

Consequences of the first world war history essay



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The lengthy campaign for female emancipation is one of the most distinguished struggles for universal suffrage. Yet, by 1914, despite over forty years of women's suffrage movements, women did not have the right to vote in general elections. On the basis women had not attained the vote before the First World War but were included in the 1918 Representation of the People Act[1], it is important to consider the impact of War on female suffrage. It would be inaccurate to suggest that the suffrage movements mainly precipitated the reform of 1918. Equally, it would be misleading to argue that the War was the singular cause of female enfranchisement. It took an amalgamation of the war and the suffrage movement's exploitation of the opportunities it afforded to divert public sympathy and political understanding into actual legislation. The 1918 Act was essentially a disproportionately large measure of male suffrage, which included limited female suffrage based on illogical age restrictions. Nevertheless, this unspectacular victory paved the way for full emancipation in 1928.[2]

Undoubtedly the pre-War women's suffrage movements contributed a great deal to the extension of the franchise that resulted in 1918. Mayer argues that the sustained influence of the suffragists demonstrated their political skill to many politicians and successfully challenged the doctrine of 'separate spheres'. [3] Nevertheless, this is far from the suggestion that the suffrage movements had achieved victory by 1914. The militant campaign had lost the fight for female suffrage by 1910 and the constitutional faction had only just begun to recuperate this 'lost ground'. Critically both the constitutional and militant factions of the suffrage movement had failed to achieve votes for women in national elections.

The War provoked certain circumstances and accidents that broke the pre-1914 status quo that had developed in the suffrage campaign. In 1914, Asquith[4] was asked whether the franchise would be extended to women and he gave a typically characteristic reply[5]: 'No such legislation as you refer to is at present in contemplation, I dealt fully with this matter in my speech on 27th January...and have nothing to add to that.' This contemporary source represents the view of Asquith shortly before the war, he was Prime Minister at that time - and herein lies its value. As Prime Minister, Asquith was in the best position to instigate reform but clearly he felt the issue was 'on hold'. Interestingly Asquith's response epitomised parliament's attitude towards the enfranchisement of women. Secondary accounts demonstrate that Asquith's stance was well supported. Whitfield notes the Conservatives opposed female suffrage altogether and the Liberals feared it would increase the Conservative vote.[1] Prior to the War, most politicians feared that granting female emancipation would damage the interests of their parties. Lang suggests that in the presence of these fears, no party, let alone party leader, would endorse any measure of female emancipation.[2] The previous forty years had demonstrated that neither Conservative nor Liberal majority-governments were likely to allow women into franchise. Therefore the question of 'votes for women' was suspended indefinitely. Ultimately the outbreak of War broke the deadlock because it established a coalition Government in May 1915. The coalition brought uncertainty and was often divided in its opinion, forcing Asquith to appoint a Speaker's Conference, which recommended the enfranchisement of women.

[3]

One of the most important consequences of the War was that it completely overhauled the structure and motivation of the suffrage movements. By 1915 both the militant and constitutional factions were behind the war effort absolutely. Shortly after the outbreak of War, Emmeline Pankhurst[4]declared[5]: ‘ never throughout the whole of the fight did we for one single moment forget the love we had for our country...one of the mistakes of the Kaiser.... was that he thought the British people would continue their internal dissensions.[6]Pankhurst reflects on the suffragette’s transition to supporting the war effort. She reminds her audience that even during the much-maligned militancy of the suffragette campaign her followers were devout patriots. Pankhurst concludes that suffragette support for the war effort should never have been in doubt. Although these are the contemporary views of a radical suffragette, addressing a suffragette-majority audience in Plymouth, history has proved her claims substantiated. Pugh notes that following the outbreak of War, Pankhurst turned from public enemy to patriot and the suffragettes rallied behind Britain’s cause. 3 Parallel to these developments, by 1915, Millicent Fawcett[7]had purged the anti-war elements of the suffragist movement and her organisation was also behind the war effort. Lang claims that the patriotic spirit of the suffrage leaders, in addition to the contribution of women in agriculture, public services and industry, made a profound impression on the minds of politicians and the public. 2 Furthermore, the suspension of the ‘ counterproductive’ suffragette militancy aided their cause.[8]Many anti-suffragists were either conscientiously or forcibly coerced into supporting the suffrage campaign. The War gave women the opportunity to ‘ prove their worth’ and made ‘ votes for women’ a realistic prospect.

