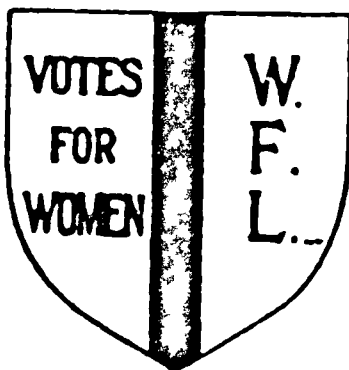

WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE.

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**DARE TO BE
FREE.**

OBJECTS To secure for Women the Parliamentary Vote as it is or may be granted to men; to use the power thus obtained to establish equality of rights and opportunities between the sexes, and to promote the social and industrial well-being of the community.

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**"DARING TO BE FREE":
THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL IDENTITIES IN THE
WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE
1907 - 1930**

**CLAIRE LOUISE EUSTANCE
SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF D.PHIL**

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CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES
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ABBREVIATIONS

- Association of Moral and Social Hygiene (AMASH)
- Church League For Women's Suffrage (CLWS)
- Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs)
- Free Church League for Women's Suffrage (F. CLWS)
- Independent Labour Party (ILP)
- International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA)
- Labour Representation Committee (LRC)
- National Council of Women (NCW)
- National Federation of Women Teachers (NFWT)
- National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS)
- National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC. Formerly NUWSS)
- Open Door Council (ODC)
- Six Point Group (SPG)
- Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations (SJCIWO)
- Women Citizens Association (WCA)
- Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)
- Women's Suffrage National Aid Corps (WSNAC)
- Women's Trade Union League (WTUL)
- Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG)
- Women's Freedom League (WFL)
- Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF, or WIL)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the history of the Women's Freedom League (WFL) in Britain in the years from 1907 - 1930. The WFL was formed following the failure of attempts to introduce internal democratic practices into the militant suffrage society, the Women's Social and Political Union. The WFL continued in existence until 1961, well beyond the period of intense campaigning for women's suffrage, and the emergence of modern feminism in the 1910s and 1920s.

The following themes are explored: changes in concepts of citizenship and democracy, and transformation of the relationship between state and society; how these changes intertwined with the development among women of a series of women-centred political identities; the ideas and activities of suffrage activists in local WFL branches in Scotland, Wales and England, and the convergence and divergence of interests between regional branches and the national leadership; and the contribution of these two tiers of the WFL to the growth of modern feminism.

I advance a method for understanding the history of suffrage organisation which is an extension of previous suffrage histories of the women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I consider the interplay of ideas and the activities of groups of WFL women based on their class and status at all levels of the organisation between 1907 and 1930. I demonstrate how the concerns of citizenship, democracy, militancy and feminism led to the emergence of a distinct feminist movement in the 1920s which continued to promote feminist concepts of equality between men and women.

INTRODUCTION

TRANSFORMATION AND CRISIS, 1880 - 1930

The years from 1880 to 1930 have been described as an "epochal age" in terms of the social and political transitions that occurred in Britain. Such were the changes in concepts of citizenship and the relationship between the state and civil society, that this period has been characterised as one of "crisis" for liberalism. The manifestations of this were the gradual and tortuous introduction of universal suffrage, and the institutionalisation of interventionist state regulation in the form of the welfare state.¹

In this thesis I am concerned with exploring how women developed their identities, both as members of a distinct women's political organisation, and as citizens during the period which saw them gain partial and then full enfranchisement. These developments were connected with the crisis of liberalism in a series of complex ways, and in the broadest context I will consider how the political interventions of women affected the transformation of liberal democracy. I also explore how the changes in the relationship between civil society and the state intertwined with the development among women of a series of distinct women-centred political identities. Specifically I am concerned with the response of women to their unequal position in society and politics, and with the changing nature of female collective action and identity. I consider these questions in relation to the development of feminism in Britain, which I define as women's understanding of the factors which worked to constrain them in subordinate social, economic, and political positions, and the ideas and actions they took to address their

¹In Britain prior to 1918 women were without the franchise, and approximately 60% of men had the vote in practice.

oppression.²

In order to contextualise my examination into the development of women's political identities, I explore various levels of the transformation of liberalism, and its relationship to my study of women's political activity in the period up to 1930

Section I: EXPLORING THE THEMES OF TRANSFORMATION AND CRISIS

The origins of the theory of "crisis" in this period can be broadly attributed to the arguments put forward by George Dangerfield in *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. Here Dangerfield argues that the years between 1910 and 1914 were marked by fundamental social disorder, initiated by the struggles of the syndicalists, the suffragettes and the opponents of Irish Home Rule. It was these struggles prior to the first world war which according to Dangerfield, led to the "death of Liberal England".³

Dangerfield's arguments provided a frame of reference for subsequent historians

²The issue of usage of the term feminism by current writers to denote ideas about women's inequality and oppression both before and after the term was first invented in the 1890s has been long debated. In this section I deploy the term feminism to describe nineteenth-century ideas about women's unequal relationship with men. This is in line with the practice of those authors of the texts referred to, for example Carole Pateman on p. 10. In the following section, I use the term feminism to denote an explicit acknowledgement of women's perceptions of gender inequality which developed in the 1910s and 1920s. See below, pp. 21-23, for a more detailed explanation of my definition of feminism.

³George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, (Paladin, Granada Publishing Limited, London, 1970), pp. 78-291.

who have significantly extended his arguments, while modifying what have been termed his "excesses."⁴ In particular Dangerfield's construction of liberalism has been expanded, both traced further back to the later decades of the nineteenth century, and extended into the 1920s. Liberalism is now understood through a series of distinct, yet closely linked patterns. Firstly, there is the question of the changes in the Liberal party itself, which over this period experienced decline both in membership and in terms of representation in Parliament. Secondly, liberalism has been defined as a ideological construction which regulated the relationship between state and society. This perspective has problematised the straightforward account of the transition from a laissez-faire system of government to one of interventionist practices. Thirdly, liberalism is seen as a social and cultural construction which defined the core of Victorian society in terms of the individual, the patriarchal family, law and Nation.⁵

It has been demonstrated by historians that the changes in these three forms of liberalism cannot be traced entirely separately. Liberalism did not "die out" in the

⁴Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, "State and Society, 1880-1930", Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, eds., *Crises in the British State, 1880-1930*, (Hutchinson, London, 1985. In association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham), pp. 9-10. An extensive exploration of crisis theory can be found in the other articles in this collection. This interpretation is by no means universally accepted. Opposing positions identify a continuity between the mid-Victorian period and the political forms and social regulations which emerged in the 1920s. See Michael Hart, "The Liberals, The War and The Franchise", *English Historical Review*, Vol. XCVII, October 1982, pp. 820-832. Hart's article is a critical reply to the article by Colin Matthew, John Kay and Ross McKibbin, "The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party", reprinted in Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class. Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991), pp. 66-100.

⁵Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, "State and Society, 1880-1930", pp. 10-11. For an analysis of the patriarchal nature of liberal society see Carole Pateman, Chapter Six: "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy", *The Disorder of Women. Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989), pp. 118-140. Her arguments are explored further later in this section.

twentieth century, but rather was redeployed and transformed. This point has been emphasised by Richard Bellamy, who comments on the "curious fate" of twentieth century liberalism. Bellamy asserts that there was a decline in the power of the parliamentary party, while liberalism prevailed:

...as a background theory or set of presuppositions and sentiments of a supposedly neutral and universal kind which dominates political thinking across the ideological spectrum.⁶

Such studies are crucial because they signal a path beyond debates solely on liberalism. They allow for consideration of other factors integral to the transformation of politics, the state and civil society in Britain in this period. Broadly these other factors were the rise of labour, conflicts over imperialism and the development of feminism and the women's movement.

Such considerations on the transformation of politics and the state are well developed in relation to the rise of labour, most notably in the studies of the shifts and realignments within the working-classes and their demands for access to political power.⁷ The rise of labour has also been studied in relation to the crisis of liberalism, in particular through tracing how state interventions under New Liberalism were in part a response to the growing influence, and fears of, the labour movement.⁸ Attention has

⁶Richard Bellamy, *Liberalism & Modern Society. An Historical Argument*, (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992), p. 1.

⁷See Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983 [1974]), and James Hinton, *Labour and Socialism. A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867-1974*, (Wheatsheaf Books, Brighton, 1986)

⁸See Bill Schwarz and Martin Durham, "'A Safe and Sane Labourism': Socialism and the State, 1910-1924", Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, eds., *Crises in the British State*, pp. 126-147. For other debates around the influence of liberalism, see David Sutton, "Liberalism, State Collectivism and the Social Relations of Citizenship", in *ibid*, pp. 63-79, and A.M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1962).

also been paid, albeit to a lesser degree, to the ideals of Empire and Nation, and how these were challenged by competition from other industrialised nations and by discontent in countries within the British Empire. Notably the struggles for independence in Ireland have been studied in terms of the connections between the demands of Irish nationalists and the demise of the Liberal party.⁹

Nevertheless, the part women played in this renegotiation of political boundaries has been isolated and marginalised.¹⁰ This situation is immediately fraught with contradictions, given that the years under consideration are those in which women's part in history has received the most systematic and prolonged attention. This attention revolves around the actions and demands of members of the women's suffrage movement in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The neglect of the part played by women in the transformation of politics can be understood by the ways in which their intervention into politics through suffrage demands has traditionally been constructed. Jane Marcus has argued forcefully that while George Dangerfield's original arguments were the first to acknowledge women in relation to the crisis of liberalism, he did so in such a way as to diminish and belittle the achievements and concerns of the women's movement itself.¹¹ While Marcus

⁹Robin Wilson, "Imperialism in Crisis: The Irish Dimension", Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, *Crises in the British State*, pp. 151-179.

¹⁰An exception is Martin Durham, "Suffrage and After". Feminism in the Early Twentieth Century", Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, *Crises in the British State*, pp. 179-189.

¹¹Jane Marcus, Introduction: "Re-reading the Pankhursts and Women's Suffrage", *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Women's Source Library, 1987), pp. 2-6.

concentrates specifically on the period which saw women's suffrage activists adopt militancy, other studies have begun to locate women more firmly within the greater schema of social and political transformation.

Carole Pateman has set out to explore what have been seen as the traditional connections between liberalism and feminism. While the two have been historically connected through their origins in the emergence of individualism as the guiding principles of social life, Pateman argues that feminism diverged by demanding that women be included into the political body as equal citizens. This constituted a challenge to the ruling foundations of what were in fact patriarchal liberal social and political relations, upsetting the boundaries between the public and the private spheres. Women in the nineteenth century did not categorically deny the existence of separate spheres of interest for women and men, but challenged the belief that women should be confined to the private sphere under masculine dominance.¹²

Further complexities in the relationship between liberalism and feminism in the mid nineteenth-century have been traced by Jane Rendall, who argues that suffrage campaigners in the 1860s and 1870s used a range of liberal beliefs and theories to renegotiate the existing boundaries of politics. These were arguments upholding a reduction in the role of the state, in order to "strengthen the potential of the individual citizen", and those perceiving enfranchisement to be a form of "political training". There were also those who based their demands for the female franchise on the need for patriotism and a republican form of public spiritedness. Rendall argues that though

¹²Carole Pateman, "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy", *The Disorder of Women*, pp. 118-119.

these ideas continued to advance gender differentiation, nevertheless, they did permit equality.¹³



Plate 1: John Stuart Mill Celebration, May 20th 1927

¹³Jane Rendall, "Citizenship, Culture and Civilization: The Language of British Suffragists, 1866-1974", unpublished conference paper, given at Suffrage and Beyond Conference, Wellington, New Zealand, 26th-28th August, 1993, p. 15.

Thus patriarchal liberalism was challenged by feminist intervention concerning the fundamentally gendered constructions of the public and the private, and the political and the domestic. In this thesis I explore these patterns by considering how women, through the intense suffrage campaigns of the early decades of the twentieth century, expanded and challenged notions of liberal democracy.

Such challenges could range from celebratory processions in honour of John Stuart Mill, the hero of liberal individualism, to participating in new patterns of state welfare provision in their local communities.¹⁴ Women both supported principles of democracy while developing their own ideas and concepts of gender inequality from within their own independent organisations.¹⁵ Women generated a distinct political culture by creating their own areas of autonomous argument, organisation and culture, and by the early twentieth century, this pressure by women was increasingly represented by uses of the term feminism.

These points are crucial in order to understand that women were not simply peripheral instruments in the great transformation of liberalism, but crucial and highly significant participants in the process of renegotiating politics and its relation to civil

¹⁴See the photograph on p. 11. For details of the developments in representations of J.S. Mill's legacy, see Stefan Collini, Chapter Eight: "From Dangerous Partisan to National Possession. John Stuart Mill in English Culture, 1873-1933", *Public Moralists, Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991), pp. 311-341. For details of women's involvement in local welfare provision see Patricia Hollis, *'Ladies Elect': Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987).

¹⁵See Linda Walker, "The Women's Movement in England in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", (PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1984), and the collection of essays in Jane Rendall, ed., *Equal or Different. Women's Politics, 1880-1914*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987).

society. Increasingly large groups of women fashioned this renegotiation by identifying and developing their own identities both as women citizens and as feminists.

Histories of the women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have tended to concentrate on particular themes among those I have identified, for example, emerging feminist ideas, or the activities and concerns of particular groups of women within an organisation.¹⁶ In this thesis I advance beyond these boundaries, and consider the relationship between the development of ideas, aims, activities, and networks across national and local membership of one suffrage society, the Women's Freedom League. As I now demonstrate, my ideas owe much to the work of successive generations of writing on women's suffrage.

Section II: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SUFFRAGE AND FEMINISM

The historiography of women's suffrage is distinct in that there has been a pattern of writing on this subject since the 1920s, in the form of autobiographies and histories written by participants, or those close to them.¹⁷ Out of this tradition, and the

¹⁶See subsequent footnotes. Recently Christine Bolt has produced a book which does attempt to incorporate the various approaches to studies of the women's movement in Britain and America. See Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movement in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s*, (Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York and London, 1993).

¹⁷See Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant*, (Edward Arnold, London, 1924); Dora Montefiore, *From a Victorian To a Modern*, (Archer, London, 1927); Ray Strachey, *Millicent Garrett Fawcett*, (John Murray, London, 1931); and Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant. Autobiographical Reminiscences*, (J. M. Dent, London, 1935). This point can be taken further, to those organisations who commissioned the writing of their own histories concomitant to the suffrage campaign itself. It may be gauged as a recognition of their own importance, and self awareness. This is discussed in the section of this

scholarly interest it provoked, two broad strands can be seen to have developed.

Firstly there is the approach, embodied by Ray Strachey in *'The Cause'*, where she traces the history of the women's movement, from the mid nineteenth century until the vote was achieved for women in 1928. While acknowledging the new militant approach adopted in 1905, Strachey emphasises the role of the constitutional National Union of Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) over and above that of the first militant suffrage society, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU).¹⁸ Variants of this approach, which tend to give relatively more emphasis to the WSPU than Strachey, have been linked to concerns about liberalism and the Liberal party. Writing in the mid 1960s, Constance Rover identified with liberal equality feminism, by developing a concept of a wider social movement, but one still broadly linked to a course of progress towards achieving equality with men.¹⁹ Another approach, similar in some respects to Rover, is David Morgan's analysis of the links between suffrage and Liberalism. Drawing on George Dangerfield, he considers what might be termed "high political questions" in relation to the affairs of the Liberal party and the failure of women's suffrage politics.²⁰

chapter on sources. See as examples, Katharine Roberts, *Pages From The Diary Of A Militant Suffragette*, (Garden City Press Ltd, Letchworth & London, 1910); Margaret Wynne Nevinson, *Five Years' Struggle For Freedom. A History of the Suffrage Movement From 1908 to 1912*, (WFL, London, 1912); and A.J.R. ed., *Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who*, (Stanley Paul & Co, London, 1913).

¹⁸Ray Strachey, *'The Cause'*. *A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*, (G. Bell & Sons, London, 1936 [1928]). For another account of the NUWSS see Leslie Parker Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 1897-1914*, (Garland, New York, 1972).

¹⁹Constance Rover, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866 - 1914*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967), p. 209, and passim.

²⁰David Morgan, *Suffragists and Liberals. The Politics of Woman Suffrage in England*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1975), p. 1, and passim. For another Liberal account, see Roger Fulford, *Votes For Women. The Story of a Struggle*, (Faber & Faber,

The second broad approach which has come to dominate popular perceptions of the suffrage movement, is that which concentrates on the actions of the WSPU membership, particularly the close knit leadership of the Pankhurst family. These histories have ranged from the scholarly, to the celebratory, and indeed the condemnatory.²¹ In general, over riding attention has focused on the autocratic government of the WSPU and the militant actions of its membership in an ever increasingly violent confrontation with the Liberal government who refused to grant votes for women.

The various emphases contained in these two approaches can be seen to be bound by some common denominators. All concentrate in the main on the leadership of the WSPU and the NUWSS, and while these two suffrage societies were significant in terms of membership numbers, many others were active in Britain and Ireland in the same period.²² With very few exceptions these accounts present an overall image of the campaign for women's enfranchisement as being undertaken by large number of middle-

London, 1958).

²¹In the order stated see: Andrew Rosen, *'Rise Up Women!' The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1974); Antonia Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes*, (Michael Joseph, London, 1973); David Mitchell, *The Fighting Pankhursts*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1967); and David Mitchell, *Queen Christabel. A Biography of Christabel Pankhurst*, (Macdonald and Jane's, London, 1977). E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement. An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideas* (Virago, London, 1984 [1931]), is still regarded as a classic, but recently her interpretation has been critically appraised by Jane Marcus, see "Re-reading The Pankhursts and Women's Suffrage", Jane Marcus, ed., *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, Women's Source Library, London, 1988), pp. 1-17.

²²A.J.R., ed., *Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who*, (Stanley Paul & Co., London, 1913), pp. 1-2, lists the thirty-six women suffrage societies active in Britain by 1913 and eight in Ireland. For an analysis of this book, see Jihang Park, "The British Suffrage Activists of 1913: An Analysis", *Past and Present*, No. 120, August 1988, pp. 147-162.

class women, who all seemed to devote their energies to demonstrations in London, and their attention to events in Parliament.²³

In short they enforced the perception that the issue of women's suffrage was only important for its occasional impact on the wider parliamentary process, or for those extraordinary moments when middle- and upper-class women joined together to demand they be given equal citizenship. For some historians, the militant suffrage period was an aberration from the great march of progress, while others, depending on their political views, saw it as the culmination of long and either successful or unsuccessful campaigns by women for justice. Moreover, for many of these historians it was the efforts of women during the first world war which was the decisive factor in women's success. Thus an apparently natural boundary was created which made any need to consider the period after 1918 largely irrelevant.²⁴

In the body of work produced on suffrage in the 1960s and 1970s, one study stands out for its attempt to challenge some of the interpretations of the women's suffrage campaign outlined above. In 1978 Jill Liddington and Jill Norris published *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, which was the first conclusive study of working-class women's

²³An exception to this almost total middle-class bias comes in Marian Ramelson, *The Petticoat Rebellion: A Century of Struggle for Women's Rights*, (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1972 [1967]). For comments on the lack of concern with the involvement of working-class women, see Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us. The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (Virago, London, 1985 [1978]), p. 14.

²⁴The exceptions to any formative study of suffrage activists's activities during the first world war in the period before 1980 are: Arthur Marwick's brief extracts in *Women At War , 1914-1918*, (Croon Helm, London, 1977); David Mitchell *Women on the Warpath. The Story of Women of the First World War*,(Jonathan Cape, London, 1966); and Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, Chapter Fourteen: "What Did You Do in the Great War?", *One Hand Tied Behind Us. The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement*, (Virago, London, 1985 [1978]), pp. 252-263.

demands for suffrage from within the women's suffrage movement. Their study of the women they termed 'radical suffragists' introduced the theme of diverse interests and concerns among suffrage activists, based on their class position, class consciousness and relations with the labour movement. These in turn are shown to have influenced the nature and pattern of women's attempts to transform politics, not least by emphasising how women could be motivated as much by socialist ideology as by liberal principles of equality.²⁵ The theme I wish to follow through relates to the issue of diverse interests and differences among women, in particular in relation to class and power, and also regional diversity.²⁶

Liddington and Norris's illustration of how class difference actually served to construct the suffrage campaign can be taken further to consider the various subject positions which were dictated by perceptions of class. Class difference was acknowledged by middle-class suffrage activists, but only related to the needs of their working-class sisters, who were situated within and outside the movement. Often the same middle-class women could be reticent about positioning themselves in class structures. This question of class difference and class consciousness raises other issues of difference in relation to the past (and on-going) party political interests of women's suffrage activists, and also their experiences as Poor Law Guardians and members of school boards, and later, in local government. That suffrage activists did have such

²⁵Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, passim.

²⁶ Michele Barrett, "The Concept of Difference", *Feminist Review*, No. 26, Summer 1987, pp. 29-39, discusses how differences among women can be understood. It follows that difference among women also related to many other factors, including their race, age and sexuality. Due to a lack of space and available sources these have not been developed in this thesis. These issues were important influences on the arguments and concerns of the women suffragists and feminists discussed in this thesis, yet substantive studies are still outstanding.

experience is apparent from various biographies and autobiographies. Such evidence in turn raises questions about the extent to which these types of activity served as trajectories into suffrage agitation, and also how such knowledge influenced the nature of activity within the suffrage movement.²⁷

The biographies which have been written include studies of women who may be termed "ordinary" members, as distinct from those women who constituted the well-known leadership of suffrage societies. This body of material provides fertile ground for exploring the question of power relations among suffrage activists, and the factors which enabled some women from both the working- and middle-classes, to progress through the ranks to positions of national influence, while others remained on the periphery of the national movement.

Such questions relating to the implications of diversity can be extended to explore, as Liddington and Norris did, the issue of regional specificity. Despite their work on Lancashire, this issue has continued to be systematically bypassed in much general suffrage historiography.²⁸ In this thesis local factors, particularly community networks

²⁷See Patricia Hollis, *'Ladies Elect': Women in English Local Government 1865 - 1914*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987), and Linda Walker, "The Women's Movement in England in the Late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries", (PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1984). For biographies see Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life: Charlotte Despard, Suffragette, Socialist and Sinn Feiner*, (Hutchinson, London, 1980); Doris Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of Ada Nield Chew*, (Virago, London, 1982); Jill Liddington, *The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel: Selina Cooper (1864-1946)*, (Virago, London, 1984); and Patricia Romero, *E. Sylvia Pankhurst. Portrait of a Radical*, (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1987). See also Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up. The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel*, edited and introduced by Geoffrey Mitchell, (Virago, London, 1984 [1968]).

²⁸Recent exceptions are, Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause. The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland*, (Aberdeen University Press, Aberdeen, 1991), and Margaret

and social and economic factors are shown to have influenced the development among suffragists of both national and local political identities. This raises the possibility of dual, and sometimes conflicting interests between national and local issues.

Academic and feminist interest in the suffrage campaign was further diversified when contemporary concerns with questions of equality and difference were raised in the 1980s. These concerns were extended to consider the ideas of suffrage activists about gender equality.²⁹ Studies by Les Garner and Sandra Holton are particularly useful contributions to this issue. Both identify the duality and complexity in suffrage activists' perceptions of gender inequality. They identify a *pattern continuing from the nineteenth century* where women's demands were grounded in liberal concepts of equal rights citizenship. Yet there also remained an awareness of the need to extend women's special qualities into the public sphere. Hence perceptions of women's difference from men were maintained.³⁰ This is summed up by Holton:

British feminists insisted on both the necessity of increasing state intervention in areas that had previously been part of women's domestic preserve and that concomitant need for women's participation in the work

Ward, "'Suffrage First - Above All Else!' An Account of the Irish Suffrage Movement", *Feminist Review*, No. 10, Spring 1982, p. 21-32.

²⁹Other studies have taken a different emphasis and consider the ways in which the suffrage campaign intersected with other movements. For connections with sexual reform and anti-militarism, see respectively Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster And Her Enemies. Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930*, (Pandora Press, London, 1985), and Jill Liddington, *The Long Road To Greenham. Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820*, (Virago, London, 1989).

³⁰Les Garner, Chapter One: "Feminism and the 1900s: Some Influences on Suffragism", *Stepping Stones To Women's Liberty. Feminist Ideas in the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1900-1918*, (Heinemann, London, 1984), pp. 1-10, and Sandra Holton, Chapter One: "'Feminizing Democracy': The Ethos of the Women's Suffrage Movement", *Feminism and Democracy. Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986), pp. 9-28.

of the state. In asserting both, they challenged the notion that domestic and public matters could be kept apart as the separate concerns of women and men respectively.³¹

Consecutively, Garner's and Holton's studies also question the nature of the boundaries between the women's suffrage societies. Holton in particular argues that in the early years of the twentieth century they were ideologically homogenous.³² Their work paves the way for extending analysis of the suffrage campaign and women's desire for separate organisations, beyond the immediate goal of suffrage, into the 1920s and beyond. It becomes possible to consider the development of a self-identified, and explicitly *feminist* critique of unequal gender relations, and also the development of a feminist movement through which women were able to articulate their ideas and demands.³³

Such an exploration of feminist ideas and their relationship to the suffrage movement and suffrage demands is both necessary and indeed crucial in terms of the British case. This is already well developed in studies of the American movement, notably by Nancy Cott who explores directly the fundamental links between feminism and suffrage, yet also the differences between them.³⁴ The debates which have arisen

³¹Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, p. 15.

³²Les Garner, *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty*, contains chapters on the NUWSS, the WSPU, the Women's Freedom League, the East London Federation of Suffragettes, and the journal *The Freewoman*. See Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 28, 29-52.

³³The term feminism was first developed in France towards the end of the nineteenth-century. See Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1987), pp. 14-15, 289 for a discussion on the origins of the term. See Chapter Four of this thesis for a discussion of its early usage and meaning in Britain.

³⁴Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, pp. 3-10.

out of the literature on this subject testify to the controversial nature of the connections between feminism and the suffrage movement in the early twentieth century.

While the many different definitions of feminism among suffrage activists must be acknowledged, Cott identifies a working definition which is useful in plotting the emergence of what she terms modern feminism in the 1910s and 1920s. Her definition is located within three basic premises: an opposition to the control by one sex of the rights and opportunities of the other; the belief that women's subordinate position was socially constructed, rather than grounded in any natural order; and finally the belief that women were not only linked by biological sameness, but also by "some level of identification with the group called women."³⁵

Cott acknowledges the dilemmas and apparent contradictions contained within her definition, but argues in response:

The 1910s and 1920s revealed paradoxes which had hovered around efforts to obtain women's rights earlier but which became the defining elements of feminism in the twentieth century. Feminism asks for sexual equality that includes sexual difference. It aims for individual freedoms by mobilising sex solidarity. It posits that women recognise their unity while it stands for diversity among women. It requires gender consciousness for its basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles.³⁶

In addition to acknowledging the dual expression of equality and difference, it is Cott's last point on women as a social group which is crucial for understanding the development of women's political identities from those grounded in suffrage demands to those related to feminism. This is not to say that women's collective unity in an organisation was necessarily or automatically feminist, nor that there are no differences

³⁵Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, pp. 4-5.

³⁶Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, p. 5.

between the history of feminism and the history of the women's movement in this country.³⁷ However in the 1910s and 1920s many suffrage activists saw fundamental connections between women's distinct local and national organisation, including friendship networks, and their explicitly feminist constructions of gender inequality. Women believed that through these connections they could bring about change.³⁸

An illustration of the difficulties which arise if the experiences of ordinary members, questions of equality and difference in feminist concepts of gender oppression, and an explicit study of the stages in the generation of a feminist identity are ignored, can be found in the work of Susan Kingsley Kent.³⁹ In *Sex and Suffrage*, she argues that the feminist ideas promoted within and through demands for the suffrage represented a "sex-war". She specifically selects the debates and writings of a number of leading activists in order to argue that feminism in the suffrage campaign was represented by demands for "total transformation of the lives of women" through redefining and recreating "by political means, the sexual culture of Britain."⁴⁰

³⁷Rosalind Delmar, "What Is Feminism", Juliet Mitchell & Ann Oakley, eds., *What Is Feminism?*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989), pp. 8-33, makes this point, and challenges the interpretation of feminism as simply a social movement of women.

³⁸Liz Stanley and Ann Morley develop this point in relation to the development of a feminist community of women, based on friendship networks, at a local level. See Liz Stanley and Ann Morley, Chapter Six: "Feminist Friendship and Feminist Organisation", *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison. A Biographical Detective Story* with Gertrude Colemore's *The Life and Emily Davison*, (The Women's Press, London, 1988), pp. 172-185.

³⁹Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914*, (Routledge, London, 1990 [1987]), "The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War One and the Demise of British Feminism", *Journal of British Studies*, 27, July 1988, pp. 232-253, and "Gender Reconstruction After The First World War", Harold Smith, ed., *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, (Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1990), pp. 66-83.

⁴⁰Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, p. 3.

Kingsley Kent refuses to acknowledge the presence of demands for sexual equality, and an emphasis on sexual difference, in the ideas of members across all levels of the movement. This leads her to present a particularly narrow and dismissive interpretation of the development of feminism and feminist identity in the period up to, and indeed after, 1914.⁴¹ Not only does she argue that a belief in complementary separate spheres between women and men replaced sex-war in the 1920s, but she claims it was this tension which represented the demise of feminism.⁴² Once again she seems to ignore the arguments of a broad cross-section of women who had contributed to the development of feminism as both a conceptual ideal, and a political movement.

Alternative approaches in what is a rapidly growing body of work on women's organisation and feminism in the 1920s, provide more useful guides to the development of feminism, feminist identities, and feminist organisations in Britain in the 1920s.⁴³ Johanna Alberti's study which is based on members of the National Union of Societies

⁴¹Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, p. 17. Kent specifically states that when she refers to "feminists" she means the "articulate women", rather than the "rank and file", because it was these women's debates and arguments which "composed the feminist discourse."

⁴²Susan Kingsley Kent, "The Politics of Sexual Difference", p. 234.

⁴³General work on feminism in the 1920s includes: Jane Lewis, "Beyond Suffrage: English Feminism in the 1920s", *Maryland Historian*, pp. 1-17; David Doughan, *Lobbying For Liberation. British Feminism, 1918-1968*, (City of London Polytechnic, London, 1980); Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries. Portraits of British Feminists Between The Wars*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987); Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage. Feminists in War and Peace, 1914-28*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989); Harold Smith, "British Feminism in the Twentieth Century", in Harold Smith, ed., *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 47-65; Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1959*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1992); Deidre Beddoe, Chapter Six: "Politics and Issues", *Back To Home and Duty. Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939*, (Pandora Press, London, 1989), pp. 132-147; and Christine Bolt, Chapter Six: "The War, the Vote, and After. Doldrums and New Departures", *The Women's Movements*, pp. 236-276.

for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) and the Six Point Group (SPG), views this period as one where the issues of equality and difference were actually *identified* rather than initiated. While she defines the perception of this duality as a problem, she locates this problem not in the decline of feminism, but in the rifts and divisions which occurred among the leadership of non-party women's organisations in the 1920s.⁴⁴ There is a case for arguing that it was the attempts by some sections of the women's movement of the 1920s to maintain the deceptively straightforward and uniting definitions of equality, that resulted in subsequent difficulties among old comrades and friends in the feminist movement of the 1920s.

I argue that in these years after suffrage had been partially granted, the temporary alliances between women began to crack.⁴⁵ Women began to demand a wider range of reforms, while at the same time as facing pressure to align with class, and party political interests. The number of women's organisations campaigning on specific issues multiplied, and this served to threaten the membership levels in the old women's suffrage organisations which had now been turned into non-party women's organisations.⁴⁶ The result of the diversity which now characterised the women's

⁴⁴Johanna Alberti, Chapter Seven: "New and Equality Feminism", *Beyond Suffrage*, pp. 164-190.

⁴⁵Nancy Cott argues this point in relation to the situation in America in the 1920s, see "Feminist Theory and Feminist Movements - The Past Before Us", Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds., *What Is Feminism?*, p. 55.

⁴⁶Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, pp. 154-208 explores women in other political parties, see also Pat Thane, "The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-1945", Harold Smith, ed., *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 124-143. Details of the activities and membership of some of these specific interest groups, can be found in Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster And Her Enemies*, and G. Bussey and M. Tims, *Pioneers For Peace: The Women's International League For Peace and Freedom, 1915-1965*, (Allen & Unwin, London, 1965).

movement was the development of a plethora of political identities among women who had once seemed so united in their demands for women's suffrage.

In understanding these difficulties, Denise Riley's analysis of the troubled overburdening of the concept of "woman" and its connections with feminism is useful. Arguably difficulties arose for suffragists and feminists in the 1910s and 1920s because they both called for and acted on perceptions of women's unity, while at the same time acknowledging women's diversity.⁴⁷ Thus their attempts to change gender relations in political, economic and social life were fraught with contradictions.⁴⁸ It is this process which has been overlooked in relation to histories of suffrage and feminism. Yet it is this which provides a key to understanding how women developed their political identities in the enfranchised world.

This survey of current suffrage historiography has identified a number of factors which have been under-researched, but are nevertheless crucial in understanding the development of a diversity of women's political identities. It is crucial to study the membership of suffrage movements, the differences between members, their own experiences, and their local networks and communities. Equally it is necessary to explore the development of feminist ideas and perceptions of inequality and oppression, in the ways that they both connected with, and diverged from, liberal and socialist traditions.

⁴⁷See Denise Riley, Chapter Four: "The Womanly Vote, 'Am I That Name?' *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke & London, 1988), pp. 67-95.

⁴⁸Denise Riley, 'Am I That Name?', pp. 2, 95.

Such are the depth and diversity of these questions, that it is not possible to consider the entire experience of women in the period from 1880. I have chosen to explore these questions through a case study of the Women's Freedom League, a women's suffrage society which was formed in 1907.

Section III: "DARING TO BE FREE": A CASE STUDY OF THE WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE, 1907 - 1930⁴⁹

i) "Daring To Be Free"

The most significant reason why I have chosen to study the Women's Freedom League (WFL) is that this organisation remained in existence until 1962, well beyond the period of campaigning for the suffrage, and the emergence of feminism in the 1910s and 1920s.⁵⁰ In addition, my choice represents the fact that of all the main suffrage societies, the WFL has received proportionately the least attention from historians.⁵¹ There are no studies of the WFL and references to it have been largely confined to histories of the WSPU, and quickly forgotten after the initial controversy surrounding the split over internal democratic government in 1907.

⁴⁹"Dare To Be Free" was the motto adopted by the Women's Freedom League in 1907.

⁵⁰In this thesis I have referred to the Women's Freedom League as the "WFL" and the "League". Both terms were used by its members: the former, mostly in literature designed for an external audience; and the latter when talking to their fellow members, or in discussions at annual conferences. I have continued in the same vein, but have used the term "WFL" when discussing other women's societies for clarity.

⁵¹Earlier this century the WFL described themselves as one of the three "main suffrage societies". The other two were the NUWSS, and the WSPU. I have continued this definition, which includes the women-only, non-party-political suffrage societies.

Because of WFL members's investment in principles of internal democratic organisation, this case study of the WFL can explore how WFL members understood democracy, and also how they incorporated it into their organisation. Furthermore, the WFL identified itself as a militant society, yet its ideas about militancy diverged from those of the WSPU. In studying WFL members' ideas about, and their practice of militancy, the relationship between militancy and the women's suffrage movement can be considered from another perspective, namely that of concepts of passive, and active political resistance to the sites of male power.

The WFL's democratic constitution which placed the power to make decisions in the hands of elected representatives of the ordinary membership, allows me to emphasise the concerns, interests and activities of the ordinary branch members of the WFL. In this thesis I have been able to demonstrate two trends: firstly the significance of the WFL to both national leaders, and its ordinary members; and secondly, the differences which emerged between what I have termed the two tiers of the WFL.

Although the WFL continued in existence until 1961 I have concluded my study in 1930. This proved an appropriate cut off point because the new factors which emerged in relation to the WFL in the 1930s and 1940s deserve an independent investigation.

The first chapter of this thesis considers the emergence of distinct (separate) women's organisations, and the militant suffrage movement, and the tensions this produced between women and the Independent Labour party in particular. I explore the split in the WSPU which led to the formation of the WFL, and the concern with internal

democratic government. I consider the practical implications of the merging of democracy and militancy on the balance of power within the League, among the leadership, and between the leadership and the regional branches.

This desire within the League to represent its many member branches leads on to Chapter Two where I take a step towards redressing the imbalance in histories between national and regional campaigns. In this chapter I consider the regional strengths and weaknesses of League branches and also the ordinary membership, particularly in relation to the different levels of power and influence among them. Lastly, I trace the emergence of a distinct political culture in the WFL's branches which fostered the generation of concerns and interests in issues beyond suffrage. This pattern of activity provided grounds for members to follow through their concerns during the first world war and in the 1920s.

The WFL is positioned problematically between what has often been presented as rigid divisions between the constitutional NUWSS and the militant WSPU. The WFL's status as a self-declared militant organisation set it apart from the former, while it never followed the latter into arson and destruction. Therefore Chapter Three explores the meaning of militancy for the WFL, characterised by members' advocacy of political resistance against the Government. In this chapter I also emphasize the links with liberal concepts of rights and justice which members drew upon in formulating certain principles of free speech and passive resistance.

Chapter Four explores the relation of the League to what one member described as the "great and wonderful feminist movement". I examine the range of meanings that

those among the leadership of the League attached to feminism, predominantly through their arguments and writings in the League's newspaper, *The Vote*. I consider both how women were perceived as wives and mothers, as workers, and as victims of male sexuality. I then explore the growing awareness of the presence of, and need for women's distinct organisation in order to go beyond the vote, which was commonly seen by League members as only the first step towards women's equality. I also highlight the ways in which relations between men and women undermined the continuation of women's distinct organisations in the name of progress.

While historical analysis has begun to consider women's feminist-motivated political activity beyond 1914, the outbreak of the first world war is still seen as the end of suffrage militancy.⁵² In Chapter Five of this thesis I demonstrate conclusively that members of the League, both in the branches and at headquarters in London continued actively to campaign for women's suffrage after August 1914. A few members also continued to pursue militant policies of resistance in their campaigns for enfranchisement.

Another theme in Chapter Five is the extent of the difficulties members in the declining, yet still numerous branches, faced over the foregrounding of pacifist and patriotic ideas within the women's movement. I consider how these concerns influenced activities in League branches and how definite moves were made in some towards involvement in local government or independent welfare work. While this was at first characterised as aid work, I indicate how in some branches this later developed into a means of gaining access to positions of power and influence at a municipal level, both

⁵²See texts cited in Introduction, footnote nos. 21, 24.

in the latter years of the war and in the 1920s.

In the final section of Chapter Five, I trace the responses of League members to the first suffrage victory in 1918. League members made changes both to the actual organisation and to their political programme with a view to carrying themselves forward towards the day when women would be equal with men. This follows on to Chapter Six which traces the League after partial enfranchisement and explores how the real hopes for fundamental change for women were replaced by an admission that women would not immediately challenge the dominant party political system.

I then move on to discuss how the League's energies were transferred to social, economic and political issues which had previously been deemed peripheral to the primary interest of the League, but now became central guiding issues. I also consider the League leadership's response to the outlining of "new" feminist objectives in other women's organisations, and the official moves to define a strict equality position. I argue that despite these moves, exclamations of strict equality principles masked a somewhat arbitrary definition of equality which included acknowledgement of separate interests of women. In explaining this inconsistency I argue that the official policy was motivated by a desire to maintain the pre-1918 sense of unity, yet instead it resulted in the jettisoning and narrowing down of broader aims which was not always welcomed by the League's branch membership.

The final chapter of the thesis returns once again to the branches and the ordinary membership, which although significantly reduced from pre-1918 levels, were still spread across Britain. I consider the patterns of branch activity and the noticeable levels

of consistency from pre-war patterns, in particular in the extent to which the branches served as social networks as well as a site for political activity. Yet all was not harmony in the branches, as I demonstrate through the debates and difficulties over party interests which came to the fore in discussions over supporting local and national candidates for government. The resolutions and compromises achieved demonstrate the existence of dual, complementary, and sometimes split loyalties to other organisations, philosophies and movements. To conclude, I discuss how a disagreement over sexual reforms between the leadership and certain branches enforced a situation which prevented the League expanding further.

I now turn to examine the sources on which this study is based.

ii) A Critical Introduction To Sources

Because the WFL continued to exist into the 1960s one might expect there to be a wealth of information on the organisation during the years of its active life from 1907. The realities are rather mixed. The minute books of the National Executive Committee of the League, the minutes of various other sub-committees and the majority of annual reports still exist.⁵³ These sources which constitute the "national" face of the League, cover the period up to and beyond the conclusion of my study. Yet in terms of information on the League's branches and on individual members, sources are much more scarce. I have only been able to locate comprehensive branch notes on the Middlesbrough branch of the WFL.

⁵³The location of the sources discussed in this section are noted in the Bibliography.

Much of the information which I have gathered on League branches and members has come from the pages of the League's newspaper, *The Vote*, which ran from 1909 to 1933, and to a lesser extent from the subsequent League broadsheet the *WFL Bulletin*. The editors of *The Vote* recognised the importance of printing weekly reports of branch activity which were sent in by members of the branches and these prove enlightening on the organisation and activities in local communities.

Members' self-awareness is the key to understanding many of the sources used in this thesis. WFL activists were highly aware of a sense of their own history and many were anxious to show the League in the best possible light. The League's NEC minutes books often failed to record in detail any criticism levelled at the WFL by members or by unconnected correspondents. There were also partially successful attempts to prevent any contributions to *The Vote* which made any less than flattering references to the League's activities. Furthermore, in the later histories written by League members on the early militant suffrage campaign there is a sense of distinct self-consciousness. It seems as if they knew the significance of this period in both the history of British politics and the history of women's struggles to end their oppression, and therefore largely passed over the turbulent years of the 1920s. Equally in the period under consideration those responsible for recording the activities of the League were under pressure to validate the necessity of their existence, both to opponents and observers. The official reports of the number of League branches, and the new members gained in any one year, often do not correspond exactly with the evidence from other sources. When this occurs I have stressed my own findings and have noted these inconsistencies.

