeds".*

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## Introduction

The struggle for the enfranchisement of women has become one of the best-known aspects of British parliamentary reform in the early twentieth century (Machin 2001; Morgan 1975; Purvis & Hannam 2020; Rover 1967; Vickery 2001). Indeed, the struggle turned from a peaceful campaign into a domestic crisis which Parliament had to confront, especially concerning the radical suffrage organization known as the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and its members, suffragettes. The WSPU, which was founded in 1903, and was led by Emmeline (1858-1928) and Christabel Pankhurst (1880-1958), have been in the focus of many historical studies over the past few decades. This is due to the fact that the WSPU was one of the most militant suffrage organizations in Britain and thus a illustrative example of what a female extra-parliamentary pressure group could do (Liddington 2014; Pugh 2001; Purvis 2003; Purvis & Hannam 2020; Raeburn 1973; Rosen 1974). This organization actually expressed its extreme discontent with radical activities, thus challenging Parliament in its traditional democratic role which excluded women from the political decision making. The WSPU members were dubbed "suffragettes" by the Daily Mail in January 1906, and a suffragist, in turn, was a more general term for members of other suffrage movements, whether radical or conservative, male or female. This difference also made the WSPU kind of a unique organization (Purvis 2000).

Overall, women's suffrage question has been approached by researchers from many different angles, such as the viewpoint of the suffragettes and suffragists, focusing on various women's suffrage organizations, their leaders or the rank-and-file members, different regions of Britain and the anti-suffragist point of view. The relationship between the suffragettes and the British Parliament has also been a research subject in some studies, but the suffragette point of view has been emphasized. Albeit the role of Parliament in the question of women's suffrage was crucial, the parliamentary aspect of the subject has often been left in the background. Even in the year 2018 (and after that), a hundred years after the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed by the British Parliament enfranchising all men over 21, as well as all women over the age of 30 who met minimum property qualifications, studies relating to British women's suffrage have not focused on the parliamentary point of view. Overall, and rhetoric aside, the language and argumentation in Parliament have not gained much attention until recently (Häkkinen 2014; Ihalainen 2017; Ilie 2016; Roitto 2015). Thus, there is still room for a new study in this field.

The power to grant the enfranchisement of women lay partly in the hands of the Members of Parliament (MP) who could change the law to enable women to vote. Highlighting this perspective and intertwining these two actors should therefore cast fresh light on the struggle for women's suffrage. In this article, the thoughts and arguments of both the MPs and the suffragettes about the question of women's suffrage will be studied. On the suffragette side, the emphasis is on the leaders of the WSPU: Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (1867-1954). These leaders were the voice of the leadership. A consideration is given especially on what kind of influence the first Conciliation Bill in 1910 [2] had on the relation between MPs and the suffragettes. The enfranchisement of women can be seen as part of a wider domestic issue, which needed to be attended or at least made less significant.

In this article, both parliamentary debates and articles from 1910 published in WSPU's official journal (and also an important mouthpiece for women's suffrage) *Votes for Women* [3] relating to the first Conciliation Bill are studied in depth by analyzing them side by side and thus forming a new viewpoint of women's suffrage. In 1910, the House of Commons debated on the First Conciliation Bill on 11 and 12 July, and this debate is the main parliamentary source in this article. The debate lasted many hours, and the floor was taken over a hundred times for and against the women's suffrage. This material can be found in the Official Report's Historical Hansard website that has been utilized in this study. The suffragette point of view has been studied through the *Votes for Women* journal which had a weekly frequency in 1910. In every journal there was an editorial written by Emmeline Pankhurst, Christabel Pankhurst or Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. These editorials are the main primary source for the WSPU in this article, and they have been chosen by their content for deeper analysis.

Although different from their form, these two forums engaged in the same discussion at various levels. It can be argued that the suffragettes and MPs had an interaction that consisted not only words but also deeds. When MPs said or did something relating to women's suffrage, the suffragettes responded to it in kind by writings or action such as deputations, bigger demonstrations, or even militant tactics, and almost immediately. These militant tactics included breaking windows in shops and prominent buildings, heckling MPs, and later on breaking the law to force arrests by destroying property, setting fire to letterboxes, destroying golf courses and even committing arsons (Harrison 1982). Militancy was used to get attention from the public and from the Government and it was seen also as a key factor in helping to bring about a successful conclusion to the women's suffrage campaign (Purvis 2019). In this article, these steps from peaceful interaction to a militant culmination point are studied by focusing on following questions: what kind of influence the first Conciliation Bill had on the relationship between the British Parliament and the suffragettes? And how, on the one hand, MPs justified their arguments both for and against female franchise, and on the other hand, how suffragettes validated their demand for the vote?

The first Conciliation Bill is chosen as a case study because it is considered to be one of the most important attempts at passing a women's suffrage bill in Britain in the early twentieth century. It is important to bear in mind that the question of women's suffrage had surfaced the House of Commons debates as early as 1867, when the Liberal MP John Stuart Mill introduced an amendment to the wording of the suffrage bill [4] then under consideration. He proposed that the word "man" be replaced with the word "person", which would have given women the right to vote in parliamentary elections in same terms as men. Mill's amendment was defeated then, but it was a starting point for the wider demand for women's suffrage. (Rendall 2001, 169-170.)