In March 1917 Asquith stated^[1]: ' I think that some years ago I ventured to use the expression " let the women work out their own salvation." Well, Sir, they have...I find it impossible to withhold from women, the power and right of making their voices heard.'^[2]In short, Asquith reaffirmed that he now supported female enfranchisement and that his position had changed as a result of the war. However, there are many limitations to this famous speech made in a Commons debate. It is important to remember that Asquith was a very good politician. His opposition to female suffrage had long preceded the inception of suffragette militancy. Jenkins states that Asquith went to great lengths to guarantee the defeat of female suffrage Bills in 1892.^[3]The important question is at what point did Asquith relinquish his obstructionism? There is no doubt that Asquith always had antipathy towards female involvement in politics.^[4]He had been raised and educated with the misogynistic view of the ' proper role' of women. There is a strong argument that he was not a genuine wartime convert to female suffrage. In 1920 he remarked^[5]: they [women] are for the most part hopefully ignorant of politics, credulous to the last degree.'^[6]Although it must not be taken out of context, this statement made long after the concessions of the 1918 Act, demonstrates his opinion towards female enfranchisement was in a constant state of change. Asquith could even be accused of hypocrisy. Nevertheless the war made it easier for Asquith to renounce his previous contentions and made him a ' tacit' supporter of the suffrage movement. 4

A combination of the War and the support of women's suffrage movements for the War brought women closer to the vote than ever. This point is exemplified by Fawcett's refusal to resume the suffragist campaign during

the conflict. Fawcett had the wisdom to realise that restarting the campaign had every danger of dissipating all the goodwill and support women had acquired during the war.[7]In December 1916 Lord Northcliffe complained[8]: ‘ there is absolutely no movement for woman suffrage anywhere. I cannot explain the psychology, but it is the fact. Try and get up a public meeting on the subject, and I will support it, and you will soon find out whether I am right or wrong.’[9]At the time Northcliffe presented himself as an enthusiastic convert to the cause of female suffrage. However, his aver must be treated with suspicion, supposedly he believed that renewing the campaign would aid the suffragist’s cause and expressed bewilderment that no such action had been taken. However, there was every chance that Northcliffe may have been acting as an agent-provocateur. 4 His continued demands to restart the campaign may have been intended to derail the suffrage cause. Whether these requests were made in good conscience or maliciously, Fawcett remained composed and unchanged in her actions, preferring to continue with her deputations to Asquith and await the outcome of the Speaker’s Conference. Fawcett realised that the War afforded the suffrage movement a great opportunity and ‘ following the course’ would facilitate their enfranchisement. This passive and patient approach paid dividends when the Conference recommended that women should be enfranchised.

War precipitated radical reform but male enfranchisement remained highest on the political agenda and the female suffrage movement could only hope for a small place within the ‘ Soldier’s Bill’.[1]By 1916, politicians were already looking ahead to the post-war reconstruction and female

