

CASE STUDY 3

'A woman's place is at the polling booth'

A woman's place: the private/public split

Societies in the early twentieth century usually undervalued women. Men lived in the public worlds of work and politics, where their opinions influenced and shaped the political decision-making process, negotiations between different groups and the development of business and industry. Societies viewed women's 'place' to be 'in the home' in the private worlds of marriage, housekeeping, childbirth and child rearing.

Religious teachings, laws and cultural practices enforced this view and ensured that women had little access to the world beyond the home. Muslim women lived in 'purdah' — seclusion from male strangers. Upper-class Chinese mothers improved their daughters' marriage chances by breaking the young girls' toes and bandaging their feet to produce the highly prized 'lily foot'. Despite the practice having been officially banned, communities in India still expected Hindu women to join their husbands in death by jumping onto their funeral pyres.

Within the home, women were expected to submit to the authority of a husband, father, brother or some other male relative. Women's education allocated large amounts of time to training in 'female' pursuits, such as needlework and household management. Work opportunities outside the home often reflected the expectation that women's skills were confined to 'female' tasks — in domestic service, nursing, teaching and other means of serving others.

The development of democracy in late nineteenth-century Britain led to demands for female **suffrage** (already achieved by women in New Zealand and Australia). This campaign was known as the **Suffragist movement**.

suffrage:
a term used to describe
the right to vote

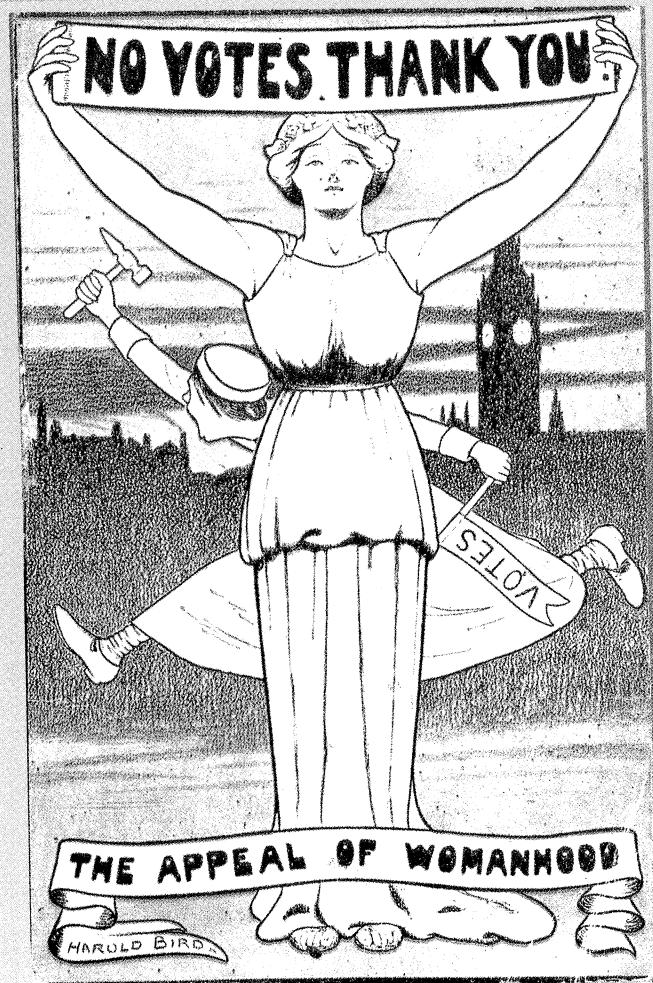
the Suffragist movement:
a late nineteenth- and early
twentieth-century campaign, in
which women demanded voting
rights equal to those
held by men

Source 11.16

An early twentieth-century cartoon commenting on women's campaign for the vote

1. What words would you use to describe each of the images of womanhood shown in the cartoon?
2. What is meant by each of the captions shown in the cartoon?
3. What is the cartoonist's purpose and what techniques does he use to address this?