Between the years 1870-1909, bills focusing on women suffrage were introduced in Parliament over sixty times and 17 of these bills proceeded into second reading. But before 1910, over 40 years after Mill's amendment, actual women's suffrage was no closer to being realized, even if women had gained other rights elsewhere and the overall emancipation of women had made progress. Women's suffrage was proving to be a very complicated issue for Parliament to resolve. In the early twentieth century, it was not only women who were excluded from voting - there was no universal suffrage

for men in Britain either. Only adult male property owners and so-called “ten-pound lodgers” [5] with twelve months’ residence required were eligible to vote in parliamentary elections. In this respect, it has been argued that roughly two thirds of the adult male population were also thus disenfranchised. (Mayhall 2003, 14-15.)

However, the first Conciliation Bill brought high hopes for suffragists and suffragettes because never before had a women’s suffrage bill been given two days for debating. This was of note because the Government and Parliament had various challenges, denunciations and rebellions, of their own to deal with as well. The Home Rule crisis over Ireland, the issue of trade unions, and the power struggle between the House of Commons and House of Lords were all major factors, which also had to be taken into account. In addition, in the early years of the twentieth century saw the Boer Wars in South Africa aggravate matters by splitting the country into pro- and anti-war factions. The political landscape in Parliament was shifting too, as the relatively new Labour Party, the successor of the Labour Representation Committee responded to an increasing need to represent the interests of working people, trade unionists and socialists in Government. (Lang 1999, 111-112; Mayhall 2003, 25). However, it is good to bear in mind that a wider women’s emancipation movement was simultaneously going on around Europe, other parts of the British Empire, and also in America where women had begun to demand rights such as the vote. Thus, the British Parliament had to respond in some level to the question for women’s suffrage.

The Conciliation Bill was so called because it was supposed to represent the maximum level of agreement between suffragists in all parties. This bill, promoted by an unofficial Conciliation Committee, would have given votes for little more than a million women householders and women occupiers of business premises with some restrictions [6] (Morgan D. 1975, 66; Pankhurst S. 1931, 337). The bill was introduced as a private member’s bill [7] in the House of Commons on 14 June 1910. It then came up for debate several weeks later, on 11 and 12 of July 1910. (HC Deb 11 July 1910 vol 19 cc41-150; HC Deb 12 July 1910 vol 19 cc207-333.) As the Liberal Prime Minister (PM) Herbert Henry Asquith stated at the time, the first Conciliation Bill aroused so much interest that it justified

...the decision of the Government to allow, for the first time in our Parliamentary history, a full and adequate opportunity for the discussion of an issue which is no less grave because it does not belong to the domain of party politics (HC Deb 12 July 1910 vol 19 c244).

Before this bill, the House of Commons had had a second reading debate whether to give women the franchise previous time in 1908. That debate lasted only for one Friday afternoon, and the bill remained at the committee stage. (HC Deb 28 February 1908 vol 185 cc212-287.) Thus, over two years had passed since the House of Commons had debated on women’s suffrage bill, although the demand for franchise had been almost fierce at that time. The WSPU succeeded in focusing an enormous amount of attention on the suffrage issue by using militant tactics, and yet the parliamentary response to women’s demands for the vote remained cool. However, in 1910 the WSPU restrained militant actions in order to give the new Parliament time to settle the question of women’s suffrage, but the interaction between the MPs and the suffragettes was still

alive. It developed during the year 1910 first being quite peaceful but step by step it escalated into a conflict which culminated in a tangible struggle. (Bearman 2005; Harrison 1983.)

In this article, this development from peace to some kind of warfare like action is studied next. First, the peaceful interaction between the suffragettes and the British Parliament in early 1910 is analyzed. Then the interaction within the House of Commons both for and against the women's suffrage is studied explicitly. And finally, the clashing interaction between Parliament and the WSPU is examined more profoundly.

## Peaceful interaction in early 1910

Women's suffrage enjoyed a great deal of support among MPs, but no political party in Parliament adopted the cause as part of its official programme. In addition party differences as to what precise form this suffrage should take blocked any actual legislation. Although MPs were able to vote for or against reform across party lines, the policy of each party can be outlined roughly as follows. The Conservatives supported equal suffrage rights for men and women, but along the existing lines that favoured homeowners. The Liberals, especially the PM Asquith, opposed this because those newly enfranchised would be only those propertied women, mainly widows and spinsters, who would be most likely to vote for the Conservatives. Consequently the Liberals preferred to include women in a measure which would also expand the male electorate, which in turn the Conservatives resisted, as these new voters would most likely to vote for other parties. The quite young Labour party's main priority was to secure the working class male suffrage and thus women's suffrage was a secondary issue. (Morgan 1975, 64-65; Rosen 1974, 134-135.)

Although many Liberal MPs were in favour of women's suffrage, the PM Asquith had become by this time a focus of opposition for the suffragettes. By January 1910 therefore, there were passages in *Votes for Women* that framed Asquith in rather hostile terms. It was argued that:

If he [Asquith] loved freedom for its own sake he would have admitted the duly qualified women of the country to the citizen rights to which they are entitled under the Constitution. This he has refused to do, enforcing his refusal by methods of violence. (*Votes for Women*, January 28 1910, 281).