Similarly there is a certain amount of whitewashing over the various differences of opinion and indeed serious divisions which occurred in the League. The League published verbatim minutes of each of its annual conferences, and these provide extensive and useful information on the nature of debate among League members, and between the national leadership and branch officials.

The Maud Arncliffe Sennett collection of press cuttings, letters and pamphlets has proved extremely useful in finding sources on local League branches in the south-east of England. Furthermore it is useful for information on the activities of the WFL's National Executive Committee of which the compiler of this collection, Maud Arncliffe Sennett, was a member from 1909 to 1910. The Pethick-Lawrence papers proved less useful, although there are some useful records relating to Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence's activities during her time as national president of the WFL between 1926 and 1935.

Both national and local newspapers have proved to be a good source of information on suffrage societies in the period up to 1914, although care must be taken as misrepresentation was rife.⁵⁴ After this date, as suffrage ceased to be a main point of interest, and there was not the same enticement of militancy, coverage of League activities and ideas declined.

My task to find out about the lives of the women who constituted the WFL has proved to be difficult. However, once again *The Vote* has proved useful as have the archives and newsletters of the Suffragette Fellowship which was formed in the 1920s

⁵⁴Liz Stanley and Anne Morley make this point. See *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, p. 148.

to commemorate the militant suffrage campaign. Evidence from these sources, and other primary material, can be found in the biographical notes on a select number of Freedom League members in Appendix Five.

* * * *

By the end of the 1920s a new form of interventionist state had been formalised, mass parliamentary democracy had been established, and party politics was now focused on the Labour and Conservative parties, with the Liberal party and independent candidates in decline. Britain's empire was much reduced as was its economic and industrial power. Yet what had happened to women's political identity, feminist ideas, women's organisation, demands and action? These issues will be explored in relation to WFL members' attempts to extend the freedom of women. This can be symbolised with reference to the WFL's own motto; to what extent did members of the WFL *dare to be free?*

RECEPTION OF DELEGATES BY MRS. DESPARD.



Barratt's

Mrs. Felix Jones. Miss Alix
M. Clark
(Montgomery Boroughs.)

Miss Husband.
(Dundee.)

Mrs. Despard.
(President W.F.L.)

(Photo Press
Miss Andrews.
(Ipswich.)

Plate 2: Reception of Delegates by Mrs Despard (1912)

CHAPTER ONE

"PREPARING OURSELVES TO GO FORWARD"¹

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE, 1907 - 1914

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores how the WFL became established as a national self-governing militant suffrage organisation between 1907 and 1914. I explain how the WFL emerged as a distinct organisation out of a split in the WSPU. I argue that the "split" was not simply the result of a personality clash, but the result of contradictions between a long standing tradition of women's political organisation and a new militant and autocratic style of suffrage campaign embodied by the WSPU after 1905. The WFL attempted to introduce democratic internal organisation to the new militant campaign, and in doing this they drew on traditions of democracy associated with liberal ideals of citizenship and equality outlined in the previous chapter. This chapter also explores the tensions which were a result of the various meanings which became associated with the terms militancy and democracy. By mid 1912 it had become clear that the original vision of the WFL had been modified in order to accommodate these tensions. The result was a greater flexibility in the WFL members' interpretation of their original principles. Nevertheless, these principles were different from the interpretations of militancy and democracy advanced in the NUWSS and the WSPU, the two suffrage societies which have dominated much existing work on the suffrage movement in this

¹See Chapter One, footnote no. 45.

period.²

This chapter is based on the premise that many WFL women were active in political organisations prior to their involvement in the suffrage campaign. Consequently these women brought their organisational practices, party loyalties and various interests in women's lives and status into the WFL. Although the implications of involvement in other organisations are explored in greater detail in Chapter Two, the first section briefly outlines dominant patterns of female political activity between 1880 and 1907 out of which the WFL emerged.

Section I: THE SPECTRUM OF FEMALE POLITICAL ORGANISATION, 1880 - 1907

i) The Development of Distinct Women's Organisations

A number of historians have traced various traditions of women's involvement in political campaigns during the course of the nineteenth century. Middle-class women, motivated by their understanding of liberal ideas of equality and natural rights successfully challenged their unequal status within marriage. In 1870 and 1882 the Married Women's Property Acts allowed married women rights over their earnings and property, initially those acquired after marriage, and later extended to all property owned at the time of their marriage.³

²See Sandra Holton, *Feminism & Democracy. Women's Suffrage & Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918*, pp. 29-52. Holton gives a comprehensive interpretation of the principles of the militants and the constitutionalists, though it is centred in the NUWSS and the WSPU. See also Chapter Three of this thesis for an account of the development of the meaning of militancy in the WFL.

³ Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics 1860-1914*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986), p. 59, and Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect. Women in English Local*

Another campaign initiated in this period was that which demanded that mothers be given rights over their children. Prior to legislation in the 1880s, these rights were marginal, the exception was in the case of illegitimate children when mothers were solely responsible for their children. As Philippa Levine points out, this was a stark contradiction which continued even after the 1872 Bastardy Law Amendment Bill, and which generated a long term campaign by various women's organisations in future years. The 1886 Guardianship of Infants Act at last gave married women limited rights over their children, although the father's authority remained supreme.⁴

Other organisations were established to demand improvements in education for women, and to challenge the effect of male sexuality on women. The latter was focused initially on the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) which began in the 1860s. This movement, motivated by the concerns of Josephine Butler, and continued through the work of the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the CDAs (formed 1869), was successful in 1886 when the acts were finally repealed.⁵

This spate of legislation in the 1870s and 1880s had been the result of long campaigns by numerous organisations and groups of middle-class women. Yet working-

Government 1865-1914, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987), pp. 194-195.

⁴ Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminists 1850-1900*, (Hutchinson, London, 1987), p. 144. Other legislation affecting women's rights in marriage included the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, which enabled women to sue for divorce except in cases of adultery. It also extended a mother's rights of access to children after divorce.

⁵ See Dale Spender ed., *The Education Papers. Women's Quest for Equality in Britain 1850 - 1912*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, Women's Source Library, London, 1987), pp. 1-9, and Sheila Jeffreys ed., *The Sexuality Debates*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, Women's Source Library, London, 1987), p. 3. See also Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminists, 1850-1900*, passim.

class women were certainly not silent or inactive in this period. Barbara Taylor has traced a continuing tradition of activism by women in the socialist and labour movements after the 1840s and 1850s, most notably in trade union organisations, and later in the newly formed socialist organisations of the 1880s and 1890s. Organisations were also formed to represent working-class women. In 1874 the Women's Trade Union League was founded, followed in 1889 with the formation of the Women's Trade Union Association. Another organisation with large numbers of working-class women was the Women's Co-operative Guild, which was founded in 1883 to extend women's commitment to co-operation.⁶

The 1880s also marked a significant move of women into party organisations which had been previously the sole province of men. From 1880 local Women's Liberal Associations were established in the regions in Britain, and in 1884 Tory women were admitted into the Primrose League. The latter move was almost certainly the result of the passage of the Corrupt Practices Act of 1883 and the Franchise Act of 1884, when women's usefulness as canvassers and organisers of the enlarged electorate was identified and harnessed by the two large political parties.⁷ In the same year, women were involved in the formation of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and later, in 1893 in the formation of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). The two latter

⁶ See Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminist in the Nineteenth Century*, (Virago, London, 1983), pp. 261-287, Ellen Mappen, *Helping Women at Work. The Women's Industrial Council, 1889-1914*, (Hutchinson, Explorations in Feminism, London, 1985), p.13, Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, (Virago, London, 1984, [1920]), pp. 3-110. For the Women's Co-operative Guild, see Jean Gaffin and David Thoms, *Caring and Sharing: The Centenary History of the Co-operative Women's Guild*, (Co-operative Union Ltd, Manchester, 1983).

⁷Linda Walker, "The Women's Movement in England in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", (D.Phil, Manchester), pp. 12-51.

organisations were the only ones to admit women to the main party on equal terms with men, yet as Karen Hunt argues, female members were not treated equally in other areas. Women were seen by some socialist men as a "problem" which needed to be addressed.⁸

As women moved into political parties, there was evidence of a dissatisfaction on the part of many women at their assigned roles, and this created a desire to engage in activity directly related to changing women's status in society. Such actions were manifested in Women's Liberal Associations where a fairly distinct and occasionally confrontational programme was generated. Even in the Primrose League, where women tended to follow their party's line, there is evidence of a distinct concern with issues such as women's suffrage. Also in the socialist parties women began to identify the need for, and to organise into, separate groups. This trend became evident in the 1890s when a number of ILP women's groups were established, and were followed in 1904 by the Women's Socialist Circles formed by a number of SDF women. Later in 1906 a separate women's organisation, the Women's Labour League, which was linked with the Labour Representation Committee was formed. The firm presence of socialist and labour women's organisations and societies was again bolstered with the formation of the small but influential Fabian Women's Group in 1908.⁹

⁸Cited from unpublished conference paper by Karen Hunt, "Making Socialist Woman: Politicisation, Gender and the Social Democratic Federation, 1884-1911", given at National Women's History Network, "Women and Protest - Women and Politics Conference", York University, 26th April 1993. See also Linda Walker, "The Women's Movement in England..", pp. 52-103.

⁹From unpublished conference paper by Karen Hunt, "Making Socialist Woman..." See June Hannam, "'In the Comradeship of the Sexes Lies the Hope of Progress and Social Regeneration': Women in the West Riding ILP", in Jane Rendall ed., *Equal or Different. Women's Politics, 1700-1914*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987), pp. 214-238, Barbara Drake, *Women in the Trade Unions*, pp.3-25, and Pat Thane, "The Women of

The overriding principle in the WLAs and the labour and socialist women's organisations was that women had particular interests and concerns, which women themselves needed to address. Not all women were content to remain in a purely subsidiary role, and their particular interests and concerns, notably in education, welfare and health shifted from the 1880s towards direct engagement with local government. Interested party women, together with women who had previously expressed their concerns through largely philanthropic endeavours, began to involve themselves directly in local government affairs in a number of ways.¹⁰

One of these was service on the School Boards, established by the 1870 Education Act. Similarly, the number of women Poor Law Guardians began to increase from the mid 1870s. Campaigns accelerated to extend the municipal franchise to women and to allow them to stand for local councils. The Women's Local Government Society was formed to this end and was active in defending women's existing positions as well as actively seeking an extension of women's influence in local government affairs. Such campaigns produced mixed results, because despite the evidence of women's good work throughout the later nineteenth century, their position was still tenuous. This was clearly demonstrated by the confusion over women's rights to stand in elections, which ended in 1899 with them being officially barred. Similarly, women were abruptly dismissed when School Boards were abolished in 1902. Finally in 1907 the bar on women candidates was lifted and in subsequent years the number of women councillors rose

the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-1945", in Harold Smith ed., *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, (Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1990), pp. 124-143.

¹⁰For a thorough account of women in local government see Patricia Hollis, '*Ladies Elect*'. There are no equivalent studies yet of Scotland or Wales.

steadily.¹¹

The women who became members of political organisations and indeed represented their party in local government, did not definitively perceive that such actions would lead to an absolute separation from the larger, male-dominated party. Nevertheless, in particular in the labour movement and among women Liberals, there was an awareness of their distinction as women within the larger movement. Hence the development of *distinct* rather than *separatist* women's organisations. This style of organisation was to become more central as attention turned increasingly towards the single issue of women's suffrage.

Since the 1860s societies were formed to campaign primarily for the extension of the parliamentary franchise to women, in line with the campaigns to extend voting to a larger proportion of the male population. The first women's suffrage societies had emerged in 1865 in London and Manchester and organised specifically to generate support for John Stuart Mill's woman suffrage amendment to the 1867 Reform Bill. While this and subsequent attempts to extend the franchise to women failed, women's suffrage societies attracted increasingly large numbers of women, and succeeded in becoming an established focus of women's political activity and debate in the period.¹²

There was a good deal of overlap between the women's suffrage societies, the

¹¹After this Act in 1907 the number of women in local government rose steadily if slowly, and accelerated after 1918. See Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, pp. 396-421, for details.

¹²Ray Strachey, *The Cause*. *A Short History of the Women's Suffrage Movement in Great Britain*, (Virago, London, 1988, [1928]), especially pp. 102-123.

Liberal party, and women Liberals active from the 1880s. These fairly informal connections came under scrutiny in the later 1880s when differences over party affiliations caused a split in the London National Suffrage Society. The rift was only healed in 1897 when all the separate societies united to form the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). It was established as a democratic society and elected Millicent Garrett Fawcett as its first president. The outstanding features of the various women suffrage societies in the period from the 1880s to the early 1900s were the unsuccessful and demoralising attempts to pass a bill through parliament, lobbying MPs and building the support of middle- class and also working-class women through a series of petitions.¹³ Notable in this latter exercise were working-class women in Manchester. The actions of these 'radical suffragists' have been extensively documented by Liddington and Norris who demonstrate convincingly the working-class interest in suffrage demands. They also demonstrate the well established links between the women suffragists, both from the middle- and working-classes, in Manchester and the newly formed, but rapidly expanding ILP. It was from this environment in Manchester that a new suffrage organisation was formed in 1903 which was to generate even greater interest in women's suffrage demands.¹⁴

While all the organisations mentioned above differed in specific, often crucial ways, an important principle evident in the suffrage societies, and among Labour and

¹³ For more details of women suffrage campaigns and societies in this period see David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s*, (Harvester Press, Brighton, 1986). Rubinstein presents a more positive interpretation of the campaigns of suffragists in the 1890s than those previously acknowledged, notably by Ray Strachey in '*The Cause*'.

¹⁴See Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, especially pp. 20-29, and pp. 64-83.

Liberal women, was the emphasis placed on equality and democracy, both in claiming the rights of citizenship for women and in their internal practice. All gave over time and effort to building up support and interest in their particular organisations. While the organisations mentioned above did not constitute, nor yet, identify themselves as part of a women's movement, their presence was instrumental in creating an environment where this could emerge. However, it was out of the newest suffrage society, the Women's Social and Political Union in Manchester, that a new dynamic was introduced to the existing patterns of female organisation. This was to manifest itself both in advances in the concept of distinct women's organisation, and in the arguments articulated by its members.

ii) "A Militant Society....In The Thick of Battle": The New Militant Suffrage Movement, 1905 - 1907¹⁵

In Manchester by the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of women began pushing the cause of women's suffrage very strongly in the ILP branch, and also, with the foundation of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) in 1900, in the labour movement generally. One group of women, all from the same family, were especially insistent that the Labour party should adopt the principles of women's suffrage. Later the names of Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia were to become synonymous with the women's suffrage campaign. While they had good relations with the radical suffragists and also a number of influential supporters in the national LRC, they became increasingly frustrated by 1903 that support for their demands was not growing fast enough. In order to speed the process up,

¹⁵See Chapter One, footnote no. 27.

Emmeline Pankhurst decided to form a women's suffrage group specifically to put pressure on the Labour party to back their demands. Out of her efforts the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was founded and drew its original members from women in ILP branches in the region.¹⁶ Significantly, there were women within the WSPU who increasingly felt it necessary to place *overriding* emphasis on women's suffrage demands.

It was in 1905 that Christabel Pankhurst demonstrated forcefully her belief in the primary importance of women's suffrage by masterminding a protest designed to build up support for the WSPU's campaign. Details of her protest with Annie Kenney and their subsequent arrest at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, are well documented elsewhere. In short, the subsequent press attention given to this militant protest publicized the demands of women suffragists to a degree that made existing organisations interested in suffrage re-examine their own campaigns. It also led to a dramatic increase in interest in the WSPU, and the formation of new branches in other areas of Britain, especially after it was decided to relocate the WSPU headquarters to London in 1906.¹⁷

Christabel Pankhurst's militant protest also marked a change in emphasis and

¹⁶ For a more detailed account of the formation of the WSPU see Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, especially pp. 173-175.

¹⁷Very little work has been done on the early regional branches of the WSPU. The sparse evidence there is shows early WSPU branches operating from 1906 in Manchester, Middlesbrough, Liverpool and in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen. See respectively, Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, pp. 167-210; Krista Cowman, unpublished paper, "'A Real Live Organisation': The Formation and Development of the Liverpool Branch of the WSPU, 1905-1914", (1992), pp. 4-6; Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause. The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland*, (Aberdeen University Press, Aberdeen, 1991), pp. 40-70.

direction in women's demands for representation which took longer to emerge. The new urgency in the campaign for female suffrage was accompanied by attempts to break existing links with other political organisations, especially with the Liberal party. Many of the women who constituted the WSPU leadership had also become disillusioned by the continued prevarication of the Labour party on the women's suffrage issue, just as they distrusted the other political parties who had for so long blocked attempts to extend the franchise to women. Charlotte Despard, Edith How-Martyn and Teresa Billington-Greig, who were all members of the ILP, envisaged, like the Pankhursts, a women's suffrage organisation independent of the political parties; an organisation run and controlled by women which would prioritise women's suffrage above all else; a campaign which would be intense and militant, and which would not end until women had achieved their demands - equal suffrage on the same terms as men.¹⁸

This disillusionment with the three political parties also appears to have extended to the newly formed WSPU branches. However, this did not immediately result in women breaking all ties with party political organisations, and the ILP in particular. On the contrary there is evidence from one particular branch in Middlesbrough that there were very real difficulties and dilemmas emerging for new members as the WSPU was guided towards a stance of strict party independence.

In Middlesbrough the organising secretary of the ILP branch, Marion Coates

¹⁸Teresa Billington Greig joined the WSPU in 1903, while Charlotte Despard and Edith How-Martyn joined later in 1906. See respectively, Carol McPhee & Ann FitzGerald eds., *The Non-Violent Militant: Selected Writings of Teresa Billington-Greig*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, Women's Source Library, London, 1987); pp. 4-6, Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 106; and Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women!*, pp. 68-69. General details in Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, pp. 189-193, and Rosen, *Rise Up Women!*, pp. 49-54.

Hansen, and a number of other women members formed a WSPU branch in 1906. They were supported in their actions by a number of their male ILP colleagues, and as a result a number of discussions and meetings on women's suffrage were held.¹⁹ However later in 1906 this co-operation was threatened when the London based leadership made it abundantly clear that they wanted to sever any remaining links with the Labour party. In October a number of WSPU members travelled to the Cocker mouth by-election where they were expected to support the Labour candidate. In the event the WSPU suffragists proceeded to ignore such calls for support and spent their time campaigning against the Liberal candidate. The result was a victory for the Conservatives, with Labour lagging far behind. By this action they had put into practice a new WSPU policy, namely complete party independence, with the focus of their protests directed at Liberal candidates who represented a government which refused to introduce women's suffrage legislation.²⁰

Their actions caused outrage in Labour circles, including some ILP members in Middlesbrough. The resultant condemnation of the WSPU's actions disrupted the ILP demonstration on women's suffrage in the town, and caused serious differences in the ILP branch. Late in October 1906 one meeting ended in disarray and there were a number of resignations, including that of Marion Coates Hansen. It was only when the conciliatory move was made to declare all discussions on Cocker mouth "null and void" that harmony was restored and the resignations rescinded.²¹ Nevertheless, Marion

¹⁹Minute Books of the Middlesbrough Branch of the ILP, May 11th, June 22nd, and July 10th 1906. (Hereafter referred to as Minute Books Middlesbrough ILP.)

²⁰Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p. 207.

²¹Minute Books Middlesbrough ILP, September 10th, October 8th, and October 15th 1906.

Coates Hansen's decision to remain active in the ILP ran counter to the official messages coming from the leaders of the WSPU, and despite continued pressure from both sides, she continued to balance her loyalties to both the ILP and WSPU (and later the WFL). This continued until 1912 when she resigned from the WFL and thereafter concentrated her active work in the ILP.²²

It is very probable that such scenes were repeated in other WSPU branches as members' long standing political affiliations were being placed under scrutiny. Specifically, the events in Middlesbrough suggest that the attempt to channel politically active women from the political parties towards the single issue campaign for women's suffrage - above all else - would not be easily achieved.

Among the leadership in London during 1906 and 1907, these difficulties were apparently set aside as growing numbers of women undertook a series of militant protests. These included organising deputations to members of Parliament and the Prime Minister and numerous confrontations with the police, which in turn led to more imprisonments, more publicity and more converts to the WSPU. In short, despite the apparent tensions between long standing political interests and the new overriding emphasis on women's suffrage, the new militant policy of drawing attention to women's unenfranchised status was working to the extent that by 1907 some fifty-two WSPU branches existed. The NUWSS, who at first tacitly supported the WSPU's actions, also benefitted from the increased attention given to women's suffrage and its membership

²²Minute Books Middlesbrough ILP, 1912 and Minute Books of the Middlesbrough Branch of the WFL, 1912. (Hereafter referred to as Minute Books Middlesbrough WFL). Marion Coates Hansen later resigned over disagreements at the Special Conference of the WFL held in April 1912. See Chapter One, pp. 82-86, and Appendix Five: Biographical Notes.

expanded. The other dimension to the now enormous interest in women's suffrage was that in the light of the extensive co-operation between the two suffrage societies suggestions were made that they should amalgamate into one massive powerful organisation.²³

Despite the growing presence of a "women's suffrage movement", there were two factors integral to this success which at the same time hindered any attempt to unite all pro-suffrage women in any definite sense. The first resulted from the rapid growth of the WSPU, which had no organisational structure capable of harnessing the growing numbers involved, and was unofficially ruled by a small number of extremely powerful women based in London. The second factor was the emerging concern about increasingly violent militant actions and the equally violent reactions to them which came from various quarters. Both factors help to explain why the president of the NUWSS, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, rejected any suggestions of amalgamating with the WSPU. Although her precise position at that time is not recorded, the reasons she later gave in her autobiography are enlightening. She claimed her reservations were due to the lack of internal democracy in the WSPU and the increasing violence of the WSPU's demonstrations.²⁴ Already there were telling signs that a number of different interpretations of democracy and militancy were present in the suffrage campaign which

²³See Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, Chapter Two, especially p. 39. Holton states that such suggestions were made as late as the summer of 1908, which was after the formation of the WFL. There is no evidence that the WFL was considered in such attempts to merge, and WFL overtures to Millicent Garrett Fawcett in December 1908 suggesting of co-operation during the forthcoming general election were spurned. See WFL National Executive Committee Minutes, December 11th and 12th 1908, p. 12. (Hereafter referred to as NEC Minutes).

²⁴Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *What I Remember*, (T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1924), p. 185.

would lead the movement to diverge into many suffrage societies.

Such undercurrents erupted in the WSPU towards the end of 1907 and resulted in a rupture in this increasingly influential organisation. The origins of this split dated back to 1906, when it became obvious to some of the WSPU's leaders that the new WSPU branches operated more or less autonomously and had very little say in the official actions and policies endorsed by WSPU headquarters. This situation prompted Teresa Billington-Greig to draft a constitution which stipulated that an annual conference of branch delegates should be the ultimate decision-making body of the WSPU. The constitution was adopted at the first annual conference in 1906, but it was not until the following year that the implications of the new constitution began to emerge. Teresa Billington-Greig spent much of her time putting the democratic constitution into practice by building up branches in Scotland and initiated the formation of a Scottish Council.²⁵ Yet such moves led to angry responses from Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst who referred to her in private correspondence as a "wrecker" and someone who "must be dealt with".²⁶

While the bulk of existing sources focuses on the disagreements between Teresa Billington-Greig and members of the Pankhurst family, she was not alone in her advocacy of internal democracy, and it became clear in September 1907 that two distinct groups existed on the WSPU's national committee. The actions which sparked the final

²⁵*Women's Franchise*, 12th September 1907. Cited in Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women!* p. 89.

²⁶The comments come from private correspondence between Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst. See Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women!*, p. 88 (footnote), and E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement, An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideas*, (Virago, London, 1984 [1931]), pp. 262, 263.

breach was Emmeline Pankhurst's decision to cancel the forthcoming conference of branch delegates. She made her opinions clear in a defiant statement:

The Constitution of the WSPU is not worth the paper it is written on from a legal point of view. A year ago the members of the Union who were then very few indeed were called together...It was very soon discovered that the Branches could not become the pivot of the movement or support the work at Headquarters; it was as much as they could do to support their own local existence...We have had no time to do the public work and also keep the Branches in close personal touch...It is a militant society. We are in the thick of battle..²⁷

The decision to pursue the campaign as a "battle", with military leaders, rather than by self-government, marked a break in the patterns of women's political organisation which had been established over the preceding thirty years. The Pankhursts and their followers favoured a new style of militant organisation which was undemocratic. The implications of this action were far reaching, for by excluding the input of ordinary members, or any forum for discussion, the contradictions and dilemmas for the membership, such as those experienced in Middlesbrough, were silenced. In the long term, such differences, along with somewhat belated complaints about the lack of internal democracy in the WSPU, may help to explain why the WSPU collapsed as an effective women's suffrage organisation during the early years of the first world war when militancy was suspended and the remaining Pankhurst leaders switched their energies to the war effort.²⁸

²⁷Taken from a pamphlet in the Maud Arncliffe Sennett Collection, British Library, Vol II, p.2. (Hereafter referred to as MAS).

²⁸ For an account of the WSPU after 1907, see Rosen, *Rise Up Women!* and other texts on the militant suffrage campaign cited in the Introduction to this thesis. Details of the activities of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst's activities in the war can be found in texts also cited in the Introduction. See Chapter Five, p. 266 for details of another split which saw the formation of the Independent Suffragettes of the WSPU. Again the focus of the split appears to have been over internal democracy.

However the entire militant suffrage movement did not follow the path laid down by Emmeline Pankhurst and her supporters in 1907, because following the decision to cancel the branches' annual conference and nullify the constitution, a number of WSPU women among the leadership including Teresa Billington-Greig, Charlotte Despard and Edith How-Martyn, resigned from the first WSPU committee and formed a new provisional committee. Following a hastily called meeting in London on September 14th 1907, it was decided to recall the annual conference and to continue to pursue the militant campaign on a democratic basis. This decision was to bring the Women's Freedom League into existence.²⁹

I have suggested that the split in the WSPU was not simply the result of personality clashes, because of very real tensions between the decision to pursue a militant campaign and the desire for internal democracy. Democracy had been a long standing pivot of women's demands and organisation, yet through one vision of militancy, by 1907 it had been threatened. The remainder of the chapter explores how the Women's Freedom League was established, the attempt to create a distinct militant *and* democratic organisation, and the extent to which the emerging contradictions between the practice of militancy and democracy were resolved.³⁰

²⁹See *MAS*, Vol II p.3. Taken from the *Morning Post* [un-dated], reporting the resignations from the WSPU committee. It was signed by Charlotte Despard, Edith How-Martyn and Carolyn Hodgson.

³⁰While I concentrate on the tensions between militancy and democracy in the WFL, other issues and concerns were also brought into the campaign for women's suffrage. This led to the formation of many suffrage societies during the years 1907 to 1914. These included the Church League for Women's Suffrage, the Free Church League, the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society, the Women Writers Suffrage League, and the Actresses Franchise League. The aims of these societies were not always conflicting in that women often belonged to more than one suffrage society. See later chapters for references to these organisations.

Section II: "THERE ARE NOW THREE SOCIETIES DEVOTED TO THE ONE OBJECT OF VOTES FOR WOMEN": BUILDING A NATIONAL ORGANISATION, 1907 - 1914³¹

i) The Founding of the Women's Freedom League

The Women's Freedom League's emergence as a distinct organisation was clouded in confusion for a number of months after the resignations in September 1907, as two national committees battled over who was in fact the *original* WSPU. The provisional committee, which included Charlotte Despard, Teresa Billington-Greig, Carolyn Hodgson and Edith How Martyn, claimed the title, arguing that they had adhered to the constitution, whereas those who had cancelled the conference had acted unconstitutionally and were therefore not qualified to speak for the WSPU membership nationwide. While the arguments of the provisional committee did have a certain basis in truth, certain factors worked against them and prevented them from assuming control of the WSPU. Not only did the Pankhurst committee keep the WSPU offices in Lincoln's Inn, but they also maintained firm control over the organisation's rapidly expanding finances. In contrast, the provisional committee had no permanent offices and very little money. Indeed, it was only through strenuous efforts and generous donations that the provisional committee managed to stage the annual conference at all.³²

Another factor which served to limit the new committee's chances of gaining

³¹Taken from MAS, [unknown press cutting] Vol. II, pp. 22-23.

³²*The Second Annual Report of the WSPU (Now WFL) October 1907*, p.13. (Hereafter referred to as WFL, *Annual Report*, 1907). Note the WFL conference in 1908 was referred to as the "Second" one to signify continuity in the militant organisation. Subsequent conferences followed this pattern.

control of the WSPU's finances and offices was that the arguments among the leaders had resulted in a certain interest from the press. Articles were published which appeared to observe with some delight the difficulties. In September, the *Daily Chronicle* reported "There is trouble in the suffrage camp..", and recorded the attempts of Christabel Pankhurst to play down the differences of opinion. She stated, "please don't call it a split.....there has been no particular row...it is more of a parting of company."³³ Her comments were a stark contrast to the bitter antagonism which had surfaced especially between herself and Teresa Billington-Greig. Similarly the provisional committee, influenced by concern to prevent any lasting damage to their campaign, tried to minimize the extent of the disagreements when corresponding to the national press.

Away from the public gaze, during September and into October, there was a furious exchange of letters between the two committees and a dash to encourage women to support one particular side.³⁴ Finally on October 13th delegates from thirty-one of the seventy WSPU branches met for the second annual conference of the WSPU. Edith How-Martyn later reported that of the thirty-one branches represented, twelve decided to remain in the self-governing organisation, and the remaining nineteen decided to form themselves into "local independent suffrage unions". Although written later, this may have been designed to disguise the relatively small number of women who originally

³³MAS, Vol II, p. 3. Taken from a cutting from the *Daily Chronicle*, Friday September 13th 1907.

³⁴MAS, Vol II, pp. 4-6. During September 1907 Maud Arncliffe Sennett received letters from both Charlotte Despard and Christabel Pankhurst asking her to speak at their particular WSPU meetings.

supported the advocates of internal democracy.³⁵ At this conference the democratic constitution was ratified and a new National Executive Committee (NEC) of twelve women elected, together with three officials; a treasurer, secretary and organising secretary. A report of the conference was sent into the *Women's Franchise* which detailed the orderly conduct of the meeting. It was clear from this report that the new committee still claimed to be the official WSPU.³⁶

The reality was that two organisations calling themselves the WSPU now existed. This impasse was ended when it became clear that the nationwide profile of the Pankhursts made it impossible for the democratic WSPU members' principles to be clearly distinguishable. And there was a growing desire to end the conflict, which was still attracting press attention. What is more, once the bitterness had died down, it did prove possible for both sides to co-operate, and this was demonstrated shortly after the branches conference when representatives from both WSPUs and the NUWSS gathered together for a joint meeting held in Edinburgh.³⁷

In November the new democratically elected committee decided it was necessary to give another name to their organisation. Four names were short listed; Women

³⁵ *The Vote*, December 9th 1909, p. 75. Edith How-Martyn's comments were written in an article giving details of the founding of the WFL. There is no information on the future activities of the independent suffrage unions referred to. The precise number of WSPU members who joined the WFL is unknown, Andrew Rosen puts the figures at around 20%, while Edith How-Martyn claimed over half of the original WSPU joined the new organisation. The latter figures seem to be an over-estimation, given that she later claimed the WFL began with twelve ex-WSPU branches.

³⁶ *Women's Franchise*, October 17th 1907, p. 179. The conference decided not to create the post of president, although this decision was reversed in 1909 and Charlotte Despard was duly elected.

³⁷ *MAS*, Vol II, p. 9. Reported in the *Glasgow Herald*, Monday October 7th 1907.

Emancipators, Women's Enfranchisement League, Women's Association for Rights, and the Women's Freedom League.³⁸ It is significant that all four suggestions excluded any direct reference to 'suffrage', although the reasons for this are obscured. Later Teresa Billington-Greig implied that the reasons for the formation of the new organisation had been motivated by a desire "to make the militant movement what it ought to be", a movement to liberate women from all aspects of oppression. Teresa, who was strongly in favour of the first suggestion, wrote after her resignation from the League in 1911:

No more potent explanation of what we hoped our rebellion might lead to can be quoted than this: when the name of the society came to be changed this little central group gave unanimous support to the title of 'The Emancipators', and the dreams we dreamed were as big as the title to which we aspired.³⁹

Despite this apparent NEC preference, the branches voted for the final suggestion and so the democratic WSPU became the Women's Freedom League. (WFL)

Teresa Billington-Greig's reference to wider aims is significant because on one level it suggests another reason behind the split in the WFL, namely an attempt to broaden out the suffrage campaign beyond the straightforward demands for the vote itself. Such a belief stands out as a reversal of the principles of the new militant campaign to highlight suffrage *above all else*. However, this must be qualified by the fact that Teresa Billington-Greig's comments were actually written in 1911, after she had left the League.⁴⁰ On the contrary, in 1907, there is no substantial evidence that

³⁸ *Women's Franchise*, November 14th 1907, p. 227.

³⁹ Teresa Billington Greig, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Emancipation in a Hurry*, reprinted in Carol McPhee & Ann FitzGerald eds., *The Non-Violent Militant*, pp. 170-171.

⁴⁰ See Chapter One, p. 81.

a desire to extend the aims of the movement was particularly strong among the membership of the new League. It was true that such broader concerns did take on more importance in subsequent years as a result of a decline in militant activity, the growing significance of local branches' particular concerns and interests, and the ideas of women prominent in the WFL leadership, notably Billington-Greig herself. These points are covered in more detail in subsequent chapters.

In the early months after the split in the WSPU, an over-riding priority among members of the League was to develop the WFL's standing as a distinct national organisation of suffrage women. These efforts were two-fold, both to continue the militant campaign, and also to build up the League's regional strength. Later in 1907 and 1908, much WFL-inspired militancy took place in London, although certain differences in the tactics of the WFL and the WSPU began to emerge. The League ceased to interrupt public meetings, a long standing WSPU policy, and instead turned their attention to developing new protests. Many of these new protests were the ideas of Teresa Billington-Greig who strongly advocated that protests should be designed to emphasize how women suffered through their voteless status.⁴¹ One notable series of actions took place in police courts when WFL members protested against the prejudice women encountered under man-made laws. Another was the policy of visiting cabinet ministers at their homes to put the WFL's case, which received a good amount of press attention. Also, in December 1907 the WFL initiated tax resistance protests, and

⁴¹ Another reason for Teresa Billington-Greig's own particular disillusionment with the WSPU in 1906 and 1907 were differences of opinion over the nature, focus and style of militant tactics between herself and other leading members of the WSPU. She refers to this in autobiographical fragments which are published in Ann FitzGerald and Carol McPhee, eds., *The Non-Violent Militant*, pp. 25-108. Her ideas about militancy and resistance are covered in detail in Chapter Three.

appealed to women to resist payment of income tax, property tax and inhabited house duty until women were enfranchised.⁴²

The Committee's commitment to regional representation was highlighted by the opening of the Scottish headquarters of the WFL in Glasgow in January 1908, and the subsequent election of a Scottish Committee. The League was noticeably strong in Scotland, largely because it had been Teresa Billington-Greig who had previously worked for the WSPU in the region and so a number of branches followed her into the WFL. The WFL was also successful in London, almost certainly due to the fact that this was the site of the League's headquarters. By November 1907 thirteen branches were active in the capital and plans were afoot to bring into being a London Branches Council.⁴³ However, in other areas the efforts to build up WFL branches took place in relative isolation and often on a fairly ad hoc basis. Among those active were branches in Manchester and Middlesbrough, whose members had left the WSPU en bloc and formed two of the twelve original WFL branches.⁴⁴

Despite these changes in militant actions and an increased emphasis on regional activity, there was still very little at this stage to distinguish between the WFL and the WSPU, in the public's mind at least. In order to contest this association certain moves

⁴² MAS, Vol II, pp. 22, 23, 30, 54. [Title of newspapers unknown]. Vol II, p. 41, The *Daily Chronicle*, Tuesday, December 17th 1907. See Chapter Three, pp. 152-156 for more details.

⁴³The first WFL offices were recorded as 18 Buckingham Street, Strand. Later in 1908 these moved to 1 Robert Street, Adelphi, where they remained until 1915. See MAS, Vol. II, pp. 46-47. *Women's Franchise*, November 14th 1907, and MAS, Vol II, p. 45. Taken from the *Daily Chronicle*, Thursday January 9th 1908. The Scottish Headquarters were situated in Gordon Street, Glasgow.

⁴⁴See Appendix Two.

to put a greater distance between the League and the WSPU were undertaken. Such moves formed one theme in the discussions during the WFL's annual conference in February 1908.

The WFL annual conference of branches, convened on February 1st, was the first display of the successful launching of the WFL as a democratic militant women's suffrage society. At this meeting in London at least twenty branch delegates attended from the small - yet growing - number of League branches, and in her opening address as chairman, Teresa Billington-Greig reflected:

I think we can congratulate ourselves upon having accomplished the real foundation work of our constitution, and organising and preparing ourselves to go forward into the militant suffrage campaign which cannot end except in success..⁴⁵

In spite of her encouraging words, the real foundation of self-government and democracy had only just begun. This became evident during the course of the conference when discussions and debates took place which demonstrated the diversity of opinion among those present. These discussions reached to the very core of the advocacy of a militant policy, the principles of a women-only organisation and the question of absolute independence from all political parties. Again they appear to demonstrate the difficulties in adjusting to the new principles embodied in a militant, democratic, non-party women's organisation. These difficulties were especially evident in the Middlesbrough branch, where many of the members had continued to maintain strong links with supporters in the ILP throughout 1907.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Verbatim Minutes of the Third Annual Conference of the WFL, February 1st 1908, p. 2. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1908.)

⁴⁶See Minutes Books Middlesbrough ILP, 1907.

The Middlesbrough branch delegate expressed the feelings of her branch about the benefits of such ILP support by putting forward a resolution recommending that men should be admitted to the League as full members. As the constitution stood, men were allowed to become associates, but this excluded them from branch meetings and allowed them no voting rights.⁴⁷ In the event, the resolution was soundly defeated, and the views expressed indicated firmly that women had taken up more strongly the principle of separating their concerns and demands from those of men. It was argued by those opposing the motion that men brought party politics into every situation. One delegate summed up the feelings of her branch:

...men put party before everything...and it would simply mean that presently all our Branches would be little Socialist or Liberal or Conservative bodies, ruled by men. We are strongly opposed to it.⁴⁸

Other delegates argued that while men should be allowed to help, women would be crowded out by any men, and especially married women, who would be disadvantaged because it would be their husbands who would go to WFL meetings, forcing the wives to remain at home.⁴⁹

While such arguments did mark a firmness in separating women's and men's political identities, they did not represent any absolute break between women's party

⁴⁷Verbatim Minutes, 1908, p. 15. The Middlesbrough delegate again put the resolution at the conference in the following year and was met with the reply "let them join the Men's League". There were a number of societies formed for male supporters of women's suffrage. Among these were the Men's League for Women's Suffrage, formed in 1907, and the Men's Political Union, a militant men's society formed in 1910. There was also the Men's Federation for Women's Suffrage, formed in 1913, and the Northern Men's Women's Suffrage Federation. A number of suffrage societies were mixed, including the Church League for Women's Suffrage, formed in 1909. See Annual Reports listed in the bibliography.

⁴⁸Verbatim Minutes, 1908, p. 16.

⁴⁹Verbatim Minutes, 1908, pp. 15-17.

interests and their demands for votes for women. Subsequent discussions highlight the extent to which party remained crucial to the way some WFL members expressed their political interests and concerns. The earlier condemnation of men's party interests did not extend to the issue of women's party political interests because while many were highly distrustful of the Liberal party - to the extent that a number had already resigned from Women's Liberal Associations - the attitude to the ILP was less clear cut.⁵⁰ The issue was raised by the Edinburgh branch delegate, Miss Maclean, who asked on behalf of a member of her branch whether dual membership of the WFL and ILP was allowed. She reported "...that this woman would resign from the WFL rather than give up the ILP." Teresa Billington-Greig, who by this time had resigned from the ILP, stated that if women wished to remain as members of a party, the only requirement was that they put the WFL "first".⁵¹ Yet her comments were a direct contradiction to the League's constitution which demanded strict party independence. During the same discussion, Charlotte Despard, possibly recognising the number of members, including herself, who still belonged to the ILP, argued:

..we do not altogether call that a political party. You can be a member of the ILP without touching upon Parliamentary strife at all...As a member of the ILP I believe that you can keep your loyalties to both. You must not, of course, take part in any Parliamentary contests..⁵²

Despard's arguments, however inconsistent with the reality of the ILP as a political party were endorsed by delegates, and this consensus seems largely to have been motivated by a desire not to lose members. Nor was this the last instance when the

⁵⁰Two League members, Alice Dilks and Marion Holmes, are known to have resigned from Women's Liberal Associations. See Appendix Five.

⁵¹Verbatim Minutes, 1908, p. 60.

⁵²Verbatim Minutes, 1908, p. 60.

constitution of the WFL was flexibly interpreted to meet the varied needs of the membership, as I demonstrate later. In 1908 the difficulties of following through a constitution which required strict party independence highlighted the extent to which women were not prepared to jettison their links with other societies, with whom their loyalties had been long before the WFL - or even the WSPU - had come into being. This mixture of loyalties was to prove a theme running throughout all levels of the WFL in coming decades.

Another significant discussion which took place at the 1908 conference was on the question of militancy. It was these discussions which highlighted the extent to which some members disagreed with the militant actions of the WSPU. The request of the Chelsea branch delegate for a definition of the word "militant" provoked laughter, yet her request was not so extraordinary, given that no clear consistent policy had yet been presented. Militancy had grown from the actions of a small number of women, and previously there had been little opportunity to discuss its implications, or any modifications. Yet, by January 1908 some members had begun to voice their reservations because they believed that militancy was no longer as successful in drawing attention to suffrage demands. These women might well have been made nervous by Teresa Billington-Greig's response to questions that militancy was a just action for women to take, because they were outlaws, with no powers in the parliamentary decision making process. Actions, she stated, could be "as militant as you like, anything from Police Court protests to the blowing up of the Houses of Parliament".⁵³

It was pointed out that it was impossible for all members to indulge in militant

⁵³Verbatim Minutes, 1908, p. 12.

actions, especially if they did not live in London, had family responsibilities or relied on paid employment. The discussion was prolonged and difficult and was concluded with the decision that militancy would continue to be part of the WFL programme and would continue to highlight the wrongs of women's unenfranchised status. It was agreed that all must endorse militancy, though not necessarily take part. This final point was significant because it again marked a flexibility in interpreting WFL policies which enabled members to judge for themselves the lengths they wished to go to for their cause.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is highly likely that a good proportion of the thousands of women who were in the WFL between 1907 and 1914 did not regularly engage in militant activities as they were originally defined by the WFL at this conference. It was also agreed that the WFL would not condemn any militant actions carried out by the WSPU, in order to show a united front, and as I will show later, this decision later resulted in serious disagreements in the League during and after 1910.