(Read the information on page 169 before answering this question.)



suffragettes:
women who campaigned for the
right of females to
gain the vote

Protests, prisons and the Pankhursts

Emmeline Pankhurst was one of Britain's most famous **suffragettes**. In 1894, she was one of the leaders of the Women's Franchise League when it succeeded in having a law passed granting women voting rights in local government elections. In 1903, she founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), an organisation in which her daughters, Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, also played active roles.

The suffragettes who belonged to the WSPU were determined to make people take notice of their demands. They adopted militant tactics and engaged in flagrant campaigns of civil disobedience. They particularly targeted vehemently anti-suffrage Liberal government politicians. Initially, WSPU members' tactics included speaking out against the government at public meetings; organising protest marches and picketing demonstrations, chaining themselves to the railings outside London's Houses of Parliament and the prime minister's residence at 10 Downing Street and noisily interrupting politicians' speeches.

Cat and mouse tactics

The WSPU succeeded in undermining support for the Liberal party but not in changing its policy against female suffrage. Liberal members of parliament (MPs) refused to either answer questions on this issue or discuss it with WSPU leaders. They attempted to escape WSPU interference by holding their meetings behind closed doors but, in doing so, they did not consider the determination and ingenuity of the female protesters. Some women forged entry tickets. Others hid within buildings to emerge hours later (from skylights or under speakers' platforms) to interrupt and harass politicians.

The government appeared to sanction police brutality against the suffragettes. It used its influence within the justice system to ensure that WSPU prisoners received harsher treatment than would have been given to political prisoners gaoled for their protests against British rule in Ireland. A number of WSPU members resorted to hunger strikes to embarrass the government. Prison authorities force-fed them through rubber hoses pushed down their throats and into their stomachs.

Source 11.17 Constance Lytton's description of her experience of forced feeding in 1909

Two of the wardresses took hold of my arms, one held my head and one my feet. The doctor leant on my knees as he stooped over my chest to get at my mouth. I shut my mouth and clenched my teeth . . . The doctor seemed annoyed at my resistance and he broke into a temper as he pried my teeth with the steel implement. The pain was intense and at last I must have given way, for he got the gap between my teeth, when he proceeded to turn it until my jaws were fastened wide apart. Then he put down my throat a tube, which seemed to me much too wide and something like four feet in length. I choked the moment it touched my throat. Then the food was poured in quickly; it made me sick a few seconds after it was down. I was sick all over the doctor and wardresses. As the doctor left he gave me a slap on the cheek. Presently the wardresses left me. Before long I heard the sounds of the forced feeding in the next cell to mine. It was almost more than I could bear, it was Elsie Howley. When the ghastly process was over and all quiet, I tapped on the wall and called out at the top of my voice, 'No Surrender', and then came the answer in Elsie's voice, 'No Surrender'.

Extract from <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/s19.htm>

What impression does this give of the attitudes of both the suffragettes and the prison officials?