According to suffragettes, the Government, and especially the PM, were to blame for women having to resort to militantism to gain full citizenship through the right to vote. WSPU's mission was to attack the Government and thus the Liberal party because suffragettes held the Government that was in power responsible for granting or denying them the vote, regardless of party. The Liberal Government had not given women the vote, so it had to be unseated. This is evident from the large number of articles published in *Votes for Women* in which the Liberal Government was presented as a legitimate enemy of women's suffrage. (e.g. *Votes for Women*, January 14 1910, 248; *Votes for Women*, February 25 1910, 340.)

Overall, the tone of articles in *Votes for Women* is quite passionate, and in some ways could be seen as an attempt to create a gendered identity and sense of community among women. But *Votes for Women* could also be seen as, what Brian Harrison has called, a “pressure-group periodical”, in which the historical significance lies in its ability to target an influential audience of “opinion-formers”. Michelle Tusan goes a step further by arguing that this suffrage newspaper did precisely this by appealing to a constituency of women who were already active in British cultural and political life as social reformers and philanthropists and remained so. She also points out that suffragettes distributed free copies to MPs and most mainstream press editors. The periodical, as Maria DiCenzo has argued, played an important role in providing information for the movement, as well as a forum for debate within and around it. Nevertheless *Votes for Women* was also used by the suffragettes to try and convert the average British woman (and man) into a supporter of their movement, in an attempt to convince society as a whole to accept their claims for the equality of men and women. (DiCenzo 2000, 115-118; Harrison 1982, 276-277; Tusan 2005, 155.)

But the suffragettes also saw the need for more militant action on behalf of the WSPU. This line of thought gained greater support in the movement when a hung Parliament was returned after the general election of January 1910. The reign of the Liberal party in Government was over and they were forced to form a minority Government with the Labour Party and Irish Nationalists [8]. (Pankhurst S. 1931, 334.) The front page of *Votes for Women* following the election, on 21 January 1910, claimed this as a victory for the WSPU and directly attributable to its campaigning efforts:

These results reveal the power of the Women's Social and Political Union in striking a blow at the Government. All over the country the influence of the women's agitation has been felt; no one who has studied carefully the facts on the spot can doubt that the defeat of Liberal candidates has been largely due to the attitude which the Liberal Government has taken up towards women. (*Votes for Women*, January 21 1910, 257.)

The Liberal Party had lost the election, but on the other hand so had the Conservatives. At the same time the House of Commons was endeavouring to establish formal dominance over the House of Lords, so considerations of franchise reform only complicated matters, as it was understood that the upper house would reject a Liberal bill anyway. (Ballinger 2011, 19-32; Morgan D. 1975, 64.) Thus, pro-suffragist MPs decided to find a bipartisan solution to the question of women's suffrage. In February, an unofficial Conciliation Committee was set up, at the instigation of radical journalist H. N. Brailsford [9]. It was chaired by the Earl of Lytton, a Conservative MP and brother of the WSPU militant - Lady Constance Lytton and composed of 56 pro-suffragist members from across all the parties. Some suffragettes had good relations with some of the MPs that tried to advance the case for women's suffrage in Parliament. (Rosen 1975, 134.) In June, the Committee drafted a bill that it was hoped, would enjoy the support of all shades of political opinion. The Conciliation Bill thereby had a more realistic chance of becoming a law, as it had been carefully drafted so that both the Liberals and Conservatives would wish it to go through: the bill would neither offend Liberal sensitivities by increasing only the propertied electorate, nor exacerbate Conservative fears of there being too many lower-class voters. The numerical balance

of parties was the key to success, so “conciliation” was the most important factor in drawing up this bill. (Wingerden 1999, 118-119.)

For the suffragettes, however, the prospect of imminent success was clouded over by the knowledge that the Conciliation Bill simply would not fulfill all the suffragette demands. For a start, it did not accept the crucial principle of men and women being equal, as married women were still denied their rights, and the bill favored upper-class spinsters and widows. Also, female lodgers, owners and university graduates were excluded. (Wingerden 1999, 118.) What the WSPU did want, was that women would be given the possibility to participate in law-making processes on the same terms as men, because men could not fully take care of issues essential to women. As the editor of *Votes for Women*, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, put it: “the world is full of the broken hearts and lives of women wronged by the social system which is founded upon the domination of one-half of the human race over the other half.” (*Votes for Women*, April 29 1910, 499.)

But the WSPU eventually supported the bill because, as Christabel Pankhurst noted:

Nevertheless we consider the present Bill to have certain great and substantial merits. In the first place, it gives to women an important instalment of political power, and it breaks down the barrier which for so long has utterly excluded them from citizenship. In the second place, the Bill [...] affords a basis of action agreed to by men of all shades of political opinion. The Bill unites hitherto divergent forces in the House of Commons. (*Votes for Women*, May 27 1910, 564.)

The quotation reveals that although the bill was not suggesting the franchise to all women, it provided the auspices for a future wider emancipation of women. The main WSPU slogan and the very title of its periodical - *Votes for Women* - might have meant universal suffrage for all women at first, but as Sylvia Pankhurst almost bitterly announced with time it became more about deciding where to draw the line between voting and non-voting women. (Pankhurst S. 1931, 392-401.) Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst never admitted that they were trying to achieve votes for ladies only, but it was obvious that social reform for working-class women had long since ceased to be the primary goal of the WSPU (Rosen 1974, 182-183). The bill was also seen as a uniting factor between all the discordant parties involved, and the suffragettes thought of it as a genuine proposal for settlement.