Because of the tentative nature of the decisions made at the conference, militancy and the question of party independence were to be issues which resurfaced at subsequent conferences and in branch discussions and at NEC meetings, yet for the time being any serious differences had been contained. The conference did lead to positive moves towards building up the strength of the League. This centred on the question of regional representation and the need to build up a nationwide network of League branches, and to give support to isolated members. Already there had been some complaints that League activities outside London were not given enough attention, and these points were backed up by the influential support of Charlotte Despard and Teresa Billington-Greig. It was agreed that the National Executive should meet in other centres besides London,

⁵⁴Verbatim Minutes, 1908, pp. 13-15.

and that officials should visit branches regularly to stimulate activity.⁵⁵

Two further ways intended to build up and unite the rather disparate WFL membership were undertaken during 1908 and 1909. These were the deployment of organisers in the regions, and the publication of the League's own newspaper *The Vote*. Intersecting with and influencing both of these initiatives were difficulties caused by the almost constant lack of finances available to the WFL.

ii) The Finances and Fundraising of the WFL, 1907 - 1914

In 1908 the WFL had very little money in their treasury, a situation which severely hindered the task of building the strength and effectiveness of the League. Novel ideas for fundraising included hiring a barrel organ, and selling gramophone records which contained a plea for votes for women. Both schemes, and others like them, served the need to raise money but also acted as propaganda - a constant theme running through many WFL fundraising schemes.⁵⁶ The burden of responsibility for acquiring finances fell largely on the WFL national treasurer, a post which after 1909 was filled by Sarah Bennett. The first treasurer had been Charlotte Despard, who resigned on her election as WFL President at the fourth Annual Conference of the WFL in 1909.⁵⁷

Sarah Bennett's letter to Maud Arncliffe Sennett in 1909 thanking her for the

⁵⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1908, pp. 31-34.

⁵⁶MAS, Vol. II, p. 45. Taken from the *Daily Chronicle*, January 9th, 1908. MAS, Vol. V, p. 45. From the *Daily News*, October 14th 1908.

⁵⁷Verbatim Minutes of the Fourth Annual Conference of the WFL, January 9th 1909, pp. 3-6. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1909).

"generous donation" indicates one method, first used by the WSPU, to raise money. She wrote:

I have written three begging letters today, or rather one was asking for an interview with a rich woman. Don't you pity me! I shall use your generous contribution as an argument why others should give.⁵⁸

Possibly because of the obvious distaste she held for this part of her job, Sarah Bennett did not appear to have great success. More often the health of the WFL treasury relied on contributions from their active members, and it was those on the NEC who appear to have been most forthcoming. Branches were also encouraged to send in money raised from fundraising efforts, and the most popular of these were jumble sales, whist drives, 'Hard-Up Socials' and cake and candy sales. This was in addition to the affiliation fees payable to League headquarters, as sixpence per branch member.

As a result of these efforts, together with regular collections at WFL meetings, the WFL's finances improved somewhat in 1909 and 1910. However they never became as well off as either the WSPU or the NUWSS. On the contrary, their finances were noticeably unstable in the years prior to 1912 when there were three acute shortages; firstly in late 1908, and again in May 1910, when members of the NEC lent a total of £162 to League funds. In 1911 the League again faced a shortfall and were this time rescued by a timely donation of £100 from the NUWSS.⁵⁹ The financial situation of the League eventually steadied during 1912 and this improvement was due largely to the efforts of Dr Elizabeth Knight who replaced Constance Tite as League treasurer. (See Appendix One: Table of NEC Members and WFL Officials) Elizabeth Knight, who was

⁵⁸MAS, Vol. VII, pp. 82-83.

⁵⁹NEC Minutes, December 11th and 12th 1908, p. 16, May 28th 1910, pp. 193-196, *The Vote*, April 1st 1911, p. 270.

a qualified doctor, and had trained with Louisa Garrett Anderson at the London School of Medicine, devoted much of her life after 1912 to the WFL.⁶⁰ In her position as treasurer, she developed new fundraising initiatives, notably the annual Green White and Gold fair, and from 1913, the President's Birthday Fund was launched to mark Charlotte Despard's birth when branches and individuals were asked to donate money. Another factor in the improved financial situation in the League was Elizabeth Knight's ample private income which was derived from her family's wealth. Often large "anonymous" sums appeared on lists of donations published in the *Vote* and these were very probably from Elizabeth Knight herself.⁶¹

One reason for the lack of available funds in the WFL was articulated by branch members in response to requests for greater financial contributions from the branches. A number argued at annual conferences that they were not well off and could not afford to give any more. Such evidence is discussed in detail in the following chapter, and suggests that there were in fact very few wealthy women members of the League. Instead, the WFL contended with a vicious circle because in order to create new branches, money was required from existing branches, and while the more branches there were, the more money was received, expenses also rose accordingly. Despite these obvious difficulties, it was clear to many that the only way to pursue their campaign successfully was to attract large numbers of supporters to 'the cause', and so with this in mind, from 1908 a large proportion of the League's resources were channelled into the employment of organisers, and from October 1909, into the production of the League's own newspaper. The following section deals with the activities of those

⁶⁰*The Vote*, November 3rd 1933, p. 345. See Appendix Five: Biographical Notes.

⁶¹See for example, *The Vote*, July 13th 1912, p. 205.

women who were employed as organisers and also those women who worked voluntarily to stimulate branch activity.

iii) Organising the WFL Branches, 1908 - 1914.

Women who were prepared to travel around the country raising interest and support, forming branches, holding public meetings and raising money, proved to be of crucial importance in the development of the WFL between 1908 and 1910. The content and purpose of their work was in many ways similar to the other suffrage societies, all of whom employed organisers. Organising by League members also mirrored the patterns established by other political organisations, including the ILP, which in its early years relied on a pool of committed and experienced speakers and organisers.⁶² The most significant difference was that organisers in the women's suffrage societies, both paid and voluntary, often faced violent reactions from some audiences, including avoiding missiles, to actual assault. More positively, working as a WFL organiser did prove to be a channel through which a number of women were elected on to the NEC and so achieved greater notoriety in the League as a whole. This was the path taken by Anna Munro and Alice Schofield Coates, both of whom later served as the WFL national president in the 1920s, and who generated widespread support and admiration through the long year of their service to the WFL.⁶³ Later chapters give insights into their experiences. In this section I concentrate on the patterns of organising in Britain in both the existing and newly formed WFL branches.

⁶²See David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1983).

⁶³See Chapter Six, pp. 309-310.

During 1908 the NEC had raised enough money to employ at least two paid organisers who joined those women who were prepared to work without payment. A number had notable success and by the end of the year at least thirty WFL branches had been formed. At the same time it also became clear that it was not enough simply to form branches, but that it was necessary to return regularly to those formed to stimulate activities. This was especially required in those branches without experienced speakers, or those with only a small number of active members. The implications of this situation are again covered in detail in Chapter Two, but the result was that a number of branches ceased to exist after a very short period of time. It could be a frustrating and tiring experience for organisers who could see their hard work coming to nothing.

With the increased demands on organisers' time in 1909 and the lack of funds to employ any more, the NEC devised the first of many schemes which would pass the responsibility for financing organisers' visits on to the branches themselves. The scheme divided the country into regions and stipulated that for every £13 raised an organiser would be provided for one month.⁶⁴ Later another scheme was introduced to increase the number of organisers by employing women known as 'probationary organisers'. These women were employed for between two to six months at lower wages, to work with more experienced organisers and branch members. For a time the scheme was successful, but problems surfaced during 1909, when instances of disagreements between organisers, financial irregularities and conflicts over the content of speeches increasingly came before the attention of the NEC.⁶⁵ This unhappy state

⁶⁴NEC Minutes, November 23rd 1908, p. 8.

⁶⁵NEC Minutes, March 27th 1909, p. 54. The NEC stipulated as for WFL organisers, that the candidates had to be WFL members of three months standing.

of affairs continued into 1910, when some among the still growing number of branches disagreed with the organiser sent to help them, and although the NEC appealed for members "to join issue even with those who they personally dislike" to fight for the cause, this had little noticeable affect.⁶⁶

The outcome was the introduction of another scheme in June 1910 which created Honorary District Organisers in various regions across Britain.⁶⁷ This initiative not only saved money but was also an attempt to counter branches' dislike of interference from organisers, who in some cases had very little knowledge of the areas they visited. The scheme gave the branches more control over their particular activities, although it was true that many District Organisers were appointed who were members of the NEC. Soon after difficulties emerged in the scheme, and in one incident in Swansea in 1911 the District Organiser, Margaret McCleod Cleeves, an NEC member who had been the branch secretary, was involved in a bitter dispute with her fellow branch members. Shortly after she resigned from the League altogether, though not before the somewhat reluctant NEC had become embroiled. Following her resignation the NEC sent a letter to branches informing them that the system of Honorary District Organisers had been discontinued. They advised branches to replace them with Branch Councils who would

⁶⁶*The Vote*, May 7th 1910, p. 14.

⁶⁷The Honorary District Organisers were announced in *The Vote*, July 2nd 1910, p. 111.

Wales: Mrs Cleeves (NEC), Manchester: Miss Manning (NEC), North Eastern Districts: Mrs Schofield Coates (NEC), South Yorkshire: Mrs Amy Sanderson (NEC), Eastern Counties: Miss Constance Andrews (elected to NEC in 1911), East Sussex: Mrs Alice Dilks (resigned September 1911), Portsmouth: Mrs Whetton. The placement of district organisers related to the strength of the particular areas, the strongest were given HDOs.

be responsible for appointing any organisers in their respective regions.⁶⁸

This policy of giving responsibility for the appointment of organisers to particular branches continued with only minor changes up to 1914. As I will argue in Chapter Two, this practice was crucially important especially after 1911, when it became necessary for branches to develop and generate their own locally based activities. The input of the NEC did not entirely cease after 1911, because a small body of paid organisers was kept on. Their work took them to areas for a period of anything from one night to two or three months and the NEC filled up any shortfall as best they could by sending committee members to speak at public meetings.

The other method of keeping information on the suffrage campaign flowing to branches all over Britain, and thus giving a sense of unity, was the WFL's newspaper *The Vote*, which was first published in October 1909.

iv) "A Symbol of Citizenship": *The Vote*, 1909-1933

The production of *The Vote* joined the other women's suffrage newspapers, *Women's Franchise*, *Common Cause* and *Votes for Women*, the latter two published by the NUWSS and the WSPU respectively. In 1909, the WFL joined in a long tradition of political journalism, and also in a specifically woman-centred tradition which emerged during the nineteenth century with the publication of journals specifically directed at

⁶⁸NEC Minutes, May 22nd and 23rd 1911, p. 110, June 18th and 19th 1911, p. 121, and July 21st and 22nd 1911, p. 124.

women, notably the *English Woman's Journal*, which first appeared in 1858.⁶⁹

Calls for a WFL newspaper increased after the obvious success of the WSPU's *Votes for Women*, which was first published in October 1907 and which became a weekly paper in the April of the following year. Serious discussions began among members of the NEC in May 1909, and later it was decided to form a public limited company with WFL member, Marie Lawson, as the managing director.⁷⁰ Soon after the Minerva Publishing Company offered shares to WFL members and received pledges for 2570 shares, valued at £642/0/0. However, by September 1909 only £108/0/0 had been received and the NEC, who already owned a large number of the shares, faced the responsibility of providing the bulk of the financial backing. Furthermore, the majority of directors of the new company came from the NEC.⁷¹

The title of "*The Vote*" was the preferred choice above the other suggestions of *WFL*, *House of the Women*, and *Rebel*, and it made its first appearance at the end of October. Its first editors were Marion Holmes and Mrs T.P. O'Connor who had replaced Cicely Hamilton at the final hour.⁷² From June 1910 Mary Olivia Kennedy served as editor until she resigned in March the following year, owing to the "pressure

⁶⁹See Jane Rendall, "'A Moral Engine?' Feminism, Liberalism and the *English Woman's Journal*", in Jane Rendall, ed., *Equal or Different*, pp. 112-138.

⁷⁰NEC Minutes, June 25th 1909, pp. 79-80.

⁷¹NEC Minutes, July 24th 1909, p. 88, and September 18th 1909, p. 102.

⁷²Cicely Hamilton agreed to take the post of joint editor, and her name appeared on the early editions of *The Vote*. Lis Whitelaw, *The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton*, (The Women's Press, London, 1990), p. 103, states that her failure to take the post was probably due to the pressure of her other work.

of private work".⁷³ She was replaced by Charlotte Despard, who worked closely with the assistant editor, Annie Smith who was appointed in June 1911.⁷⁴

From the earliest editions it became clear that *The Vote* was intended to appeal to women interested in obtaining the vote, but there were also strong messages that this would not be the sole aim of the paper. In the first edition Charlotte Despard wrote of *The Vote*:

..we hope and believe that through its pages the public will come to understand what the Parliamentary Franchise means to us women. Now it will be both a symbol of citizenship and the key to a door opening out on such service to the community as we have never yet been allowed to render, and therefore it is our earnest hope that our paper will keep its place in the hearts of men and women long after the first victory has been won.⁷⁵

In Chapter Four I discuss the content of *The Vote* in more detail. However, it is worth noting here that Charlotte Despard's comments mark the first public reference to a concern with the broader aims of the WFL, and to visions of a long term future for this organisation. Such an acknowledgment of the need to draw attention to issues beyond the immediate goal of enfranchisement was a significant reason why *The Vote* played a crucial part in the development of the League. This newspaper provided an opportunity for readers to develop and to share ideas and concerns. Contributions to *The Vote* predominantly came from among the WFL leadership and from a number of male journalists.⁷⁶

⁷³*The Vote*, June 11th 1910, p. 75, and March 4th 1911, p. 224.

⁷⁴*The Vote*, March 11th 1911, p. 241, and NEC Minutes June 18th and 19th 1911, p. 122.

⁷⁵*The Vote*, October 30th 1909, p. 10.

⁷⁶Contributors included members Marion Holmes, Teresa Billington Greig, Louisa Thompson Price, Margaret Wynne Nevinson, and later Nina Boyle, Florence Underwood and Elizabeth Knight. Distinguished names included Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Men

Despite these stated broader concerns, or even possibly because of them, *The Vote*'s circulation was disappointingly low, and this coupled with the limited response to the offer of shares in the Minerva Publishing Company meant that severe difficulties emerged with the paper almost immediately. The problem was further complicated by some confusion over the editorial policy and later by outright complaints that *The Vote* did not reflect the "spirit of the League." Only two months after its launch Marie Lawson wrote to the NEC suggesting that all editing should be done by the Company editor, that the WFL should contribute £2 a week to costs, and that they take 10,000 copies weekly. Finally she suggested that the WFL should allow the Company to give quotes on all printing requirements. The NEC turned down all the suggestions except to contribute to costs, and only agreed to take 1,000 copies, later increased to 2,000. Even this overestimated the demand in London.⁷⁷

In addition to the reservations on cost expressed by the NEC, the branches whose members were the ones deemed to have the responsibility of buying and selling the *Vote* were also not all satisfied with their new paper. The strongest complaints came from the Manchester branch, where the secretary, Miss Manning, claimed it was "useless for propaganda purposes".⁷⁸

After strenuous appeals, sales slowly increased and by December 1910 issues 53

also contributed, including Laurence Housman, Henry Wynne Nevinson, and Israel Zangwill.

⁷⁷NEC Minutes, December 13th 1909, p. 128, June 20th 1910, p. 215; a loss of £7/- week on sales of *The Vote* in London was recorded, and May 22nd and 23rd 1911, p. 108.

⁷⁸NEC Minutes, July 25th 1910, p. 226.

to 59 sold in total 8450 copies nationwide. While it never rivalled either *Common Cause* or *Votes for Women*, many members of the WFL did recognise the importance of their own paper in keeping members informed and in generating a sense of a united organisation.⁷⁹ After the early difficulties the NEC took over more direct control of *The Vote*, especially after Charlotte Despard became the editor.

In 1913 and 1914 a number of blanked out spaces appeared in *The Vote's* pages, but this apparent censorship never reached the scale applied by publishers to the WSPU's *The Suffragette*, which first appeared in October 1912.⁸⁰ After the outbreak of the war in August 1914, *The Vote's* commitment to keeping members informed continued, although the number of pages was reduced. Despite its smaller form the *Vote* was faithfully published every week throughout the 1920s, interpreting the turbulent changes in the status and experiences of women and of the women's movement itself. In the 1920s the *Vote*, whose readership had contracted sharply during the war, focused more on international issues and also more generally covered issues deemed to be of interest to women - from female swimmers of the English channel to "Women of the Empire".⁸¹

⁷⁹NEC Minutes, December 17th 1910, p. 21. The circulation of *Vote for Women* in April 1908 stood at 5,000 copies a week. This figure continued to increase, for details see Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women!*, p. 102.

⁸⁰Emmeline and Fred Pethick Lawrence left the WSPU after yet another disagreement over policy and direction, with Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst in October 1912. *Votes for Women* continued as an independent suffrage paper, and Christabel edited *The Suffragette* from her exile in Paris until her return in 1914.

⁸¹*The Vote* September 18th 1925 p. 301, and August 27th 1926, p. 268.

Florence Underwood, the WFL's secretary, replaced Annie Smith as editor by 1920, and her close friend Elizabeth Knight, who was still the national treasurer, made generous contributions which kept the *Vote* in existence.⁸² The other person responsible for the *Vote* in these years was NEC member Alix Clark, who had proved herself to be an expert at selling the paper in the years prior to 1914.

Despite these early difficulties with *The Vote*, and the ambiguous attitudes towards organisers, and the occasional strained relationship between branches and the NEC, it is clear that the attempt to establish the WFL as a national organisation had been largely successful. Yet the maturity of the WFL in terms of internal organisation, which was evident by 1910, had been achieved without any real test of the WFL's identity in terms of its democratic militant principles. Up to this point, the militancy issue had been contained; those who wished to pursue it could, while those who refused were not required to do so. However, this balance was disrupted in 1910 when differences among League members on the question of militancy emerged in the period when a truce was observed with the Government. As a result, during 1910, 1911 and 1912 a series of events on the League's NEC and in a number of branches, highlighted the strains inherent within the WFL's attempt at democratic militancy. The final section of this chapter traces how dominant interpretations of these principles, by 1912, had changed into a distinctly different vision to that which had led to the original split in the WSPU in 1907.

⁸²It was reported in *Jus Suffragii* in April 1920 that Florence Underwood was now the joint editor of the *Vote*. Elizabeth Knight's contributions to the *Vote* were openly acknowledged at annual conferences from the mid 1920s onwards. See *Verbatim Minutes*, 1925-1930.



The New National Executive. - Standing (Left to Right: Miss Manning, B.A., Mrs Sanderson, Mrs Holmes, Mrs Vulliamy, Mrs Hicks, Mrs Arncliffe-Sennett, Mrs Woods, Mrs Cleeves, Miss Matters, Mrs Sproson. Seated (Left to Right): Mrs How-Martyn, Mrs Despard, Mrs Billington-Greig, Miss Bennett, Mrs Snow. (Mrs Manson absent through illness)

Plate 3: The National Executive Committee of the WFL (1910)

Section III: "FOLLOWING A POLICY...OR A PERSONALITY": EVALUATING MILITANT SUFFRAGE DEMOCRACY IN THE WFL, 1910 - 1914⁸³

In the period prior to 1910 the WFL's militant campaign had continued on various fronts, and these are explored in detail in Chapter Three. The campaign did change in early 1910 when through the efforts of the suffrage movement it became necessary to re-evaluate the part militancy played in WFL policies. Officially this was prompted by the formation of a Conciliation Committee of MPs in January 1910 which attempted to draw up a women's suffrage bill and pass it through Parliament with all party support. The subsequent draft bill outlined a limited extension of the franchise to no more than one million women and was supported by all the women's suffrage societies.⁸⁴

The WFL leadership saw the Conciliation Bill as a first step for women suffragists, and together with the WSPU agreed to a suspension of most militant activities while the bill was debated. These months during 1910 were the first prolonged period when the two militant suffrage societies, who had built up so much of their identities through militancy, worked without such policies. The WFL continued to advocate passive resistance and much of its energy was devoted to supporting and encouraging tax resisters. Members also joined in other public displays in support of women's suffrage, notably in the suffrage processions masterminded by the WSPU which took place in

⁸³Taken from comments by an unnamed speaker at WFL, Special Conference, 1912, see Chapter One, footnote no. 94.

⁸⁴ See Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women!*, p. 134. Rosen states that the relatively small numbers of women who would have been enfranchised (1:13) was in order to ensure Tory support for the bill.

London in June and July 1910.⁸⁵

Despite the very real feeling of possible victory, there was some decline in intensity in some local League branches. However, this was eclipsed by the actions of some branch members and NEC representatives in raising the issue of the League's internal democratic principles. At this stage there were over sixty League branches, and in order to facilitate the effective representation of this large number of branches, the Headquarters in London and the NEC underwent a series of reorganisations to ensure that the League was organised as efficiently as possible. Such moves had already started back in 1909 with the formation of new departments at Headquarters. These were; Finance, Press and Advertising, *Vote* Street Sales, Branch and Provincial Meetings, Organising in London and a separate Political and Militant department. The departments were run by an Honorary Official elected from the NEC, and it was agreed that officials could organise a sub-committee if they so wished. However the overall purpose was to have one individual known to branches who would be responsible for providing specific information and responding to queries and requests.⁸⁶

In spite of such moves, the task of coordinating the branches, and also the responsibility for all militant and political work, still fell on the shoulders of one woman, Teresa Billington-Greig. Billington-Greig, who had always had a large amount of authority and influence in the WFL, found that by 1910 her work load had grown to enormous proportions. Reservations about the amount of work in the hands of one official led to suggestions to divide Teresa Billington-Greig's work between two or three

⁸⁵ For details of the processions see Chapter Three, pp. 166-168.

⁸⁶ NEC Minutes, November 20th 1909, p. 112.

women. In the event, such moves were cut short following Billington-Greig's serious operation which kept her out of all League activity for much of the later part of 1909. Her return in 1910 was short-lived when she was injured in a train crash in Ireland, and subsequently suffered a nervous breakdown, which kept her out of touch with the League until May 1910.⁸⁷ After her return it became obvious that she was determined to have some of the work pressures on her lifted. Yet her threat to resign if this was not done did nothing to stabilise the NEC, which was soon rocked by difficulties with another League official, the treasurer Sarah Bennett. In June 1910 Bennett was suspended from her post, and accused of disloyalty towards the WFL because of claims that she had spoken for another society, and was also a member of the WSPU. Sarah Bennett was given the chance to explain her actions at the annual conference in 1911, but failed to make any impression and consequently resigned from the League.⁸⁸

The treatment of Sarah Bennett indicated nervousness among some WFL officials about the extent to which some League members endorsed the actions of the WSPU, and this reached its height after the return to militancy by the WSPU briefly in November 1910. The events which were later to be known as "Black Friday" were a result of Asquith's failure to provide space for debate on the conciliation bill. WSPU members' anger erupted and the response of the police led to scenes of extreme violence against

⁸⁷Verbatim Minutes, 1909, pp. 16-17. Resolution defeated 18/22. WFL, *Annual Report*, 1910, p. 11.

⁸⁸NEC Minutes, September 3rd 1910, pp. 237-238, December 17th 1910, p. 16, and Verbatim Minutes of the Sixth Annual Conference, January 28th 1911, pp. 1-13. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1911). Information on Sarah Bennett can be found in Appendix Five: Biographical Notes.

the suffragette protestors.⁸⁹

In response the League's NEC decided not to endorse an immediate resumption of militancy, as there were still hopes that the Conciliation Bill might be saved. However, it became evident that some members of the WFL, both in the branches and on the NEC actually supported the actions of the WSPU on "Black Friday" and resented the response to it by some parties - including their own national committee. Six members of the Hackney WFL branch resigned after the publication in *The Vote* of Lord Lytton's letter criticizing the WSPU's actions, and they were not alone when they declared themselves disillusioned with the "spirit of criticism" in the League.⁹⁰ Yet, on the other hand, some members felt that the WFL did not go far enough in distancing itself from the WSPU. The inconclusive attempt to mark out a distinct WFL policy in December 1910 was too little, and had come too late for Teresa Billington-Greig, who resigned from the NEC and the WFL later in this month claiming to be thoroughly disillusioned with the militant suffrage movement.⁹¹

These internal difficulties were partly a result of the militant truce, because it represented the first real test of the WFL's efforts to generate a distinct policy and programme and a recognisable image in the suffrage movement. In 1910 it became evident that in practice such a distinctive image was proving difficult to establish in the

⁸⁹A detailed account of these events can be found in Caroline Morrell, *"Black Friday" and Violence Against Women in the Suffragette Movement*, (Women's Research and Resource Centre, London, 1981).

⁹⁰*The Vote*, December 17th 1910, p. 95.

⁹¹NEC Minutes, December 17th 1910, p. 16, January 6th and 7th 1911, p. 30. See also her letter to *The Vote*, January 21st 1911, p. 159.

minds of some members. Sarah Bennett was not the only one who had displayed loyalties to the WSPU, and whereas previously a flexible interpretation of the constitution had been allowed, increasingly members were now being made to choose between the two branches of the militant movement.

Yet this was not the reason for Teresa Billington-Greig's resignation. Instead she believed that the WFL was nothing but a weak imitation of the WSPU, and had failed to beat out a separate path. Although her criticisms and her well publicized departure, which are covered in detail in Chapter Four, did not lead to a noticeable number of resignations, they did contribute to the undermining of the WFL as an effective national organisation in the following few years. Her resignation left gaping holes in the NEC and the various departments which she had led. To fill these, Edith How-Martyn stepped in as Head of the Political and Militant department, and a permanent secretary, Florence Underwood, was employed. Another woman just growing accustomed to her new job was Constance Tite, who had become the League treasurer following the departure of Sarah Bennett.⁹² This sudden change in NEC personnel sparked off further difficulties which related directly to the issue of internal democracy, and these were made all the more serious towards the end of 1911 by the resurfacing of the still unresolved questions surrounding the WFL's militant policy.

These difficulties, which began to affect the NEC towards the end of 1911, centred on the amount of control in the hands of Charlotte Despard who throughout the changes had continued as League president. In what was an uneasy environment for the women's suffrage campaign generally, particularly after the WSPU resumed active

⁹²See Appendix One.

militancy in early 1912, the difficulties for the League's NEC on questions of militancy and internal politics, threatened to cripple the effective working of the committee. This in turn has important implications for the national coordination of the League as a whole. The intolerable situation, which led to almost all the members of the NEC issuing threats to resign, culminated in the decision to call a special conference of branches in April 1912.

Ostensibly the purpose of the Conference was to lay down firm policies for WFL future activity in the light of another failed Conciliation Bill, but it began with a vote of confidence in Charlotte Despard's presidency. This had arisen when seven NEC members; Edith How-Martyn, Alison Neilans, Bessie Drysdale, Emma Sproson, Eileen Mitchell, Katherine Vulliamy and Constance Tite, who disagreed with Charlotte Despard's actions, had jointly sent letters to all branches explaining that their president was acting autocratically and blocking the effective work of the NEC.⁹³

At the conference, which met on April 27th and 28th 1912, the main point of debate centred on Charlotte Despard's decision to hold a militant protest in November 1911 in direct contravention of the League's agreed policy of observing a truce with the government. It was argued that the president had ignored the advice and opinions of her fellows workers on the NEC, and so the very continuation of the League along the lines of democratic self government was under threat. One discontent argued tellingly, "I am in favour of democracy...I do not approve of a leader...I follow a policy, not a

⁹³See private and confidential letter to the members of the WFL, dated April 1912, Suffragette Fellowship Collection, Group D., Vol. III, p. 80, and Verbatim Minutes of the Special Conference of the WFL, April 27th and 28th 1912, pp. 3-4. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912.)

personality.."⁹⁴ Others endorsed her comments, and made strong references to the original split in 1907. Mrs Kathleen Mitchell, an original member of the League put forward her views:

The WFL came into existence, in fact it owes its very name to this, that certain people including Mrs Despard, Mrs How Martyn, Mrs Sproson, myself, and many others found it impossible to reconcile their claim for political enfranchisement of women with an autocratic instead of self governing society... It is with the greatest regret that I have to tell the Conference that my own experience has proved conclusively to me that this principle is in danger of being fatally reversed.⁹⁵

Others on the NEC defended Charlotte Despard. Miss Constance Andrews argued on the accusation of the bad use of individual popularity, that "personalities had been thrust upon us". Another, Miss Agnes Husband, made the point that while Charlotte Despard might be autocratic, so were all other members of the NEC. Nevertheless she argued that this was held in check by the democratic organisation of the meetings, namely, one woman - one vote.⁹⁶

The diverse range of interpretations of democracy and autocracy continued when Charlotte Despard put forward her own explanation of her behaviour. She stated:

I am a democrat. My views are very well known, long long before there was a WFL....Now I am sorry to say that I am what I am. My opinion on these things is before you, and it was before the WFL when it elected me as President. I cannot be tied up. I cannot be told you must say this and you must do that. That is absolutely impossible for me. I must be myself...I simply and solely do what I can to help the WFL, the cause of women and of women's freedom and emancipation...Make someone else your President, or have no President at all, which ever you choose. As I have said already, if the latter is your will, or the former, I shall go out of this room and out of this hall, and those who will, will follow me, and we will continue to work for the suffrage as we have always done. But I am

⁹⁴Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, pp. 10-12, 16.

⁹⁵Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, p. 15.

⁹⁶Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, pp. 32, 37.

absolutely loyal to the WFL....⁹⁷

Despard's interpretation of democracy differed as much as her colleagues on the NEC from the principles outlined in the constitution. This was a crucial point, because from the discussions which took place at this conference, it is clear that no consensus on the meaning and expression of democracy was possible. This was partly because the practice and principles of militant action favoured strong individual personalities, and quick, spontaneous actions. Yet the majority attending the conference were not prepared fully to accept the arguments of another speaker, Nina Boyle, who stated, "We are not here as democrats, but as suffragettes, and we are out to get the Vote!". On the contrary, her comments which were similar to the sentiments expressed in the autocratic WSPU, were greeted with cries of "No, No!"⁹⁸ With so many different views among its membership, the WFL still did not have a clear effective way of incorporating militancy and democracy into one consistent programme of action and protest.

Charlotte Despard's references to leaving the WFL appear to have decided the matter. The majority wanted to avoid another split in their organisation and this, along with her undeniable popularity among the membership, ensured that the vote of confidence went in Despard's favour by eighteen votes to thirty-five.⁹⁹ The implications of this vote were felt the following week when the seven discontented members resigned from the League, and so the WFL lost the skills of these committed women. Among them were Marion Coates-Hansen, Edith How-Martyn and Alison

⁹⁷Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, pp. 49, 51, 53-54.

⁹⁸Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, p. 69.

⁹⁹Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, p. 76.

Neilans, who went on to pursue different paths in the emerging women's movement.¹⁰⁰

No bigger rift in the WFL occurred, as the women who resigned showed no inclination to establish another women's suffrage society. Instead, the branches who had been shocked and dismayed by the crisis in the NEC, had sent their delegates with numerous resolutions outlining suggestions and changes. As a result, the second day of the conference was filled with debates on future WFL policy, which resulted in the declaration of a firm commitment to maintain closer links between the branches and Headquarters, which in the following years was partially achieved. However, despite these affirmation of the principles of self government and internal democracy, the NEC continued to hold enormous influence over the policy and national image of the WFL, which belied the strong commitment to internal democracy. Moreover, many of the new women elected to the NEC after the special conference in April 1912, were strongly behind Charlotte Despard. This ensured a united front in the NEC which continued for the remainder of the period up to 1914.¹⁰¹

The significant development in the WFL branches towards local campaigns and networks, which I develop further in Chapter Two, offset the imbalance between the ideal and the practice of internal democracy in the League. By 1912 the branches had found other directions for their energies, and this reduced the impact of the limitations of the WFL's democratic militant ideals. The issues taken up by the branches were

¹⁰⁰*The Vote*, May 4th 1912, p. 42. See Appendix Five for notes on Marion Coates Hansen.

¹⁰¹Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, [Sunday], pp. 1-54. See Appendix One for the NEC.

incorporated into the League by a flexible interpretation of the constitution's overriding commitment to obtaining women's suffrage. Another reason why the WFL did not suffer more from the tensions which exploded at the special conference in April 1912 was the continuation of the militant truce with the Government, which the WFL continued until January 1913. As I discuss in Chapter Three, during this period, a clearer definition of WFL militancy was developed, which did not cause so many contradictions with the principles of internal democracy which were still cherished by the majority of the membership.

CONCLUSION

By 1912 the WFL's identity as a democratic and militant society had gone through a long process of development and change. However, it had been acknowledged that its democratic and militant principles could only be sustained if they were flexibly interpreted and flexibly enforced. This situation does not necessarily represent a failure of democratic militancy, because although many dedicated suffrage activists left the League in the years from 1907, the League succeeded in becoming an acknowledged part of the women's suffrage movement. The flexibility which characterised interpretations of the League's constitution after 1912 allowed for the incorporation of broader concerns and interests by the membership. Such moves began to bear fruit in the discussions on the future of the WFL, and the ways in which to end women's unequal position in relation to men. Discussions on these issues took place among the national leadership, and among the ordinary branch membership.

A CARAVAN TEA PARTY.



Including Mrs Despard, Mr, Mrs, and Miss Fox-Bourne, Mrs Dodd, Mrs Clarendon-Hyde, Miss C. E. Andrews, Miss Elliott, Mr and Mrs Samuels and Mrs Ponder.

Plate 4: A Caravan Tea Party

CHAPTER TWO "FULFILLING THEIR DUTY TO WOMEN AND SOCIETY"¹

THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE BRANCHES OF THE LEAGUE, 1907 -1914

INTRODUCTION: "SUPERFLUOUS DETAILS?" THE MARGINALISATION OF REGIONAL BRANCHES AND MEMBERS

The activities, interest and concerns of the ordinary membership of the League's branches in the period up to 1914 are largely unwritten and marginalised aspects of the history of the women's suffrage movement.² Therefore Chapter Two sets out to piece together information about the branch membership of the WFL; their class location, employment and marital status; the networks they created and operated in, and the interests and concerns expressed at branch meetings and through other activities linked to the suffrage campaign.

The WFL had formed at least sixty branches by 1909, with a constant membership in these of no more than 5,000 women, although given the tendency for League branches to disband and reform, and for new branches to emerge, the number of women who at one stage were members of the League was much greater.³ It is the experiences of these women which are explored in this chapter. While the issues raised cannot

¹The title is taken from Emma Sproson's letter to Maud Arncliffe Sennett. See Chapter Two, p. 114.

²See Introduction, for further explorations of this point.

³The WFL Hon. Secretary, Edith How-Martyn wrote to *The Times*, October 16th 1909 that the WFL had sixty-five local branches, with a total membership of "...about 5,000...". She added, "it must be remembered that we have a large body of sympathizers who will not become members because they cannot fulfil the very stringent regulations...". A cutting of this published letter can be found in MAS, Vol. VIII, p. 61.

represent the particular and often highly personal journeys of all the members of the WFL, certain themes do emerge which give insights into the factors and practices which caused many to re-evaluate their own understanding of politics and to construct a place for themselves within the political process.

By considering the varied social positions, experiences and concerns of the membership of the League, existing assumptions about the nature and context of the suffrage movement must come under scrutiny. Simplistic generalisations that the movement was interchangeable with and bound by demands for, *and only for*, women's suffrage can no longer be validated. In raising this question the process of exploring branch members' lives is not only an exercise in recovery from marginalisation, but also an integral part of understanding the growth of a particular woman-centred political culture. By political culture I refer to the practices used by League members to identify and express their understanding of politics and women's specific concerns within it. This was manifested in the different groups of women who were encouraged to join, the types of gatherings organised, the discussions and activities held, the speeches made, and the networks created through which demands for changes in women's status were made.

Such practices, while not unique to the WFL, did contain, along with other suffrage societies, an over-riding emphasis on women's interests as a distinct group. This emphasis can be attributed to the new urgency and importance expressed through the use of militant tactics endorsed first by the WSPU, and later by the WFL. The militant suffrage campaign did not straightforwardly generate the woman-centred political culture which was to become an integral part of WFL branches by 1914. The tensions created by the introduction of militancy to the campaign for women's

enfranchisement which I outlined in the previous chapter, also influenced the activities and concerns of the League branches. It was these *tensions*, explained below, which were one factor in the emergence of a woman-centred political culture particular to the WFL, between 1907 and 1914.

I referred earlier to the continued marginalisation of the activities and concerns of ordinary branch members in histories of the suffrage movement. This marginalisation was also present in the contemporary suffrage movement itself. In 1907, the members of WFL branches were aware of the emphasis that had been placed on regional representation and regional activity in the newly formed organisation. They must have been dismayed by the distinct marginalisation of their efforts in the *Annual Report of the WFL* published for that year. Under "Other Methods of Propaganda" the report stated:

The less attractive methods of propaganda have not been neglected. Large numbers of indoor and outdoor demonstrations have been held in London, Scotland and the provinces, details of which would be superfluous; but we have still to look forward to the day when we can fill the Albert Hall without difficulty, and when we can collect 100,000 women in Hyde Park.⁴

In spite of the League leadership's intentions, predominantly these members of the NEC tended to construct an image of the WFL's campaign as a vibrant militant revolt of women. I argued in Chapter One that on one level this concentration was necessary because it showed the lengths women were prepared to go to uncover the injustice of denying women votes, and it was precisely such militant actions which had forced the issue of suffrage to the forefront of political debate. Yet, this was carried out at the expense of acknowledging the arduous tasks undertaken in the various regions of Britain

⁴WFL, *Annual Report*, 1907, pp. 16-17.

to develop and sustain the activities of women suffrage supporters in their communities, including those who did not necessarily want to participate personally in militant actions.

The reservations voiced by some members on the marginalisation of regional issues were the result of very real concerns that militant actions were not enough to sustain the commitment of the membership, and indeed, in some cases, militancy may have even lessened such commitment. This dichotomy between a public militant image and the more low key "less arduous" work left regional branch officials and activists coping largely alone with the task of devising campaigns which would not alienate their members, but instead would bring large numbers into their branch. This was achieved through the development of activities and meetings which discussed a wide range of issues and concerns, not simply about militancy and the vote, but any issues deemed by branch members to be of interest to their colleagues in League branches.

Until 1910 such moves towards a distinct political culture in the branches remained largely submerged by militant protests undertaken in London and other large cities and towns. Initially it was through the decline in media attention and the lessening of interest in women's suffrage during the militancy truce in 1910, as the Conciliation Bill was debated in Parliament, that more emphasis was placed on those branch activities which explored the interests and concerns of the membership. The outcome was that gradually a broad based platform of interest in reforming issues became an established part of the WFL's programme. It was this broad interest, alongside the continued practice of passive resistance and a developing rhetoric of militancy, which generated a woman centred political culture, which was to play an important part in the continuation of the WFL in the years of the first world war, and

later in the 1920s.

In order to illustrate these points on the development of a woman-centred political culture in the WFL, I have selected thirteen branches active in the years from 1907. By using the sources gathered on the membership in these branches I will explore the following themes: the levels and nature of paid and unpaid employment undertaken by the League membership; the networks operating within the branches; and the class configuration of the membership and the groups of women targeted as potential recruits. Later sections explore the position of the thirteen branches in their respective communities and links with other organisations. I argue that these links, together with the varied experiences of the membership were the crucial factors in dictating the types of activities undertaken and the various interests pursued. The final sections look at the range, type and purpose of branch meetings and social activities, and the topics discussed within. In this way I demonstrate that the branches were sites of developing, contested and lively political debates among women.

In order to place the information on the thirteen branches which constitutes the bulk of the material used in this chapter, in context, I will begin by giving a broad overview of the League branches active in the British Isles between 1907 and 1914.⁵ This overview will highlight certain trends in the formation, continuation, and collapse of branches which are explored in more detail in later sections of this chapter.

⁵This overview is supported by the information in Appendix Two: WFL Branches formed, 1908-1918.

Section I: AN OVERVIEW OF WFL BRANCHES, 1907-1914⁶

The following overview differs in a number of crucial ways from existing accounts of the development of suffrage societies which present a picture of a steady, often dramatic increase in the number of members and branches of women's suffrage societies which spanned Britain in this period. The references in secondary sources to the steady increase in branch numbers can be traced from the interpretation given in much of the literature published by suffrage societies themselves in the period up to 1914 and in subsequent autobiographies.⁷ Because of the desire to show the popularity of the movement, details of any failures or negative trends were overlooked so not to detract from the overall sense of achievement and purpose.⁸

However, difficulties and differences did exist. In the official published WFL accounts, no mention is made, or explanation given, of the number of League branches which ceased to exist after relatively short periods of time, or those which were largely inactive or redundant. Similarly, rifts and outright hostilities between the branches and the NEC are overlooked. Official lists published in *The Vote* after 1909 claimed that there were between sixty and seventy League branches in existence at any one time.

⁶The sources used in this section are: WFL, Annual Reports, 1907, 1908, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913; correspondence with the WFL National Executive Committee recorded in the NEC Minutes; and *The Vote*. I have noted the precise source of particular information when I reference existing published material, or when I discuss named League members.

⁷For example see; Andrew Rosen, Chapter Six: "Rapid Growth", *Rise Up Women!*, pp. 79-85.