enfranchisement remained an intractable issue that could be postponed for several years or even indefinitely.[2] Nonetheless, the wartime environment presented Fawcett with a golden opportunity to put forward the case for women's suffrage. Pugh noted that both the Liberals and the Conservatives felt that the question of female suffrage ought to be settled during the unique circumstances of a wartime coalition.[3] In 1916, during the coalition government's ongoing debate over the Register, Fawcett wrote to Asquith[4]: ' Our movement has achieved very great accessions of strength during recent months, former opponents now declaring themselves on our side...The view has been widely expressed in a great variety of organs of public opinion that the continued exclusion of women from representation will...be an impossibility after the war.'[5] As a man of severe intelligence, Asquith would have been acutely aware of Fawcett's alignment, motives and persuasive nature. However, he could not contend the argument that many anti-suffragists had been converted or had at least retracted their opposition. [6] On the other hand, he may not have been manipulated into believing that war necessitated the inclusion of women in the franchise. Lang certainly disagrees with Fawcett that the war made the exclusion of women impossible. He argues that Asquith could easily have extended the life of parliament and only included men in the new electoral register. [7] Significantly, Fawcett made it apparent that the suffragist movement was capable of renewing its campaign as expediently as it had been suspended. Utilising the exceptional circumstances of War, Fawcett kept women's suffrage in the forefront of Asquith's mind during this time of change. 3 Asquith had intended to defer the issue to the House of Commons but

Fawcett's compelling arguments meant that female suffrage was addressed by the Speaker's Conference instead.

The campaign for female suffrage extended from 1872 to 1928. However, despite footholds gained by both suffrage movements prior to WWI, women were not permitted to vote in general elections. Politicians and men in general considered that women were 'unfit to vote' and their views seemed unlikely to change by 1914. Perversely, it took the dawn of war for women to prove their 'electoral worth'. The contribution of women during the four-year struggle altered the public's perception of 'votes for women' and polarised political sympathies to their cause. As a result of the conflict a coalition government was established in May 1915. Unlike previous headstrong majority-governments, the coalition was often divided, which made government unpredictable and uncertain. This forced Asquith to appoint a Speaker's Conference, paving the way for far-reaching reform that included women. The War precipitated substantial reform but it did not guarantee female suffrage. Had they been given the option at the time it is likely the government would have aborted the whole exercise. The establishment of a Speaker's Conference, which led to the outcome of female suffrage, was by no means assured. Crucially, Fawcett was able to exploit the opportunities surrounding the war to translate expressions of political sympathy and support into tangible legislation. In short, female emancipation was not simply a consequence of war but women's votes were won during the war.

1. 0: Assess the significance of the role of individuals in bringing about an extension to the franchise in Britain in the period 1830-1932

In 1830 Britain had no semblance of what we would consider ' democracy' or ' representation' in the 21st Century. The parliamentary system was broadly based on the ageing Tudor system. For the most part, it was only men from the more prosperous end of the middle-class who could vote. However, over the next century, democracy and representation improved markedly in Britain; distinguished by the broadening of the franchise to universal suffrage.[1]The extension of the franchise was due to several measures of political reform, key events and the evolution of political parties. The franchise was extended in 1832, 1867, 1884, 1918 and 1928. Each extension was the result of a combined multitude of factors. Individual actions, popular pressure and key events all had a greater influence at different times but were all of equal importance in steering Britain towards a more democratic society.

The first major element of political reform was the Reform Act of 1832.[2]The Act extended the franchise by giving the vote to more middle-class men. The Reform of 1832 was undoubtedly mainly due to popular pressure with both the positive and negative actions of individuals playing a supporting role which led to reform. By 1930, both middle and working-class movements were calling for universal suffrage. The Birmingham Political Union (BPU) [3]was heavily involved in agitation for reform after 1830. The BPU was able to successfully play on the strong undercurrent of public opinion in favour of reform that existed prior to 1830. The BPU had broad appeal and united the classes towards common purpose.[4]Crucially the Union successfully played

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on the Whig's fear of revolution, credibly arguing that an extension of the franchise would 'extinguish the revolutionary fire'. Whitfield suggests that Whig ministers were intensely aware of the growing support for reform among the public, especially the middle classes. 4 Further evidence that the obligation to reform was due to public pressure can be seen in the fact that Earl Grey[5] gave instruction that the first Reform Bill 1832[6] should be to satisfy public opinion rather than provide constructive reforms.[7]

In 1831, the Lord's rejection of reform led to popular unrest. This heightened the fear of impending revolution and supported the Whig's campaign for reform. Following the Bristol Riots,[8] Earl Grey stated[9]: 'It is undeniable that the middle classes are activated by an intense and almost unanimous feeling in favour of the measure of reform.' The Whig Government was left with little option but to force reform through both Houses of Parliament.