Although the militant methods seemed to be quite efficient, the WSPU announced a truce or suspension of all militant activity, so in order to secure the atmosphere of conciliation required for the bill to pass. Emmeline Pankhurst in particular was convinced that “the Government were weary of our opposition and were ready to end the struggle in the only possible way”. (Pankhurst E. 1914, 166.) Pankhurst thought that the WSPU's militancy had worked in that the male political elite had finally realized that women were serious and really wanted the franchise. In an article in *Votes for Women* appearing in February, she encouraged women to “work on, full of serene confidence that victory is near at hand.” (*Votes for Women*, February 11 1910, 310.) In addition, the truce was clearly a shrewd tactic as it gave the WSPU time to figure out

new methods and rally its troops. Militancy, as practiced, had not won the instant enfranchisement for women as wished for, and the Government (and indeed Parliament itself) appeared to be immune to all the tried ruses, both non-militant and militant.

The truce had an effect on *Votes for Women* too. The periodical's tone changed to one of hope during the spring and summer of 1910. Women's suffrage seemed closer than ever before and the suffragettes really believed that the Government, and in turn Parliament, would pass the Conciliation Bill. This optimism can be also seen in the writing which refers to MPs and the PM. Back in January 1910, Asquith had received sharp criticism from the suffragettes, but by June 10, in her editorial, Christabel Pankhurst seemed to have a certain amount of faith in Asquith. She declared: "Everything in the present situation indicates that instead of blocking it by refusing time for the discussion, he [Asquith] will allow it to continue its progress through the Commons." (*Votes for Women*, June 10 1910, 596.)

The WSPU leaders used *Votes for Women* to try to engage the public as well as MPs with the news as defined and shaped by women. By ceasing militant action and concentrating their activity on other actions, such as peaceful demonstrations and increasing the circulation of *Votes for Women* (By the end of February 1910, the circulation of the periodical was estimated to be between 30,000 and 40,000 copies.), the suffragettes were giving the Government and MPs leeway to deal with the bill. (Rosen 1974, 133) For a moment it seemed that the WSPU's motto, "deeds, not words," had been overturned and replaced instead with "words, not deeds."

The suffragettes were fighting not only against the Government but also against traditionally entrenched prejudices which stated that women were subordinate to men and thus not considered as independent individuals. Although, as Simon Morgan has argued, women already had many extensive and politically charged opportunities for engagement in the male public sphere, and received some political rights (such as the municipal vote), the parliamentary vote and thus the full citizenship was still missing (Morgan S. 2007, 3). In the twentieth century, the citizenship consisted of political power and right to participate in the decision-making process but on the other hand, it also included duties such as tax paying and obeying the laws. Thus, the fight for the vote should not, in itself, be seen as the sole aim of women's suffrage in 1910, but also as the keystone in the fight for full citizenship.

This point was emphasized and reiterated over and again in *Votes for Women*. The suffragettes thought that the franchise was an essential part of being a citizen, and thus a full member of society. "Why Women Want the Vote" was one such piece published in the periodical that framed the debate in these terms. The vote was described here as "the hall-mark of citizenship" which was "necessary to safeguard the interests of women", and would allow women to express their opinions more effectively, and thus to participate more in "the life of the nation." (*Votes for Women*, July 22 1910, 702.) It was argued that only women themselves could adequately be the mouthpiece for women. The suffragettes thus demanded the right to vote, to participate, and to represent themselves.



The question about citizenship was particularly important to Christabel Pankhurst, the chief organizer of the WSPU. Almost every week in *Votes for Women*, throughout 1910, there was a leading article written by her, often addressing the concept of citizenship. On January 28, for instance, she argued that women were “still outside the pale of citizenship”, because they were not entitled to a parliamentary vote. On June 3, she pronounced in a quite positive tone that if the Conciliation bill went through, it would “throw open to women the doors of citizenship.” (*Votes for Women*, January 28 1910, 281; *Votes for Women*, June 3 1910, 580.) She was able to use this platform to reiterate WSPU policy, the rationale behind it, and to turn any political developments to the WSPU's advantage. Although it is quite difficult to estimate how deep an impact the periodical really had, *Votes for Women* proved to be a means for the suffragettes to enter British political life before actually attaining the franchise.

### **The interaction within the House of Commons**

The first Conciliation Bill was introduced to the House of Commons under quite favourable conditions by MP David James Shackleton (Clitheroe, Labour), under the ten-minute rule [10]. Shackleton was a supporter of adult suffrage yet he introduced the bill in order to get the principle of women's suffrage established in the hope that if it were once adopted it would later be extended to other classes. In his speech, Shackleton highlighted women's tremendously increased participation in the political sphere and made the point that women “have a right to come in and take their part as citizens in the full sense of the term.” According to him, the bill provided the first step towards a wider enfranchisement. In opposition to this, an anti-suffragist Conservative MP, Frederick Edwin Smith (Liverpool, Walton) demanded that the House “dismiss this highly controversial question”, which in his opinion divided “the whole country, and [...] the House of Commons.” (HC Deb 14 June 1910 vol 17 cc1203-1205.) In spite of Smith's speech however, the bill went on to a second reading.