⁸This practice of imparting selected information is evident in the histories written by members of the WFL, see Stella Newsome, *A History of the Women's Freedom League, 1907-1957*, (WFL, London, 1958) and Mrs Gerard, *Hats Off To The Past, Coats Off To The Future*, (WFL, London, [1932]).

Yet evidence from other sections of *The Vote* and from private correspondence suggests that there were probably no more than fifty branches constantly active in any one year up to 1913, and no more than sixty prior to August 1914.⁹ Furthermore, these figures disguise the extent to which new branches replaced those branches which collapsed or disbanded. Given this discrepancy between official lists of branches and other indirect sources, the following overview, broken down by region, uses the latter sources which include "Branch Notes" published in *The Vote*, reports of correspondence between the branches and the NEC, and the reports published annually by branches themselves.

Scotland

As I outlined in Chapter Two, the formation of a semi-autonomous Scottish Council of the WSPU in 1907 was one factor contributing to the increasing tensions between Teresa Billington-Greig and the Pankhursts. Given that Billington-Greig was responsible for generating much of the support for the WSPU in this region prior to the split, a good number of them transferred their allegiances to the WFL at the end of 1907. The WFL formed their own Scottish Council with members elected from the Scottish branches, but by 1910 the bulk of the co-ordination had passed over to individual branches.

The WFL in Scotland attracted large numbers of supporters to their ranks, notably in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee, which were the strongest sites of women's suffrage activity in Scotland in the period up to 1914. Additional WFL branches were formed

⁹For lists of WFL branches and secretaries published in *The Vote* see, October 22nd 1910, pp. 307-308, September 16th 1911, p. iii, August 10th 1912, p. 281, October 24th 1913, p. 431.

in Aberdeen, Perth and Dunfermline, and in 1912 a branch was formed at Rothesay following that year's Clyde Coastal Campaign.¹⁰ The four latter branches did not become permanent features, and after they disbanded, members were kept in touch through the "Scottish Scattered Members" network.

In Glasgow local co-ordination was extensive and by 1909 the city boasted seven branches in various districts including Govan, Partick and Kirkintilloch. In 1910, these branches amalgamated to form one large Glasgow branch with a membership of many hundreds. Activities were coordinated by local secretaries who were responsible for the districts in the city and the surrounding area.

From the formation of the WFL in 1907 its leadership acknowledged the importance of Scotland to the suffrage campaign, and at least one Scottish representative was encouraged to stand for election to the NEC which met in London. Those elected included Agnes Husband, well known for her public work in Dundee, and Glasgow-based Eunice Murray.¹¹ However, the distance Scottish representatives were required to travel to attend the London NEC meetings occasionally caused problems, and so in 1911 and 1912 it was decided to share the responsibilities for representing Scotland between two or three members. (See Appendix One) In this way the views and concerns of Scottish League members continued to be represented on the national body

¹⁰WFL Clyde Coastal Campaigns were organised annually from 1909.

¹¹For further information on Agnes Husband see Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause*, p. 261, and *The Vote*, March 19th 1926, p. 90, May 14th 1926, p. 151, and June 4th 1926, p. 169. For information on Eunice Murray see, Appendix Five: Biographical Notes, and her book *Frances Murray- A Memoir* (Printed for private circulation, [Glasgow, Maclehouse, Jackson & Co, publishers to the University, 1920]). This biography contains details of Eunice Murray's mother and prints various letters, containing references to Eunice Murray.

of the WFL.

Scotland continued to be an important regional area to the WFL up to 1914 and beyond. Its status was reinforced by the strong presence of both WSPU and NUWSS branches and organisers. There was a good deal of co-operation between the various suffrage societies as Leah Leneman had ably demonstrated.¹²

London Districts

A London Branches Council, representing thirteen branches, modelled along the lines of that already in operation in Scotland, was established in the capital towards the end of 1907. By 1910 twenty-five branches were active in London, and this figure only fluctuated slightly over the period up to 1914. London was acknowledged as a site of considerable strength for the WFL, although this disguised the fact that a number of branches were fairly temporary affairs, and for periods existed in name only. Many of the League's London branches were situated in close proximity to one another and in order to avoid duplicating activities, occasionally branches would amalgamate, as happened between the branches in Tottenham and Northern Heights in 1910. There were areas in London that were stronger than others and which boasted more than one branch. Coming into this category were the members in Hampstead, where in 1911 three branches existed which together boasted a membership of over two hundred.¹³

¹²See Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause*, and Elspeth King, *The Scottish Women's Suffrage Movement*, (Peoples' Palace Museum, Glasgow Green, 1978), for further information on the suffrage movement in Scotland.

¹³Further information on the WFL branches in Hampstead can be found in MAS, Vols. I - IX. See also Margaret Wynne Nevinson, *Life's Fitful Fever*, pp. 191-221.

There were a number of well-founded complaints over the years from League branches in other areas that London members were given undue credit for their activities.¹⁴ Their high profile was because suffragists in the capital were able to benefit from the large number of public meetings organised by the WFL and the many other suffrage societies operating in the capital. These meetings were often addressed by well-known speakers based in the area, and the various activities coordinated by the WFL Headquarters, notably the large "At Homes" held at Caxton Hall in Westminster, ensured that London members had a ready focus for their energies. A number of London branches benefitted from the publicity of having well-known individual suffragists among their ranks. For example in 1909 and 1910 the Central London branch had as its president none other than the well known novelist and writer, Cicely Hamilton. Yet the opportunities and benefits aside, the success of individual London branches still depended, as with the provincial branches, on committed and experienced branch officials who were willing and able to coordinate branch activities and events.

The Midlands

Of the original branches who split with the WSPU, the most isolated was probably that in Wolverhampton. Its survival up to 1913 was largely due to the efforts of one woman, Emma Sproson, who was one of the few working-class women to be elected on to the NEC. Because of her direct links with the NEC, Sproson, with the support of her husband, kept the WFL flag flying in this district. She introduced a variety of topics

¹⁴See Verbatim Minutes, 1908, pp. 32-33. There is very little published material on the branches of suffrage societies in London. The exception is Les Garner, *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty*, pp. 78-93.

into branch discussions, and often spoke on the plight of working women in industry.¹⁵

Other suffrage societies in the Midlands were much stronger, especially the NUWSS, and while in other areas this appeared to motivate the NEC to single out the area for possible new WFL branches, such work was not undertaken with any real intent in the Midlands until 1913. This lack of interest seems one reason why the Birmingham branch disbanded sometime in 1908/9, and why Burton-on-Trent branch which was formed in 1910, lasted for barely a year. In 1913 another WFL branch was formed in Birmingham and joined the now well-established WSPU and NUWSS branches in the city. This relatively new WFL branch disbanded during the war, most probably precisely because it was not strong or established enough to withstand the dislocation and disorganisation caused by the hostilities.

The North West - Manchester & Liverpool

In the Manchester district by 1909, the WFL had a strong network of branches in Sale, Urmston, Burnage, Eccles and later, in Walkden. These branches came together in 1910 to form a Manchester Branches Council, but difficulties later emerged in the first two branches and subsequent disagreements with the NEC caused them to split from the WFL and form into the independent "Sale & District Women's Suffrage Society".¹⁶ After this rift in 1911, the NEC devoted attention to the remaining

¹⁵Details on Emma Sproson are in Appendix Five: Biographical Notes. See later in this chapter for an extract of a letter written by Sproson to Maud Arncliffe Sennett in 1909.

¹⁶NEC Minutes, December 1st and 2nd 1911, p. 27, and February 16th and 17th 1912, p. 57.

branches in the region. Along with other suffrage societies, the WFL branches coordinated joint meetings and demonstrations which served to consolidate the League in the north west.

Similarly, in Liverpool the three League branches in Liverpool, Aintree and Waterloo, which existed in the period 1907 to 1914, worked alongside other suffrage societies, in this case most notably the Men's League, although it was the WSPU and NUWSS branches which were the strongest and most numerate.¹⁷ Again, probably because of the strength of the other suffrage society branches, the NEC put a lot of effort into building up their base in Liverpool. In 1910 for instance, the NEC agreed to pay Miss Broadhurst up to the sum of £90 to co-ordinate a WFL campaign in the region, but they later regretted their decision when it emerged that a loss of £75 was recorded in just three months.¹⁸ After such a dismal failure organising efforts in the area remained more low key and less expensive. In 1913, largely due to the efforts of local members, a branch was formed in nearby Chester.

Despite the fairly uneven progress made by the League in both Liverpool and Manchester, both areas continued to host branches throughout the war, possibly capitalising on the collapse of WSPU organised activities in these regions during the same period.

¹⁷A detailed study of women's political activity on Merseyside is currently being undertaken by Krista Cowman, Centre for Women's Studies, University of York. See also Marij van Helmond, *Votes for Women. The Events on Merseyside, 1870-1928*, (National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, n.p., 1992).

¹⁸NEC Minutes, June 25th 1909, p. 83, and September 18th 1909, p. 99.

The North East

In the North East the base of WFL activity centred on Middlesbrough, where despite early difficulties over members' allowing men to attend their meetings, numbers and interest grew steadily from 1910. This resurgence was largely due to the efforts of the WFL organiser, Alice Schofield Coates, who married local business man and ILP activist, George Coates in 1910 and settled in the town where she became the branch secretary and later its president.¹⁹

Other branches in the region were situated in Sunderland, South Shields and West Hartlepool, and a number of instances of co-operation were recorded. With the exception of Middlesbrough, none of the League branches in this region were particularly strong. The fact that Middlesbrough managed to survive, and indeed prosper in its relative isolation was mostly to the efforts and commitment of branch members, and co-operation and support from the local ILP branch. Also, the election to the NEC of Marion Coates Hansen, and her sister-in-law Alice Schofield Coates, kept the members in Middlesbrough in touch with the deliberations taking place at Headquarters in London.

Yorkshire

WFL activity in neighbouring Yorkshire was centred in Sheffield, where members of the League kept the branch active by forging strong links with the local branches of

¹⁹Sarah Eddy, "Alice Schofield Coates: Suffragette and Middlesbrough Councillor" in *Cleveland & Teesside Local History Society Bulletin*, No. 53, Autumn 1987, p. 21.

other suffrage societies.²⁰ Relatively early in the period, attempts were made to build up League branches in the region, which suggests that it was designated as another important target area by the NEC. As in a number of other such targeted areas, there were no consistent organising efforts on the part of local women and these attempts were largely unsuccessful. This factor explains why the branches formed in Bradford, Wakefield and Pontefract in 1909 did not become established. The York branch, although it was continually listed as a branch in *The Vote*, remains something of a mystery because no record of any correspondence with the NEC exists and no contributions to "Branch Notes" were ever published. Such a discrepancy might have been the result of an initial interest shown in the WFL by the woman listed as branch secretary, in the hope of attracting other local women. However, the women suffragists in York seem to have been content to work in the local NUWSS branch.

The efforts in Yorkshire once again highlight the inability of the League to have much success in areas designated by the NEC as fruitful and desirable in terms of WFL activity. On the contrary, the case of the South East of England detailed below shows that by far the most consistently successful branches were those formed and active because of interest and commitment by local women themselves. While many women throughout Britain were interested in women's suffrage, this did not always translate into a desire for the responsibility of forming and running a WFL branch.

²⁰J.H. Copley, "The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Yorkshire", (Undertaken during a course at Sheffield City College of Education, 1965-1968. Now housed at Sheffield Central Library).

The South Coast of England

The benefits of regular public meetings organised by the dynamic and highly organised Eastbourne branch secretary, Alice Dilks, ensured the existence of a strong branch on the South Coast of England from 1909. Its relative isolation was offset by regular visitors from WFL Headquarters, including Maud Arncliffe Sennett the wealthy and experienced campaigner for women's suffrage.²¹ Although branches in the south east of England did benefit from a regular supply of speakers from London, this could not cancel out a lack of organisation within a branch itself. It was this last factor which was the reason why the WFL branch at Bournemouth was only short-lived.

During 1910 the WFL's attempts to expand its branches along the South Coast were very successful, with branches formed in Portsmouth and Gosport in June and July 1910, and followed shortly after by the Brighton and Hove branch further east. This year marked the beginning of a very successful WFL area which continued into the 1920s. The factor which made the branches in Brighton and Portsmouth stronger than those in Bournemouth and Eastbourne, were the commitment and ability of local members. Also, the branches in Portsmouth and Brighton co-operated extensively with local branches of the NUWSS, the WSPU, the CLWS, and a number of men's societies for women's suffrage.²²

²¹See MAS, especially Vols. I - VII.

²²For a study of suffrage activity in Portsmouth which concentrates on the NUWSS and WSPU, see Sarah Peacock, "'Votes for Women' The Women's Fight in Portsmouth", in *Portsmouth Papers*, No. 39, December 1983, pp. 3-24.

South East England

Midhurst in West Sussex was the only main (non-coastal) League branch in the south-east corner of England active between 1908 and 1909. Its formation was due to the efforts of two sisters, Miss Vinvela and Miss Elsie Cummins. The latter, while showing an interest in local branch organisation, was especially committed to militant protests and travelled to London where she was arrested on at least one occasion.²³ The branch appears to have ceased all activities in 1912 and this may have been because the Cummins sisters transferred their allegiance to another suffrage organisation. Given their interest in militancy, this could well have been to the WSPU.

There are no obvious reasons why no more WFL branches emerged in this area, nor why the NEC made no particular organising effort given its close proximity to London. Possibly the presence of a strong network of NUWSS branches might have in this case resulted in little League activity. Also there may well have been little support for militancy in the largely rural and comfortable districts in the south east of England. One WFL meeting held in September 1909 had to be ended early when the proceeding became too noisy and violent to continue. The majority of the protests made at this meeting centred on WSPU militancy with which the WFL was still strongly associated, despite their efforts to the contrary.²⁴

²³MAS, Vol. V, p. 23 from the *Midhurst Times*, October 2nd 1908, Vol. VI, pp. 16,74; a handbill for a WFL meeting in Midhurst, Vol. VI, p. 90 from the *Sussex Daily News*, [n.d]; Vol. VII, pp. 58, from the *Sussex Daily News*, May 27th 1909, and Vol. VII, p. 92 from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 9th 1909.

²⁴MAS Vol. VIII, p. 45. Taken from the *West Sussex County Times & Standard*, September 25th 1909.

South West England

An isolated WFL branch was active in Cheltenham during 1909, and as in Sheffield, there is strong evidence that the membership relied on joint activities with other local suffrage societies. Unlike Midhurst there is no evidence of strong associations with militancy, on the contrary, the branch's most active and distinguished period of activity was in 1911 when members championed the cause of Daisy Turner, a young unmarried mother, accused of infanticide who had been deserted by the father of her child. The League branch co-operated with the local NUWSS branch, and with the help of the NEC coordinated a relatively high profile campaign to bring attention to the unjust way the young woman had been treated.²⁵ Despite this campaign, no noticeable upsurge in WFL membership or branches ensued.

Further west, no WFL branches were formed during the entire period up to 1914. Even a summer campaign undertaken in this region in 1913 failed to produce any new branches and was probably due to the strength of the WSPU in this area.²⁶

Wales

Wales proved to be a relatively strong area in terms of WFL support, with seven active branches: Cardiff, Caldicott, Carmarthen, Aberystwyth, South Glamorgan,

²⁵NEC Minutes, July 21st and 22nd 1911, p. 130, *The Vote*, July 29th 1911, p. 171, August 19th 1911, p. 206, October 28th 1911, p. 2, and November 11th 1911, p. 34.

²⁶See A.J.R. ed., *Suffrage Annual & Women's Who's Who* (Stanley Paul & Co., London, 1913), pp. 116-118. The WSPU reported branches or organisers in Bath, Exeter, Falmouth & Penryn, Ilfracombe, Newquay, Torquay and Paignton.

Swansea and Montgomery Boroughs. Most of these were formed during a travelling tour by the WFL organiser, Muriel Matters in 1909, although it was the Swansea branch which proved to be the most organised and long lasting of these. After Matters left the area all the branches with the exception of Swansea and Montgomery Boroughs, quickly experienced difficulties. The subsequent formation of two more branches in Aberdare and Barry highlights the interest in suffrage in the region, but again this was not coupled with organisational commitment and they too soon disbanded.

Swansea remained the only permanent and visible branch until 1911 when a new branch was formed and named "Montgomery Boroughs", with its central core around Newton in Mid-Wales. The branch soon boasted a large and organised membership and its subsequent permanence in this case, unlike other Welsh branches, was the result of the efforts of Alix Clark, who had already distinguished herself as a *Vote* seller. Clark continued to hold on to and enthuse the members, and the branch went from strength to strength in the region.²⁷

The NUWSS claimed twenty three branches active in Wales in 1913, and the WSPU three. In this region the WFL appears to have been stronger and more organised than the WSPU, and a more detailed study of the WSPU in the region would throw light on the relative weakness of this society.²⁸

²⁷*The Vote*, July 15th 1911, p. 154, and September 9th 1911, p. 252.

²⁸A.J.R. ed., *Suffrage Annual*, pp. 89-90, 118.

East Anglia

One recurring theme in this overview is the evidence that networks of WFL branches were predominantly centred around large cities and industrial centres such as Manchester, Glasgow and London. One exception to this was in East Anglia where by 1912 a fairly extensive network of branches existed. The first branch formed in this area was in Norwich, but its status as the most important League branch in the area later switched to Ipswich where a branch had been formed in 1909. The members, and notably Constance Andrews, proved to be highly committed and through their efforts new branches and groups were established in the small nearby towns of Hadleigh, Stowmarket and Woolpit between 1910 and 1912. Again the area was one which through its own efforts and successes, became noticed as an important WFL area, and this was consolidated when Constance Andrews was invited to sit on the NEC in September 1911. However, following her election to the NEC and subsequent departure to London in February 1912, activities in the area fell off slightly. This situation again highlights how one woman could hold the key to the strength of individual branches.²⁹

Ireland

Ireland stands out as the largest single area where the attempts of WFL representatives to organise branches met with almost total apathy and even direct resistance. In 1910, the WFL's organiser Edith Bremner, undertook a campaign in Ireland and her posting was most probably the result of Charlotte Despard's interest in the country which caused her to push for WFL involvement there. In March 1910

²⁹*The Vote*, February 17th 1912, p. 194.

Bremner reported that a branch had been set up in Londonderry, followed by a branch in Bangor in May. The existence of an already long established network of Irish suffrage societies, whose members had concerns very different from those of suffragists in Britain, meant that, although desperately committed, the WFL failed to break through in Ireland. Bremner soon realised this to be the case and asked permission to return to England declaring that "only Irish women could organise in Ireland".³⁰

The events in Ireland proved to be another instance where the NEC targeted a particular area and failed to break through. The well-established Irish women's suffrage movement was dealing with the specific questions around Irish independence and home rule, and both the WFL and the WSPU failed to appreciate the complexities of these concerns.³¹

* * * * *

In conclusion, the most significant trend emerging from this brief overview of League branches was the eagerness of the efforts to form branches, and the unenthusiastic responses from some areas, where even if a branch was formed, it might only have lasted a few months or years. Yet in other areas, with minimum of effort from either the NEC or organisers, branches flourished. The factors which influenced

³⁰NEC Minutes, April 2nd 1910, p. 170.

³¹For studies of the Irish women's suffrage movement see; Rosemary Cullen Owens, *Smashing Times. A History of the Irish Women's Suffrage Movement, 1889-1922*, (Attic Press, Dublin, 1984), and Margaret Ward, "Suffrage First - Above All Else!. An Account of the Irish Suffrage Movement", *Feminist Review*, No. 10, Spring 1982, pp. 21-32. For an exchange between the WFL and Irish suffragists see *The Vote*, September 2nd 1911, p. 233 and September 9th 1911, p. 252.

such different responses certainly bear further investigation in local studies, in relation to the input of local activists and the levels of regional representation on the NEC, and the extent of links with other suffrage societies, which could be both beneficial and damaging.

Section II: THE BOND OF COMRADESHIP AMONG THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE WFL

Case Studies

Dundee, Glasgow, Swansea, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Letchworth, Portsmouth, Brighton, Eastbourne, Ipswich, Hampstead, Hackney, Anerley & Crystal Palace.

BRANCHES	FORMED (date)	RE-ORGANISED (date: pre 1914)	DISBANDED (date: pre 1920)	APPROX. MEMBERSHIP (where known)	REPRESENTED ON NEC (date and name)	PREMISES/ OFFICES (date)
DUNDEE	1907	/	1920	50+ (1909)	AGNES HUSBAND (1911,1912,1913)	1909, 1910
GLASGOW	1907	/	/	200+ (1910)		1908-1914
SWANSEA	1909	/	/	70+ (1911)	MARY McCLEOD CLEEVEES (1910)	/
MANCHESTER	1907	/	/	100+	MISS MANNING (1909,1910)	1910- 1913
MIDD'BORO	1907	1910	/	67 (1913)	MARION COATES HANSEN (1908,1909) ALICE SCHOFIELD COATES (1911-)	1914
LETCHWORTH	1907/08	/	/	20+		/
PORTSMOUTH & GOSPORT	1910	/	/	50+		/
BRIGHTON & HOVE	1910	/	/	75+ (1910) 50+ (1911)		/
EASTBOURNE	1907	1909	1912	30 (1910)		/
IPSWICH	1908/1909	/	BY 1918	50+	CONSTANCE ANDREWS (1911-1914)	1910-1914
HAMPSTEAD	1907/08	/	/	100+ (1909)	LILIAN HICKS (1909,1910)	/
HACKNEY	1907/08	/	/			1910,1911,1912
ANERLEY & CRYSTAL PALACE	1910	/	1913	25 (1910)		/

TABLE 2.1: DETAILS OF DATES FORMED & DISBANDED, MEMBERSHIP, REPRESENTATION ON THE NEC AND PREMISES³²

³²The information in this table has been obtained from MAS; *WFL Annual Reports*, 1907-1914; "Branch Notes" and *The Vote* generally; and Verbatim Minutes of WFL Annual Conferences, 1908-1914. In column 5: Approximate Membership, those figures with no dates are approximations based on the relative activities of the branch and a comparison with other branches. Those with dates are more precise and given usually in the *WFL, Annual Reports* as above.

The branches listed above give a broad geographical cross-section of active branches formed in the period from 1907 to 1912. The branches considered in this section do not constitute detailed local studies where regional factors such as employment, local government, infrastructure and local industries, business and culture are considered in detail. Although I acknowledge that particular local factors did have a bearing, this must be saved for future detailed local studies. The above table shows that of the thirteen branches considered, only Eastbourne and Anerley & Crystal Palace disbanded prior to 1914. Given the number of branches that did disband in this period, these case studies cannot claim to be entirely representative.

In the following sub-sections I consider the role of local officials and activists who proved so crucial in organising League branches. I consider the class configuration of the membership of the thirteen branches and suggest reasons why working-class women were targeted as recruits, whereas parallel concerns about middle-class women were absent. These questions are crucial to contextualising the styles of branch activities and meetings which are discussed in the final section of this chapter.

i) Branch Officials

In 1909 a pamphlet was published on the instruction of the NEC with the purpose of informing interested women on the procedure for forming a WFL branch. In the starkly titled *What to do and How to do It*, new members were instructed that on coming together to form a branch they should elect a secretary and a treasurer and a committee of members. These officials and the committee were responsible for controlling branch finances and arranging meetings to inform members, old and new,

and the general public, of the WFL's just and urgent demands for women's suffrage. The message implicit in this NEC sponsored pamphlet was that the NEC considered the priorities to be the collection of funds and the organisation of well-attended and well-publicised meetings. On the matter of sustaining branch members' commitment and enthusiasm, while this need was acknowledged, the onus was placed very much on the branches themselves to identify those ways to ensure a vibrant and committed branch network.³³

The thirteen branches considered here did eventually elect the required officials and committees, yet among them there were enormous variations in the patterns of branch organisation. In Glasgow organisational tasks were very much shared between the branch officials and the committee, and as in a number of other branches, they created the additional posts of branch president, press secretary and literature secretary. The decision to appoint additional officials was a luxury enjoyed mainly by the well organised and well established branches. Those which were less well established were run by far fewer women, and in some cases single handedly. In Eastbourne, for example, the highly organised and seemingly rather awesome Alice Dilks, previously the secretary of the local Women's Liberal Association, dominated the branch. Her duties included organising meetings, and corresponding with the Press and NEC, and speaking at meetings. In Eastbourne this policy worked well because all the members backed Alice Dilks' authority, although the branch suffered badly after Dilks left the area to move to London with her husband and daughter in March 1911. After this date Dilks' tasks were shared out between a new secretary and a committee of six women who together could not bring the branch back up to the levels of activity previously

³³[anon] *What To Do & How To Do It*, (WFL, n.p.,1909).

enjoyed. In 1912 the frequency of meetings dwindled further and a general disillusionment set in followed by the collapse of the branch after the decision of the new secretary and other members to join the local branch of the NUWSS.³⁴ It seems likely that because of the truce in militancy, the Eastbourne League members saw very little to distinguish their aims from those of the NUWSS, and may have wanted to work for suffrage through the larger organisation.

In other branches the responsibilities and burden were undertaken with a little more resilience, although not without occasional complaints from both the members and the officials alike. In the previous chapter I mentioned the difficulties in the Swansea branch in 1910 when the branch secretary Mary McCleod Cleeves resigned amid claims she was taking on too much authority. This was not the only instance of dissatisfaction. The sentiments expressed by the Anerley activist, Ethel Fennings, when she complained of her branch in 1913 that "apart from my sisters, there are only two women who practically ever do anything at all", may well have been felt elsewhere. Fennings comments were very likely one reason why the Anerley branch disappeared in 1913 not to reform.³⁵ Ethel Fennings's decision to concentrate her suffrage work in the local branch of the Church League, similarly to the actions of the women in Eastbourne, strongly suggests that one reason for the collapse of branches was not because of a lack of interest in suffrage, but rather a disillusionment with the everyday organisational slog required of WFL branch officials. Nevertheless, the remaining eleven branches did have

³⁴NEC Minutes, June 1st and 2nd 1912, p. 118, and June 29th 1912, p. 121, and *The Vote*, April 9th 1910, p. 284, and March 18th 1911, p. 252.

³⁵Verbatim Minutes of the Eight Annual Conference of the WFL, March 29th and 30th 1913, p. 60. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1913). See also CLWS, *Annual Reports*, 1910-1913.

women prepared to make those commitments, and of these, many flourished.

Another important factor in a branch's survival was the extent of representation on the NEC. Table 2.1 shows that of the thirteen branches, six had members on the NEC. This generated liaison and interaction with nationally well-known figures and led to a number of personal friendships, which in turn led to visits by famous League women to some branches. The meetings which were held to mark the visits of Charlotte Despard, Teresa Billington-Greig and Anna Munro were always popular events in the branches. Also those branches with a link to the NEC were the ones which were kept in close touch with the state of the campaign and any immediate changes, although the significance of such links lessened to a certain extent during the malaise in 1910, 1911 and 1912 when women's suffrage lay at the mercy of parliamentary bureaucracy and ministers' personal opposition.

The following sub-section looks specifically at the experiences of suffrage activists in the thirteen branches. While surviving sources on the thousands of members is sparse, those that were more prominent and of whom most is known were the officials. Their status puts them in a different category to the members whose attendance at meetings and whose interest was so crucial to the suffrage campaign. Even so, what can be gleaned of the lives of these officials is still significant because it demonstrates the considerations involved in being a women's suffrage activist, the drawbacks and the positive benefits, and the networks developed.

ii) The Suffrage Activist: Employment, Family and Friendship Networks

The League officials serving in the branches worked long hours to organise support and conduct the various meetings and activities of their branches. While many spoke of the positive rewards, and their hopes and aspirations, often they faced abuse and ridicule within their communities. Emma Sproson's letter to Maud Arncliffe Sennett, written in May 1909 demonstrates this point. She wrote:

...the bruises and scar of the flesh is not the worst we endure in this fearful conflict, I was addressing a large crowd on one occasion when a dirty urchin spit in my face and his expectoration passed out of his lips into mine, I collapsed and now know what had happened. I would have lost any limb I own to have escaped this experience, but more bitter still are the slights and insinuations of those whose sympathy ought to encourage our hopes and strengthen our backs for the conflict. But what ever happens the same motive which stimulated me for the conflict will inspire me to the end. Namely I have a daughter and I can only fulfil my duty to my girl and society by breaking down the fetters of the girls of the future which have bound us down in the past.³⁶

Such commitment to the cause is made all the more exceptional when one considers the other obligations many other WFL members had. Table 2.2 below gives information on twenty officials from eleven of the thirteen branches considered in this chapter.³⁷ Among them, nine are known to have been employed in full-time paid work, two served as Poor Law Guardians, and one of these, Agnes Husband also served on the Dundee School Board and as a member of her local Parish Council. This was in addition to those who coped with family responsibilities within their homes.

³⁶MAS, Vol. VII, pp. 54-55. Written from Wolverhampton, dated May 8th 1909.

³⁷The information in Table 2.2 is taken from the following sources; Minute Books Middlesbrough ILP; Minutes Books Middlesbrough WFL; MAS; *The Vote*; *The Times*; A.J.R. ed., *Suffrage Annual*; and Margaret Wynne Nevinson, *Life's Fitful Fever*.

NAME & BRANCH	POSITION IN BRANCH	MARRIED/ SINGLE	PAID WORK (** denotes previous)	VOLUNTARY WORK	PRIVATE INCOME	DATE OF BIRTH (where known)	ARRESTED FOR MILITANCY
ALICE SCHOFIELD COATES MIDD'BORO	SECRETARY, PRESIDENT	MARRIED	TEACHER (**)			1882	YES
AMY MAHONEY MIDD'BORO	COMMITTEE MEMBER	SINGLE	TEACHER				
LOTTIE MAHONEY MIDD'BORO	COMMITTEE MEMBER	SINGLE	TEACHER				
NELLIE BEST MIDD'BORO	COMMITTEE MEMBERS	MARRIED	REGISTRY KEEPER				
CLARA LEE LETCHWORTH	SECRETARY	SINGLE	NURSE (**)			1853	
AGNES HUSBAND DUNDEE	PRESIDENT	SINGLE		GUARDIAN SCHOOL BOARD PARISH COUNCIL			
LILA CLUNAS DUNDEE	SECRETARY	SINGLE	TEACHER			1881	YES
JANET LEGATE BUNTEN GLASGOW	TREASURER GLASGOW COUNCIL	SINGLE			YES	1878	YES
BESSIE SEMPLE STEWART GLASGOW	SECRETARY	SINGLE	TEACHER			1875	YES
MARGARET McCLEOD CLEEVE SWANSEA	SECRETARY	MARRIED					
CLARE NEAL SWANSEA	COMMITTEE MEMBER	SINGLE	TEACHER				
EMILY PHIPPS SWANSEA	COMMITTEE MEMBER	SINGLE	TEACHER				
M.E. MANNING MANCHESTER	SECRETARY	SINGLE	TEACHER			1881	YES
MARGARET WYNNE NEVINSON HAMPSTEAD	TREASURER	MARRIED		GUARDIAN			
AMY MAUD HICKS HAMPSTEAD	LITERATURE SECRETARY	SINGLE		EDUCATIONAL WORKER		1878	YES
LILIAN M.HICKS HAMPSTEAD	COMMITTEE MEMBER	MARRIED		PHILANTHROPIC WORKER		1853	YES
SARAH WHETTON PORSTMOUTH	SECRETARY	MARRIED					
MARY A. HARE BRIGHTON	SECRETARY	SINGLE	TEACHER OF THE DEAF				
ETHEL FENNINGS ANERLEY	SECRETARY & ORGANISER	SINGLE					
ALICE DILKS EASTBOURNE	SECRETARY	MARRIED					

TABLE 2.2: INFORMATION ON 20 OFFICIALS FROM ELEVEN BRANCHES.

Table 2.2 shows that of the nine officials in paid work, all but one were teachers. This interesting relationship between League membership and the teaching profession is borne out by Hilda Keen in *Deeds Not Words: The Lives of Suffragette Teachers*. She argues that membership of the League was especially predominant among those teachers who were members of the National Federation of Women Teachers (NFWT, later renamed the National Union of Women Teachers). As I demonstrate in detail in Chapter Four, the WFL was keen to highlight women's economic interests in addition to question of the suffrage, and it was this practice, as Kean argues, that ensured the NFWT's demands for equal pay were given a prominent platform in the WFL.³⁸ It was the stark experience of inequality between the sexes in their profession which drew so many teachers to the suffrage campaign, and to the WFL in particular. It was also true that these teachers, through their own efforts, raised the profile of women teachers demands for equal pay in the WFL.

No less that six of the thirteen branches considered here are known to have had teachers among their membership, and evidence of members' employment in this type of profession is a factor previously overlooked in discussions of working women as suffragists. Table 2.2 shows that four WFL branch officials did risk the financial security of paid employment by undertaking WFL endorsed militant actions which led to their arrest. More precisely, in 1910 it was reported in *The Vote* that one, Lila Clunas, the Dundee branch secretary, was threatened with dismissal by her employers because of her persistent agitation for women's suffrage, both in Dundee and further

³⁸Hilda Keen, *Deeds Not Words, The Lives of Suffragette Teachers*, (Pluto Press, London, 1990), passim, but especially pp. 19-21.

afield.³⁹

Clunas managed to juggle her various responsibilities of teaching and acting as secretary of her local WFL branch until February 1913 when she resigned her post in the League. It may be that she had come to the conclusion that the conflicts of interest between needing a paid job and the violent reaction to her political activities was too great. The obvious commitment of Lila Clunas to the WFL and the suffrage campaign was acknowledged by her peers who organised a gathering to mark her work for the League. The meeting was reported in *The Vote*:

Miss Clunas had demonstrated what a working woman can do for the cause...[she]..feelingly replied, remarking that she had simply done her duty when she had the opportunity..⁴⁰

Even after her resignation, Lila Clunas did not cease agitating for women's suffrage, and she remained a League members and put her energy into publishing her views on women's suffrage in the pages of local newspapers, an undertaking which may even have given her more notoriety, although it could not lead to her arrest.

The extent of League membership among women teachers, although it refers to only one profession, does highlight that working women were involved in the suffrage campaign. In the WFL this seems to have been confined to white collar workers, rather than women from the industrial working class such as those in the Manchester mills discussed by Liddington and Norris.

³⁹*The Vote*, January 22nd 1910, p. 145.

⁴⁰*The Vote*, February 21st 1913, p. 285.

Married League members with families and domestic commitments were subject to the rage and anger of anti-suffragists more than most other groups of women. Their very presence in suffrage societies was deemed to threaten the stability of the family unit, which relied on the authority of the male breadwinner who acted in the public sphere, and the support of the mother who was confined to the private sphere of the home. The emotive messages of the anti-women's suffrage movement were challenged by the WFL in a variety of ways, in articles in *The Vote*, which both defended the right of mothers to vote and argued that such roles were not the only province of women.⁴¹ The arguments of the antis were practically challenged by married League members who highlighted their status as wives and often as mothers in order to emphasize their demands. For this reason in some branches "Mother and Baby At Homes" were organised to which mothers were encouraged to attend.⁴²

Seven of the women listed in Table 2.2 were married and five of them, Alice Schofield Coates, Margaret Wynne Nevinson, Sarah Whetton, Lilian Hicks and Alice Dilks, were mothers. While they benefitted from the greater financial security open to them as middle-class women, they still ran the gauntlet of abuse and condemnation. Some, like Alice Dilks, involved their young children in this propaganda work. For example, it was reported in the local press in Eastbourne how her daughter had presented a bouquet to Charlotte Despard at a meeting in June 1909. In other ways the children of other members were encouraged to assist the campaign by delivering mail

⁴¹For details of the anti-suffrage campaign see; Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain*, (Croon Helm, London, 1978).

⁴²*The Vote*, November 26th 1910, p. 56, and January 21st 1911, p. 155.

to members' houses for which they were rewarded with a party organised by the branch.⁴³

A great deal more research is needed in order to assess the level of acknowledgement of members' different situations. However, the brief examples given above do demonstrate that some differences were incorporated, and even used to positive advantage, in branch activities. In this way the organisation of local suffrage branches stands out from the contemporary male dominated local societies active in this period.

Often branches were established through existing networks of women, which could be based on friendship, although the most strongly represented networks among the thirteen branches considered here are based around family links. In total, ten family networks are known to have operated in the branches. Of these, five were between mothers and daughters, and the other five between sisters or sisters-in-law.⁴⁴ The Anerley and Crystal Palace branch was practically run by one family, with Ethel Fennings serving as the Honorary Organiser and her sisters Jessie, Muriel and Agnes serving as the remaining officials. The expression and use of family relationships differed enormously in the thirteen branches. In Hampstead in 1909, not only did Lilian

⁴³MAS, Vol. VII, p. 58. Taken from the *Eastbourne Gazette*, June 2nd 1909. See also *The Vote*, November 26th 1910, p. 56, and January 6th 1912, p. 130. See Appendix Five: Biographical Notes.

⁴⁴These family relationships were: Mothers and Daughters: Hampstead - Lilian and Amy Hicks; Ipswich - Mrs and Miss Pratt; Glasgow - Mrs and Miss Wilson, Anerley - Mrs Fennings and Ethel, Jessie, Agnes and Muriel Fennings; Swansea - Mrs and Miss Hutton and Mrs Bell.
Sisters and Sisters-in-law: Dundee - Lila Clunas and E. and J. Clunas; Helen and Annot Wilkie; Anerley - Fennings family as above; Middlesbrough - Alice Schofield-Coates and Marion Coates-Hansen; Amy and Lottie Mahony; Swansea - Miss Hutton and Mrs Bell.

Hicks reject the closeting of mothers in the private sphere of the home, she positively turned it on its head by engaging in militant actions which led to her arrest in Downing Street only one week after her daughter Amy had been arrested for the same action.⁴⁵

In other branches the emphasis in family networking was on co-operation and support from male relatives of members. This was true in both Middlesbrough and Swansea where members' husbands and sons were either male associates or simply assisted with League activities. Such networking was remembered years later in Swansea when after the death of member Mrs Emilie Hutton in 1927, the obituary in *The Vote* recalled how her son had often helped the branch in "amateur theatricals".⁴⁶ In Middlesbrough, George Coates, the husband of Alice Schofield Coates, gave support in the form of generous financial donations, as well as the occasional speech at meetings.⁴⁷

In all the cases mentioned above, the support of siblings, parents, husbands and children stood as positive sources of strength in what could be a fairly daunting environment for women, especially when they first made the decision to join a League branch. Similarly, networks of friendship played an important part in the membership of suffrage societies, as Liz Stanley and Ann Morley have demonstrated in their biography of WSPU activist Emily Wilding Davison.⁴⁸ In the WFL there were two

⁴⁵MAS, Vol. VII, p. 95, and Vol. VIII, p. 54. Taken from *The Times*, July 10th 1909 & August 28th 1909. See Appendix Five: Biographical Notes.

⁴⁶*The Vote*, July 29th 1927, p. 239.

⁴⁷Minute Books Middlesbrough WFL, 1910-1914.

⁴⁸See Liz Stanley and Ann Morley, Chapter Six: "Feminist Friendship & Feminists Organisation", *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, pp. 174,175.

possibilities. Such networks could either be carried into the branches or alternatively, they could be developed through membership. In the case of WFL branches, both situations seems assured, for while sources are sparse concerning the period up to 1914, the reminiscences and obituaries written in the 1920s and after, highlight the strength and long-standing nature of some of the relationships formed in the WFL branches in the years of the militant suffrage campaign.⁴⁹

An exception to the obscurity of these types of support networks and friendships is in the Swansea WFL branch in 1911 when the secretary Miss Emily Phipps began to use the "Branch Notes" section of *The Vote* to publicize the personal achievements of her fellow members. Congratulations were offered to three members who obtained Bachelor of Arts degrees, another on her forthcoming marriage, and member Miss Hilda Davies was given a fond farewell after her appointment to a new post at a training college in Yorkshire. Emily Phipps herself was a life long friend of fellow teacher, NFWT and WFL member, Clare Neal, who lived with Phipps in London after her retirement in 1930.⁵⁰

Another member of the Swansea branch, Mrs Ross, experienced the supportive environment which existed in her branch following the birth of her daughter. In a letter to *The Vote* in October 1913, she thanked her colleagues for their kindness, and commented:

⁴⁹See Appendix Five: Biographical Notes.

⁵⁰*The Vote*, July 22nd 1911, p. 168, and August 19th 1911, p. 216. See also Hilda Keen, *Deeds Not Words*, pp. 116-118.

.. It does one good to feel that there is such a bond of comradeship among the members of the WFL. I shall never forget their kind and generous acts. I hope to be able to take up active work again very soon. Nothing gives me greater pleasure than fighting for justice for women.⁵¹

These sentiments demonstrate that the WFL branch were not only sites of political activity for suffrage demands, but that they also operated as supportive environments for certain groups of women suffragists. Such evidence supports the arguments of Liz Stanley and Ann Morley concerning the webs of friendship intersecting the suffrage campaign and the various suffrage societies, and I take up this point again in the penultimate section of this chapter. Before I consider these issues it is necessary to look at another factor which related to the membership of the WFL and that is the extent to which the unity of women which was promoted and built into the suffrage campaign intersected and affected existing social boundaries between women, of which class was the most significant.

iii) "Encouraging the Presence of Working Women...": The Implications of Class Differences on WFL Suffrage Networks

The question of the class location of League members focused most often on the extent to which the branches attracted working-class women, women, the Brighton correspondent wrote, "whose joys are few and whose leisure is short".⁵²

Articles in *The Vote* and reports of branch activities were rich in references to the plight of women from the working-classes and arguably this was a product of the

⁵¹*The Vote*, October 24th 1913, p. 429.

