

# THE WOMAN QUESTION



During the 19th century, it became increasingly apparent that most women had less social, legal and economic rights before the law than men. Questions began to circulate around women's suffrage, property rights, legal rights, medical rights, marriage and more. In many countries this growing debate and frustration gave rise to the suffrage movement, with many women believing the real solution would come with the right to vote.

And so began the campaign to give women the right to directly influence governments and the law. Associations like the Womanhood Suffrage League were launched in NSW and in most other states. Public meetings and debates were held, leaflets published, and petitions signed and delivered to parliaments around the nation. Newspapers such as *The Dawn*, published by the "Mother of Suffrage in NSW" Louisa Lawson, gave a strident voice to women's concerns. Rose Scott, another leader in the NSW suffrage movement, wrote:

'Men have come to look upon women as a sort of appendage to themselves....in the future his tail will assert its own individuality.'

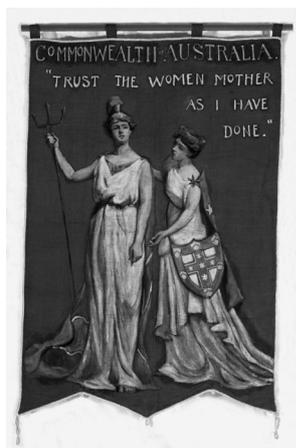
Sir Henry Parkes, then Premier of NSW, introduced electoral reform bills to the Parliament in 1890 and 1891 which included the provision for women's right to vote. In casting his vote against the bill Sir George Dibbs, who followed Parkes as Premier, said "the bulk of women are incapable of performing the duties of men."

South Australia became the first Australian state to give women the right to vote and enter Parliament with the Adult Suffrage Bill of 1894; the first legislation of its kind in the world. In 1901 Australia became a Federation and women were given the right to vote in the commonwealth elections. The *Women's Franchise Bill 1902* was finally passed on its third attempt in the NSW Parliament.

## The Suffragettes

The suffrage movement emerged in most Australian states from within other women's organisations, including the Women's Christian Temperance League in New South Wales. Alcohol abuse was viewed by many women as having a destructive effect on family and community life, and so from the late 1880s the temperance movement focused on the potentially more effective agent of change – women's suffrage.

The campaign to gain the women's vote was foremost one of education that aimed to convince society of the merits of allowing women to contribute to government and democracy. A leaflet printed and circulated in South Australia in 1895 listed 16 reasons for supporting women's suffrage, notably 'because a Government of the people, by the people, and for the people, should mean all the people and not one half.'



In 1891 the New South Wales Womanhood Suffrage League was formed, bringing to prominence the activist Rose Scott and other important campaigners such as Dora Montefiore and Maybanke Wolstenholme.

Australian women stood side by side with their British sisters in the long fight for suffrage, joining street marches and the impassioned, sometimes violent protests. At a street rally held on 17 June 1911 in London Margaret Fisher (wife of the Australian Prime Minister), Emily McGowen (wife of the Premier of New South Wales), Lady Cockburn (wife of the South Australian Premier) and Vida Goldstein (one of Australia's most prominent feminists at the time) joined 40,000 women from Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

The role of Australian women in the British suffrage debate is depicted in this remarkable banner, 'Trust the Women Mother, As I Have Done', which was painted by Dora Meeson. It was carried proudly at the head of an Australian and New Zealand contingent of women suffragists in the Women's Suffrage Coronation Procession in London on 1911. This included Margaret Fisher (wife of the Australian Prime Minister), Emily McGowen (wife of the Premier of New South Wales), Lady Cockburn (wife of the South Australian Premier) and Vida Goldstein (one of Australia's most prominent feminists) who joined 40,000 women from Britain, Australia and New Zealand in the march.

In 1988 the banner was presented as a bicentennial gift to the women of Australia. The central image was also used on a commemorative one dollar coin, minted in 2003, to celebrate a century of women's suffrage in Australia.

## Women's Franchise Act 1902

Universally, one of the main objections to the suffrage movement stemmed from the assumption that married women would simply vote the way of their husbands, in effect doubling the voting power of married men at the ballot. Little credit was given to the notion that women could think and act as independent, politically-minded individuals.

A little known occurrence at the Victorian elections in 1864 however, showed that women were perfectly capable of voting quite unaccompanied by their husbands. In Victoria, the right to vote was based on property ownership. As many women did own property, they were therefore entitled to vote. 'At one of the polling booths...a novel sight was witnessed. A coach filled with ladies drove up, and the fair occupants alighted and recorded their votes...' *The Argus*, 1864.

This was not an early victory for the suffragettes, however, but rather an administrative oversight. The law was quickly amended to exclude women once more.

In 1902, Australia became the second nation in the world to allow women the right to vote in Federal elections. Shortly after this, the *Women's Franchise Bill* was finally passed in NSW. It was a momentous occasion for the women of the Suffrage League. And yet it was just the beginning in a long journey that many would argue is still underway today.

## Protest by design



The suffragette campaign in NSW and other Australian states was a peaceful one in comparison to the level of militancy of the campaigns in Britain. There, marches often became violent, with extreme actions and hunger strikes leading to arrests and prison sentences for campaigners.

However the fight for women's suffrage in the United Kingdom was not all militant, and was also characterised by a sophisticated education and marketing campaign. Organisations such as the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) produced and sold a wide range of merchandise in order to raise funds and promote the cause to the public. Items produced included postcards, clothing, haberdashery, banners, buttons, crockery and even games.

Pictured here is the board game, 'Pank-A-Squith'. Produced in the early 1900s, it was named after two people central to the story of British women's suffrage: Emmeline Pankhurst and Herbert Asquith, British Prime Minister from 1908 to 1916. The game is a traditional spiral of squares where players, through a series of events, including rock throwing and being thrown in prison, end up at the British Houses of Parliament, having successfully petitioned for votes for women.

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