After the first reading MP Keir Hardie (Merthyr Tydfil, Labour), a close friend to the Pankhurst family and therefore deeply affiliated with the WSPU, made a speech at the Queen's Hall on June 27, 1910. According to Hardie, the whole bill represented the WSPU's “greatest triumph of all.” He argued that “the Conciliation Bill is the first legislative fruits of the agitation which you [suffragettes] have carried on with such ability and courage and so much sacrifice.” (*Votes for Women*, July 1 1910, 653.) Hardie's speech seemed to reinforce the hopeful attitude of the suffragettes that became apparent in the June editions of *Votes for Women*. The periodical now argued that “the prospects of the new Suffrage Bill are very bright” and “there is a splendid change for getting the Bill passed” which would be “a good beginning” for women's enfranchisement. (*Votes for Women*, June 3 1910, 580; *Votes for Women*, June 17 1910, 614.) The front-page cartoons in *Votes for Women* also reflected a generally optimistic spirit among most suffragettes. For example, in the cartoon published on June 8, the famous ship “Victory” was sailing towards a pier filled with suffragettes. (*Votes for Women*, July 8 1910, 661.) The WSPU emphasized that the organization was completely behind the bill, through positive articles and arguments, even though it was seen as just the beginning of women's emancipation. So if the bill had become law it would have doubtlessly satisfied the suffragettes up to a point, but never as anything more than just a step towards full emancipation.

In the second reading on 11 and 12 July, 1910, the limited scope of the bill gave rise to a great deal of discussion as to the finality of the measure. Nearly a hundred comments were delivered and 39 MPs took the floor during the two day debate. From these MPs 19 were supporting the bill and 20 opposed it. It is interesting to notice that the Liberal Party MPs, from which 17 took the floor, divided almost equally for and against the bill. Conservative MPs were mostly against it dividing four for and nine against. All three Labour MPs were for the bill but Irish Nationalists divided two for and two against. This division within the parties and their members shows that women's suffrage question was not so much a party question although there were some lines drawn by the party leaders as mentioned above.

The arguments that emerged from these debates can be roughly divided into three categories: firstly, there were arguments that stressed gender qualifications, i.e., the aptitudes and abilities of men versus women; secondly there were those arguments concerning the differences between men and women in terms of public and private spheres of influence; and thirdly there was the issue of women and representation, focusing on issues of political power and public authority. All three included arguments both for and against women's suffrage. These debates over the parliamentary franchise of women can be considered as the *pro et contra* kind, because they led to division. The *pro et contra* debates could be seen as, according to Kari Palonen, "the driving force behind the distinctively parliamentary form of politics." Also, Cornelia Ilie who has studied parliamentary debates sees "parliaments [...] as basically confrontational settings that instantiate the polarization of political power". (Ilie 2004, 5; Palonen 2008, 82). Arguments that the MPs used also defined the bounds of full citizenship.

As Sandra Stanley Holton has noticed, in the early twentieth century a broad spectrum of women, and men, accepted the assertions of most Victorian doctors and social scientists (who were all male) that the differences between the sexes had a very real basis. Such differences were deemed to be a "natural" phenomenon and women's lives were therefore unavoidably subject to their capacity to give birth. (Holton 1986, 13-15.) Arguments relating to both the physical and mental aspects of these gender qualifications came up many times in the debates. The basic argument of anti-suffragist MPs was that women were not suited to the task of political decision-making, due to their temperament and status. MP Charles Thomas Mills, (Uxbridge, Conservative), supported this viewpoint. Mills, just elected in the House of Commons and the "Baby of the House" being the youngest Member in the age of 23 years, thought that granting the vote for women would weaken their maternal abilities, so women should not be tempted to neglect their "natural functions which are absolutely essential to our national existence." It was thought that women already had enough such duties to bear, i.e., sitting on school boards and local councils. Parliamentary franchise would be a step too far and overburden them. Mills also emphasized that "the right to vote is a trust imposed by the State upon those people whom it thinks are likely to exercise the vote in a way conducive to the happiness of the community." (HC Deb 12 July 1910 vol 19 c288.) Women were not considered to be rational political agents, and therefore not capable of practicing citizenship.

Nonetheless, not all MPs shared in this opinion of women having less capacity for "practical" tasks than men (other than child-rearing). These MPs maintained that the

sexual differences between men and women were no excuse for withholding the female franchise which would be as Sir John Rolleston, a Conservative MP from Hertford argued, “an evidence of our advancing civilisation and [...] a landmark in the march of progress in this country.” (HC Deb 11 July 1910 vol 19 c51.) It was also argued that many British colonies, such as Australia and New Zealand, had adult suffrage already and, in the Commonwealth of Australia, women were also eligible to sit in Parliament. MP David James Shackleton, who introduced the bill, compared Britain, for instance, to its colonies and asked:

Why should it not be possible for women in our own country, to the extent that this Bill would grant to them, be in a like position of being able to claim their full rights as citizens just as are the women in the Commonwealth of Australia? (HC Deb 11 July 1910 vol 19 c47.)

According to him, British women were currently not active and involved members of the political community, but more like passive recipients of specific rights and duties. Only a parliamentary vote would give them full citizenship.