⁵²*The Vote*, June 8th 1912, p. 128. The quote comes from a branch report of a meeting with the "working women of Hove."

increasing use of class to define political, social and economic worlds in this period. The WFL entered the fray in 1907 when political debate was already weighted down with assaults, primarily by socialist organisations and individual socialists, on what they saw as the bourgeois middle-class suffrage societies.⁵³

In Dundee, the only self-proclaimed "entirely working-class branch" of the thirteen considered in this chapter, the members were certainly aware of the importance of identifying the benefit of the vote to working-class women. In 1911, in co-operation with other local societies, the branch undertook a canvass of women municipal voters to ascertain the kind of women who would qualify under the proposed Conciliation Bill. The results which were recorded in the branch's report for that year were as follows: 89.1% working women; 3.4% professional and business women; and 7.5% women of independent means, would qualify for the parliamentary franchise.⁵⁴

While Dundee was the only branch which appears to have had an extensive working class membership, the repeated discussions and campaigns which took place in other branches, together with the evidence discussed in the previous section, indicates that the WFL membership cannot in any simple or straightforward way be defined as middle-class, either in terms of the women who joined, or in terms of its demands, concerns and practices. At least eight of the thirteen branches held meetings either directed exclusively at working women, or reported that working women had attended.

⁵³Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, pp. 98, 161, 233-4, 244 relate specifically to the Social Democratic Federation.

⁵⁴WFL, *Annual Report*, 1911, p. 21. Reference to Dundee's exclusive working-class membership was made during a discussion on a resolution to attract working-class women to the WFL at the Special Conference of the WFL in April 1912. See Verbatim Minutes of this conference, p. 11.

Discussions at annual conferences and records of the donations and financial contributions made to the League, both national and local, indicate the scarcity of rich women members. The Portsmouth delegate was especially vehement on the question of increasing donations to headquarters, when she declared that "they were not a rich branch, and had many working members." She was not alone in pointing out the difficulties in gathering large amounts of money in the local branches and also the lack of time the members had to arrange fund raising activities.⁵⁵

Among the varied personal testimonies, diaries and autobiographies that tell of individual women's work in the suffrage movement are records of three working class women who joined the League. These women were Hannah Mitchell, Eva Slawson and Ruth Slate. What comes across strongly in their writings, and is born out in the branches, was the difficulties faced by working-class women in sustaining regular participation in League campaigns and activities. Specifically, difficulties arose because of Hannah Mitchell's family commitments, and from Ruth and Eva's work commitment, which means that they never launched themselves fully into the WFL. However, the constraints were not only financial, as the latter two women seemed to prefer to immerse themselves in a wide spectrum of radical activity of which their actions in support of women's suffrage demands formed only one part.⁵⁶

While these factors could affect all classes of women, it was especially among working-class women that other responsibilities and interests were most strongly felt.

⁵⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1911, p. 43.

⁵⁶Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, and Tierl Thompson ed., *Dear Girl. The Diaries and Letters of Two Working Women*, (The Women's Press, London, 1987).

Furthermore, in some sections of the increasingly powerful socialist movement attempts were made to draw working women into their organisations and away from suffrage societies. Very often working-class women could be caught between these two pressures. For example, Nellie Best who was a member of both the committees of the ILP and the WFL in Middlesbrough, was influenced by both class and gender consciousness.⁵⁷ Despite her leading role in passing pro-women suffrage resolutions at ILP meetings, she expressed profound reservations about the middle-class character of the suffrage movements, which she felt served to isolate working-class women. Her reservations, which mirrored the attacks of many male and female socialist activists were recorded during her correspondence with a member of the WSPU in the *Woman Worker* in 1908:

..Agnes A Kelly takes exception to part of my letter which said that, unless before the vote is won, working women force themselves into the suffrage movement, we may find ourselves eventually dominated by the female capitalist?

Miss Kelly says this has distressed her, because the society she represents would be only too glad to welcome servants and laundresses to their at-homes, but unfortunately lack of time and intense weariness on their part forbid their coming. Now, that is just my point. I am a registry keeper, so Miss Kelly can tell me nothing about their lot that I do not know.

But what is the WSPU doing for them? What is the WFL (of which I am a member) doing to ameliorate their lot? Agitating for votes, you say. Good I answer, as far as it goes; for are these women workers behind you? I say no, emphatically no; and they never will be until they are organised.

Miss Kelly did not answer the most important part of my letter, I said that I had learned with regret that one of the London suffrage branches held at-homes where 'evening dress' was general; and I humbly submit that evening-dress is not likely to encourage the presence of working women....⁵⁸

⁵⁷Minute Books, Middlesbrough ILP, January 1908-February 1913, and Minute Books Middlesbrough WFL, November 1910-January 1914.

⁵⁸*The Woman Worker*, October 16th 1908, p. 502.

While Best convincingly demonstrates one of the differences between women of the middle- and working-classes, it was not the case that the WFL simply ignored the difficulties working-class women experienced. Many of the thirteen branches singled out a number of strategies which were aimed at encouraging working-class women's involvement in their branches. Dundee and Glasgow held regular evening meetings as part of their programme, while the Portsmouth and Anerley branches found that open-air meetings were good contact points. Members of the Brighton and Hove branch recognised the benefits of such meetings a year or so after their formation. During 1911 and 1912 this predominantly middle-class branch held meetings specifically to attract working-class women. Moreover, they had considerable success as from two such meetings in 1912 a total of forty-eight working women were reported as giving their names as members. Certainly these meetings served to educate the middle-class members on the financial constraints faced by working-class women, because it was decided to allow new recruits to contribute what they could towards membership and capitation fees, and to make up any shortfall out of branch funds.⁵⁹

Such evidence shows that working-class women were interested in the suffrage issue and what is more, did join the WFL. However very often working-class women did not remain active members of the League branches which had managed to recruit them. The reason for their departure was because in the discussions held in the branches, working-class women were often seen as *subjects* of concern in the majority of branches, rather than as equal participants in the campaign. The same was not

⁵⁹Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, pp. 11-13. For reference to the Brighton & Hove branch see *The Vote*, May 25th 1912, p. 97, June 8th 1912, p. 129, June 29th 1912, p. 179, July 6th 1912, p. 196, July 27th 1912, p. 249, and February 14th 1913, p. 301. See also *The Vote*, June 20th 1913, p. 133.

considered in relation to middle-class women, nor was there the same concern to attract specifically middle-class women to the branches. In the majority of branches there was already a middle-class bias both in membership and in discussions which could have been the reason why some groups of working-class women were alienated.

The exception in the thirteen branches considered in this chapter was in the predominantly working-class Dundee branch. Thus in attempting to explain the presence of *some* working-class women, it could be that rather than the classes mixing within League branches, some had a greater proportion of working-class members, while others had middle-class officials and activists and a mass of working-class women on the periphery of the branch. This accounts for the claims made at the WFL's special conference in 1912 by the Portsmouth delegate that they had working-class members, while to all intents and purposes giving the impression of having a greater proportion of middle-class activists. Such an interpretation acknowledges the presence of both middle- and working-class women in the WFL, while at the same time accepting that the boundaries of class remained largely intact. The distinctions of class were too fundamental and intrinsic to be dissolved to any long term degree by the campaign for women's suffrage, or by membership of the WFL.

The evidence that the majority of League activists and officials were middle-class had implications for the nature of the woman-centred political culture developed in the WFL in this period. Before I consider this in detail, the following section considers the extent of alliances between suffrage organisations and with other political, social and educational organisations. Specifically I consider the implications this had for the WFL, and the status acquired by League branches in their respective communities.

Section III: THE SPIRIT OF CO-OPERATION: WFL BRANCHES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

In Chapter One I argued that at the time of the split in the WSPU, the WFL emerged the smaller of the two militant societies and was dwarfed by the NUWSS in terms of branches and members. This was still true in 1913 when the most comprehensive guide to local suffrage branches and societies was published, the *Suffrage Annual & Who's Who*. Earlier I raised certain contradictory factors relating to the relative strength of WFL branches in towns and cities with other suffrage society branches. Table 2.3 below provides a breakdown of the number of WFL branches listed in the *Suffrage Annual* in 1913 and the corresponding number of WSPU and NUWSS branches in those regions.

REGION	TOTAL WFL BRANCHES	WSPU BRANCHES (in the same area)	TOTAL WSPU BRANCHES (in brackets; organisers)	NUWSS BRANCHES (in the same area)	TOTAL NUWSS BRANCHES
LONDON	18	8	34	6	47
ENGLAND	28	11	50 (+ 18)	16	328
SCOTLAND	10	3	3 (+ 1)	7	58
WALES	5	2	3 (+ 1)	2	27
TOTALS	61	24	90 (+ 20)	31	460

TABLE 2.3: COMPARISON OF WFL BRANCHES WITH NUWSS AND WSPU BRANCHES. 1913⁶⁰

Of the thirteen branches considered in this chapter, all but three operated in areas which had both a WSPU and NUWSS branch nearby. One of these three was the Anerley & Crystal Palace branch, yet since this was in London, which had a heavy concentration of branches nearby, the effect was not particularly strongly felt. The branch had its strongest links with the local Church League branch as League member,

⁶⁰The information in Table 2.3 is taken from A.J.R. ed., *Suffrage Annual*.

Ethel Fennings, was also the secretary of the Church League. The result was a number of joint activities between the two branches, although Ethel Fennings chose to concentrate her efforts in the Church League branch after 1913.⁶¹ The other two branches were those in Swansea and Middlesbrough where no WSPU branches were recorded in the *Suffrage Annual*. In both areas the branches were well organised and highly active, although as I argued earlier, it did not follow that in all areas where a branch of the WSPU and NUWSS did exist, the WFL branch was the weakest among them. On the contrary, the occasional complaints about duplicate activities and poached members were outweighed by the positive benefits the WFL gained from such work.⁶² All the suffrage societies drew strength from joint activity in public meetings and the occasional joint deputations to local councils and MPs to gauge their views on women's suffrage and to demand support for the series of Conciliation Bills.

⁶¹CLWS, *Annual Report*, 1910, p. 4.

⁶²Example can be found in *The Vote*: Dundee; July 6th 1912, p. 196. Manchester; October 8th 1910, p. 284, and June 15th 1912, p. 146. Hackney; July 23rd 1910, p. 151, and WFL *Annual Report*, 1911, p. 24. Eastbourne; WFL *Annual Report*, 1910, p. 19. Portsmouth; November 12th 1910, p. 31, and March 9th 1912, p. 239. Glasgow; January 2nd 1914, p. 157. Swansea; May 27th 1911, p. 63. Ipswich; WFL *Annual Report*, 1911, p. 26.

WFL BRANCH	OTHER WFL BRANCHES	NUWSS	CLWS	WSPU	F.CLWS	MEN'S LEAGUE	NON-SPECIFIC
DUNDEE	SCOTTISH COUNCIL	YES		YES		YES	
GLASGOW	SCOTTISH COUNCIL			YES		YES	
SWANSEA		YES			YES		
MANCHESTER	MANCHESTER COUNCIL	YES		YES		YES	YES
MIDD'BORO	NORTH EAST BRANCHES	YES					
LETCWORTH				YES			
PORTSMOUTH & GOSPORT		YES	YES	YES		YES	
BRIGHTON & HOVE	EASTBOURNE		YES			YES	YES
EASTBOURNE	BRIGHTON & HOVE	YES					YES
IPSWICH	EAST ANGLIAN BRANCHES						YES
HAMPSTEAD	LONDON BRANCHES COUNCIL (LBC)		YES (Margaret Wynne Nevinson)	YES		YES	WOMEN WRITERS SUFF. LEAGUE
HACKNEY	LBC	YES	YES	YES			YES
ANERLEY & CRYSTAL PALACE	LBC	YES	YES				
TOTALS OUT OF 13	10	7	5	7	1	6	5

TABLE 2.4: JOINT WORK WITH OTHER SUFFRAGE SOCIETIES⁶³

Table 2.4 shows that joint activities did not only take place between the NUWSS, WSPU, CLWS and the WFL. In particular, the Mens's League joined regularly with branches in Portsmouth, Brighton, Glasgow, Dundee and Manchester in various meetings and campaigns. A tendency which is more difficult to quantify is the extent to which individual members developed personal ties with other suffrage societies. More is known about Margaret Wynne Nevinson, the treasurer of the Hampstead branch and contributor to *The Vote* who was also active in the Women Writers' Suffrage League,

⁶³Sources for Table 2.4 from NEC Minutes, MAS, and *The Vote*.

and the Church League.⁶⁴ Her multiple membership was not uncommon, as shown in the short biographies of the suffrage activists in the *Suffrage Annual* in 1913.⁶⁵ In the branches there is evidence that dual membership had no obvious damaging effect. On the contrary the WFL was well placed to attract suffragists from other societies since it paved a mid-way stance between the constitutional NUWSS and the militant WSPU.

There is no substantial evidence that the branches themselves took any conclusive steps to prevent dual membership. Middlesbrough's response to an NEC questionnaire in 1912 noted that two members belonged to other suffrage societies and there had been no noticeable difficulties as a result, and such sentiments were probably echoed elsewhere.⁶⁶ The question does remain however, that given the extent of choice of suffrage societies, why did so many remain committed to the WFL? Any answer is difficult to gauge exactly, yet the existence of friendship networks and other relationships I outlined earlier, must be taken into account. Another factor which I explore in more detail in Chapter Three relates to the reactions to militancy and WFL militant policies which were less violent than those in the WSPU. Finally there were some who voiced their reservations about the growing violence of WSPU protests during and after 1912, and so might have joined the WFL instead.

⁶⁴Margaret Wynne Nevinson, *Life's Fitful Fever*, p. 209, and A.J.R. ed., *Suffrage Annual*, p. 318.

⁶⁵A.J.R. ed., *Suffrage Annual*, pp. 171-395.

⁶⁶Minutes Books of Middlesbrough WFL, April 1st 1912. Middlesbrough's reply is the only one remaining. It stated that two members also belonged to the WSPU, one to the British Social Party, two to the ILP [probably more]. One, a Miss Hotham, also belonged to the Women's Co-operative Guild. Also members in Dundee and possibly Manchester and Glasgow in 1912 belonged to the ILP.

There was some decline in the overall number of joint activities with the WSPU in some branches after 1912, while activities with the NUWSS appear largely unchanged. It is only possible to speculate about the reasons for this, because while some members did express outrage at certain militant acts, others condemned the treatment of WSPU prisoners, especially Emmeline Pankhurst, under the Cat and Mouse Act of 1913. Given this mixture of positions on the WSPU coming from League members, it may have been that the WSPU itself decided to scale down the number of provincial public meetings with other societies. This could be seen either as a sign of their growing strength or alternatively as indicating that they had become so unlawful that public meetings were more difficult to organise.⁶⁷

After sending the questionnaire to branches in 1912, no further action was taken by the NEC on dual membership. They may have realised that they were fighting against a tide and consequently there was more encouragement for branches to co-operate with other societies with a large or exclusively female membership. This was already fairly common practice in Swansea and Portsmouth where debates with the Women's Labour League were arranged, and in Ipswich where one member addressed the local branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild, and in Hackney a meeting with the local branch of the National Federation of Women Workers was reported in 1912 as a success.⁶⁸

⁶⁷Detailed studies of WSPU branches would hopefully uncover more on this point.

⁶⁸*The Vote*, Women's Labour League: Portsmouth - October 1st 1910, p. 272; Swansea - July 8th 1911, p. 142. Women's Co-operative Guild: Ipswich - *WFL Annual Report*, 1911, p. 26. National Federation of Women Workers: Hackney - March 14th 1913, p. 331.

The NEC was more ambiguous when it came to co-operating with party-political organisations which were officially banned under the League's constitutional clause relating to complete party independence. However, as I demonstrated in Chapter One, the ILP was largely excluded from this ban and for Middlesbrough at least, links with this organisation were beneficial. After 1910 links between the two organisations continued to the extent that by 1912 co-operation was so close that it was decided by ILP members to forgo plans for a meeting in order to attend one being held under the auspices of the WFL. Likewise Middlesbrough League members attended a number of ILP meetings, including one addressed by Kier Hardie in July 1913.⁶⁹ Across the League increasing links with the labour movement were compounded in 1912 when the special conference endorsed proposals already introduced by the NUWSS, to support Labour candidates in parliamentary contests.⁷⁰

Among ten of the branches, by far the greatest number co-operated with the ILP and labour organisations, in line with the tacit approval of the NEC. There is evidence however that some branches flouted the stance of party independence even further. In Hackney for example in August 1911 the branch was accused of supporting the Tory candidate against the socialist in the Bethnal Green by-election. While this was strongly denied, the following year in July 1912 a member, Mrs Mustard, spoke at a meeting of the North Hackney Conservative Club on the need for women's suffrage, and again in October 1913 she took part in a debate at the club on the same subject with a member

⁶⁹Minutes Books Middlesbrough ILP, October 24th 1911, and *The Vote*, July 18th 1913, p. 202.

⁷⁰See Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, (Sunday), pp. 13-20, and Chapter Four, pp. 229-230.

of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage.⁷¹ Nor were representatives of the despised Liberal Government ignored entirely as members in Glasgow and Swansea agreed to speak at liberal meetings in these towns.⁷²

By 1913 contact between the WFL and other suffrage societies, political organisations, and local societies, had become standard activities in many of the branches. In this year Brighton and Hove reported that they had addressed meetings of eighteen sisterhoods and women's guilds during the past year, and evidence from other branches indicates that this was not unusual, especially in Glasgow where members addressed audiences attending meetings of the Giffnock Literary Society and the Northwoodside Current Topics Club.⁷³

Discussion tended to focus on the League's demands for female enfranchisement, and more especially on answering criticisms on militant strategies, but this was not true of all branches. In Swansea a member addressed another society on a subject other than suffrage, and this was suitably unusual to merit attention in the branch's report for 1911. The subject of discussion was the branch's campaign for municipal lodging houses for women in the town, which they put before the Health Committee of the Town Council. The branch report stated:

⁷¹*The Vote*, August 5th 1911, p. 191, July 13th 1912, p. 214, and October 10th 1913, p. 394.

⁷²*The Vote*, Glasgow; January 2nd 1914, p. 167. Swansea; January 13th 1912, p. 143, and October 12th 1912, p. 425.

⁷³*The Vote*, Glasgow; January 2nd 1914, p. 167, and *WFL Annual Report*, 1913, p. 27. Brighton & Hove; *WFL Annual Report*, pp. 24-25. Manchester (Eccles); *WFL Annual Report*, 1911, p. 22.

..we consider that we are a moral force in the town; our opinions are respected, and our Cause is advancing every week..⁷⁴

This statement was significant because it signalled a broadening of interest beyond suffrage which had been generated from within the Swansea branch itself. However, this wider interest was tempered by the knowledge that women's demands for the vote still had to be achieved. Consequently the WFL still predominantly identified itself with, and in turn was seen as, a suffrage society. Therefore any broadening of concern in local municipal issues, such as that in Swansea, remained in the period up to 1914 confined to individual branches. The range and diversity of discussion of wider issues beyond suffrage is nonetheless significant and I turn in the final sections to look at the expansion of concerns, and the ways in which an environment was created in which some women developed an understanding of their interests and concerns which was firmly enmeshed in their understanding of the political process.

Section IV: "CONTINUAL HARD WORK": THE PRACTICAL WORK AND ORGANISATION IN WFL BRANCHES⁷⁵

Very early on in their existence branches recognised the importance of sustaining members' interest and commitment, and to keep them coming to meetings and working for the campaign. In order to assert some order and structure to this programme, regular days and evenings were set aside for meetings of the entire branch and the committees, and officials. In most branches these meetings were held either weekly, fortnightly or

⁷⁴WFL *Annual Report*, 1911, p. 31. Hampstead also broadened out its campaigning stance, albeit in a more short term way when it joined in with the demonstration organised by the West London Allied Trades Committee in Gladstone Park to uphold free speech. This demand was a corner stone of many of the arguments of suffragists in this period, and the issue was used by the Hampstead branch to unite different organisations. Reference from WFL *Annual Report*, 1913, p. 24.

⁷⁵Taken from the Glasgow branch's entry to the WFL, *Annual Report*, 1911, p. 23.

monthly. The other activity common to all branches was the holding of open-air meetings in their towns and cities and in the surrounding area, and by doing this some branches acquired a regular pitch which was often the meeting place for other local political organisations. Others branches especially those in London, held meetings in parks, and in those branches on the coast, beach meetings were not uncommon in the summer months.

Activities were divided into season; usually Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer campaigns. The branches generally slackened off their meetings in July and August, the latter being known as the "holiday month." By 1912 it was a common pattern for members to take time off from suffrage activities, or, if they wished they could participate in summer campaigns organised by the League on the Clyde Coast, or other one-off campaigns with the WFL caravan which toured numerous districts in England during the years up to 1914.⁷⁶

Different patterns of activity existed in the branches which were due to the resources available to them. One asset to League members was the possession of a suffrage shop, offices or club-room where meetings could be held without fear of interruption or censor. Because of the financial outlay required to open such premises, only the largest or the most resourceful branches could benefit, and of the thirteen branches considered here, those in Glasgow, Dundee, Middlesbrough, Hackney, Ipswich

⁷⁶See the photograph on p. 87. This was taken during a tour of East Anglia in August 1912. See also *The Vote*, August 3rd 1912, p. 255, August 17th 1912, p. 295 and August 24th 1912, p. 301.

and Manchester opened premises in the period up to the end of 1914.⁷⁷ The possession of such premises enhanced the possibilities for activities enormously, because in addition to public meetings, business and committee meetings, the branch had a central meeting point and a venue which was not difficult or expensive to hire in which to hold social and fund raising events. A popular trend was to open tea-rooms on the premises which proved to be both a financial success and a good way of drawing women's attention to the League. One of the most successful WFL shops was based in Glasgow where the branch reported in 1910 how their "Suffrage Centre" was:

..becoming a place where committees of women interested in other matters meet to discuss their business..⁷⁸

The Glasgow shop provided the venue for one member to hold her dancing classes, the profits of which were donated to branch funds, a practice repeated, although not in their own shop, by the branch in Swansea.⁷⁹

Those branches without specific premises tended to use the home of an official of the branch as a correspondence address, and occasionally their homes served as a venue for discussion meetings. On one level the practice of meeting in members' homes does

⁷⁷Of these shops, only the one in Dundee was temporary, being opened specifically for the election campaign of Churchill in late 1909, early 1910. See *The Vote*, December 30th 1909, p. 119, closed; February 12th 1910, p. 191. For references to other WFL premises see *The Vote*: Glasgow; October 30th 1909, p. 10, and November 25th 1909, p. 58. Photograph of Glasgow Shop; December 24th 1910, p. 104. Middlesbrough; Minute Books Middlesbrough WFL, December 1914. Hackney; April 23rd 1910, p. 271. Ipswich; June 8th 1912, p. 129, and September 21st 1912, p. 376. Manchester; January 2nd 1914, p. 167 tells of new premises at 79 Piccadilly, Manchester. There was also a shop in Sale, near Manchester, opened temporarily for the general election in November 1910.

⁷⁸WFL *Annual Report*, 1910, p. 24.

⁷⁹*The Vote*: Glasgow; January 16th 1914, p. 201. Swansea; December 17th 1910, p. 92.

reinforce the existence of a close-knit network of women, on another this was not particularly conducive to attracting new members who might have felt intimidated by existing friendships. This tendency is especially probable in relation to working-class women's responses to invitations to genteel middle-class homes. Yet even those branches which claimed large numbers of working-class members still held "drawing room" meetings.⁸⁰ Glasgow's drawing room meeting in October 1913 which was attended by one hundred and fifty people problematises assumptions that all such meetings were held in genteel drawing rooms.⁸¹

Given these figures it is likely that the Glasgow meeting was held in a hall, and the title may have been chosen to intimate informality or intimacy rather than actually describing a meeting held in a member's drawing room. Similarly the "At Homes" held in London and in all branches, although occasionally held in private houses, were often staged in a hall or in actual WFL premises. Furthermore while "drawing room" meetings and "At Homes" were held in the majority of WFL branches, open air meetings were usually more numerous. In Portsmouth, their three drawing room meetings and three "At Homes" held in 1911, were by far outnumbered by the twenty-one branch meetings held at other venues and the regular open air meetings in the Guildhall Square.⁸²

⁸⁰Future work could consider the extent to which the pressure of working-class politically active women to be 'respectable', influenced the types of activities organised in branches. Such an undertaking would go some way to explaining the lack of any concrete or sustained evidence of differences between those League branches which claimed large numbers of working-class women and those which did not.

⁸¹*The Vote*, October 3rd 1913, p. 368.

⁸²WFL, *Annual Report*, 1911, pp. 28-29.

The styles of meetings organised by the branch in Portsmouth highlights the second issue I raised, namely the extent to which branches copied other branches' organisational and fund raising strategies. One way in which branches copied activities from other branches may have been by reading the reports published in the "Branch Notes" in *The Vote*. Such a practice would explain how the traditional 'Cake and Candy Sales' held in Scottish branches soon lost their regional distinction as branches in England began to organise events under the same title.⁸³ Below further examples are given of activities common in various League branches which were geographically far apart and possibly highly varied in terms of the class location and status of their members. The examples below also demonstrate the extent to which fund raising and social events organised by branches served both to entertain and to raise money, and as ways to publicise the WFL's political demands in a relaxed environment which was particularly predominant in women's suffrage societies.

Social events which doubled as fundraising opportunities were extremely important activities in the branches not least because they increased branch funds, satisfied the demands for donations to League Headquarters, and provided the opportunity for members to meet socially. One popular fundraising event which summed up the constant financial difficulties of the League were the "Hard-Up Socials" that were held in Glasgow, Hampstead and Ipswich. The social activities and the occasional dances, musical evenings and recitals that were held did not pass without at least one speech on women's suffrage - a practice summed up by the Portsmouth branch as the "mixing of propaganda with pleasure."⁸⁴ The Portsmouth branch was also one of the first to

⁸³See "Branch Notes" in *The Vote*, 1909-1914.

⁸⁴*The Vote*, January 27th 1912, p. 167.

arrange what proved to be highly popular excursions to which all members were invited and which had little to do directly with advancing 'the Cause'. These included rambles in nearby woods and a picnic for all members held during the summer months of 1913.⁸⁵ Social activities were not depressing or dangerous, they were enjoyable and sociable, and where occasionally complaints about low attendance at some branch meetings crept on the pages of *The Vote*, there were no complaints about the social events, and this popularity encouraged their repetition.⁸⁶ These patterns of activity suggest that as branches continued to organise over a period of years, the positive benefits of responding to women's need for a social environment coupled with their demands for political representation were as important a task as educating their communities on the justice of women's suffrage. Social interaction and political identity were mutual supportive and led to a regular and stable membership in many League branches by late 1912.

The ways such networks were created within the WFL branches were in some ways similar to other local organisations, especially those which campaigned for specific political objectives.⁸⁷ Yet what needs to be emphasized is the extent to which the continuing identification with suffrage served to perpetuate, yet also to distinguish, the political culture emerging in the WFL from previous forms of political organisation

⁸⁵WFL, *Annual Report*, 1913, p. 26, and *The Vote*, June 13th 1913, p. 117.

⁸⁶For examples of such complaints see, *The Vote: Manchester*; February 12th 1910, p. 190. *Mid-London*; March 4th 1911, p. 227. *Anerley*; January 6th 1912, p. 130. Bad reports appeared the pages of *The Vote* despite pressure from the NEC to refrain from reporting disappointing events.

⁸⁷For example compare with the ILP see June Hannam, "Women in the West Riding of the ILP" in Jane Rendall, ed., *Equal or Different*, pp. 214-238. See also Minute Books Middlesbrough ILP, January 1906-February 1913.

among women. This is explored in detail in Chapter Four where I consider the debates and ideas surrounding the emergence of a women's movement and feminism. In the final section of this chapter I demonstrate how the suffrage campaign acted as both a catalyst to, and provided an environment in local branches where, women could explore their ideas and concerns.

Section V: FROM VEGETARIAN COOKERY TO "WEIRD SUPERNATURALISM": DISCUSSIONS HELD IN THE WFL BRANCHES

An upsurge in discussions and lectures became noticeable after the militant truce was declared in 1910, and when both the practice of locally inspired militant acts, law breaking of all kinds and the focus on militancy in London were replaced by fewer, albeit larger peaceful demonstrations. With the disappearance of this militant stimulus the attempts to maintain local members' interest focused more heavily on the efforts of branches. Consequently the already well-established social and political environment in the branches was given an added impetus and the topics of discussion in the branches diversified. These no longer focused exclusively on women, but rather they came from members' own interests in subjects which were as varied as vegetarian cookery, temperance, and the Irish question.⁸⁸ However, a number of themes which were discussed in a greater majority of the thirteen branches can be identified.

Subjects ranged from "racy" accounts by branch members of their foreign travels, to talks by visiting speakers active on women's behalf in other countries. Most often

⁸⁸*The Vote*, Vegetarian Cookery: Dundee - February 4th 1911, p. 180. Temperance: Dundee - December 9th 1911, p. 84; Kilmarnock - October 15th 1910, p. 296; Glasgow - March 12th 1910, p. 232. Irish Question: March 19th 1910, p. 252, August 27th 1910, p. 205, and November 25th 1911, p. 49.

discussion concentrated on Australia and New Zealand where women had the vote, and therefore were deemed relevant for the still unenfranchised British woman. Members were interested in religious issues which ranged from the orthodox, to theosophy and "weird supernaturalism".⁸⁹ There was an interest in literature, and literary discussions and recitals became a feature in some League branches. In Manchester, Olive Schreiner's work was discussed while women poets were the subject of a meeting in Brighton in July 1912.⁹⁰ Some branch members chose to highlight the achievements of women in their society, and during 1912 subjects discussed in Glasgow and Brighton included "Pioneer Women", and "Madame Curie, Feminist & Socialist".⁹¹

Members and speakers gave lectures on their employment experiences in a wide range of jobs and professions, and in particular medical issues, education and health were popular topics. The impact of Government action on divorce reform and legislation such as the National Insurance Act of 1911 were discussed, as were the party political system, working conditions in industry and unionisation, as well as the plight of the unmarried mother and male vice.⁹²

⁸⁹*The Vote*, Australia & New Zealand: Dundee - December 21st 1912, p. 137; Eastbourne - August 17th 1912, p. 298; Swansea - July 9th 1910, p. 127; Acton - March 23rd 1912, p. 267. [China: Ipswich - August 26th 1911, p. 221.] Theosophy: Hackney - June 13th 1913 p. 116; Manchester - May 16th 1913, p. 42, and April 18th 1913, p. 421. Charlotte Despard gave a series of lectures on theosophy to coincide with the publication of her book, *Theosophy and the Women's Movement*, (Theosophical Publishing Society, London, 1913).

⁹⁰*The Vote*: Manchester; December 21st 1912, p. 137, and October 19th 1913, p. 392. Brighton & Hove; July 13th 1912, p. 214. [Middlesbrough; June 27th 1913, p. 153.]

⁹¹*The Vote*: Glasgow; February 3rd 1912, p. 179. Brighton & Hove; February 21st 1913, p. 285.

⁹²*The Vote*: Party Politics, Anerley; September 14th 1912, p. 361. Ipswich; July 18th 1913, p. 202. Dundee; November 2nd 1912, p. 15. Industry & Working Conditions,

By 1913 these questions were common factors associated with the concerns of suffrage campaigners, yet the evidence for the WFL branches is that such concerns were not simply dictated from above by the leadership. Even those issues such as sexuality, vice, sex education, and the plight of the unmarried mother which all became campaigning issues for suffrage activists, had a firm basis in the concerns of local members. These women could see the repercussions of bad health care and discrimination in their own communities and they acted on their concerns. This was born out in the two series run in *The Vote* entitled "How (Some) Men Protect Women" and "The Protected Sex", which relied on reports from members of local branches who attended police court sessions and took notes on cases relating to women and children.⁹³ The same applied to the plight of industrial workers and unionization, and some branch members supported the strikes of local women workers. In Portsmouth the entire branch decided to boycott Huntley and Palmer biscuits until the firm stopped discriminating against its unionised workers. In 1914 this branch and also the members in Middlesbrough planned exhibitions to highlight the evils of sweated industries.⁹⁴ Swansea's campaign for municipal housing for women in their town, and Cheltenham's campaign for Daisy Turner were other examples of how members were prepared to discuss the experiences and oppression of women and to challenge such oppression in

Hackney; October 7th 1911, p. 297. Middlesbrough; March 5th 1910, p. 221. Ipswich; February 13th 1914, p. 267. Unmarried Mothers and Male Vice, Glasgow; May 18th 1912, p. 71. Middlesbrough; February 26th 1910, p. 213. White Slave Traffic, Brighton; January 24th 1913, p. 216. Anerley; September 21st 1912, p. 377. Eastbourne; August 26th 1911, p. 225.

⁹³An example is those sent in by the Swansea branch. See *The Vote*, April 20th 1912, p. 215. See Chapter Four, Section II, iii.

⁹⁴*The Vote*, February 24th 1912, p. 214, and March 23rd 1912, p. 267. For references to the Anti-Sweating Exhibitions, see Minute Book Middlesbrough WFL, April 6th 1914, and July 28th 1914, and Sarah Peacock, "Votes for Women", pp. 4-5.

their local communities.

By 1914 a pattern had emerged to the interests and activities of many League branches. Furthermore, the distinct political culture evident in League branches continued beyond the resumption of certain militant acts endorsed by the WFL in 1913, and also beyond the outbreak of war in August in the following year. Women in the WFL had developed and expressed explicitly their concerns and demands as women in political terms directly related to their own experiences and interests as women, and as reformers.

This interpretation of the local political culture in WFL branches is significant because it challenges the assumptions that define militancy as the focal point of woman suffragists' political identity.⁹⁵ In the following chapter I also offer a redefinition of the meaning of militancy in the WFL which explains this apparent trend away from militant confrontation.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have demonstrated the richness of the political culture developed in the WFL branches. While the social distinctions of class proved impossible to overcome completely, women from both the middle- and working-classes did find a voice and an identity, however limited in the case of the latter, in the WFL. Furthermore I have shown how women with family responsibilities and work

⁹⁵See texts on WSPU, in particular; Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women!*, and Antonia Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes*, (Michael Joseph, London, 1973), and *The Suffragette View*, (David Charles, Newton Abbott, 1976).

commitments found ways to become involved in the suffrage campaign, and have presented evidence showing how family and friendship networks were incorporated into the activities and organisation of the branches. I have demonstrated the extent to which WFL branches developed networks in their local communities with other suffrage societies and political and social organisations, and the constraints, real or otherwise, that they faced. It was in this environment that women in the WFL branches identified themselves and their role in the suffrage campaign, and in relation to the political process. It was a necessary process that in campaigning for their right to vote they also identified their interests and concerns in women and inequality. For many such interests did not only come out of the suffrage campaign, but had been present long before. However the WFL's network of branches did provide a platform for the expression of these ideas and concerns, and through this a series of political identities were beginning to emerge.

Lastly I have demonstrated that militancy did not dictate the activities of the ordinary membership of the League in their local communities. Yet the League continued to identify itself as a militant society. The following chapter examines the manifestations of League militancy, and the reasons why such an identification was thought necessary. It constitutes a reinterpretation of the "meaning of militancy" for League members.



Broken Windows at the W.F.L. Shop, Edinburgh, "by some person or persons who did not stop to bear the penalty."

Plate 5: Broken Windows at WFL Shop, Edinburgh

CHAPTER THREE

THE MEANING OF MILITANCY

THE IDEAS AND PRACTICE OF POLITICAL RESISTANCE IN THE WFL, 1907 - 1914

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One I highlighted the extent to which militancy was a highly problematic issue in the WFL, both in terms of its meaning and also in its practical application. In Chapter Two I argued that the heavy concentration on militant acts in London marginalised the work and efforts of local members who were either unable or unwilling to take part in these actions. In this chapter I explore in detail the content and focus of militancy and the impact it had on the WFL in the years 1907 to 1914.

In order to contextualise the issues discussed, it is necessary to establish precisely what I mean by 'militancy'. It has been described in one study as "a political weapon" which after 1912 degenerated into a form of millenarianism, and in another as an indicator of a particular political strategy used by some suffragists in their campaign for women's enfranchisement. From another perspective militancy has been described as an exclusive tactic available only to certain women with either the finances or the conviction to carry such actions out, but denied to many women.¹ Liz Stanley and Ann Morley have more recently interpreted militancy as an expression of protest against the violent treatment meted out to suffrage activists and best understood in the realm of

¹Consecutively, Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women!*, pp. 196, 245; Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 34-35; and Les Garner, *Stepping Stones To Women's Liberty*, pp. 44-49.

'personal politics'.²

This range of interpretations, which all have a bearing on the meaning of militancy, serves another purpose because taken together these views demonstrate how militancy was in fact a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon best understood for its diversity rather than being seen as one-dimensional and narrow. However, all the above interpretations relate to the WSPU and not to the WFL and the majority of actions described - deputations, window smashing, interrupting meetings, arson and imprisonment - give a definition of militancy which should be seen as particular to that organisation.

The WFL, like the WSPU, always positioned itself in the suffrage movement as a *militant society*, although League members' own understandings of what this meant shifted significantly over the period up to 1914. Especially after 1911 their definitions differed in a number of crucial and complicated ways from those current in the WSPU. League ideas on militancy made them distinct from the constitutional NUWSS. In this chapter I argue that it is limiting to define WFL militancy simply as those acts designed simply to outrage, shock and publicize. Instead the WFL sought to define militancy as the expression of a revolt of women against the barriers to their equality, with the vote being the most important focus, but not the only one. I also argue that in their use of militancy members of the WFL both challenged and colluded with traditional liberal interpretations of politics and society as these related to the population in general, and women in particular. I will demonstrate how the WFL found itself constrained by the definition of militancy expressed by observers and especially by some members of the

²Liz Stanley and Ann Morley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, p. xiii.

WSPU. I show that from 1911 onwards 'militancy', as defined in existing histories, was but one thrust to a wider policy of political resistance developed by the WFL. This policy of political resistance marked a significant challenge to the construction of paternalist, liberal bourgeois society which located the public sphere as exclusively male, and through their actions League members entered the public sphere of politics in what was a forceful and challenging way.

The chapter covers the period of militant protest up to 1910, the years of the WFL truce, and their resumption of "active militancy" again in January 1913. The first section covers the period up to 1910 and looks at the debates and practice of militancy in terms of the attempts to generate a distinct identity for the WFL, and also at the factors which prevented this. The second considers the generation of a policy of resistance which was the result of attempts to overcome the tensions and differences within the League. I look at the use of militancy as rhetoric and at the diverse range of protests, which were described at various stages as "active militancy", "passive militancy" or "passive resistance".

Section I: THE "STRICTEST SECT" OR A "MERE ECHO OF THE WSPU"?: THE ATTEMPTS TO CREATE A DISTINCT WFL MILITANT POLICY 1907 - 1910³

i) "The Strictest Sect..."?

In Chapter One I demonstrated that the decision to pursue militant tactics by the WSPU in 1905 marked an attempt to rupture long standing links with the three main political parties, especially Liberal and Labour, and that militancy signalled a feeling of renewed urgency on the part of its members. In order to assert their militant stance in a clear and justifiable way, to attract support, and also to offset the ferocious outcry against their actions from newspapers, politicians and anti-suffragists alike, a growing body of literature explaining suffrage militancy was produced by the WSPU. One of those in the forefront of this project was the WSPU, and later WFL official, Teresa Billington-Greig, who wrote numerous articles, pamphlets and speeches on suffrage militancy. In them she argued with conviction that the demands of the suffragists for equal citizenship were both just and logical because they were grounded in extending *to women* the long standing liberal principle of the rights of the individual. While in Holloway prison in November 1906 she argued:

Women's need of the vote, the justice of their claim, the many logical arguments by which they supported it, have not proved sufficient to move Parliament...when argument and justice and need are on the side of those who have no votes, the support they win alone remains merely sympathetic. The voteless have no votes and therefore no power to get. Their work is sterile of practical result unless they show in a perfectly unmistakable way their determination to have the reform they seek. The power of the voter must be replaced by the persistence and immovable determination of the

³See Chapter Three, footnote nos. 14, and 51.

voteless. This is the only road to success.⁴

Her arguments in this document contain many of the themes of the militant campaign as they were understood in 1906, and as they later emerged; the need to win support, to attract publicity, to demonstrate impatience with the ineffectiveness of constitutional methods, and the need to show unequivocally the desire of women for the vote. Most importantly, in terms of the distinctions between the WFL and the other suffrage societies, she identified militancy as a direct assault by unenfranchised women on the *power* of those who had the vote. Billington-Greig located the power of male voters in the laws and practices they developed and enforced, and contended that:

Upon those who are makers of the law, laws are naturally binding. Upon those who are not, there can be no bond. The authority of the law over them rests, not upon consent, but upon brute force.⁵

Taking this principle, Billington-Greig asserted that women, having no say in making laws in Parliament, were "outlaws", and the only method open to them to force change was to revolt. This revolt would be against the laws illegally forced upon women by the Government and the institutions and practices which upheld such an unequal relationship, namely Parliament, the Law Courts, and the conduct of elections.⁶

In the period before the split in the WSPU, Billington-Greig's arguments were largely submerged by the emphasis on publicity and drawing in new supporters. She later claimed that her disagreement with WSPU policy prior to the split was grounded

⁴Teresa Billington-Greig, "The Militant Policy of Women Suffragists", Manuscript, November 12th 1906. Written in Holloway Prison, and reprinted in Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald, eds., *The Non-Violent Militant. Selected Writings of Teresa Billington Greig*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1987), p. 113.

⁵Teresa Billington-Greig, "The Militant Policy of Women Suffragists", p. 113.

⁶Teresa Billington-Greig, "The Militant Policy of Women Suffragists", p. 114.

in the failure to direct WSPU militant actions sufficiently towards attacks on the instruments of women's inequality.⁷ I argued in Chapter One that there is no consistent evidence that Billington-Greig's desire to direct an assault on all aspects of male power was particularly strong among the other women who broke away from the Pankhurst faction. I make this point because this tension between Teresa Billington-Greig's ideals and those favoured by the rest of the WFL was to have important implications for the development of the WFL's programme of political resistance.