[1] The weight of popular pressure fueled the Government's determination to deliver a Bill through the seemingly 'impassable' House of Lords.

Eventually even the anti-reform, Tory-dominated, Lords had to relent to popular pressure. The rejection of Tory Government by the public granted King William IV' reluctant assurance that he would flood the Lords with Whig peers if this was necessary to pass reform. The Lords grudgingly passed the Bill in June 1832. Not only did popular pressure initiate the campaign for reform but it also forced reform through both Houses of Parliament.

Individuals played a supporting role in the passage of the 1832 Act. Earl Grey was an important figure in this change; he backed early reform and was instrumental in the design of the Reform Act 1832[2]. Likewise, Lord Russell[3] championed the cause for parliamentary reform. Nevertheless, in a <https://assignbuster.com/consequences-of-the-first-world-war-history-essay/>

negative sense, Wellington's individual responsibility for the Reform Bills was greatest. Wellington was mistaken in the belief that the current parliamentary system was universally accepted across the country.

Wellington's misjudgments in the two years he served as Prime Minister led to the appointment of Whig Government and the subsequent Reform Bills. On top of this, his failure to form a Tory Ministry whilst leader of the opposition was a major factor in the Lord's acceptance of the 1832 Reform Bill. 1 These negative individual actions were certainly conduit to the eventual 1832 Act.

Undoubtedly in the early years it was public pressure rather than the role of individuals that had the greatest influence on parliamentary reform. Despite the threat of revolution being largely fictitious in 1831-32, enough MPs and peers believed the threat was tangible and responded accordingly. 5 The Whigs had always intended to introduce parliamentary reform but it was the colossal weight of public opinion backing reform that allowed it to be carried through both Houses.

A revival in pressure for reform resulted in the Reform Act 1867. Around 35 per cent of men over 21 were now enfranchised as the window to democracy continued to widen. The revival of reform in the 1840s up until the late 1860s was largely down to the role of individuals in parliament with external factors such as popular pressure playing a subordinate role.

Ironically, the main standard bearer for reform between 1840-1860 was an aristocrat, Lord Russell. Russell felt that the franchise ought to be widened in response to the growth of a more intelligent and informed population since

1832.[1]Despite infamously declaring that the measures of 1832 should signal the end of reform, in the late 1840s, 'Finality Jack' felt that the issue should be readdressed. Soon after, in the 1860s, Gladstone[2]took up mantle for reform. Typically, he presented the need to reform as a 'high moral duty'. Gladstone's popularity transcended class and between 1860 and 1865 he became known as 'The People's William'.³ His decision to take up the cause of the working classes brought the question of reform back onto the political agenda. The positive climate of opinion for change was reinforced by his proposed reform measures of 1866.[4]

In contrast, popular pressure was notably absent from the resurgent reform issue. Indeed, in the 1860s, it was an embarrassment to the Reformers that there was so little public agitation for reform. In 1860, Russell famously conceded to Palmerston[5]that the apathy of the nation was undeniable. [6]The fear of revolution that was overwhelmingly present between 1830-32 was not so prevalent during the 1860s.[7]Therefore, popular pressure was a subordinate factor in the revival of parliamentary reform.