Arguments concerning the public/private distinction for men and women formed a basis for the second kind of debate during the second reading. Opponents to the bill emphasized that a woman's place was at home with her children i.e. the private sphere, and the duties of the public political sphere should fall upon a man. John Annan Bryce, a Liberal MP from Inverness Burghs pointed out that “the intervention of woman in politics will tend either to make impossible the business of Government or to extinguish woman in those ideals which are her most precious possession.” (HC Deb 11 July 1910 vol 19 c73.) All in all, women were seen as not suitable for political decision making. But then the idea that women should move towards the public sphere and political arena was supported. Women had the means to participate in the public sphere via their husbands but nevertheless, according to Keith Faulks, men were still able to dominate their wives very effectively as “masters” of their family, and through their control of economic and political institutions. (Faulks 2000, 60-61.)

Also linked to arguments concerning this public/private distinction, was the issue of physical strength. One of the most eager opponents to the bill, the aforementioned MP Frederick Edwin Smith, stated that it would be dangerous to give women too much influence over political affairs, because women could be easily manipulated and ask men to do things on their behalf. Were women to have been given the vote, he argued, “...the result might have been that the women voters, or a majority of them, might have voted for war, and might have asked men who might have been totally unaffected [...] to fight in such a war.” (HC Deb 11 July 1910 vol 19 c67.) In answer to this, supporters of the bill, such as MP Keir Hardie, pointed out that women were in fact capable of defending and protecting themselves so this would be unlikely to happen, and thereby meant they were capable of taking part in political work (HC Deb 11 July 1910 vol 19 cc138-145). This exchange of opinions raised questions as to the precise boundary between men and women's worlds. If women had too much power over men, would women still be women? According to Mary Poovey, by violating the norms of womanly behavior, which included mostly the private sphere of family, women would risk the withdrawal of male protection. Then women would be citizens on the same terms as

men, and this would equally entail participating in national defence. (Poovey 1988, 10-11.)

But perhaps most importantly of all, women's suffrage was a political question. Each party had a particular line of argument that each member supported, but each MP was also entitled to his own opinion. The parliamentary vote was an instrument for exercising political power, and as such this instrument was seen to be so powerful that parties felt that they had to restrict its use. The issue remained hidden behind other arguments most of the time, but as MP Sir Alfred Mond (Chester, Lib.) made clear:

It seems to be a principle in these franchise questions that you should only franchise people who are going to vote for your side; in other words, that you should deliberately keep out of their right of citizenship people whom you think are going to oppose you politically, and keep them out for that reason. (HC Deb 12 July 1910 vol 19 c277.)

It was true that political parties restricted franchise to their own advantage, and the result was that they effectively excluded some people, such as women, from citizenship. Sandra Stanley Holton has stated that the criteria usually used for exclusion were along the lines of property, which many MPs in the Liberal and especially Labour parties opposed. Extending the vote, but keeping the property principle would simply mean "votes for ladies" (i.e., women of the propertied classes), and therefore more votes for the Conservative Party. (Holton 1986, 53-54.) Likewise, some MPs, who supported women's suffrage, nevertheless opposed specific female suffrage measures. The Home Secretary Winston Churchill for example, among others, was one of those MPs who declared himself to be a women's suffrage supporter, yet he resisted this bill because he believed it would increase the power of the unions and so be harmful for the British Government. (HC Deb 12 July 1910 vol 19 c256.)

MPs' arguments relating to women's suffrage reflect not only their own opinions and motives [11] as regards women, but also how female suffragettes and male MPs related to each other. The distinction between men and women remained, but the climate was evidently becoming more tolerant judging from the new influx of MPs elected in 1906 and in January 1910. Certainly, some older and also younger MPs, such as aforementioned MP Charles Thomas Mills, still had a mid-Victorian frame of mind, i.e., a woman was inferior to man in everything except moral character and moral inspiration, but there was also an increasing number of MPs who thought of women as equal to men. (HC Deb 11 July 1910 vol 19 cc71-83; Lewis 1991, 7-9.) It is also interesting to notice how the question of women's citizenship was brought out in arguments both for and against. This fact did not go unnoticed among the suffragettes, and the second reading debates (that were very well reported in *Votes for Women*) were thought to have been essential to the wider question of what constituted "citizenship".

## **The clashing interaction between Parliament and the WSPU**

The first Conciliation Bill passed its second reading with a large majority, by 299 to 190. After the second reading, the suffragettes were sure that the first Conciliation Bill would finally pass. But although the bill passed its second reading, it was eventually

shelved because PM Asquith had implied that he wished all franchise bills to go to a Committee of the Whole House [12], and the House of Commons voted for this decision by 320 votes to 175 immediately after the second reading voting on 12 July. This effectively meant that the Government would have to find time for the committee stage on the floor of the House, something for which it would never be prepared to do in the case of women's suffrage. Either the MPs were reluctant to solve this question after all, or they were trying to pass the baton on to the Government. (HC Deb 12 July 1910 vol 19 cc207-333; Pankhurst S. 1931, 340-341; Rover 1967, 190.)

Even before PM Asquith's final decision to send the bill to a Committee of the Whole House had been announced, the suffragettes had begun to question the parliamentary method of policymaking. Time went by and frustratingly nothing happened, with tempers beginning to fray among the suffragettes. In her article "Our Next Move" Christabel Pankhurst announced:

The Suffrage Bill has the majority of the House of Commons behind it, and if the Government are to be allowed, where a great constitutional issue is at stage, to override the deliberately expressed opinion of the Commons, then our representative system has fallen into a state of decrepitude from which it would seem only the exertions of the politically awakened women of the country can rescue it. (Votes for Women, July 29 1910, 728.)