It was only after the ruptures in the WSPU during September and October 1907, that Billington-Greig was in a position to put into action her plans for a wide ranging assault on the sites of male power. The subsequent WFL protests at a London police court were the first example of this new strand of suffrage militancy. The first case of such "police court protests" was reported in the *Women's Franchise* in November 1907, which gave details of how members attending the police courts stood up to protest about the proceedings and their unfairness to women.⁸

Later such actions spread to other cities in the country, but it was another new initiative first developed towards the end of 1907 which really gave League members in districts away from London the chance to undertake assaults on the practice of government without representation in their own districts. This was manifested through the practice of tax resistance which was first publicly linked with modern suffrage protest in the latter months of 1907 and in early 1908, although it was not until 1909

⁷Teresa Billington-Greig, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Emancipation in a Hurry*, reprinted in Ann FitzGerland and Carol McPhee, eds., *The Non-Violent Militant*, p. 172.

⁸*Women's Franchise*, November 28th 1907, p. 253. See also Stella Newsome, *A History of the Women's Freedom League 1907 - 1957*, (WFL, London, 1958), p. 4.

that members in regional branches began to resist certain taxes in any significant numbers. One of the earliest references to this policy was made in November 1907 under the heading of "New Suffragist Scheme of Passive Resistance", where it was reported that women tax payers were being asked to resist income tax, property tax and inhabited house duty.⁹ In March the following year, the *Daily Chronicle*, a regular reporter of suffrage activities, reported that the "First 'Passive' Resister", WFL member Dr Octavia Lewin, was to be taken to court. It was announced in the same report that "the WFL intends to organise a big passive resistance movement as a weapon in the fight for the franchise."¹⁰

Such resistance, which I consider in detail in the next section, was not intrinsically new to the militant movement because previously it had been endorsed in other campaigns for freedom and equality, notably in those led by Gandhi in South Africa in the last years of the nineteenth century.¹¹ Nor were the WFL the only suffrage society to endorse and develop such protests. Members of the WFL were closely linked to the independent Women's Tax Resistance League, which was formed in 1909 with the support of the WFL, and run by Margaret Kineton Parkes.¹²

⁹MAS, Vol. II, p. 41. Taken from *The Daily Chronicle*, December 17th 1907.

¹⁰MAS, Vol. III, P. 15. Taken from *The Daily Chronicle*, March 28th 1908.

¹¹Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 141. Linklater also points to a more direct link between Despard and Gandhi who met in 1909, and from which Gandhi later wrote how he "admired her greatly" and "much appreciated her advocacy of spiritual resistance".

¹²Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald, eds., *The Non-Violent Militant*, p. 301 [End note 30] Meetings of the Women's Tax Resistance League were regularly reported in *The Vote*.

Despite the initial success with which the new tax resistance campaign was heralded, Billington-Greig had to contend with similar problems in the League to those she had complained of while still in the WSPU. Behind the declarations of success in these new militant methods, her attempts to concentrate political protest on the sites of male power do not appear to have been altogether successful.¹³ The reason for this, as she later argued, was that her policies had to contend with the already well established, popular and provenly successful militant style of protest of the WSPU. Suspicion of Billington-Greig's ideas came from within the League itself, and also from those observers grappling, usually half-heartedly, with the various differences between the policies of the suffrage societies. In 1908 the *Eastbourne Gazette* came the nearest to Billington-Greig's desire to distinguish the League when a reporter referred to it as the "strictest sect" of the suffragettes.¹⁴ Yet this comment was as likely to be a result of the general confusion among journalists about the differences between the growing number of societies, as prompted by the new policies outlined by Billington-Greig. The intricacies of Billington-Greig's ideas were no match for the ease with which many journalists could generalize on suffrage outrages.

This emphasis in much of the newspaper coverage barely improved in the entire period up to 1914. Similarly, among the ardent opponents of women's suffrage there was the tendency to tar all the pro-suffrage societies with the same brush. This was especially noticeable in some of the later attacks during and after 1909 when WFL speakers were accused of being "window smashers", even though the WFL made it

¹³In the WFL *Annual Report*, 1908, p. 12 it was recorded that the tax resistance campaign had developed, but not as much as had been hoped.

¹⁴MAS, Vol. IV, p. 67. Taken from *The Eastbourne Gazette*, [non-dated].

clear that they never endorsed this policy.¹⁵

Contrary to these generalisations, in 1908 in the WFL itself, militant protests and actions were in fact being advanced on a number of fronts, which included a limited programme of assaults on man-made laws and the power of the Liberal Government, as well as more publicity-conscious protests, and those which marked a fusion of the two. Among the most notable of the latter was the action taken by Muriel Matters, Helen Fox and Violet Tillard in October 1908 in the Ladies Gallery of the House of Commons. On this occasion Matters and Fox chained themselves to the grille which sectioned off the Ladies Gallery from the chamber below, and they were only removed when the much-hated grille was taken down, with the two women still attached!¹⁶ In February 1909, Muriel Matters gained further notoriety when she travelled across London in a hot air balloon, dropping suffrage literature on the unsuspecting population.¹⁷

Another example of a militant action by League members which was designed to coincide with Parliamentary business and to bring the League publicity, was the highly

¹⁵One example is from a report of a WFL meeting at Midhurst in the *West Sussex County Times & Standard*, on September 25th 1909. The report recorded a voice in the audience "Call yourselves ladies. You break windows and don't know how to behave yourselves." The League speaker replied "No member of the WFL has ever broken windows, you are speaking of the WSPU. But though our party is different from the WSPU we do not get any better treatment by the law". For details see MAS, Vol. VIII, p. 45.

¹⁶MAS, Vol. V, p. 86. Taken from *The Daily News*, October 29th 1908. The Grille Protest was immortalised in later WFL suffrage histories as one of the "Outstanding Protests". See Mrs Gerard, *Hats off to the Past, Coats off to the Future*, p. 2. As late as 1961 Marie Lawson recalled this protest in a piece in the *WFL Bulletin*, November 17th 1961, p. 2. The remnants of the chain used in the protest were preserved at the WFL's headquarters in London over the following decades.

¹⁷MAS, Vol. VI, pp. 90,91. *The Daily Mirror*, [non-dated, c. 1909], and *The Daily Mail*, February 17th 1909.

confidential bill posting exercise planned to coincide with the opening of Parliament in October 1908. The "Proclamations" which demanded equal voting rights were stuck up all over London in the early hours of the morning by WFL volunteers: on pillar boxes, minister's homes and even on the wall of Scotland Yard. "...nothing could have exceeded the adroitness" one report commented.¹⁸ The other actions undertaken by the League which distinguished them from the WSPU were the visits to the London homes of cabinet ministers, where pleas for votes for women were issued on ministers' doorsteps until the police were called to intervene.¹⁹

Throughout 1908 the League enjoyed a fairly close, though sometimes fraught working relationship with the NUWSS, both in the branches and between the respective national executive bodies. This is borne out by Sandra Holton who has argued that during the early years of the militant campaign, the militant and constitutional wings of the suffrage movement, while pursuing different policies of political protest, were in "symbiosis" with their different political styles complementing each other.²⁰ One

¹⁸MAS, Vol. V, p. 26. Taken from *The Daily Chronicle*, October 13th 1908, and Vol. V, p. 29 [undated press cutting]. See also Stella Newsome, *A History of the WFL*, p. 5. On the whole, while the WFL certainly gained a reputation for novel and innovative protests, the WSPU continued to be the most consistent at staging militant protests. They also had greater numbers of members arrested and in prison: in 1908 the WSPU claimed that over sixty of their members had been arrested and imprisoned (*WSPU Annual Report*, to February 1909, p. 11) This compares with the twenty-nine WFL members imprisoned in 1908. See *WFL Annual Report*, 1908, p. 12.

¹⁹See for example MAS, Vol. II, p. 54. [unknown and non-dated press cutting]. On one occasion this resulted in the arrest of nine WFL members. In propaganda work the WSPU and the WFL kept up their separate attempts to send deputations to the Houses of Parliament, and anti-government campaigns at by-elections. The WFL, *Annual Report*, 1908, p. 12 reported that in that year thirteen by-elections campaigns had been undertaken.

²⁰Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, p. 31.

indication of this relationship was the invitation to the WFL to take part in the mass march organised by the NUWSS in June 1908. The march, which culminated in a mass meeting at the Albert Hall in London, was the successor to the original NUWSS "Mud March" of the previous year which marked the first time in the suffrage campaign when women marched in large numbers through the streets, proclaiming their right to citizenship.

Although the NUWSS originally planned these public demonstrations to counter the impact of WFL and WSPU militancy, it was the WSPU who successfully gained the initiative in these displays with their "Women's Sunday" staged in June 1908 which attracted 30,000 suffragists and between a quarter and half a million spectators.²¹ In contrast the WFL never managed to stage a similarly spectacular event and after 1909 switched their allegiance to the processions coordinated by the WSPU. The WFL did however organise impressive contingents and smaller scale events, especially during and after 1910. Furthermore, as I demonstrate later, this emphasis on imagery and spectacle as a means of highlighting women's claims to the suffrage was introduced successfully into a number of local branches.

Evidence of the cooperation between the WFL, WSPU, and NUWSS indicates that Billington-Greig's ideas of a militant revolt of women against male power had not yet established a distinctive profile for the WFL. Furthermore, League members' reactions to militancy often served to constrict the development of a distinct identity for the League.

²¹See Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, pp. 55-148, for an account of these marches and processions. In particular see pp. 55, 59, 73-100.

In Chapter One I signalled that one difficulty for the WFL was the ambivalence shown by some League members towards official militant policy.²² The reasons for this are complex, and are difficult to comment on conclusively, because of the lack of relevant sources, but they can be located to some extent in particular factors which limited the ability of some members to undertake militant actions. These were the heavy and unavoidable concentration of highly secretive militant protests in London, employment commitments, domestic responsibilities, the threat of violence, and ideas about political protest which were grounded in other beliefs which could conflict with those militant protests endorsed by the WFL.

Many militant protests could only have the maximum effect if carried out in London, like the grille protest and the "proclamations". Moreover, such actions could only be successful if they were kept absolutely confidential, and so for speed, they usually only involved London members. The few women who travelled to London from as far afield as Scotland to take part in militant acts remained in a minority among the membership.²³ Garner has made the point that militancy (he refers here exclusively to WSPU militancy) was both exclusive and marginalising to working-class women and this seems to be true of the other forms of resistance encouraged by the WFL.²⁴ For

²²See Chapter One, pp. 62-63.

²³An example is the deputation to the Houses of Parliament by League members in October 1909. Of the fourteen members arrested, only two women are known to have been resident outside London. These were Mary Manning, a teacher from Sale, and Jane MacCullen from Dunfermline. Of the thirteen defendants who were tried, there was a strong concentration of women without a profession or possibly who had more 'flexible jobs'. "No occupation": 5, "Married": 2, Organiser: 1, Private Secretary: 1, Book Keeper: 1, Teacher: 1, Actress: 1, Lecturer: 1. Information taken from MAS, Vol. V, p. 88. Taken from *The Times*, October 30th 1909.

²⁴Les Garner, *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty*, p. 49.

example, the early plans for resisting Imperial taxes required a certain level of income which only the richest members managed to reach. This was however to alter as the tax resistance campaign diversified as I discuss later in this chapter.

Another reason for a certain ambivalence about militancy among members of the League may well have been the increasing violence meted out to suffragettes by opponents and by the police. Rather than any condemnation of those who risked such violence, there was thorough support and consideration. However this did not completely cancel out the concerns of members for the respectability of the WFL, and opponents' claims that women were being paid to go to prison. It is possible that it was this desire for a certain respectability, linked to credibility, which influenced the WFL's decision shortly after the split in the WSPU to discontinue the practice of interrupting public meetings, and instead to concentrate on putting legitimate questions to speakers.

This shift in policy proved to be the most important distinction between the actions of the two militant societies. However from the discussions held at the League's annual conference in 1908 it is evident that this policy change was not entirely supported by the membership. Discussions on conduct at meetings was the subject of a furious debate following the comments of one delegate that it threatened free speech. This was met by the reply that it was not suffragists who denied free speech, but the men who broke up suffragists' meetings. The resolution which was finally passed agreed to endorse the principles of free speech, yet any concerns to develop the League's own political policy were obscured.²⁵ Billington-Greig's arguments about militancy as a just revolt by unenfranchised women appears to have failed to convince those League members who

²⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1908, pp. 10-11.

were more concerned that traditional liberal principles of democratic practice should be observed, despite the fact that the very pinnacle of liberal ideology - citizenship - excluded women.

As the meaning of militancy continued to be debated within the WFL, events placed the good relations between the WFL, the NUWSS and the WSPU under strain. During and after 1909 members in all three organisations began to express reservations about the effects of the others' policies.²⁶ Eventually in October 1909 it was the actions of two League members in what later became known as the "Bermondsey Ballot Box Protest" which finally upset the uneasy relationship between the NUWSS and the two militant societies.

The origin of the Bermondsey protest was the peaceful WFL picket of the House of Commons which ran continually from July 6th to October 28th, when WFL members attempted to practice what they claimed to be their constitutional right to petition King Edward VII through the Prime Minister.²⁷ During the picket the members who took part, and the League generally gained the admiration and respect of supporters and observers alike. Yet after three months the pickets continued to be studiously ignored by the Prime Minister. To register their disgust, Alison Neilans and Alice Chapin attempted to invalidate a by-election in Bermondsey by throwing dye into some ballot boxes.

²⁶Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, p. 48.

²⁷*The Vote*, January 22nd 1910, p. 145. For details of the picket see Mrs Gerard, *Hats Off to the Past, Coats off to the Future*, pp. 2-3, and Margaret Wynne Nevinson, *Life's Fitful Fever*, p. 203.

The resulting storm of protest which followed this "outrage" reverberated around the country, and was exacerbated by the accidental injury to the returning officer during the course of the protest. The following is an extract from a report in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and was typical of much press coverage:

The occasion has been seized by one of the branches of militant suffragists to commit an outrage unparalleled in English history, the object being to invalidate the election...²⁸

The protest reflected the WFL's militant policy because it had threatened the democratic parliamentary processes which excluded women, a point which was later emphasised in *The Vote*:

..we must rebel, we must not rest until the ballot box is no longer the symbol of sex tyranny but the symbol of political sex equality.²⁹

However, reactions in the immediate aftermath caused enormous problems for the League, especially as the praise they had received during their picket evaporated and was replaced by a barrage of complaints and condemnations from the press and supporters alike. Edith How-Martyn made a statement to the *Pall Mall Gazette* regretting the "unfortunate injury to Mr Thorley", but standing firm on the injustice of the Prime Minister's refusal to receive the WFL's petition.³⁰ This still did not stem the condemnation from members of the League and suffragists in other societies. The

²⁸MAS, Vol. VIII, p. 82. Taken from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, October 28th 1909. Reports were published in many newspapers across the country, including in the *Dundee Advertiser*, November 6th 1909, p. 7.

²⁹*The Vote*, November 4th 1909, p. 21. Neilans and Chapin were found guilty of interfering with a ballot box and common assault sentence to three and four months to run concomitantly. See also *The Vote*, December 2nd 1909, pp. 61-63, 70, and MAS, Vol. IX, p. 13. Taken from *The Times*, November 25th 1909. Chapin and Neilans were the first militant suffragists to be tried by a jury.

³⁰MAS, Vol. VIII, p. 82, taken from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, October 28th 1909. It was claimed by Edith How-Martyn that this attempts to invalidate an election was initially the idea of Teresa Billington Greig.

Eastbourne branch of the WFL, along with others, expressed their concern, but mollified by the letter of explanation sent by the NEC, decided to save their anxieties for the next annual conference.³¹ Certainly no other branches went as far as the members in Burton-on-Trent who decided to sever their connections with the WFL in protest. The repercussions did not end there, as the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage, not surprisingly, cancelled a planned debate with the League. Much more importantly, the NUWSS held a protest meeting, arguing that "all their hard work of the last two weeks had been wasted by this act..."³² Their condemnation marked the conclusion of the "symbiotic" relationship outlined by Holton, and the beginning of a more strained relationship between the constitutionalists and the two militant suffrage societies.³³

Through this protest the WFL had achieved a distinct identity which, in a clear and definitive way, was firmly directed to the concept of a revolt of women against the barriers to their equality. Yet, rather than continue along these lines, the WFL actually recoiled from this position. Despite the defiant messages put out by the leadership after the Bermondsey protest, especially those which dealt with the subsequent trial of Alice Chapin and Alison Neilans, and indeed while most of the League's members appeared to support the original action, the number of militant protests declined. The WFL did manage to re-muster sufficiently to conduct a number of spirited anti-Government campaigns during the January 1910 election, and caused significant difficulties for

³¹Verbatim Minutes of the Fifth Annual Conference, January 29th 1910, p. 11. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1910).

³²Burton on Trent: MAS, Vol. VIII, p. 70. Taken from *The Times*, October 30th 1909, and NUWSS: MAS, Vol. VIII, p. 82. Taken from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, October 28th 1909.

³³Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, p. 47. NUWSS members also increasingly voiced their condemnation of subsequent WSPU militant actions.

Churchill in his Dundee constituency and for Asquith in East Fife.³⁴ However, it was clear that the WFL's militant policy as it then stood, was splintering under the strain of members' conflicting opinions.

The difficulties within the WFL overflowed at the League's annual conference in January 1910. The final outcome was a vote in favour of continuing to pursue a militant policy, but not to injure persons or private property, and in addition, an amendment was added which required the NEC to "initiate no undertaking involving risk of personal injury to bystanders."³⁵ In effect the vote was a message from delegates not to carry out another protest similar to the one in Bermondsey, and was taken despite Billington-Greig's message to the conference that the protest, which she had first suggested, had been a political act, and that in order to continue to be militant the WFL needed to be progressive. "If you have continuous repetition, it becomes habit.", she argued.³⁶

Earlier during the conference, the League's militant policy as outlined by Billington-Greig had suffered a further setback when a representative of the Passive Resisters Committee explained that it was felt that passive resistance, especially tax resistance, needed to be seen as independent of the policies of militant societies.³⁷

³⁴*The Vote*, January 15th 1910, pp. 141, 142, January 22nd 1910, p. 154, and January 29th 1910, pp. 158, 164.

³⁵Verbatim Minutes 1910, p. 16.

³⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1910, pp. 9,11,13,14.

³⁷Verbatim Minutes, 1910, pp. 5-8. One speaker from the Tax Resistance League went further and actually denied that the WFL had any hand in the formation of the organisation.

Thus the League lost ground in another dimension to its political policies of protest against the instruments of Government. The conference delegates' endorsement of militancy was largely nominal, and no new protests were suggested or discussed. Effectively, a policy under which all members could unite had become even more distant, precisely at a time when such a policy had never been more urgently needed, as the WSPU continued to direct its energies to ever greater violence and destruction.³⁸

Shortly after the conference, the pressure on achieving such unity was lifted due to a breakthrough in the political campaign. This came with the announcement of a debate in the Commons on a Conciliation Bill which if passed, would enfranchise a small proportion of adult women. In response the WSPU and the WFL announced a truce in their militant activities. It was to be another year before the WFL seriously embarked on the task of defining their militant policy, and during this period a number of events occurred which helped to shape the form it would finally take.

³⁸Stanley and Morley in *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, convincingly demonstrate that WSPU activists had their own particular reasons for escalating their militant protests, namely to protest against the harsh treatment of their fellow workers, especially while in prison. See p. xiii and also Chapter 5: "Militancy: Doing Something Silly instead of Doing Something Cruel" pp. 147-171.

ii) "...A Mere Echo of the WSPU...?"

After the announcement that time had been allocated to discuss the Conciliation Bill the League issued the following statement to the Government:

Now is your opportunity. If you take it you will be responsible for the carrying into law of a great act of justice and for bringing to a conclusion a struggle which may otherwise have much graver consequences³⁹

Behind these strong words there was a great deal of confusion within the WFL both on which protests against the Government would be discontinued and what the consequences of a failure to pass the Conciliation Bill would be. Passive resistance, which was still being pursued by individual League members, continued. Among them was Charlotte Despard, who was threatened with imprisonment in June 1910 over her failure to pay her taxes. However, these protests were sporadic and undertaken individually rather than through any consistent policy by the League.⁴⁰

All the actions other than tax resistance which might lead to arrest and imprisonment were suspended, yet this only confirmed what had already happened unofficially. Instead the WFL turned their attentions to campaigning for the Conciliation Bill, by educating the public and also by using peaceful methods to highlight the justice of their claims for equal citizenship.

At this juncture the work of the subsidiary societies and networks of women professionals who supported the demands for suffrage became noticed. For example,

³⁹*The Vote*, February 19th 1910, p. 198.

⁴⁰Still, the NEC were not slow to capitalise on the publicity surrounding Despard's case. See *WFL Annual Report*, 1910, pp. 10,11.

Cicely Hamilton who was a member of both the WFL and the Women's Writers Suffrage League wrote a suffrage play called the "Pageant of Great Women". The play was directed by Edith Craig and first produced at the Scala Theatre in London on November 10th 1909. The pageant which has been described in detail elsewhere complemented and enforced the WFL's basic claim that it was unjust and illegal - not to mention damaging - to exclude women from citizenship.⁴¹ After the success of the performance in London when Cicely Hamilton offered to lend costumes and props to any League branch who wanted to perform the pageant, a number came forward.

The performance of the pageant by local WFL branches in Sheffield, Ipswich, Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Swansea, filled the void in press attention and local interest which had developed in 1910 after the declaration of the truce and the consequent lack of headline-grabbing stories.⁴² Reports of the local pageants filled the pages of *The Vote* and even some local newspapers during 1910 and 1911. In Swansea the performance by local members even succeeded in earning the grudging respect of the reporter from the Tory *South Wales Daily Post* who wrote "...mere man can and does admire the important part that woman has played in the world's history..." On a more dismal note, he added in true "anti" fashion "...the wisdom of giving votes to women is perhaps another matter"⁴³

Peaceful protests were also undertaken by the WFL in London during 1910, and

⁴¹See Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, pp. 69-71 for a description of the Pageant.

⁴²*The Vote*, Sheffield: April 30th 1910, p. 11. Ipswich: October 29th 1910, p. 3. Middlesbrough: October 15th 1910, p. 294. Sunderland: October 22nd 1910, p. 305. Swansea: May 14th 1910, p. 26.

⁴³*South Wales Daily Post*, May 6th 1910, p. 5.

one of these was the John Stuart Mill Procession which took place on Mill's birthday on May 21st 1910, and ended with a wreath-laying ceremony by his statue in Temple Gardens. The choice of Mill was no coincidence, and contained in reports of the event were references to Mill's attempts to extend the liberal principles of individual rights to women, and the WFL's campaign to continue what he had begun back in 1867. This use of liberal symbols impressed members of non-militant societies as well as members in the WFL and a total of ten wreaths, one from the constitutional Uxbridge Suffrage Society, were sent from local suffrage branches. The procession to mark the birth of Mill and his "legacy to women", was heralded as a distinct success and became an annual event which was continued by the WFL throughout the 1920s.⁴⁴

Across the entire suffrage movement during 1910, there was a sense of impending success, and for the WFL in particular this helped to stave off immediate problems regarding militancy, because many believed it might not be necessary to resort to these tactics again. In June 1910 attention turned instead to the preparations for the WSPU "From Prison to Citizenship" procession.

On the day, branch members in their hundreds marched behind divisions boldly displaying the League's colours of green, white, and gold.⁴⁵ These included those for: Graduates, Nurses, Cyclists, Athletes, Civil Servants, Pharmacists, Shop Assistants, Factory Workers, East End Sweated Workers, and Teachers. These were joined by an

⁴⁴*The Vote*, May 14th 1910, p. 26, and May 28th 1910, p. 50. See photograph on p. 11.

⁴⁵The colours of the League: "gold, the earliest suffrage colour and the colour of the dawn; white for purity of purpose; and green for the promise of spring". See MAS, Vol. VII, p. 11.

International Section, a section for Prisoners and Picketers, and a Ju Jitsu section, and bringing up the rear was a "special detachment" of motor vehicles for "those members unable to walk the whole distance."⁴⁶

The details of the procession have been described by Lisa Tickner. They deserve attention here because they indicate that distinguishing the WFL from the WSPU was still a high priority, especially among the leadership of the League.⁴⁷ The procession also countered the emphasis in militancy on secrecy, and on solitary and spontaneous actions, and instead highlighted the diversity between the members and the broad range of interests within the League.

Yet behind the outward display of unity between the WSPU, the NUWSS and the WFL, the differences in WFL and WSPU militant policy continued. In addition there was still no clear agreement between the two leaderships on when, and indeed if, to recommence active militancy. This made for a highly volatile situation which was ruptured in November 1910 by the decision of the WSPU to stage a militant protest outside the Houses of Parliament. The events which were sparked by a set-back in the passage of the Conciliation Bill marked some of the most extreme violence against suffrage protesters and ended in the arrest of a large number of WSPU activists.⁴⁸

⁴⁶*The Vote*, June 4th 1910, p. 69, June 18th 1910, pp. 93-94, and June 25th 1910, pp. 98-107. Less attention was paid to a second procession held shortly after in London on July 23rd 1910. Fewer ordinary members were able to travel to London. See Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, pp. 115-119.

⁴⁷Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, pp. 111-115.

⁴⁸See Antonia Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes*, (Michael Joseph, London, 1973), pp. 152-158, and Caroline Morrell, *"Black Friday" and Violence Against Women in the Suffragette Movement*, (Women's Research and Resource Centre, London, 1981).

The WFL's response to the events of "Black Friday", as I stated in Chapter One, was swift but mixed, especially as it was known that some members of the WFL had taken part. Here I am concerned specifically with the response of Teresa Billington-Greig, who despite her absence through illness for much of 1910, was still one of the main coordinators and directors of WFL militancy. Billington-Greig condemned the WSPU's actions in an article in *The Vote*, as "inexpedient" and made her case for a continuation of the truce until the future of the Conciliation Bill was clear. It is likely her comments would have been stronger, but she was constrained by the League's policy of avoiding criticism of their "sister" society.⁴⁹ In the weeks that followed the tensions among the membership over their attitudes to militancy again resurfaced and again contained the same mix of support for the WSPU, and ardent criticism. Billington-Greig's dissatisfaction and disillusionment, not least with the failure of her fellow leaders to take a stand against the WSPU, led to her very public, and as it emerged, bitter resignation at the end of 1910.⁵⁰

In the following year she published her opinions of the WSPU, the WFL, and militancy in her book *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Emancipation in a Hurry*. In it there were a number of intricate and damning criticisms of the WFL. The organisation she wrote, was "a failure"; it had failed to distinguish itself from the old WSPU and had weakened itself by refusing to offer any criticism of the other society. She claimed, there were others who were so desperate to distance themselves from the old movement that they had failed to do justice to the new movement by missing crucial opportunities

⁴⁹*The Vote*, November 26th 1910, p. 54,

⁵⁰*The Vote*, January 28th 1911, p. 164, February 4th 1911, p. 183, and February 11th 1911, p. 194. NEC Minutes, December 17th 1910, p. 16, and January 6th and 7th 1911, p. 30.

to emphasize or publicize their demands. Billington-Greig contended that because the WFL was made up of so many different opinions it had failed to take a decisive lead, and rather than allowing internal democracy to work for them, it had merely ended with red-tape and stagnation. In short it had become nothing more than a weak echo of the WSPU.

Teresa Billington-Greig's comments highlighted many of the problems which the WFL had experienced in relation to militancy in the preceding years since 1907. She linked her criticisms of the militant suffrage movement with a wider concept of a feminist revolt against inequality and prevailing male power. The first, she felt, should have been the basis for the second, but she contended that instead militancy had become publicity and protest for its own sake.⁵¹

Billington-Greig was not the only WFL member to draw out links between the militant suffrage movement and a wider feminist movement. Many others were conscious of the same issues, yet unlike Billington-Greig they did not feel the need to resign from the WFL. The majority, despite the continuing run of problems and difficulties, still believed that the WFL occupied a crucial position in the campaign for women's suffrage and for women's emancipation.

Even though Teresa Billington-Greig had decided there was no role for her any more in the WFL, she left a legacy in her writings and ideas which related to a broad-

⁵¹Teresa Billington-Greig, *The Militant Suffrage Movement; Emancipation in a Hurry*, reprinted in Carole McPhee and Ann FitzGerald, eds., *The Non-Violent Militant*, Chapter VI: The Freedom League Failure, pp. 171-178, and Chapter VIII: A Criticism of Militancy, pp. 185-193.

based policy of militancy. Although she claimed that her specific attempts to extend militancy had failed, it was the case that the more general emphasis in her ideas had been partially incorporated into the League. This is evident in the diversification in WFL protests and policies of resistance to inequality, such as pageants and tax resistance, which were clearly identifiable in WFL branches and also national policy by the end of 1910. It was increasingly understood by leaders and members alike that the resistance against male power through government and women's outlaw status need no longer be expressed through the actions which had acquired the very narrow definition of "militant". As internal democracy was to be flexibly interpreted, so the meaning of militancy would also be extended, and in the next section I explore how this was achieved in the WFL through the adoption of a broader and more versatile *policy of resistance*.

Section II: MILITANT BUT NOT VIOLENT: TOWARDS A BROADER DEFINITION, 1911 - 1914

In the first section I demonstrated how narrow definitions of militancy which were a fusion of press coverage, opponents' arguments and the opportunism of some militant activists, became unworkable as a uniting policy for members of the Freedom League. By 1911 the need for an established, broader based policy had become one of the most urgent concerns within the League itself. What concerned members had shown was that they wanted the vote, but not at the cost of splintering their organisation

There were a number of issues which formed the core of the discussions about how the League could diversify its programme of political resistance: the already

acknowledged factor of diversity - and tensions - among the members was one reason, together with a recognition of the need to offset a decline in the interest in women's suffrage, which had generally built up over the year of truce with the Government. This decline can be seen on three levels; press attention had dwindled both nationally and locally, and financial contributions to the League had declined by as much as twenty percent during 1910, as Despard reflected on this state of affairs, "It is proof of the sad love of mere sensation that funds fall off when there is no active militancy".⁵² Thirdly, the decline in the sense of urgency and struggle was felt in those League branches who searched for direction and motivation and lacked local suffrage or community networks to stimulate activity.⁵³

Once again the inspiration for the conceptual and also the practical basis of militancy came from among the leadership of the League, and after the departure of Teresa Billington-Greig, this consisted of Charlotte Despard and Edith How-Martyn, who were assisted by Constance Tite, Bettina Borrmann-Wells and London associates. Following the departures after the 1912 Special Conference, Despard gained a firmer hold on the direction of WFL militancy and was prominent in the moves to incorporate further instances of passive resistance in to the League's political campaign.

⁵²Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 142. Linklater provides no references to his sources.

⁵³See Chapter Two.

j) "The Passive Resisters"

During 1911, the League, aware of the continuing debates on the Conciliation Bill in Parliament, was to exert political pressure in another, highly public direction. The protest which was to catch the attention of the press and also galvanise local branches was the resistance to the census of April 1911, a proposal first outlined by Laurence Housman in the opening weeks of this year. The League leadership quickly endorsed his plan, putting their own particular case for this action forward. All League branches were urged to take part in the protest, and this was reinforced by numerous articles in *The Vote* and through tours by popular WFL speakers to branches, when they urged members to do all they could to resist the collection of census data.

Housman's article in *The Vote* in March 1911 had a telling title: "The Passive Resisters". He was extending an already established tradition of civil disobedience which was motivated by the purpose of putting pressure on the Government through tax resistance and boycotts to force it to see the error of its ways.⁵⁴ Housman distinguished between passive resistance and militancy, stating that "passive resisters were those women who are unable to act militantly so instead passively resist".⁵⁵ The distinction was a tactical necessity, given that the WFL was officially observing a militant truce. Yet the only noticeable different was that passive resisters would avoid violence and abuse previously meted out to other militant protesters.

The interest in passive resistance in the League, while still based on the challenge

⁵⁴See comments in Chapter Three, footnote no. 80.

⁵⁵*The Vote*, March 4th 1911, p. 223.

to the core of male-dominated Government, shifted in focus towards demonstrating forcefully the inability of men to govern without the consent of women. That the census protest amounted to such a challenge was clearly expressed by Edith How-Martyn in her article which responded to the criticisms of the protest from one national newspaper, *The Spectator*. She argued:

We cannot reiterate too often that our object is to give a practical example of the impasse which would be produced in our national life if women seriously began to refuse their consent to the autocratic government by men. Passive resistance against unjust authority is binding on those who believe in doing something to win their freedom. Until women win representation they are morally justified in demonstrating that their exclusion from citizenship certainly does involve national injury.⁵⁶

This move away from violent confrontation struck a chord with the membership of the League. The new life breathed into the League's campaign and its branches was significant because it signalled a new emphasis to political protest which rejected violence both to and against suffrage activists.. Charlotte Despard acknowledged this in her speech to a meeting in Portsmouth shortly before April 1st, when it was reported that she "gloried in it because she realised that it would mean less suffering to the individual woman than any other protest..." *The Hampshire Times* recorded how she emphasised that:

...Women had suffered too much in the past, so now they were going to have a real bit of fun, and it was going to be the most effective protest they had ever made, and a bloodless one..⁵⁷

The enthusiasm among League members had practical results, and this is

⁵⁶*The Vote*, March 4th 1911, p. 226. Edith How-Martyn's arguments were similar to those of Gandhi's *ahimsa* (nonviolence). Despard made a number of references to Gandhi's model of nonviolence, although the League itself never fully developed along the lines Gandhi had proposed. For details of Gandhi's thought on *ahimsa* see Raghaven N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1973), pp. 177-184.

⁵⁷*The Hampshire Telegraph*, March 24th 1911, p. 2.

demonstrated in the *WFL Annual Report* for 1911. Of the thirty-two branches which sent in reports, only eight mentioned nothing of the census, and of these, three were not in existence on census night.⁵⁸ In Portsmouth the branches of both the WFL, and the WSPU, whose leadership joined the protest in late February, planned events, which including hiring a hall and sleeping in other members homes. All these plans were told to local reporters by the WFL branch secretary Sarah Whetton, who stated that nearly one hundred supporters were intending to resist.⁵⁹ In Manchester sixteen houses were placed at the branch's disposal, and in Edinburgh Miss Sidley reported that the numbers taking part in the protest had "reached four figures".⁶⁰ Members later recorded some unusual methods they used to avoid detection. Two Swansea members, Clare Neal and Emily Phipps, recalled how they had spent the night in a cave on the Gower coast with friends before going to work the following day as usual.⁶¹ *The Vote* emphasised the numbers which had taken part and declared that it had been the:

..most effective protest yet made by women against government without consent...The census of 1911 has been made memorable by the organised revolt of women...⁶²

⁵⁸See *WFL Annual Report*, 1911, pp. 18-33. Of those branches taking part, twelve were in London, two in Wales, which could have spread across as many as five towns, three in Scotland and seven in the rest of England. At least four other branches took part but did not send in annual reports.

⁵⁹*The Hampshire Telegraph*, March 24th 1911, p. 3. In an interview in *The Hampshire Times* printed on April 7th 1911, p. 2, Sarah Whetton explained that in the end the League had not taken a hall because they felt it inadvisable because of police interest. Instead the resisters met at the home of one member and while the older members slept, the younger ones danced and played cards. In the same edition of the paper the WSPU branch's actions were recorded although it was claimed by the police that all the women entering the premises hired for the occasion had been counted.

⁶⁰*The Vote*, April 15th 1911, pp. 299, 302.

⁶¹*Woman Teacher*, October 5th 1928, p. 3. Cited in Hilda Keen, *Deeds Not Words*, pp. 25-26.

⁶²*The Vote*, April 8th 1911, p. 286.

The reactions to this protest testify to its significance, which equalled the impact of other 'violent' militant protests, not least in the virulent and angry responses from opponents. For example one enumerator in Brighton claimed the census protest had been exaggerated by a "few conceited, hysterical women and their effeminate supporters". His attacks on these "female hooligans" mirrored in many ways the images projected in some newspapers of "hysterical" women who publicly protested about their exclusion from citizenship through demonstrations in the streets.⁶³ While the exact numbers of those women who resisted the census will never be known, what is clear is that it was the most successful countrywide passive resistance to be undertaken by suffragists in this period, and the reactions of opponents only served to emphasize its effectiveness.

After census night the re-energised membership of the League began to consider more ways to passively resist, notably through tax resistance, a protest which had up to this point involved a relatively small proportion of League members. Now it began to receive far greater attention and support from League branches.⁶⁴ Members had the example of their president Charlotte Despard who had consistently refused to pay some, or all of her taxes since 1905, and who had her possessions - including her piano -

⁶³*The Brighton Herald*, April 15th 1911, p. 10.

⁶⁴The point has been made that tax resistance took some time, usually eighteen months, before to come before the courts, and this was another reason for the increase in numbers being tried in 1911. Laurence Housman continued to speak and write on passive resistance after 1911, and supported tax resistance. His sister Clemence Housman was imprisoned for her refusal to pay inhabited house duty. However he also commented in his autobiography that tax resistance had arrived too late to develop to its full potential. See Laurence Housman, *The Unexpected Years*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1937), pp. 284-285.

seized.⁶⁵ In 1911 tax resistance by members including Constance Andrews, Elizabeth Knight, Emma Sproson, Mrs Lane, Mary McCleod Cleeves, Kate Harvey, and Mary Hare was given consistent coverage in *The Vote*.⁶⁶

What made tax resistance even more popular was the introduction of a wider range of taxes into the campaign. The earliest instances of resistance to Imperial taxes were increasingly outnumbered by those who resisted payment of dog licences, duties on carriages and carts and inhabited house duty. The inclusion of resistance to dog licences in particular allowed many more women to engage in tax resistance, from richer women like Elizabeth Knight, to the less well off, like working-class League activist Emma Sproson. Both women were taken to court for non-payment, although it was Emma Sproson's actions which prompted the severest reaction of the courts who imprisoned her twice for six weeks in the third division, and ordered her dog to be shot.⁶⁷ In other branches, members tended to make their resisting colleagues' cases the focus of particular campaigns, as in Brighton where the entire branch rallied to support the actions of their secretary and treasurer who had their goods seized and in lieu of their uncollected inhabited house duty. In Edinburgh the members resisted paying taxes on the branch's bank interest, and amiably dismissed the Sheriff Officer when "he called

⁶⁵MAS, Vol. VIII, pp. 82-83. Letter from Sarah Bennett to Maud Arncliffe Sennett, dated June 29th 1909, giving details of a protest meeting held to prevent the sale of Charlotte Despard's goods. In *The Vote*, March 2nd 1912, p. 227 it was reported at a League meeting in Buxton that Despard had not paid her imperial taxes for five years.

⁶⁶*The Vote*, April 29th 1911, p. 7, May 13th 1911, p. 35, June 17th 1911, p. 93, and November 11th 1911, p. 34.

⁶⁷Margaret Wynne Nevinson, *Five Years Struggle for Freedom. A History of the Suffrage Movement for 1908 - 1912*, (WFL, London, 1912), p. 16. Sproson was moved to the first division after a hunger strike. For a short biography see Appendix Five. Constance Andrews was imprisoned in Ipswich in this year for the same offence.

to expostulate with us."⁶⁸

Thus it was during 1911 that the work of the Women's Tax Resistance League and the League's tax resisters really came to fruition. With the spate of prosecutions and imprisonments, members were presented with examples of an alternative to the violent confrontation and abuse which had previously accompanied protests against their exclusion from citizenship. Furthermore, tax resistance proved a consistent point of alliance between members of the numerous suffrage societies, especially between the two militant societies and the NUWSS. As Margaret Kineton Parkes pointed out:

Tax Resistance forms a common bond of action for Suffragists of all shades of opinion. Many Suffragists of "Militant" spirit have definitely made Tax Resistance their chosen line of protest, and we also number among our members many Constitutional Suffragists.⁶⁹

However, Parkes was in the minority in emphasising this "common bond", even though as I will indicate later, there is evidence which substantiates her claim of links between the suffrage societies.⁷⁰ In spite of these links, there were conflicts of interest between League tax resisters and other groups closely associated with the campaigns for women's suffrage. This was demonstrated by the actions taken by the League in response to the introduction of the Insurance Bill.

⁶⁸WFL *Annual Report*, 1911, pp. 19-20, 22.

⁶⁹Margaret Kineton Parkes, *Why We Resist Our Taxes*, (WTRL, London, n.d), p. 7.

⁷⁰In 1911 resisting WFL members received practical help from the WTRL and the earlier tensions between the two organisations appears to have diminished. Tax resistance was so crucial to some activists that they actually devoted their energies to this organisation above all others. At least two women who were originally in the WFL, Marie Lawson, ex-director of the Minerva Publishing Company, and Amy Hicks of the Hampstead branch were active members of the WTRL. See *The Vote*, and Suffragette Fellowship Collection (Museum of London), Group D. Vol. III, p. 10.

In 1911 Lloyd George introduced the Government's plans to introduce insurance contributions to cover sickness and unemployment in the National Insurance Bill. Both before and after it received royal assent at the end of 1911, the bill served as another focus for passive resisters in the WFL who were urged not to comply with the new taxes. However in this case WFL members had to tread much more carefully because the introduction of the bill had elicited a variety of responses from those groups in society who would be affected by this legislation. There were those who resisted the bill on the grounds that it would force employers to lower wages or release staff, and those who supported the legislation as a progressive step towards alleviating hardship. The WFL acknowledged these particular difficulties, yet remained firm to their original statement that they opposed the legislation because women had not been consulted and that decisions were being made for them without their consent.⁷¹ Because of their commitment to this policy, the WFL found themselves in a difficult position because their policy of resistance intersected directly with the concerns of sections of the labour movement, many of whom still had unofficial links with the League. Labour MPs and activists welcomed the national insurance proposals, while campaigning to get them extended both in terms of the workers who received benefits and the amounts that were paid out.⁷² Individual League members must have found themselves in a difficult position because the debates over the Insurance Bill and the WFL's stated position conflicted with some members' demands for welfare legislation to improve conditions

⁷¹The arguments used by the League against the National Insurance Act rested on demonstrating the rejection by women of all classes of the legislation because they had not been consulted. However, some members protests might also have be motivated by a rejection of state intervention into the relationship between employer and employee. The photograph on p. 180 was printed in *The Vote*, June 8th 1912, p. 117.

⁷²See E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, pp. 353-354. She records how the suffragette movement were opposed to the national insurance tax, but claimed herself discontented with the "destructive criticism" of this "far-reaching legislation".

for women workers. Conflicts over this policy led to at least one resignation from the NEC, that of Mrs Snow, Head of the *Vote* Sales department in January 1913.⁷³



The Men "Had Women Had A Vote We Should Never Have Reached Such An Impasse!"