The revival of reform precipitated the 1867 Act, but the final Act was the product a parliamentary battle dictated by party considerations and tactics. Once again the role of individuals was crucial in this conflict. Popular pressure played a lesser role in convincing Disraeli[8]that the Conservatives should instigate further reform. The prevention of the Reform League's[9]meeting in Hyde Park resulted in riots. Mayer suggests the riots demonstrated that the public was behind reform but crucially that the public stance would not amount to revolution. On top of this, the middle classes had recognised the respectability of the working class argument for political

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concessions. A powerful alliance of the classes emerged which undoubtedly helped to persuade politicians to expand the franchise.[10]

However, it was Disraeli's personal political calculations that ultimately led to the 1867 Act. Disraeli felt that the Conservatives had to move away from the stereotypical party of 'landed reaction'. [11] He was persuaded that Tory reform would result in greater electoral success. What is more, personally he felt that successful Conservative reform would be the perfect retort to the intolerable Gladstone. [1] Therefore, the 1867 reform was largely a result of the individual actions of Disraeli. He instigated reform for political reasons and partly due to his personal intrigues and rivalry with Gladstone.

Disraeli's strong motivation to strengthen the Conservatives and pre-empt Gladstone led to an 'overly zealous' Reform Act of 1867. In Disraeli's mind, passing the Reform Bill through the Commons was paramount. In order to achieve this he allowed a number of significant amendments by radical Liberals. Alarmingly this meant that the extension of the franchise was much greater than originally intended. [2] The Hodgkinson amendment alone enfranchised almost half a million people. 1

From the late 1840s to the late 1860s the British Government began to recognise that moderate political reform was essential for stability and the maintenance of parliamentary government. Many politicians polarised towards reform and this was the decisive factor in the extension of the franchise during this period.

The Representation of the People Act 1884 [3] effectively gave two-thirds of the male population the right to vote. Pressure groups such as the Trade

Union Congress (TUC)[4] played an important role in lobbying and pressuring Parliament for an extension of the franchise. However, it was the role of radical individuals within the Liberal Party that led to the 1884 Act.

Surprisingly, there was minimal pressure from the country areas themselves for an extension of the franchise to the counties.[5] In lieu of their apathy Gladstone exerted the greatest influence on the process of change, as indeed he had over the wider period of 1865 to 1885, which resulted in the 1884 Act. In 1873 Gladstone felt that the extension of the franchise to the counties could no longer be avoided.[6] Once again perceiving reform as a 'moral duty' he successfully oversaw the passage of the 1884 Act.

Parallel to these developments was the vital importance of the passage of the Redistribution Act 1885[7]. Lord Salisbury[8] made it abundantly clear that he would not allow the 1884 Act to pass the Tory-dominated House of Lords unless the 1885 Act accompanied it. There is little doubt that his motivation was entirely political. Showing great tactical skill, Lord Salisbury effectively held the Liberals to ransom and turned the situation towards the Conservative's favour. 1 The Act was given Royal Assent in June 1885. Once more, a prominent individual had aided the extension of the franchise indirectly.

The Representation of the People Act 1918[1] increased the electorate to over 21 million and incorporated some women. However it was neither popular pressure nor the role of individuals that played the greatest role in bringing about the Act. The suffragists led by Millicent Fawcett[2] were important in the constitutional movement for female votes before the War. They applied sustained pressure on the government that helped to bring

about the 1918 Act.[3]In addition, the suffragettes, led by Emmeline Pankhurst,[4]adopted a militant stance towards suffrage, which assured that female suffrage remained fixed in the minds of both politicians and the public. However, even contemporary supporters of women's suffrage were forced to concede that these movements only played a contributory role.[5]It is transparent that war precipitated the extension of the franchise. War disproved previous theory that working-class men and all women were ' unfit to vote'. The sacrifices made by both men and women meant that the argument for their exclusion was untenable.[6]Evans stated: ' Britain was jerked into democracy by the discontinuity of the War.'[7]Conclusive ' patriotic consensus' compelled the government to extend the franchise more radically than ever before.

The Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928[8]fulfilled the enfranchisement of women. This legislation owed its existence to both individuals and popular pressure in equal measure. Stanley BaldwinShare this: Facebook Twitter Reddit LinkedIn WhatsApp