The conceivable collapse of the Conciliation Bill convinced Christabel Pankhurst not only that the Government's promises were worthless, but that men in general could not be trusted. It could also be argued that Pankhurst saw women as more effective than men here, in the sense that only "politically awakened" women such as suffragettes could save the whole British political system by using militant methods against the Government to pressure Parliament. She thought that MPs needed suffragettes to help "get rid of the Government's veto" (Votes for Women, July 29 1910, 728), and the only way to do that was for women themselves to take action.

Emmeline Pankhurst also made people aware that the Conciliation Bill might not pass. But she still had some faith in MPs, and argued that:

It has been said that the Bill is dead in consequence, but I cannot believe that Members of Parliament will submit to the destruction of their Bill. Women are determined at all costs to get the Bill through. I am sure that you will agree that the enfranchisement of women is an essential preliminary to getting more humane laws than will ever otherwise be got in this country or any other. (Votes for Women, September 9 1910, 808.)

Like Christabel Pankhurst, Emmeline Pankhurst was really worried about the state of Parliament. She questioned whether Parliament was still a functioning institution that could really be trusted. If it was not, Pankhurst conceivably thought women should take political power into their own hands, since Government and Parliament were clearly not willing to further women's demands.

The Government, due to political and constitutional reasons, was the principal generator of bills and was, after all, responsible for the parliamentary timetable [13]. With this being the case, PM Asquith then indicated that no facilities would be provided for further consideration of the bill in the new parliamentary session. However, this decision was not announced until in the end of 1910, on 18 November. When news of this unfavorable turn reached the WSPU, the truce was immediately abandoned and a deputation of some 300 women was sent from Caxton Hall directly to the House of Commons. The strict letter of the law was abided to, by dividing the deputation into detachments of twelve [14]. This expressed suffragette anger at the Government, yet at the same time gave the establishment no legislative grounds for dismissing the problem.

In the past when suffragettes had attempted to rush past police lines, they had been quickly and politely arrested. But on this occasion, the situation was different. During a six-hour struggle, and reluctant to make arrest by order of the Home Secretary Churchill, the police used violence against the women - including numerous acts of indecent assault. Women were pushed, shook, and flung and even pinched. Eventually, 119 suffragettes were arrested and according to Caroline Morrell over 130 women reported being attacked and manhandled by the police. It appeared to witnesses as well as the victims that the police had intentionally attempted to subject the women to humiliation in a public setting to teach them a lesson. This day of extraordinary violence became known as "Black Friday" and it seems plausible, as suggested by Sophia A. Van Wingerden, that the Government had somehow played a part in authorizing such extensive use of violence. It could also be seen as an attempt perhaps to weaken the suffragettes' will to fight for the vote. (Morrell 1981; Wingerden 1999, 123.) This marked yet another step in the radicalization of the question, and WSPU's campaigning, and seems partly due to Parliament (and the Government's) failure to recognize and resolve an internal, domestic conflict.

*Votes for Women* immediately devoted column space to Black Friday. It protested loudly that "The treatment which this deputation received was the worst that has been meted out to any deputation since the conflict between women and the Government began." (*Votes for Women*, November 25 1910, 117.) The suffragettes were shocked and disappointed. Their earlier faith in the country's political decision-makers and, on a wider scale, in the British political system as a whole was lost (not to mention their faith in the police). Thus, underlining ever more the need for militant action, Christabel Pankhurst went a step further to argue that Black Friday amounted to a declaration of war from the Government. In her editorial entitled "We revert to a state of war" she illuminated her thoughts about the conflict between suffragettes and Parliament:

At the beginning of the present Parliament we declared a truce, which, if the Government had acted in the same spirit of reasonableness and conciliation that we have displayed, would have ended in peace; but the Prime Minister, by his recent statement, so injurious to our right as citizens and so insulting to our intelligence, has put an end to all hope of a peaceful settlement of the issue between us. 'Negotiations are over. War is declared.' (*Votes for Women*, November 25 1910, 126.)

The conflict between suffragettes and police was also discussed in the House of Commons. However, only one oral question about the strife was presented. This is noteworthy because suffragist MPs had usually used questions to bring out the women's suffrage and also the treatment of suffragists, but in this case, they were peculiarly quiet. On November 24, 1910, Home Secretary Churchill had to answer a question relating to the incident of Black Friday. A Liberal MP, Henry Chancellor (Shoreditch Haggerston) asked about the instructions that had been given to police concerning the arrest of suffragettes and the "unnecessary violence [...] used before arrest". In his answer, Churchill sarcastically regretted the violence police had used arresting "those who violated the law and endangered their own safety in the crowd", but he also stated that police had followed the law. (HC Deb 24 November 1910 vol 20 c389.) This comment was implying a parallel to be drawn between the suffragettes and common troublemakers or criminals, in an attempt to play down the significance and scale of the violence.