Plate 6: An Argument Against National Insurance

⁷³NEC Minutes, January 11th 1913, p. 21.

In contrast to the difficulties over resistance to the National Insurance Act within the League, there was the remarkable success of the WSPU "Coronation Procession" in June 1911. League branches made up an impressive WFL contingent, which was accompanied by one made up of NUWSS members, and as *The Vote* later commented, "Never perhaps in the whole history of our great movement was the spirit of comradeship so overwhelming evident."⁷⁴ This marked the first, and the last time when such co-operation between all the suffrage societies was so publicly displayed.

In the branches the instances of cross-society co-operation had been building for a number of years, and where in 1910 five WFL branches reported activities with both the NUWSS and the WSPU, in 1911 this number had risen to fifteen. However these instances of "common bonds" in local branches were tempered by the lack of agreement among national leaders on the sincerity of attempts by Parliament to legislate on suffrage. The growing divergence between the WFL and the WSPU, nationally at least, hit home when the WSPU decided to call off their truce with the Government in the latter months of 1911.

In the aftermath of the latest WSPU actions, unlike the situation a year earlier, spokeswomen for the League were less reticent about stating their reservations on WSPU militancy. Despard in particular was more assured in asserting a distinct WFL position:

⁷⁴For details of the procession see Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, pp. 122-138. *The Vote*, June 24th 1911, pp. 110-116 lists the forty-four WFL branches that were represented by members in the procession.

as regards our future action and the principles on which we act, we are militant; and when the moment for effective, logical, well-considered militancy arrives, we shall find means of showing that we do not intend tamely to submit to the perpetual tutelage which a manhood suffrage bill would entail. Not a militant action which spreads itself over one day and is simply forgotten by the curious sensation-loving crowd, shall we initiate, if the worse comes to pass. A militancy rather the object of which will be to hamper Government action continually - through resistance of taxation and revolt against other legislation - and to show in certain striking ways the importance of women's place in the nation⁷⁵

In this statement, Charlotte Despard emphasised that a distinct militant programme endorsed by the WFL would be put into action if at any stage they believed the Government would not act on their pledge and legislate on women's suffrage in the new Government-sponsored Reform Bill. Despard's statement indicates that the WFL had finally broken its commitment not to criticise their sisters in the WSPU, and was forcefully striking out in an independent direction. This was demonstrated, again by Despard, early the following year, when she stated:

..We occupy a unique and peculiarly difficult position, but a useful one...we are in the middle of two opposing principles... Militancy to the WFL is an elastic weapon... We can use it or we can refrain. When we use militancy we put forward the logic behind it.⁷⁶

Her reference to the League's "peculiar difficulties" rebounded on the League in a more intricate way than she imagined when the statement was published, and it was to be yet another year before a distinct WFL militant policy would be realised. In the intervening period, the League underwent a serious internal crisis, which culminated in

⁷⁵*The Vote*, December 2nd 1911, p. 66.

⁷⁶*The Vote*, February 3rd, 1912, p. 172. Charlotte Despard was by this time the editor of *The Vote*, and as such had overriding control of the material which went into the newspaper, and consequently the public image of the WFL. Her methods as editor were raised as another example of her autocratic style by Alison Neilans at the Special Conference in April 1912, who referred to an article written by the president which contradicted with another article written and endorsed by the NEC. See Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference 1912, p. 22.

the public criticism of seven NEC members at what they saw as Despard's attempts to govern the WFL autocratically.⁷⁷

The difficulties and tensions in the League in the first half of the year, were not solely a product of disagreements on the NEC. In the same period militancy was going through the last painful process of becoming acknowledged as a multi-faceted policy of resistance by women against their exclusion from citizenship. This multi-faceted nature was reflected in the affirmation of militancy as *various types* of resistance which contained aspects of passive resistance and active, confrontational protests against the law, male power, and sexual and economic inequality. There was a conscious awareness of a policy of resistance which had outstripped older boundaries of suffrage militancy, but which was still bound by reference to them. The final formulation of this policy of resistance is discussed below.

At the special conference in April 1912 it was agreed that militancy was to be *any kind of protest involving the risk of imprisonment*, and this included tax resistance, because as Charlotte Despard pointed out, women were suffering in prison because of it, yet there was to be *no violence towards persons or private property*.⁷⁸ This inclusion of passive resistance as militancy in the WFL's policy marked an explicit acknowledgement by League members of a wider spectrum of civil resistance in relation to women's unequal position. There were now plans to boycott goods sold and

⁷⁷See Chapter One, pp. 82-86.

⁷⁸Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, p. 27. The position of no violence towards persons or private property had been agreed by the League much earlier. However in 1912 it became necessary to strongly re-emphasize this as the WSPU began its campaign against the property of Government ministers.

produced by opponents of women's suffrage which were acted upon with increasing zeal.⁷⁹

However, the majority of League delegates backed away from Charlotte Despard's plans for a "Producers and Consumers League," whereby members would only buy goods from businesses managed by women. She also suggested that a farm be purchased which could be operated by women who would produce food for other women.⁸⁰ The president was opposed not because of fundamental disagreements with her ideas, but because it was felt that such actions would take far too long, "we should be working for the vote for our great great-grandchildren" commented one delegate. A less vocal, but persistent argument also raised its head again when it was claimed by one delegate that in doing so you "are limiting free speech".⁸¹

⁷⁹Verbatim Minutes, 1912, pp. 32, 34-35. That some members were already practising this is evident in a letter written by a League member to *The Vote*, January 14th 1911, p. 147. Signing herself as a "housewife" she stated that although she was not able to help in propaganda and speeches, every week she bought her coal from an advertiser in *The Vote*. The Minerva Publishing Company actually ran a competition to encourage readers to buy goods from those advertisers, although this was also geared towards covering the costs of producing the paper. See *The Vote*, March 12th 1910, p. 236.

⁸⁰Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference, 1912, p. 36. Despard's proposals were not a new phenomenon in political resistance as earlier in the nineteenth century the Chartist movement devised their Land Plan, and its female members, especially, advocated exclusive dealing. Owenites had established worker owned shops where the means of production and distribution were collectively owned. See Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, esp. pp. 83-101 and Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988), passim. Also Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s*, (Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York & London, 1993), pp. 223-225, refers to the consumer movement which was particularly strong among American woman suffragists from the late nineteenth century.

⁸¹Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference 1912, p. 36.

Such comments formed the crux of the WFL's difficulties in constructing a militant policy too heavily geared to one form of resistance. Even with the broad agreement on passive resistance, there were those members who desired immediate militant action which would produce immediate results, and which would raise the profile of women's suffrage. Publicity was still a powerful force, and although the majority of delegates were against the outrages of WSPU window smashers, there was strong support for high profile instant protests against the Government - as long as they did not infringe on the rights of free speech. In the words of Charlotte Despard, many wanted actions that were "going to last" and which would in some way "upset the structure of society".⁸² The deliberations had proved that the League would need to direct its energies on various fronts in terms of political resistance, yet this policy still had to produce conclusive results.

For the remainder of 1912, the WFL waited to see the fate of the Conciliation Bill and the Government's Reform Bill, and while they made much of their continued abidance of the truce, members continued to resist their taxes, and undertake educative and propaganda work at by-elections and in the branches. Certainly the police and members of the public seemed to dismiss the WFL's truce as the former rushed to arrest any WFL member, even at peaceful protests, and crowds of the latter also demonstrated their lack of interest in the truce as they set about interrupting League meetings. The actions which provoked the most outrage from the League was the wrecking of a WFL fair organised by the Montgomery Boroughs branch in July 1912. In the same month Constance Andrews reported how on her tour with the WFL caravan they were met in one small village "by a crowd of 1,500 hostile people", who refuse to let them speak

⁸²Verbatim Minutes, Special Conference 1912, p. 31.

and hounded them outside their lodgings until midnight. The following day the League tourists went to find their caravan had been wrecked.⁸³

The WFL's claim that it still officially observed a truce with the Government was nominal, as opponents failed to make any such distinction. Moreover, by the WFL's own definition of passive resistance as militancy, the WFL had never observed a truce in the first place. However, their continued claims that they were refraining from militancy demonstrate how the WFL still relied on the association of militancy with outright law breaking and large public demonstrations. The growing gulf between the WFL's apparent patience with the deliberations of parliament, the effect and reactions to WSPU militancy, and the assaults on WFL activities, left a minority of members desperate to undertake such active large scale protests again. Their discontent was offset by an enticing rhetoric masterminded by Charlotte Despard which always threatened active militancy - by calling for members to volunteer for danger duty - but always asserting that any WFL actions would be logical and considered.⁸⁴ Despard's policy served to keep dissatisfied militant advocates in the League, as well as reassuring those who were less eager to resume active militancy, and calming fears that the League might copy WSPU actions which had graduated on to arson and widespread destruction.

At the end of 1912, the patience of League members and leaders alike was wearing thin, as the Government continued to prevaricate on the issue of women's suffrage. Consequently there were moves in the League once again towards a more explicit and direct anti-Government stance, embodied through mass public demonstration

⁸³*The Vote*, July 13th 1912, p. 204, and July 27th 1912, pp. 246-247.

⁸⁴For example Charlotte Despard, "On Watch!", *The Vote*, August 14th 1912, p. 292.

and "shock" tactics. This was reflected by Charlotte Despard when she argued:

..we desire peace with our brothers..the latest militancy can be explained and justified to a certain extent... all use these tactics if they really believe it is right....we are fighting for our freedom in our country...⁸⁵

This was the position of the WFL as the campaign for women's suffrage moved into 1913. Charlotte Despard commented as the League looked set to return to active militancy, "We are 'builders' as well as 'fighters'".⁸⁶ She demonstrated how the WFL had moved beyond the militant policies it had endorsed between 1907 and 1910. In 1913 and 1914 the militant resistance of the WFL finally encapsulated a dual emphasis on "building" the militant campaign to incorporate the different positions of their members, and "fighting" the Government in their refusal to do justice to women and acknowledge them as citizens of the nation. In the final part of this chapter I explore the practical effect of this dual concern.

ii) **"..Builders and Fighters...": The Climax of WFL Militancy 1913 - 1914**

In January 1913, members of the WFL were being bombarded with reports in *The Vote* of the tax resistance campaigns of their fellow members, and with urgent requests that they buy their goods from the pro-suffrage businesses who placed advertisements in *The Vote*. At the end of the month, the Government bill which included an amendment on women's suffrage was rejected in the Commons and this finally broke the last vestiges of the WFL's claim to a truce with the Government. Shortly after the announcement on the bill Elizabeth Knight and Charlotte Despard led a protest march in London, in the style favoured prior to the 1910 truce and were quickly and

⁸⁵*The Vote*, December 7th 1912, p. 98.

⁸⁶*The Vote*, December 7th 1912, p. 98.

predictably arrested by the police.⁸⁷ The subsequent attention given to these events in *The Vote* demonstrated to its readers that once again, the WFL had resumed direct protests against the Government. In a statement written to members it was declared that the "WFL will once more resort to militancy".⁸⁸ The return to a narrow definition of militancy as public protest was necessary to demonstrate a *shift* in policy, and to incite members in branches to undertake more confrontational methods of protest. In some well-organised branches it did have the desired affect, and members in Portsmouth, Middlesbrough, Manchester, and Brighton organised secret bill-posting campaigns in their towns reminiscent of those carried out in London in 1908.⁸⁹

In the initial months after the declaration in *The Vote*, militant actions focused strongly on other protests which had characterised the WFL's campaign of political resistance prior to 1910, namely public demonstrations which culminated in arrests. While the policy of non-violence continued to constitute an important thrust of the WFL's resistance, at the same time, the League capitalised on the violence meted out to, and also by, WSPU demonstrators, in the style of language they used in *The Vote* to protest against the treatment of their cause by the Government.⁹⁰

However, as the WFL settled down again into its role of agitator against the Government, the emphasis on WFL militancy turned towards a broader base which

⁸⁷NEC Minutes, February 8th 1913, pp. 33-34.

⁸⁸*The Vote*, January 31st 1913, p. 222.

⁸⁹*The Vote*, February 14th 1913, pp. 269, 270, and *WFL Annual Report*, 1914, pp. 24, 26.

⁹⁰For example, see in *The Vote* comments on forcible feeding, April 27th 1912, p. 22, and June 29th 1912, p. 168.

balanced public protest and passive resistance. Finally the League began to reap the benefits of the long and often divisive discussions on diversifying militant resistance. An indication of these benefits was the transcendence of previous heated arguments on the issue of free speech. Whereas in 1909 this question had divided the League, by 1913 it served as a rallying point and formed the main focus of two large London based public demonstrations in April and May. At these meetings speakers strongly protested against the denial of free speech to *women* rather than as in 1909 debating its denial to liberal politicians by suffrage activists.⁹¹

The actions which followed the free speech protests and similar London based protests made in the vicinity of Parliament led to protests against the treatment of women in police courts and while in custody. These campaigns had a double edge, because they raised the issue of inconsistencies between the sentencing of suffragists and other women for non-violent crimes, and those given to men found guilty of crimes against women and children. The League also protested against the forced exclusion of women from courts when certain cases were discussed, often those which contained explicit sexual references.⁹² The Police Court actions were reminiscent of those led by Teresa Billington-Greig back in 1907, but the emphasis had evolved into one of a "New Crusade" against the double standards which existed in the treatment of men and women offenders. The language used when referring to police court scandals was similar to that used by Christabel Pankhurst in *The Great Scourge* and focused on attacking the

⁹¹WFL *Annual Report*, 1914, p. 17, and *The Vote*, May 9th 1913, pp. 23-24.

⁹²*The Vote*, May 23rd 1913, p. 55, June 13th 1913, p. 107, and June 27th 1913, p. 137.

immorality of men, their double standards, and accompanying threats to women.⁹³

Thus resistance by the League members had moved beyond the law and government right to the heart of sexual politics.

One hindrance to the new dynamism in the League's militant policies was that once again the balance of emphasis on WFL militancy tended towards London in terms of popular press coverage and the notoriety of militant actions. An example was the coverage of the speeches given by Nina Boyle from a motor launch on the River Thames to unsuspecting MPs on the terrace of the House of Commons.⁹⁴ Whatever the prejudice of press reporters, the imbalance in terms of actual protests by members of the League, between London and other areas in Britain was not as extreme in 1913 as it had been in earlier years. Some local branch members ardently pursued their rights to enter Police Courts and sent in reports of the proceedings to *The Vote*. Tax resistance by members outside London continued apace with well-attended public meetings organised at the sale of goods in a number of areas.⁹⁵ The most spirited of these protests was undertaken by Kate Harvey, a close friend of Charlotte Despard, at her home in Bromley, Kent. In May 1913 she managed to barricade herself into her home

⁹³See Christabel Pankhurst, *The Great Scourge and how to end it*, (E. Pankhurst, London, 1913), passim. Susan Kingsley Kent emphasises this point in *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860-1914* (Routledge, London, 1990), pp. 5-7. Kingsley Kent argues however that these issues were at the heart of suffragists' demands, whereas I see them as one aspect, albeit an important one, especially during and after 1912. See Chapter Four for details.

⁹⁴WFL *Annual Report*, p. 18, and *The Vote*, July 25th 1913, p. 207. Nina Boyle was accompanied by Mrs Hyde, Mrs Watson and Miss Sidley.

⁹⁵WFL *Annual Report*, 1913, p. 15. Tax resistance was referred to as "our first line of attack" and it was reported that members from London, Chester, Glasgow, Edinburgh were resisting. Also Headquarters were resisting National Insurance taxes, as were number of individual members.

against officials attempting to collect the heavy fines imposed on her for her refusal to pay taxes. Accounts of the subsequent sale of her property reported large numbers of sympathizers crowding into the auction and bidding one penny for all the items put up for sale. In the League's *Annual Report* for 1913 it was recorded as "one of the most effective protests we have ever made!", and noted with satisfaction that the Government had made a loss of £7/- on the proceedings.⁹⁶

Throughout 1913 and 1914 the WFL continued their policy of resistance which focused on the "War against Law" in the police courts, on tax resistance and in occasional large public demonstrations. This drew in new members who at last appeared to respond positively to the WFL's message that it stood between the "extreme" violent militancy of the WSPU and constitutional, solely "pacific" protests by the NUWSS.⁹⁷ Although the WFL never became a secret and outlawed organisation to the same extent as the WSPU, it still posed a threat to the Government and male-dominated society. This can be seen in the actions of anonymous persons in paying the small fines imposed on League activists in order to prevent them going to prison. Also League members were highly indignant about the decision to refuse to allow them to meet in their traditional London venue, Caxton Hall, and the ban on public meetings in London parks. Finally, fears of a raid similar to the one on the WSPU offices appeared

⁹⁶WFL *Annual Report*, 1913, p. 16.

⁹⁷*The Vote*, June 6th 1913, pp. 87-88. The words "extreme" and "pacific" are quoted from this section of an article describing the WFL in relation to the WSPU and the NUWSS to European readers. This edition of *The Vote* was produced to coincide with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance conference at Budapest, which was attended by two WFL members.

to have led to the decision by the NEC to meet in secret from March 1913.⁹⁸

The WFL's resistance to laws which served men's interests, unrepresentative government and male sexual exploitation had the potential to be even more far reaching after 1913. Some in the League, notably Nina Boyle, were seriously attempting to diversify the thrust of militant protests into areas which had not before been considered.

Nina Boyle was South African by birth and the earliest references to her in relation to the WFL were in 1911. She was appointed as the assistant to the League's general secretary in September 1911 and swiftly came to occupy a more influential position which culminated in her appointment as Head of the Political and Militant Department after the Special Conference in April 1912. Nina Boyle always strongly identified herself as a suffragist, implying that women's mutual interests, because of their lack of the franchise, were of prime importance. Like League officials before her, Nina Boyle extended her interest in women's distinct concerns and interests to consider women's sexual, economic and legal inequality. In line with her growing importance in the League, which by 1914 had begun to vie with that of Despard, Boyle's ideas increasingly appeared in suggestions for militant actions during 1913 and 1914.⁹⁹

At the annual conference of the League in March 1914 Nina Boyle presented her plans for a series of deputations to Parliament to protest, amongst other things, at the

⁹⁸The decision to hold NEC meetings in secret and also to withhold from the authorities the names of NEC members was recorded in the NEC Minutes, March 31st 1913, p. 57. After this date, until October 17th 1915, the minutes of NEC meetings are missing.

⁹⁹*The Vote*, September 2nd 1911, p. 242, and NEC Minutes, June 29th 1912, p. 124, and November 17th 1912, p. 177.

lack of women's economic power in marriage and the disabilities married women faced in local Government. This fell into line with the NEC's recent actions in writing to Government ministers on the state of the vans which transported women from court to prison, and the need for women officers in prisons.¹⁰⁰ After long deliberations these initiatives were accepted on principle, yet concerns were expressed about the wisdom of this diversification, especially when it covered issues which seriously and fundamentally divided League members. Such divisions were most clearly highlighted in the discussion following Nina Boyle's proposal that :

....a direct threat be made, embodied in letters directed to the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other authorities, that should woman suffrage be denied beyond a certain date, a campaign to assist working women to limit the birth rate be commenced.¹⁰¹

The issue of birth control was certainly not a new one in this period, and a small number of women connected with the suffrage campaign had been active in its promotion since the late nineteenth century.¹⁰² However, this was the first time the issue had been raised so publicly in the WFL. During the subsequent discussion the majority declined to support the comments of Eunice Murray that it was an excellent idea, and that many "working people are ready to meet us half way". They showed by force of numbers, by thirty-nine votes to three, that the question was too controversial for the League. Alice Schofield Coates summed up the feeling of the majority when she declared, drawing on a mixture of religious conviction and moral reason, that abstinence should be the only weapon in such an undertaking, "otherwise you are giving people

¹⁰⁰Verbatim Minutes, Ninth Annual Conference, March 28th 1914, pp. 15-31. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1914).

¹⁰¹Verbatim Minutes, 1914, p. 61.

¹⁰²Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family, 1880-1930*, pp. 170-174. For reference to League members connected with this issue, see Chapter Four, pp. 217-218.

opportunities for unlimited licence."¹⁰³ It was not that the WFL shied away from discussion about reproduction and sexuality, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter. On the contrary, members were not unanimously agreed on what was seen as a "very complex question", and so tended to bypass it rather than publicly divide the League.

Subsequent support from members, by a large majority, for a plan to "raid the gold reserves of the Bank of England" as in the 1830/1 campaign to secure the Reform Bill, demonstrates that the WFL were prepared to undertake radical actions. Neither were they unduly worried by the lack of support from the WSPU and also the NUWSS, the latter declaring the WFL's plan to be "ethically objectionable".¹⁰⁴ In the event, neither the birth control campaign or the raid on gold reserves came to fruition, as the war prevented further diversification of the League's militant policy of resistance.

Despite the lack of consensus on the practice of militancy which came out of the 1914 League conference, the discussions themselves demonstrate how the League's policy of resistance continued to develop during 1914. While the League continued to identify militancy as public protest, in truth they had moved far beyond its original boundaries.

The proposal for militant actions which were discussed at the 1914 conference were never carried out for two reasons. Firstly, because of the now common resistance

¹⁰³Verbatim Minutes, 1914, pp. 61-71. Individually League members had become involved in campaigns for birth control, notably Edith How-Martyn, who increased her work in this area after her resignation from the League in 1912.

¹⁰⁴Verbatim Minutes, 1914, pp. 80-81.

of some members to plans for militant actions, and secondly, because of the outbreak of war in August 1914.

The impression given by scholars of the WSPU is that the outbreak of the first world war came as a necessary release for militant suffrage activists and allowed them to cease their activities which were embedded in a reactive pattern which had resulted in further retrenchment by the Government. This may indeed have been true for the WSPU leaders, who shortly after the outbreak of war rallied to support the war effort, apparently setting aside all their previous demands on the Liberal Government.¹⁰⁵ However, in the WFL the pattern was different, because although confrontational militant policies such as public demonstrations were reduced, the broader policy of resistance against taxes and against Government laws which were seen as unfair to women, did not disappear. This broader policy was to be important during the years of war, at a time when members faced strong pressure to support the very society which they had previously condemned.¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, reminiscences and identification with the various meanings of militancy were to play an important part in the WFL after 1914, even though the mass support never returned. References to militancy's significance, and its "extraordinary" qualities continued to be made long after militancy had ceased to be seen as the defining element of the women's movement in Britain.

¹⁰⁵Rosen argues that the WSPU by 1914 was practically a millenarian organisation, devoted to the "policies of apocalypse". See Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women!*, p. 245. However, a distinction should be made between the views and actions of the WSPU leadership and the members.

¹⁰⁶This point is discussed in Chapter Five.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have explored the origins of the various strands of political resistance which were incorporated into the League's policy of resistance. By 1914 the meaning of WFL militancy was still a contentious issue in the League. The return to styles of public protest which had been favoured in the period up to 1910 signify that the League could never disassociate itself from the original militant image of protest first developed in the WSPU from 1905. The crucial difference was that League activists drew at particular times on older and more recent traditions of passive resistance and nonviolence, creative media and public protest, to highlight the inequalities women experienced, and the marginalisation they suffered in the social, political, sexual and economic spheres of society.

The criticisms of militancy made by Teresa Billington-Greig in 1910 were never fully overcome, yet the experiences of the League after this year had shown that it was simply was not in their interests to do so. The tensions in the League needed to be contained, and the result was that a mixture of ideals and practices went to construct a highly diverse meaning to militancy in the WFL. This development was made even more complex because in the same period women were debating precisely what changes they needed in their lives. In the following chapter I explore in detail the content of these ideas, and the extent to which a broader feminist understanding of women's inequalities was generated.

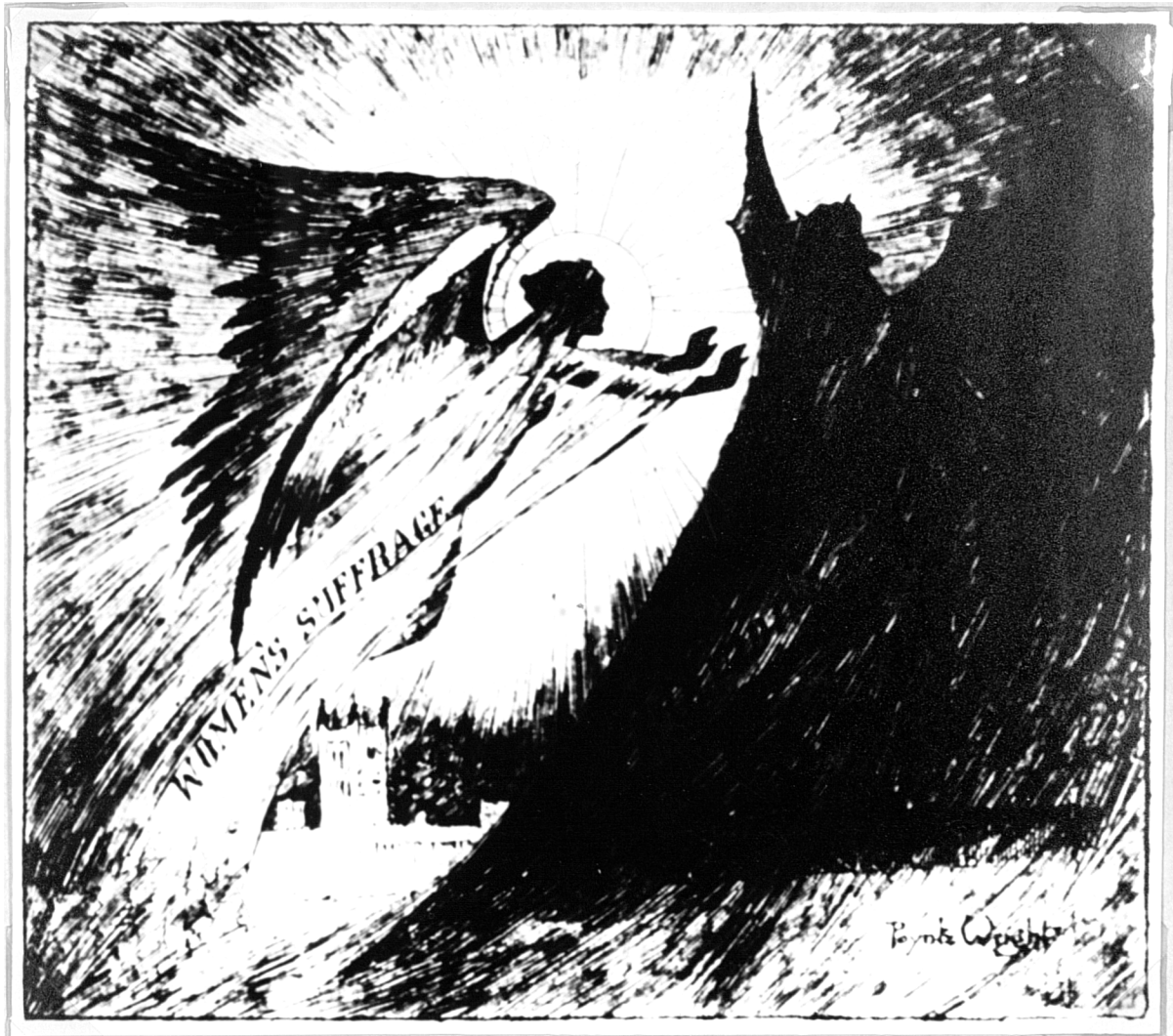


Plate 7: "Women's Suffrage"

CHAPTER FOUR

"A GREAT AND WONDERFUL FEMINIST MOVEMENT"¹

THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMINISM IN THE WFL, 1907 - 1914

INTRODUCTION

The aims of this chapter are to explore the context in which members of the Women's Freedom League understood gender relations in society in the period up to 1914, and the ways in which they articulated challenges on a series of fronts in order to achieve their visions of a progressive and equal society. These issues are significant because traditionally the activities of woman suffragists have been seen as geared solely towards the attainment of equal parliamentary representation, and their 'success' in 1918 as the pinnacle of women's organised revolt against patriarchal society and its values.² The result has been the institutionalisation of the belief that the objectives of feminists earlier this century were synonymous with those of women suffragists.³

In this chapter I take an alternative approach. I explore how League members understood the terms feminism and a feminist movement, and the ways in which they

¹Title taken from comments by League member, Bettina Borrmann Wells. See p. 202.

²Ray Strachey's *The Cause* provides the best example. For a critique of this tradition see Ros Delmar, "What is Feminism?" in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds. *What is Feminism*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986), pp. 14-24.

³In the period covered in this chapter, the term feminism was just coming into use by activists in organisations fighting for women's equality, including the WFL. I use the term in its historical context, and am not arguing that League members' use of the term in any way represents current usage.

saw these as distinct from, although linked to, the campaign for the vote.⁴ As I stated in the Introduction to this thesis, in reflecting on the arguments of members, I use a modern definition of feminism formulated by Nancy Cott which is made up of three components; an opposition to the control of one sex by another; a belief that women's status is socially constructed rather than natural; and the belief that women are not only a biological sex, but also a social group, with some common experiences.⁵ Cott argued that the fragmentation of an all embracing concept of "woman" was a product of changes in the second half of the nineteenth century whereby woman began to enter previously forbidden areas in social, economic and political life. The result was that women's rights activists and campaigners could no longer categorically claim complete sex oppression and so began to search for other explanations for women's continued lack of status and equality in society. Cott argues that this process, which was symbolised by an increasing use of the term feminism, produced the defining features of modern feminism.⁶

In understanding how - and indeed if - the WFL contributed to the development

⁴This approach differs from the arguments of Susan Kingsley Kent, who interpret the suffrage movement as the height of feminist "sex-war", and who sees the women's movement of the 1920s as a "failure of feminism." See Introduction, pp. 22-23.

⁵This definition is used by Nancy Cott in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1987), pp. 4-5. Cott's work focuses on interpreting American feminism. For a more precise account of the issues raised in this book see, Cott's "Feminist Theory and Feminist Movements: the Past Before Us", in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, *What is Feminism?*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986), pp. 49-62.

⁶Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, pp. 1-10. Other scholars who explore the relationship of the concept "woman" to this period are Ros Delmar, "What is feminism?", in Juliet Mitchell & Ann Oakley, eds., *What is Feminism?*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986), p. 23, and Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, (Macmillan, London, 1988), pp. 67-95.

of modern feminism as outlined by Cott, the following issues will be explored: in the first section I consider the ideas of gender inequality and progress formulated by members and the extent to which they constituted the defining features of feminism as it was developed in the WFL. The second section explores in more detail the ways League members defined inequality and how they negotiated the differences between women, particularly in relation to their class and domestic responsibilities and their sexual identities. The final section returns to the question of women's distinct organisations and their relationship to a developing feminist movement. I conclude by considering the extent to which the League fulfilled its visions of becoming a "feminist organisation".⁷

⁷In Chapter Two I argued that League branch members did discuss their ideas on inequality through forums like branch meetings. However, relatively few were in a position where they could record and publicize their ideas on issues other than demands for the vote. The exceptions to this silence were leading League members like Charlotte Despard, Teresa Billington Greig and Nina Boyle, and other members who are discussed in this chapter who occasionally took up conceptual issues. Yet, simply to write about these women's ideas is not necessarily representative of the way other League members thought about gender relations, and for this reason I have used extensive material from *The Vote*. In spite of its limitations, *The Vote* did provide a greater number of members the chance to express their ideas, concerns and beliefs. In addition I have explored in some cases the responses of the membership in general, although detailed comments rely heavily on speculation and insights acquired through my detailed study of connected campaigns and activities.

Section I: "I BELIEVE IN OUR SUCCESS, BECAUSE I BELIEVE IN PROGRESS.": THE DEFINING FEATURES OF FEMINISM IN THE WFL.⁸

In the 1910s the term feminism had by no means acquired an established or agreed frame of reference but had remained an ambiguous terms since it was first used by Hubertine Auclert in France in the 1890s. This ambiguity has been highlighted by Nancy Cott, who argues that in the United States the term was more commonly used by sceptics and those critical of the campaigns to emancipate women.⁹ A similar situation is apparent in Britain in the early years of the twentieth century. The term was used negatively, for instance, in a *Daily Sketch* article published in September 1909, entitled "The Failure of Feminism." It asked, "Do Women Matter? Are they any force or help: Or are they really a hindrance to the world?..." Whatever the ambiguities among suffragists and women's rights campaigners, it seemed that male journalists had coined a use for the term.¹⁰

On the subject of altering gender relations, members of the WFL, and the speakers they attracted, generally offered more constructive alternatives. The women discussed below understood feminism in the following ways; as an evolutionary, spiritual or progressive concept; as a pathway to more humanist consciousness of the partnership between men and women, based on economic equality; as a challenge to the belief in women's natural subordination; more straightforwardly as a reflection of the significant

⁸Taken from a statement made by WFL member, Bettina Borrmann Wells, printed in *The Vote*, March 5th 1910, p. 219.

⁹Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, pp. 13-15, 289 [note no. 4].

¹⁰*MAS*, Vol. VIII, p. 41. Taken from *The Daily Sketch*, Saturday September 18th 1909.

progress women had made in social, economic and political spheres; and also as the embodiment of critiques of sexual inequality and women's sexual oppression by men.

The range of meaning attached to the term feminism was apparent in the different reactions of League members. For example in September 1910 *The Vote's* editor, Mary Kennedy published an interview she had conducted with London activist, Bettina Borrmann Wells, where she described her as "besides being a strong feminist, above everything else [she] is a very feminine woman."¹¹ That Mary Kennedy felt the need to emphasize such a point suggests a possible awareness of the negative connotations associated with self declared "feminists", and even her own misgivings about the term. Bettina Borrmann Wells herself presented a more positive analysis of her beliefs, and was quoted as saying:

I sometimes think that we do not lay sufficient stress on the great and wonderful feminist movement of which suffrage is but a phase. What fascinates me is the gradual evolution of womanhood. This evolution is a product of the economic pressure of industrialism on the one hand and of the growth of altruism and higher ethical ideas on the other. Partly the chains are dropping off, partly we cast them off. I have not a particle of sex prejudice, and yet I feel that this freeing of womanhood of the race is more important than anything else in the world today.¹²

The most striking point which emerges in Borrmann Wells' comments is the way she merged a progressive view of womanhood with an emphasis on an evolutionary perspective, which was directly related to economic development and a process of self-transformation. What is significant is the way her views bear distinct similarities with other sets of ideas and beliefs concerning social change articulated in this period. Not

¹¹*The Vote*, September 3rd 1910, p. 220.

¹²*The Vote*, September 3rd, 1910, pp. 220-221. Bettina Borrmann Wells's views are certainly clear, although the interviewer says little about other League members' attitudes to feminism.

least, her comments on gradual progress followed both a liberal tradition of individual human rights, and also Darwinian ideas of the inevitable development of the species.¹³

Borrmann Wells stands out among members of the WFL for her confident identification with feminism. Possibly her views had been developed during her years in America between 1907 and 1909 where she was deeply involved in the women's movement. Prior to her return to Britain when she transferred her formidable organisational energy to the WFL, Borrmann Wells helped to form the National Progressive Women's Suffrage Union of America in 1908.¹⁴ The earlier development of an organised women's movement in the United States of America, differing from Britain in its focus and background, lends weight to speculation that during her stay, Borrmann Wells may have worked with women who were more at ease with the concept feminism.¹⁵ It may have been through this process that she incorporated emergent definitions into her own understanding of social change.

A fellow League member who was less enthusiastic about the term feminism was the president Charlotte Despard. One of her biographers, Andro Linklater has found

¹³For further details on Darwinism, see Peter Bowler, *Evolution. The History of an Idea*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984), pp. 176-265.

¹⁴*The Vote*, September 3rd, 1910, p. 220. The interview also recorded how before her return to London Borrmann Wells inaugurated the American Legislative Union and the Progressive Women Suffrage Union of New Jersey. Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, p. 27, states that the Progressive Union was the first society in America to attempt a street parade in 1908.

¹⁵Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movement in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s*. (Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York & London, 1993), pp. 1-11. In this recent book Bolt charts the different experiences and factors influencing the movements in the two countries. However, she says nothing on the actual use of the term feminism and used this term interchangeably with that of "women's movement."

records of a speech where she claimed to "hate the very word", stating that it:

...is my earnest hope that the present women's movement will prove to be a passing phase and that the day is not long distant when it will merge with the men's movement.¹⁶

In other pieces, particularly those written for *The Vote*, Despard was certainly not as vehemently against women's distinct organisation, or feminism, as is implied above.

Indeed in one article written to League members in 1911, she argued entirely differently,

I see the Vote won and I see beyond it. I see our League settling itself, through the instruments it has obtained, to help in the great synthetical work of the opening century...My forecast is that in the Women's Freedom League one of these instruments is to be found. I see those who have been the most earnest students of social conditions - those who have felt most deeply the power of feminism and its part in the growing humanism of to-day refusing to loose the bands of comradeship that hold them together...¹⁷

I discuss her ideas on the future of the WFL and the connections other League members made between feminism and the women's movement, later in this chapter. At this stage I want to concentrate on Despard's reference to "humanism", because it is this statement which provides the key to her understanding of change in society. Despard perceived "progress" as the time when men and women would join together as equals and work for the good of *humanity*.¹⁸ She linked this with her belief that the first stage, which

¹⁶Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 164. Linklater provides no references for his sources.

¹⁷*The Vote*, February 18th 1911, p. 201. Despard's comments come from a series of three articles written in *The Vote* apparently as an attempt to detract from the bitter criticisms made of it by Teresa Billington Greig following her departure at the end of 1910. See below, pp. 243-244.

¹⁸Humanism was first popularly used to define a set of beliefs in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It continued to be used even alongside feminism, for example by Laurence Housman in his book *The New Humanism*, (WFL, London, 1920), which envisaged co-operation between women and men. An article by Despard in *The Vote*, January 28th 1911, p. 163, contained this extract; "Progress! Here I boldly and fearlessly maintain that from the platform of the WFL, from its initiations until now, the one note has continually been sounded. Progress for all to be a part of longing for better conditions, larger possibilities for all, men, women, children, workers, sufferers from the

represented the achievement of equality, would only be achieved if women organised separately.

Despard's ideas give an important indication of the development of the meaning of feminism in the WFL. Firstly, she was one of the most prolific and influential exponents of ideas on women's status and change in the WFL in the crucial years between 1910 and 1918. Secondly, in spite of her rejection of the term "feminist", there are a number of important connections between her ideas and those of Borrmann Wells which suggest some common ground. Lastly her views are important because of the way she combined her strong commitment to women's rights with her commitment to socialist principles of economic regeneration, workers' rights and comradeship between the sexes.

It is possible that Despard's interest in theosophy was responsible for her ability to reconcile class oppression and women's interests at certain times. Theosophy, like Darwinian beliefs, was grounded in the principles of inevitable change, but differed in that followers believed change would be achieved through individual moral and spiritual development. Linklater has argued that through her practice of theosophy, Despard came to understand how her socialist beliefs and her belief in women's equality need not be antagonistic, because they were part of the same spiritual force which would lead to a new and equal society for all people.¹⁹

injustice of society..."

¹⁹Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 158. Linklater also includes Despard's catholicism in this equation.

Other League members were drawn to the theosophical belief of a gradual replacement of the traits of masculinity with more feminine qualities. Marion Holmes and Kate Harvey were among Despard's colleagues in the League who also worked and waited for the certain coming of a New Order where the class and gender inequalities, which were such a part of the 'old order', would be a thing of the past.²⁰

Despard's arguments and ideas on social change, and the connections she made with changes in gender relations, stand as one dimension to the development of feminist ideas by campaigners for women's rights in Britain in this period. They existed alongside, and frequently intersected with a variety of alternative arguments. Those expressed by other members of the League focused on economic regeneration, an uplifting of women's domestic responsibilities and skills, an end to male sexual violence against women and children, and the longer standing liberal beliefs of individual rights. As I have previously indicated these did not operate in mutually exclusive environments and were often crucially connected through the language used and campaigns adopted by League members in this period.²¹

Despard's interest in changing economic power relations touched a chord with those members, who like their president had acquired their early political experiences in organisations like the ILP and the SDF. Indeed, both Borrmann Wells and Despard's emphasis on comradeship and progress between the sexes mirrored beliefs in the ILP

²⁰Charlotte Despard wrote a number of articles and books on theosophy and its connections with the women's movement including *Theosophy and the Women's Movement*, (Theosophical Publishing Society, London, 1913), and the article "The Coming of the New Age". On Kate Harvey, see Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 156, and Marion Holmes, see *The Vote*, April 16th 1910, p. 292.

²¹See Chapter Three.

and the labour movement generally, and so the two on some levels could be seen to occupy some common ground.²² However, those who did not ascribe to the principles of theosophy espoused by Despard, could not so easily overcome their sense of the conflicting interests between class and economic regeneration and the freeing of womanhood, as I demonstrate in the following section.

Equally, Liberal women were in a position to bring in their ideas and beliefs about individual rights, democracy and equality, which found a ready base in the constitutional principles of the WFL. Yet as demonstrated in Chapter Three, once such principles, like "free speech", were transferred into the League, the relationship between the two was neither static or stable.²³

American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman's highly developed ideas on gender roles in society and her emphasis on the concepts of progress and change were similar to the ideas held by some members of the WFL. Perkins Gilman rejected the label feminist, preferring to call herself a masculinist, arguing that "it was she who sought to introduce a truly humanised concept."²⁴ She argued that women had been forced to depend on men economically since their labour had been appropriated by men.²⁵

²²This is manifested from the comments in the editorial of *Labour Leader's* special suffrage supplement in January 1913, where it was argued that "In the comradeship of the sexes lies the hope of progress and social regeneration." This quote makes up the title of June Hanham's study of Women in the West Riding of the ILP, in Jane Rendall, ed., *Equal or Different*, p. 214 [pp. 214-238]. See *Labour Leader*, January 9th 1913.

²³See Chapter Three, pp. 159-160, 189.