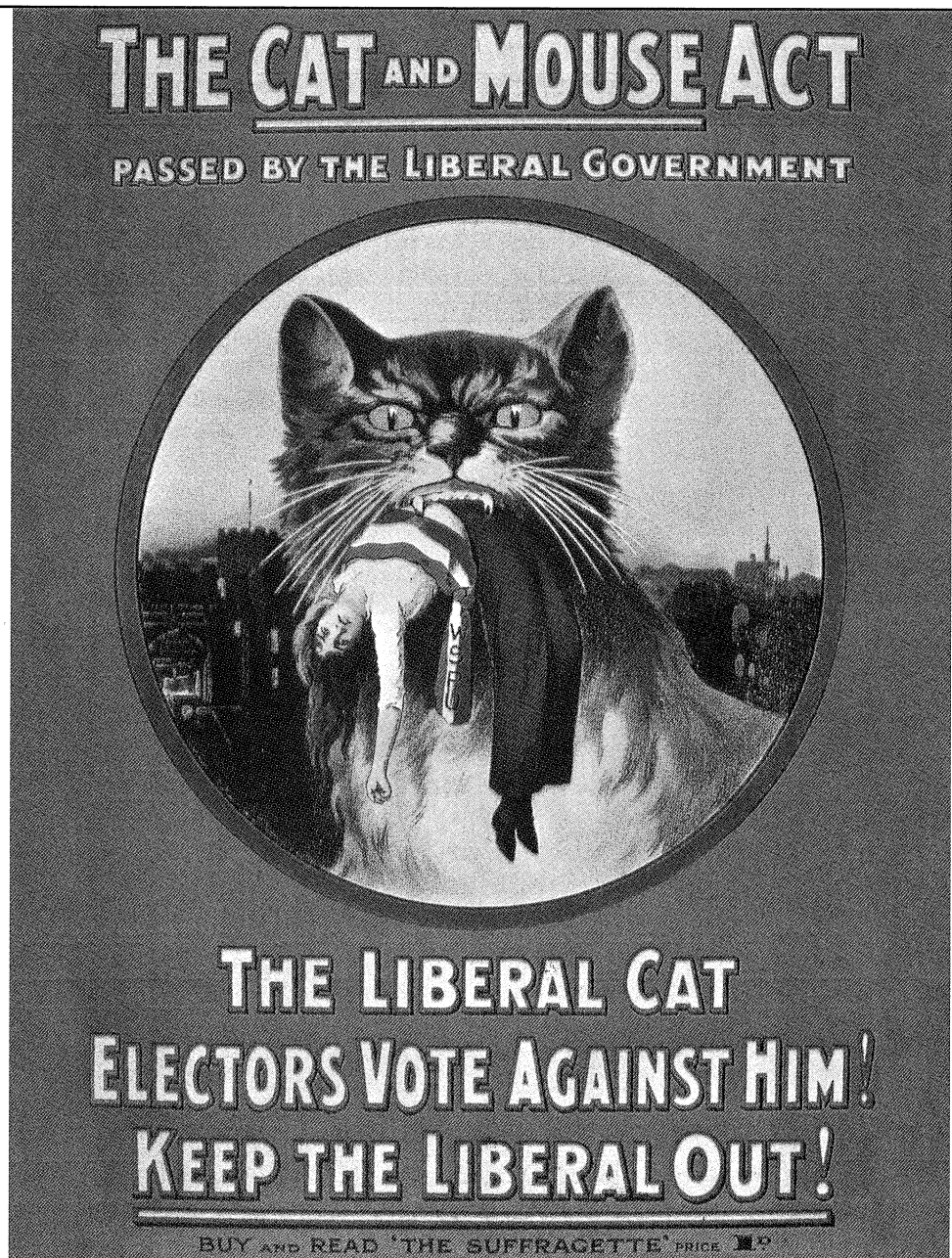
Some Liberal party politicians even made fun of the suffragettes for not engaging in the violent tactics that had characterised great political protests of the past and suggested this as a reason for not taking their demands seriously.

These attitudes encouraged many WSPU members to adopt more violent tactics. In mid 1912, Christabel Pankhurst led a secret arson campaign. Her supporters attempted to burn the homes of two MPs who had spoken out against female suffrage and did considerable damage to a house being built for Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The WSPU continued this campaign throughout 1913 by setting fire to empty houses, train stations, sports stands and clubhouses. They also cut telephone wires and ruined the contents of letterboxes by dousing them with chemicals. WSPU members who disapproved of these tactics were either expelled or ceased to play an active role in this organisation.

As a result of this campaign, more WSPU members ended up in prison, where they continued to go on hunger strikes to gain more attention for their cause. The government responded by passing the *Prisoner's Temporary Discharge of Ill Health Act*. This enabled prison authorities to release women who became ill from lack of food. The police then brought them back to gaol once they had recovered. Critics of the government nicknamed this the 'Cat and Mouse Act'.

Source 11.18

WSPU postcard showing the suffragettes' reaction to the 'Cat and Mouse Act'



What message did the WSPU want to convey with this postcard?