In the wake of Black Friday, PM Asquith announced to the House of Commons on November 22, 1910 that: "the government will, if they are still in power, give facilities in the next Parliament for effectively proceeding with a bill which is so framed as to admit of free amendment." (HC Deb 22 November 1910 vol 20 c273.) The Government was indeed still in power after the December 1910 election, and the Conciliation Committee carefully redrafted the bill. However, the conflict between MPs and the suffragettes remained unresolved in 1910. Suffragettes and suffragists had to wait until 1918 for women's enfranchisement, when the fourth Representation of the People Act was at last passed by the British Parliament, and finally given the royal assent. This Act was the first to practically include all adult males, as long as they were over 21 years old and were resident householders, in the political system, and so began the inclusion of women. It was a very crucial change to the British constitution, as the power was no longer entirely in the hands of the male political elite.

## Conclusions

This article focused on the distinct interaction between the Members of Parliament and the suffragettes in 1910 when the first Conciliation Bill was introduced and read in the House of Commons. The first Conciliation Bill was a significant attempt to solve the issues of conflict raised by the question of women's suffrage. The WSPU and especially its leaders, the Pankhursts really believed that the fight for women's suffrage would finally produce results and Parliament as well as the Government would yield to their demands. Also, the second reading debate was promising due to the fact that the majority of the MPs were voting for the bill. The arguments emerging from the debates (the natural aptitudes of men versus women; the public and private spheres of men and women; and women and political representation) revealed that although there were still MPs thinking that women were not capable to participate in parliamentary decision - making, the amount of the supportive MPs had ascended, and women's suffrage was considered to be an important issue to deal with.

The WSPU can be seen as an extra-parliamentary pressure group that nevertheless saw the parliamentary aspect of the suffrage question as important. It therefore tried to influence Parliament through MPs, even if the process of parliamentary policymaking

was questioned from time to time. The WSPU's motto was "deeds, not words", but the suffragettes must also have believed in the power of words. By ceasing militant action, the WSPU wanted to lend their support to the first Conciliation Bill to give both Parliament and the Government the necessary space to resolve the crisis. Though the suffragettes were not completely satisfied with the actual contents of the bill, it was seen as a start and could perhaps get the ball rolling for increased suffrage later. The suffragettes were emphasizing that the vote for women was also a question of citizenship. The parliamentary vote and full political participation were thus demanded by women for women.

The suffragettes and MPs, as well as the Government, clearly endeavoured to settle the conflict or at least mitigate it. Fury and frustration on both sides was evident. Indeed, the first Conciliation Bill should be seen as not only conciliatory between the political parties, but also between the suffragettes and Parliament. This hoped-for conciliation was not reached however, and the interaction between these two protagonists continued.

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## Notes

[1] In her autobiography, Emmeline declared that "deeds, not words, was to be our [suffragettes'] permanent motto." Pankhurst E. 1914, 38.

[2] Three Conciliation Bills were put before the House of Commons, one each year in 1910, 1911 and in 1912. None of them became law. Rover 1967, 39.

[3] *Votes for Women* was established in October 1907, and its first editors were Emmeline and Frederick Pethick Lawrence, a married couple. The Pethick Lawrences were keen supporters of female suffrage, and, because of the paper, they were even arrested on the charge of conspiracy against the Government in 1912. (Mercer 2004)

[4] The Second Reform Act of 1867 simply extended the vote to all male householders and men paying more than ten pounds in annual rent in the boroughs (Vickery 2001, 2).

[5] A ten-pound lodger was a man who paid at least £10 per year for lodgings (Mayhall 2003, 14-15).

[6] Rateable value of business premises had to be at least £10 per year. Married women were not directly excluded, but it was expressly stated that husband and wife might not vote for the same property, even though two men might qualify as joint householders or occupiers under the existing law. (Morgan D. 1975, 66; Pankhurst S. 1931, 337.)



[7] Private members' bills were an important way to have an impact on the political practice in nineteenth and in early twentieth century Britain. Through these bills, MPs tried to change the general law. These bills were brought forward by a private member (back-bench MP) rather than by the Government. However, the time for consideration of these bills was limited and most bills introduced were not debated. (May 1917)

[8] In the general election, the Liberals lost a hundred seats to the Conservatives, and resumed office without a majority. The seats were divided as follows: 275 Liberal seats, 273 Conservative seats, 82 Irish Nationalist seats, and 40 Labour seats. (Pankhurst S. 1931, 334.)

[9] H. N. Brailsford's wife, Jane, was a prominent member of the WSPU, who resolved to undertake acts of violence to protest against force-feeding in 1909 (Rosen 1974, 134).

[10] The ten-minute procedure was an alternative to winning time during a ballot to introduce a private member's bill. The problem was that often no time could be found for the further stages, even if the bill was successfully introduced. (May 1917).

[11] By analyzing the debates and highlighting the arguments MPs used, intentions and motives of MPs can be brought to light (Skinner 2002, 79-80).

[12] A Committee of the Whole House was a device in which a legislative body or other deliberative assembly was considered as one large committee. All members of the legislative body were members of such a committee. This was usually done for the purposes of discussing and debating the details of bills and other main motions. The committee was also a very good way to delay bills. (Dangerfield 1935, 156–157).

[13] The Government or private members can put forward a bill, but only ministers can propose bills that charge revenue from the public (Norton 1993, 63).

[14] A Tumultuous Petitioning Act passed in 1661 provided that no petition or address shall be presented to the king or either house of Parliament by more than ten persons, although Emmeline Pankhurst stated that the number of persons was twelve (Pankhurst E. 1914, 94–95).

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