²⁴Ann J. Lane, ed., *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader. The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Fiction*, (The Women's Press, London, 1987), p. xiv

²⁵Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man Made World or Our Androcentric Culture*, (Charlton, New York, 1911). This book was reviewed in *The Vote*, January 13th 1912,

While this situation has once been necessary for evolution, Perkins Gilman believed that civilization now required that a balance be achieved which equally acknowledged female qualities such as co-operation and nurturing.²⁶ This balance could only be attained if women led the struggle for their equality, which would reap benefits for the whole of society.²⁷

Perkins Gilman's clear arguments and readable fiction made her a popular figure among League members, and her work was regularly recommended in *The Vote*, along with that of another well known writer, Olive Schreiner.²⁸ Perkins Gilman's connections with the League were strengthened during her visit to England in 1913. On her tour she spoke at a number of League meetings in London and also in Bromley, Kent at the home of the tax-resister, Kate Harvey. In one of these speeches to League members, Perkins Gilman focused on "The Real Devil" which she defined as those who remained in "the grip of the past...". The following quote is an extract from the report published in *The Vote* following the meeting:

If we would only put the Real Devil behind us and keep him there and face facts with an open mind, we could in three generations make more progress than has been accomplished in three thousand years; we should do what *we* thought best; not what *they* thought best...

The chief value of the Woman's Movement, she insisted, was that women were working, not for themselves, but for the race; only one-half of

p. 136. For more details on Perkins Gilman's work see Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done To Them*, (Pandora Press, London, 1988), pp. 516-527.

²⁶Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Olive Schreiner also developed forceful critiques of militarism, arguing that it was a fundamental masculine trait. See Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham. Feminism & Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820*. (Virago, London, 1989), pp. 65-70. See Chapter Five, pp. 254-255.

²⁷Ann J. Lane, ed., *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, pp. xiii, xiv.

²⁸*The Vote*, January 13th 1912, p. 136, July 11th 1913, p. 201, and January 2nd 1914.

the race had taken part in its management; the other half was capable of wide development to the infinite benefit of all concerned - man and woman standing together against the Real Devil....²⁹

Despite Charlotte Perkins Gilman's successful encounter with the League in 1913, her involvement was on a different, rather more distant, level from those League members who regularly spoke at meetings, wrote articles and took part in the internal government of the League.³⁰ These women reflected and digested the particular immediate concerns and changes facing suffrage activists in this period in Britain.

A home-grown critique of masculine dominance came from Scottish member, Eunice Murray in her pamphlet entitled *Prejudices, Old And New*. As the title suggests she argued that it was prejudice, and not 'natural' unchangeable differences between the sexes, which was holding women back from taking a full and equal share in social, economic and political life. Murray also extolled the progress women had made during the nineteenth century, in particular through gaining access to higher education and the medical profession.³¹

Murray's arguments need to be placed into context in order to understand this double-edged thrust, which criticised existing sex bias while at the same time giving examples of when and how this prejudice had been breached. When this pamphlet was written during 1912, Murray was arguing first and foremost the case for women's

²⁹*The Vote*, July 4th 1913, p. 165.

³⁰Perkins-Gilman did not return to speak for the WFL again. However later in 1926 she did send a letter of support and encouragement to *The Vote's* readership. See *The Vote*, December 10th 1926, pp. 385-386.

³¹Eunice G. Murray, *Prejudices Old And New*, (Published by the Scottish Council of the WFL, n.p. [1912]) pp. 3-15.

enfranchisement, and so in order to make her case stronger she had to emphasise how women were systematically excluded solely because of their sex. However, strategically she emphasised the recent successes in order to prove that women were capable of being effective citizens. As if to reinforce her belief in women's valuable contributions to society, Murray was emphatic in stressing how recent successes had been achieved through the efforts of women who "entered boldly into the affairs of the world". She wrote:

such women as Mary Somerville, the mathematician and astronomer, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, Mrs Gaskell, the Brontes and Mrs Browning, inspired and encouraged those who strove to win education for their sex....³²

In her arguments Murray was concerned to highlight individual women's contributions to changing society.³³ Furthermore, throughout the entire article, a distinct pattern emerged which defined and voiced a distinct political identity for women, grounded in a progressive vision of social change based on liberal principles and beliefs. League members did more than symbolically celebrate John Stuart Mill's work for women's rights through processions to his memorial in London. There were those, Murray among them, who appropriated the language and parameters of liberalism to advance their critiques. In *Prejudices Old And New*, she paid tribute to the small number of men who had helped the women's cause:

Here and there we find a man sufficiently generous to stand by her and fight her battles. First and foremost amongst these champions was John Stuart Mill; his hand was ever extended to help women in her struggle for

³²Eunice Murray, *Prejudices Old And New*, p. 8.

³³It was not simply literary figures who were heralded as the originators, later in *The Vote*, Florence Nightingale was described, interestingly as a "great feminist" in recognition of her support for J.S. Mill's attempts at suffrage reform for women. See *The Vote*, August 20th 1910, p. 196.

emancipation, whether it was social, political or educational liberty which she craved..³⁴

Murray's choice of political issues which concerned women included divorce laws, the mentally deficient, temperance, housing, education, tariff reform and the Criminal Law Amendment Act. These were a deliberate expression of the concern of the current Liberal Government in this period.³⁵ That suffragists and feminists in the WFL found so much to campaign for, and against, in the reforms of the Liberal Government, testifies to the crucial links between their beliefs and their allegiance to liberal notions of social progress and political reform. This allegiance existed in spite of the very real critiques of the same Government which denied them their rights. Indeed the outrage for some suffragists at least, was founded in the belief that the Liberal party had betrayed its traditions and political ideology by refusing to grant women political citizenship.

Eunice Murray's reference to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill is significant because she was writing at the period in the suffrage campaign when many organisations were campaigning for legal reforms to end the evils of the "white slave trade." Many League branches held meetings on this subject, and some like Brighton, focused much effort on attempts to pass a bill giving harsher sentences to profiteers from prostitution. However, Murray did not chose to concentrate on sexual violence and abuse in her pamphlet, and instead it was left to her friend and colleague, Nina Boyle to advance these issues in the League.

³⁴Eunice Murray, *Prejudices Old And New*, p. 8.

³⁵Eunice Murray, *Prejudices Old And New*, p. 14.

Nina Boyle, who came relatively late to prominence in the WFL, was responsible for a significant increase in attention to issues of male sexual abuse. Boyle had a tradition of involvement in campaigns to reform male sexual vice and its dangers to women and children, which dated from her involvement in the campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, in the 1880s. In the League after 1912, her contributions to *The Vote* on the subject of male sexual power increased, and her anger about sexual abuse, unequal marriage and violence spilled over in her articles. Both capitalising on and stimulating the second wave of Police Court protests taken up by League branches, Boyle roundly condemned the sex bias of judges and the lack of equal treatment meted out to women, particularly in the collection and submission of evidence by the police.³⁶ This expression of discontent was more than an offshoot of the suffrage campaign, and constituted a powerful element in feminist critiques of gender relations in this period, which dated back to the nineteenth century.³⁷ Also, many activists, both inside and outside the suffrage societies, argued that no real progress was possible while men still controlled and abused women through enforced heterosexual relationships.³⁸

In conclusion, while there were League members who were distinctly ambiguous

³⁶Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, pp. 20, 140, 141. For an example of Boyle's articles see *The Vote*, October 17th 1913, p. 406. Cited in Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, p. 140.

³⁷See Chapter below, pp. 213-214.

³⁸See Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, pp. 6-127. Jeffreys explores how the critiques of male sexuality, disease, violence and prescribed feminine norms in the period from the later nineteenth century, could come into conflict with liberal ideology and theories of natural rights and social progress. See also Dina Copelman, "Review Article: Liberal Ideology, Sexual Difference and the Lives of Women: Recent Works in British History", in *Journal of Modern History*, 62, 1990, pp. 315-323.

about the term feminism, it is possible to see how the ideas generated within the League, do *collectively* meet Nancy Cott's criteria for modern feminism. The interest in individual rights and democracy, critiques of sexual double standards, the belief in economic regeneration, moral, and spiritual forces, and the commitment to progress through a feminist movement, were fundamentally connected through individuals and different campaigns taken up by members in the period up to 1918. In the following sections I explore in more detail those campaigns, issues and ideas which attracted the critical attention of League members and which enabled some to develop their various ideas about "progress" into a more formalised feminist critique of existed gender relationships.

Section II: SITUATING WOMEN'S INEQUALITY

In Section One I signalled some connections between the late nineteenth century campaigns by women's rights activists and later campaigns in the WFL. In addition to the symbolic importance of nineteenth century campaigners, like Josephine Butler and John Stuart Mill, and the continuity provided by individuals such as Nina Boyle, League members also continued to use many of the same frameworks as their nineteenth century predecessors in their perceptions of gender relations. This heritage, which has only recently been credited with any systematic coherence, can be seen in the arguments League members used to demand equality.³⁹

³⁹See Mary Maynard, "Privilege & Patriarchy: Feminist Thought in The Nineteenth Century", in Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall, eds., *Sexuality and Subordination*, (Routledge, London, 1989), pp. 221-247. See also the recent work by Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movement in the United States and Britain*, pp. 182-235. Bolt connects the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries and challenges perceptions that the militant suffrage campaign somehow cut women off from the ideas of previous women campaigners.

Twentieth century campaigners inherited an awareness that ideologically women were located in society in the private sphere of home and family. While this was indeed a reality for many women, there was also recognition that increasingly women in certain sections and classes in society were employed in jobs and professions which took them outside their traditional domestic environment. Following this pattern, activists in the WFL argued that women had a right both to enter paid employment and to enter those institutions which controlled their working lives. They could demand at the same time that women's duties and responsibilities in the private sphere made it necessary and just that their voices be heard equally with those of men in the political arena. This issue of women's rights as individual workers and their duties as mothers and carers, contributed to discussion on the nature of womanhood itself.⁴⁰

League member Crystal Macmillan, demonstrated this dual emphasis in her contention that women were equal, but held particular qualities and responsibilities, in her contribution to the series in *The Vote* entitled "Why I Want The Vote". She stated:

I want the vote for women because they are different from men, different in the external accident of life, and in much of the work they do....And I want the vote for women because they are the same as men, the same in those fundamental human qualities in virtue of which a share in self-government is given to men...⁴¹

Her argument was one of many printed in this series which offered varied opinions and arguments for women's right to and need for the vote. Other League members did not state the issues raised by Macmillan as explicitly, but still they demanded equality with men by drawing on a language which served to accentuate their differences as women.

⁴⁰This has been identified in the arguments of women's rights campaigners in the late nineteenth century; see Mary Maynard, "Privilege & Patriarchy", pp. 234-237.

⁴¹*The Vote*, December 9th 1909, p. 74.

Maud Arncliffe Sennett's arguments mirrored those of others:

...Lord Curzon says "it is the imperishable heritage of the human race" and therefore it belongs to me...I want it for women's work..to educate children, house the poor, protect the mother's spirit, to vote away the bad divorce law which the "Englishman's sense of fair play" has though good enough for English wives!....⁴²

There appears to be no explicit awareness in Macmillan's and Arncliffe Sennett's arguments that this dual emphasis on 'equality' and 'difference' was necessarily problematic. However, such views were increasingly coming into conflict with the arguments and ideas of members of the Women's Trade Union League and the Women's Co-operative Guild, who were working for different groups of working-class women. Arguably the factor which allowed the WFL the flexibility to speak for "all women" was based in the nominal unity which they claimed existed among women through their common demand for the vote.

In spite of these surface allegiances and the extent to which class differences between women were sometimes brushed over in rhetoric, the League did separate women into different groups. Three such groups which continually surfaced in the arguments of League members focused on women as "wives and mothers", as "workers", and as "victims of dictated sexual identity." It is these three categories, and the shifting emphasis on equality and difference, which formed the basis of the WFL's broader feminist programme of change which was to carry them beyond the vote.

⁴²*The Vote*, February 26th 1910, p. 207.

i) Wives and Mothers, "...Workers age long and time honoured..."⁴³

The ordinary and monotonous appeal of the male scoffer to the suffragette, "Go home and mind the baby," is one that she is only too anxious to answer; but the baby must be minded in the House as well as the home, and there, so far at least, the man has done the minding - and done it badly...⁴⁴

Members of the WFL were at pains in this period to stress the numbers of women in its ranks who were wives and mothers. This gave them the opportunity to use members' personal experiences and situations to positive effect in their propaganda and arguments. While the tide of popular opinion appears to have served to marginalise any formal discussion of alternatives to the heterosexual, Victorian bourgeois family unit, this did not stop League members from challenging women's lack of status and their lack of effective power in the private sphere of the home.⁴⁵ Articles with the titles "If Motherhood Was a Lucrative Profession" and "Marriage, Choice or Necessity?", illustrated one of the pivotal issues in debates on marriage and one which was highlighted earlier, namely the wife's economic dependency on her husband.⁴⁶

One League member who had much to say on this issue was Cicely Hamilton who published her much acclaimed *Marriage as a Trade* in 1909. In it she argued that women married, not out of choice but out of economic necessity and that women were in the desperate position of selling themselves in a manner akin to prostitution. Her

⁴³From a quote by Charlotte Despard in *The Vote*, May 6th 1911, p. 17.

⁴⁴*The Vote*, January 15th 1910, p. 140.

⁴⁵This point has also been argued by Carol Dyhouse in *Feminism and the Family in England, 1880-1939*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989), pp. 5-6. There are a number of known cases of League members living in circumstances other than such a model, for example Clare Neal and Emily Phipps, and Cicely Hamilton and Edith Craig.

⁴⁶*The Vote*, April 27th 1912, p. 22 and May 11th 1912, p. 60.

book was a powerful personal and conceptual critique of this injustice, and in it she pronounced:

I have no intention of attacking the institution of marriage in itself - the life companionship of man and woman; I merely wish to point out that there are certain grave disadvantages attaching to that institution as it exists to-day. These disadvantages I believe to be largely unnecessary and avoidable; but at present they are very real, and the results produced by them are anything but favourable to the mental, physical and moral development of woman.⁴⁷

Following the publication of her book, which made regular appearances in lists of recommended reading to League members, Cicely Hamilton became perhaps the most well-known suffragist critic of contemporary marriage. However, she was not alone in stressing the economic relationship in marriage and motherhood. With a slightly different emphasis, Charlotte Despard declared that mothers should be acknowledged as workers "age long and time honoured", and as such, should be paid for their work.⁴⁸ A similar recommendation which was later to become known as the 'endowment of motherhood', was outlined in Lady McClaren's "Women's Charter" which was endorsed officially by the League in 1909.⁴⁹

Although this particular emphasis on the need for financial recognition for mothers was heavily stressed by many of the leading members in the League, another important figure on the National Executive, the secretary, Edith How-Martyn, voiced her own

⁴⁷Cicely Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade*, (Chapman and Hall, Ltd, London, 1912, [1909]), p. vi. Cicely Hamilton's personal dislike of the pressures she faced to attract a husband has been emphasised by Lis Whitelaw in *The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton, Actress, Writer, Suffragist*, (The Women's Press, London, 1990), p. 66. Whitelaw presents a rare view of the distinctly silenced critique of marriage by women who lived their lives with other women. See *ibid*, pp. 95-98.

⁴⁸*The Vote*, April 9th 1910, p. 287

⁴⁹*The Vote*, December 2nd 1909, p. 68.

reservations. She believed that the endowment of motherhood "would only shelve the question of a mother's economic independence", because they would still be dependent on a body of men. The alternative offered by Edith How-Martyn in a series of lectures was that girls should be brought up as self supporting, and that marriage should not be looked on as an easy option.⁵⁰ She also argued for a situation when a woman alone could decide when she became a mother, making her one of the few WFL activists actively to promote birth control for women in this period.⁵¹

The energy put into such debates operated in an environment in which women's duties as wives and mothers were constantly affirmed. Nevertheless, there was still a renegotiation taking place in the meaning of motherhood and marriage to women. What Hamilton, Despard and How-Martyn rejected was women's *powerlessness* within the home which not only denied them economic independence, but equal rights over their children, and no redress against violent, abusive husbands.

Charlotte Despard was one of the few League members to draw attentions to the difficulties faced by working mothers, describing their position as "worse than slaves". She also addressed the issue through two articles entitled, "Why We Want The Vote: The Child of the Wage-Earning Mother", once again demonstrating the full force of both

⁵⁰*The Vote*, July 29th 1911, p. 176.

⁵¹Another was Malthusian Bessie Drysdale, who in July 1911 spoke at a meeting on "Emancipation and Motherhood". See *The Vote*, August 5th 1911, p. 182. Also, *The Malthusian*, November 15th 1911, reported a meeting where Dr C. Drysdale's spoke on birth control, a meeting in which Nina Boyle and Edith How-Martyn took part. (Thanks to Hilary Francis for this reference)

arguments for economic independence and a higher status for domestic responsibilities.⁵²

League members also drew attention to the way women were discriminated against because of the inflexible association of women with motherhood and the caring, nurturing instincts. In one case recorded in *The Vote*, where a couple were charged with child neglect and where there did not "seem to have been a pin to chose between them", outrage was expressed at the harsher sentence given to the wife, for "no apparent reason for the discrimination on the part of the magistrate other than the woman was a woman."⁵³

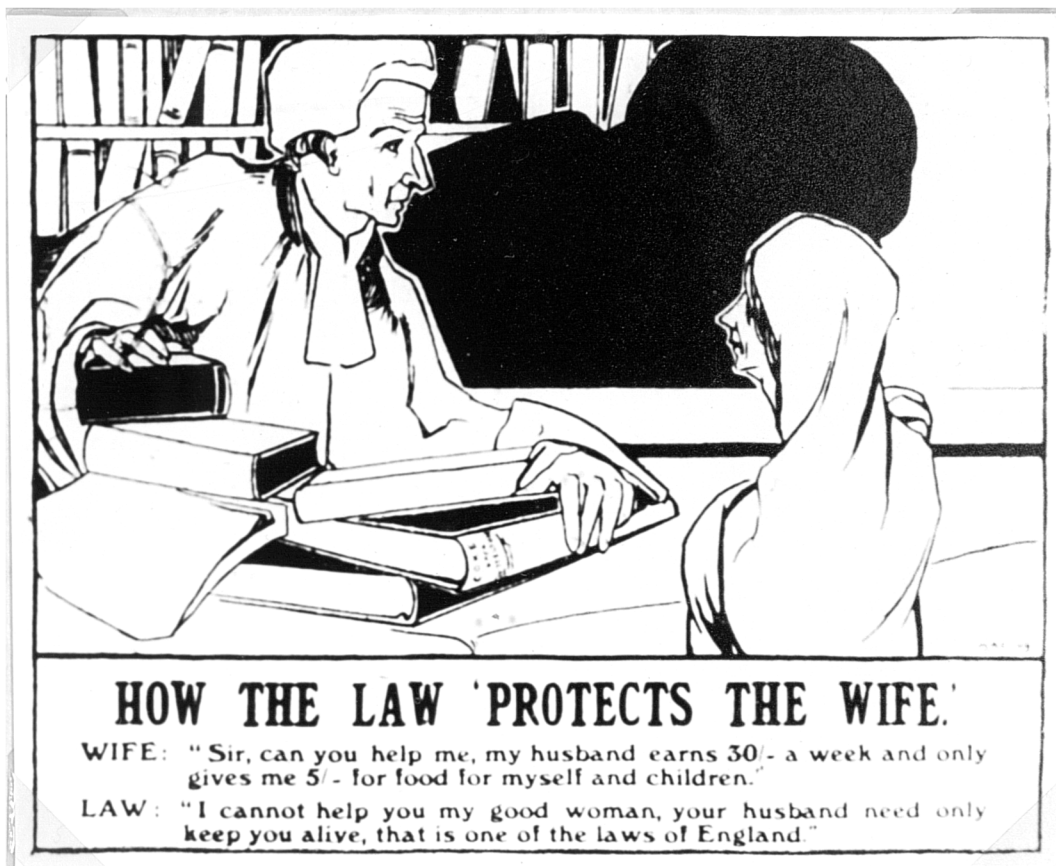
Through a detailed study of WFL literature, articles and speeches it is apparent that strong feelings of anger and injustice at women's powerlessness in the family were a continuous thread running through debates about gender relations in the period up to 1914. One *Vote* editorial in 1910 dismissed the concept of "The Ideal Home", stating that "as long as a husband has the power of throwing his wife on the parish relief, it is idle to talk or think of the ideal home."⁵⁴ In 1912 another approach was tried where sketches designed specially by members of the Suffrage Atelier were printed in *The Vote*. One cleverly symbolized how the "Wife" was pitched against the "Law".⁵⁵

⁵²*The Vote*, April 16th 1910, p. 291, June 24th 1911, p. 122, and July 1st 1911, p. 140.

⁵³*The Vote*, May 6th 1911, p. 14.

⁵⁴*The Vote*, April 16th 1910, p. 289.

⁵⁵*The Vote*, May 25th 1912, p. 85. There was an increase in such sketches after the Suffrage Atelier entered into an alliance with the Minerva Publishing Company in April 1912. Two examples of these sketches are on pp. 220, 221.



Wife: Sir can you help me, my husband earns 30/- shillings a week and only gives me 5/- shillings for food for myself and children

Law: I cannot help you my good woman, your husband needs only keep you alive, that is one of the laws of England.

Plate 8: How The Law Protects The Wife



MARRIED MOTHER: "The magistrate says I am not the parent of my own child! so my old man has to lose a day's work to get the Vaccination Exemption Order for the baby

UNMARRIED MOTHER: "That's queer, I'm counted the parent of my baby all right; the Law don't seem to treat you very well.

Plate 9: The Law and The Mother

In addition to this consistent critique of the powerlessness of mothers, members of the League reversed attacks made by opponents who claimed that suffrage activists were threatening the home, through a strategic use of their own experiences and status as married women. In 1910, Amy Sanderson was reported as denying that suffragettes were "anti-men". She claimed that not only were the majority married, but happily married - herself included - with most husbands supporting their wives actions.⁵⁶

The emphasis of League members' arguments was nothing if not flexible. League members also drew on the mainstream perceptions of women's duties as mothers breeding a purer and nobler race as a means of justifying women's demands for the vote. League member and NEC representative, Mrs Edward Francis, was certainly not alone in capitalising on fears about racial degeneration as a means to reinforce demands that women needed equal voting rights. Among the reforms she suggested in a speech to a WFL meeting in London in January 1911, were the segregation of all feeble minded children into special schools, and the seclusion of all lunatics and confirmed drunkards.⁵⁷

Some members were at pains to incorporate into their critiques of women's powerlessness as wives and mothers, an awareness of the sufferings of working-class

⁵⁶*The Vote*, March 19th 1910, p. 248. Another example of visual propaganda was printed in *The Vote* July 11th, p. 173 which included a photograph of a working class mother from Norway, where women had voting rights. Underneath it was stressed that female suffrage did not destroy the home.

⁵⁷For a report of this meeting see *The Vote*, January 21st 1911, p. 152. See also July 9th 1910, p. 125 "101 Points" refers to the "interests of Empire" and links this with the interests of women's equality. In 1914 Dr Emily Thomson made similar points during a speech to the League branch in Dundee on "Race Degeneration." See *The Vote*, February 27th 1914, p. 301.

women. In *The Vote*'s series called "101 Points in Favour of Women's Suffrage" it was occasionally emphasised that laws affected different women in different ways. Another example came in 1910, when at the height of activity over the Divorce Commission, it was argued:

A working man's wife whose husband is cruel and unfaithful to her is in an even worse position than a woman of the middle classes. As divorce costs £50 or £60, and as such a sum is utterly unknown to a woman who has the handling of only a few shillings, it is quite impossible for her to get a solicitor to take up her case on the chance of recovering the money from the husband.⁵⁸

More consistent still was the criticism of the double standards applied to unmarried as compared to married mothers. Another Suffrage Atelier cartoon (shown on p. 221) highlighted the different rights the two groups had over their children, with the former, who were predominantly working-class, faced with the entire responsibility for their children, while the latter coped with minimal rights.

Occasionally the efforts of some members succeeded in helping unmarried mothers driven to desperate means, but the voices of working-class mothers who fell victim of this double standard were submerged by the far stronger middle-class language of rescue and protection, and the concern to alleviate this "difficult problem."⁵⁹ Any

⁵⁸*The Vote*, December 31st 1910, p. 120. Discussion in *The Vote* did not centre only on financial access, but also on violence and abuse. For an example of the anger felt in the League about this situation see March 5th 1910, p. 229.

⁵⁹*The Vote*, October 7th 1911, pp. 294-5. Charlotte Despard wrote a number of articles on "The Unmarried Mother" where she defended the woman and attacked the unscrupulous man who took advantage of her. More details of her arguments particularly those printed at the time of the campaign in Cheltenham to defend unmarried mother Daisy Turner can be found in *The Vote*, October 14th 1911, pp. 302-303. The tendency in the League to marginalise the concerns of working class mothers is particularly noticeable when comparing the arguments in the League with those of the Women's Co-operative Guild. See Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Maternity. Letters From Working Women*, (Virago, London, 1978, [1915]), and *Life as We Have Known It. By Co-operative Working Women*, (Virago, London, 1990, [1931]).

undercurrents within the League which emphasised women's distinct class interests in relation to motherhood and marriage were contained. Yet they were certainly not resolved, and exploded in the 1920s when the vote could no longer be used as a reason for all women to unite.⁶⁰

To conclude, women's major responsibilities for the care of home were explicitly cited by League members in the interests both of political equality, and of particular needs. This left League members at times open to casting women into one mould in their emphasis on marriage and motherhood, but equally they were countered by ferocious arguments which discussed women's work outside the home. It was Cicely Hamilton who argued that "woman" should not be equated with "mother", and a number of League members certainly carried this perception through in their discussions on women's work.

ii) Women as Workers

Let the woman-worker understand that the vote is the first step on that ladder which, if she is wise, will lead her to economic freedom...⁶¹

In the sparse references that have been made to the WFL in previous histories of women's suffrage, the League has been credited as one of the societies which had perhaps the most to say on the rights of women workers.⁶² Such an interpretation is

⁶⁰See Chapter Six.

⁶¹*The Vote*, April 29th 1911, p. 5.

⁶²Examples are Les Garner, *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty*, pp. 34-38, and Ian Bullock and Richard Pankhurst, eds. *Sylvia Pankhurst. From Artist to Anti-Fascist*,

deserved since individual members and branches were involved in supporting the campaigns of women of the middle- and working-classes to better pay and conditions.

As I have argued elsewhere, the WFL could truly claim to speak for the demands and interests of women teachers, given the significant number who joined League branches. From 1910 the League ran campaigns at the National Union of Teachers conferences and frequently liaised with and published reports of the activities of both the National Union of Teachers and the National Federation of Women teachers.⁶³ The WFL also stands out for the extent to which it interested itself in demands for more women doctors, and in 1914 in the regulation and registration of nurses.⁶⁴

Some members, notably Charlotte Despard, took the issues of women's work further, and acknowledged that if the League truly wanted to alter women's lack of economic power and to ensure equal access to employment, it needed to represent those women working in industry and also in the newly emerging "white-blouse" professions. The latter could be, and were, counted among the membership, and the claim in September 1911 that the League had "many workers - teachers, clerks, shop assistants and artisans" in its ranks was more than empty rhetoric, although oversimplified in implying that all women workers had equal influence within the League.⁶⁵ As I argued

(Macmillan, London, 1992), p. 66.

⁶³See A.M. Pierotti, *The Story of the National Union of Women Teachers*, (NUWT, London, 1963). In 1919 The NFWT was renamed the NUWT. Hilda Kean, *Deeds Not Words*, p. 84.

⁶⁴The presence of Dr Elizabeth Knight gave a resonance to these demands. See, *The Vote*, August 27th 1910, p. 215 and March 13th 1914, p. 331.

⁶⁵*The Vote*, September 16th 1911, p. 255.

in Chapter Two, certain groups of women, in particular those working in industry, remained on the periphery of the membership in the branches.⁶⁶ Consequently this produced analyses, especially of industrial working women's conditions and experiences, which were constructed by middle-class League activists. One indication of a difference in agendas was the League's adamant condemnation of protective legislation for women, even though the Women's Trade Union League had shifted their stance to accept the need for such regulations back in the 1890s.⁶⁷

This conflict of interests, while a cause of concern in this period, was to reach a peak much later in the 1920s. In the 1910s, however, there were genuine attempts on the part of members to address the issues concerning industrial working women through considerable coverage in *The Vote*. This coverage increased even further after Charlotte Despard, a long standing sympathiser with the difficulties her working-class sisters faced, became editor of *The Vote*, in March 1911.⁶⁸

Even before Despard's appointment there was detailed coverage of the spate of strikes in what was a highly confrontational period of industrial militancy, particularly after 1910. And when, for example, the strike action of women 'fancy leather' workers in Sheffield was covered, the opportunity to raise the profile of the women's movement was not ignored:

⁶⁶See Chapter Two, Section II, ii.

⁶⁷See Anne Phillips, *Divided Loyalties. Dilemmas of Sex and Class*, (Virago, London, 1987), p. 86.

⁶⁸Later Charlotte Despard introduced a regular column entitled "Women in Industry," so maintaining the profile of industrial relations.

...we hope the girls will get their rights, and we can only regard the recent frequency of these strikes and their uniform success as the outward and visible sign of the uprising of womanhood against industrial systems which attempt to take advantages of the handicaps of the female sex...⁶⁹

While there was a general consensus among League members who addressed the issue, that the vote would improve women's rights and opportunities as workers, underlying this claim was a troubling dichotomy. A key question which tended to come to prominence at particular times, in Trades Unions, the Labour movement *and* the WFL, was the extent to which women's lack of economic equality was based on their sex or on their class position - or both. Equally it was not always cut and dried who would be working women's closest allies - working-class men or middle-class women? - when they attempted to alter their position in society.⁷⁰

Charlotte Despard's influence was largely behind efforts to raise the question of women's working conditions and to draw attention to, and welcome, the formation of trades unions which accepted and represented women workers.⁷¹ By the same score, accusations of hypocrisy on the part of male workers and male employers were not uncommon from League members.⁷² In *The Vote* articles were published which condemned the level of women's and girls' pay in comparison with that of men and

⁶⁹*The Vote*, August 27th 1910, p. 205.

⁷⁰These themes have been developed in Anne Phillips, Chapter Three: "Classing The Woman & Gendering The Class", *Divided Loyalties. Dilemmas of Sex and Class*, (Virago, London, 1987), pp. 29-70. See also the collection of articles in Lucy Middleton, ed., *Women in the Labour Movement*, (Croon Helm, London, 1977).

⁷¹Later more members began to seriously address these issues. See for example, Eunice Murray, "The Strike of the Kilbirnie Fish Girls", *The Vote*, August 29th 1913, p. 290, and "Factory Girls and The Vote", *The Vote*, September 19th 1913, p. 339.

⁷²For example, *The Vote*, September 23rd 1911, p. 229 recorded the formation of the Bar Assistants Trade Union.

boys, much in the same vein as organisations directly representing working women attacked this inequality.⁷³

There were cutting criticisms of the strikes by male workers in Edinburgh in 1910 in protest against the employment of women in the predominantly male printing trades. In an editorial in *The Vote* it was noted:

The Edinburgh Typographical Society is providing us at present with a crying example of the kind of industrial protection which the working man has so often accorded to his sister woman, and the hypocrisy which can be imparted into the conduct of this purely selfish attempt at monopoly seems to be considerable....⁷⁴

In common with comments by women in the labour movement, these attacks marked one dimension to League members' perceptions of economic inequality. However, it did not follow that there was an outright condemnation of the male-dominated labour movement. Powerful figures in the League continued to call for dialogue between the women's movement and the labour organisations. Such calls reached a peak in the WFL following the spate of publicity around the attendance of Charlotte Despard and Middlesbrough activist, Marion Coates Hansen at the 1911 Trades Union Congress.

Both women were critical of the labour movement's lack of interest in equal rights for male and female workers, nevertheless they firmly endorsed the need for women to

⁷³See for examples *The Vote*, March 4th 1911, p. 221 on the lower pay for girls in the Post Office, and September 2nd 1911, p. 229, for comments on Women's wages in the metal and engineering trades as reported by the Board of Trade.

⁷⁴*The Vote*, September 10th 1910, p. 229. See also p. 231 for a response by Amelia L. Mc'Lean the Secretary of the Edinburgh Women Compositors Union.

unionise and co-operate with working men.⁷⁵ This was made clear by Marion Coates Hansen in her article calling unequivocally for co-operation with the trade union movement. Her comments prompted an immediate oppositional response from Nina Boyle, who argued:

she [Marion Coates Hansen] voices her indignation at the contemptuous attitude at the TUC towards the women's movement, and asks "Are we women to be inside or outside such movements - inside to lift our voices in protest ...or outside, to be helpless witnesses? I say uncompromisingly, Outside, every time, until we come in by special invitation on equal terms... ..Why should women strengthen Trades Unionism when it has ever been their worst enemy, smiting them here and there remorselessly and taking trade and wage and bread and living from them...The best "Unions" ever founded are the suffrage societies...."⁷⁶

Marion Coates Hansen responded calling for Nina Boyle to prove that trade unions had been women's worse enemy, and returned the attack claiming that under Boyle's plan, women would be left in the "wilderness."⁷⁷

It appears that Marion Coates Hansen came to the conclusion that Nina Boyle was not alone in her feeling that calls for co-operation with Trades Unions were not the highest priority. Her disagreement with the backing given to Charlotte Despard by delegates at League's Special Conference in April 1912, gave Coates-Hansen the opportunity to resign from the League and to concentrate her energies more directly towards her local ILP branch in Middlesbrough, and Labour politics nationally.⁷⁸

Like Marion Coates Hansen, other members faced the dilemma of wanting to

⁷⁵*The Vote*, September 16th 1911, p. 255, and September 23rd 1911, pp. 268-9, 271.

⁷⁶*The Vote*, September 30th 1911, p. 285.

⁷⁷*The Vote*, October 7th 1911, pp. 292-293.

⁷⁸See Chapter One, pp. 82-86.

maintain their links with both the WFL and labour organisations. For a time these members were secure in the knowledge that the League had formed an indirect alliance with the Labour Party in their general election policy.⁷⁹ However, because no official links were established between the Labour Party and the WFL, those members who preferred to emphasize the common bonds between unenfranchised women rather than their class and economic differences, could continue to do so. I make this point to emphasize how the various beliefs and ideas held by League members did not significantly prevent unity on other demands like those for women's enfranchisement.

It was once again due to the efforts of Charlotte Despard that the League continued to discuss how different interests between women workers inside and outside the League could be modified and overcome. She argued in *The Vote*:

..the woman worker knows that until women and men stand together in the state, as they do in the family, no such organisation will be. For woman is there, in the industrial arena, whether men like it or whether they dislike it. They cannot help themselves. The thing has come to pass, she is there. Her knowledge, her experience and her point of view are necessary if labour is to be redeemed from base uses and to reap the harvest of joy and beauty which awaits it. Over and over again men have said to me "This is our question as well as your, We want your help. For a new and juster order has to be built up, and in this work woman, the worker must have her share..."⁸⁰

Despard's arguments were an important factor in the extensive economic and class analyses forwarded by League members. However, her strong convictions do not obscure the conflicting opinions of other League members. Arguably, prior to 1918, no

⁷⁹The policy of supporting Labour candidates with the purpose of ousting Liberal candidates was discussed at the WFL's 1912 special conference. It was later endorsed by the majority of branches, although it was repeatedly stressed by the NEC that the policy did not mark an alliance with the Labour party. See *The Vote*, June 29th 1912, p. 124.

⁸⁰*The Vote*, April 29th 1911, p. 5.

one set of ideas on economic change was ever fully integrated into a "WFL feminism", and others were never conclusively excluded. It was to their credit that branch members and some leading figures managed to enlist a flexibility which permitted a critique of male hypocrisy and male prejudice in the work place, while male support was still elicited for the suffrage campaign. This placed the WFL in a useful position during the first world war to argue for improved wages and conditions for the greatly increased female workforce, and I discuss these further in the following chapter.

The claims of unity, which were enhanced by the heavy emphasis on women's common lack of citizenship before 1918 should not be underestimated in terms of their effect in offsetting ruptures between class and gender interest. However, the flexibility in the WFL over questions of class difference and economic interests could only be temporary. Given the volatile nature of industrial relations in this period, once the barrier to women's enfranchisement had been removed after 1918, the League had to make firmer decisions on its analysis of women workers interests and accompanying class distinctions. As I will show in Chapter Seven, particular decisions were taken which formulated the explicit class tensions which were to become representative of the feminist movement in the 1920s.

iii) Critiques of Sexual Inequality

"You will be called unsexed"

"And over-sexed"

"Yes I know, and sexless - all at the same time..."⁸¹

In the final part of this section I will demonstrate that as with reproductive and economic issues, there were within the League a number of different ideas about sexual inequality and the part it played in women's subordination to men.

In talking and writing about the threat of male sexuality, members of the League drew on a long tradition of criticisms of sexual inequality between men and women which had been expressed since the second half of the nineteenth century. The main connecting factor was the belief that male sexual urges were damaging to women and children. Many League members endorsed the calls of social purity campaigners for reforms in male sexuality and the introduction of a tighter policy of sexual regulation which would eliminate prostitution and the sexual abuse of girls.⁸²

A smaller number of members could also draw on less dominant, yet nonetheless persistent, challenges from women who had begun to argue that female sexuality did

⁸¹Taken from "The Nun", by Gertrude Colemore, a short story printed in *The Vote*, June 29th 1912, p. 175. See below for a discussion.

⁸²Frank Mort, "Purity, Feminism and the State: Sexuality Moral Politics, 1880 - 1914," in Mary Langham and Bill Schwarz, eds. *Crises in the British State*, p. 209, and Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and her Enemies*, p. 8. Texts which give opposing views are Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, and Linda Gordon and Ellen Dubois, "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth century Feminist Sexual Thought", in *Feminist Review*, ed., *Sexuality. A Reader*, (Virago, London, 1987, [first published in *Feminist Review*, 1983]) pp. 82-97. Excellent details can be found in Judith Walkowitz, "Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Britain", in *History Workshop Journal*, No. 13, Spring 1982, pp. 79-93.

include a positive heterosexual sexual response. In Britain these women, among them Stella Browne and Dora Marsden, promoted among other issues, free love and open marriage on the pages of *The Freewoman*.⁸³ Teresa Billington-Greig also developed aspects of this philosophy and carried through her rejection of male oppression into her marriage by drawing up a nuptial agreement which negated all British marriage and property laws.⁸⁴

From the League's earliest days, its members did not shy away from raising the cases of women who had suffered sexual abuse at the hands of men. In 1908 and again in 1911, Charlotte Despard, Edith How Martyn and some branch members took up the cases of two unmarried mothers, Daisy Lord and Daisy Turner. These women were accused of murdering their babies, the latter's the result of a rape, and the League was active in demanding leniency towards them, arguing that they had suffered at the hands of corrupt men.⁸⁵

Attention to such cases in *The Vote* developed in February 1912 into a regular

⁸³*The Freewoman* was started in 1911 by Dora Marsden. Marsden had tried to set up a forum for her ideas in a supplement of *The Vote*, but her ideas was rejected by the NEC. See Les Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit: Dora Marsden, 1882-1960*, (Avebury, Aldershot, 1990), pp. 51-52. See also Les Garner, Chapter Five: "'A Nauseous Publication': *The Freewoman*. November 1911-October 1912", *Stepping Stones To Women's Liberty*, pp. 61-77. For more information on Stella Browne, see Sheila Rowbotham, *A New World For Women, Stella Brown, Socialist Feminist*, (Pluto Press, 1977).

⁸⁴Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald, eds., *The Non-Violent Militant*, p. 7. Billington Greig increasingly, although not exclusively, tended to promote her own views on sexuality through League channels, although this medium was closed to her after her resignation in December 1910.

⁸⁵See Chapter Four, footnote, 59. *The Vote*, August 19th 1911, p. 206 and November 4th 1911, p. 15.

column which gave details of cases of the sexual exploitation, abuse and harsh treatment of women under the law.⁸⁶ Through the comments and arguments which accompanied these cases a developing analysis emerged which continued the social purity contentions of the unnaturalness of male sexual exploitation and the moral superiority of women who made up a reforming force.

The title of the column in *The Vote*, "How Men Protect Women" at first appeared to continue these contentions. However, shortly afterwards it was changed to "How *Some* Men Protect Women".⁸⁷ Arguably this was a concession by those in control of *The Vote* to the need for a more complex understanding of male sexual double standards, its accompanying danger for women, and the broader issues of sexual politics. Earlier contributions by members like Margaret Wynne Nevinson had already problematised the arguments that it was men's sexual double standard alone which created the evils of prostitution. In 1911 she argued in *The Vote*:

prostitution is an economic problem, rather than a moral one, not to be hedged by the philanthropic palliative or one-sided legislation.....⁸⁸

Nevinson argued that it was the low wages of women workers which forced them into prostitution and so the situation could only be challenged when women earned a living wage.⁸⁹

⁸⁶Plan for the Column were announced in *The Vote*, February 10th 1912, p. 185 and was started in the light of the 'Godalming Scandal' when a man who assaulted a girl of seven and a half years was given a very light sentence after being found guilty in the courts.

⁸⁷*The Vote*, July 6th 1912, p. 189. Later another series was started which was entitled "The Protected Sex."

⁸⁸*The Vote*, March 11th 1911, p. 238.

⁸⁹*The Vote*, Her views may well have been informed by the dire poverty she witnessed in her job as a poor law guardian in London's East End. See Margaret

Such alternative formulations of the root cause of sexual immorality were still peripheral to the central guiding principles of sexual politics in this period which continued to emphasize how women were forced into "white slavery."⁹⁰ It was the moral panic caused by this image, along with the strenuous efforts of social purity organisations, which led to the introduction of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill in 1912. This legislation proposed harsher penalties for those found guilty of procuring women into prostitution.⁹¹ In a period when any success or possible vehicle for their cause was being grasped by suffrage societies, the League strongly supported the proposed legislation. In addition to strategic concerns to promote demands for women's suffrage, the emphasis placed on such campaigns touched a chord with those League members who strongly identified with the need to challenge male sexual immorality. As a result, from 1912 branches, members, and leaders alike were driven to campaign for sexual reforms. However, this hegemonic relationship between suffrage societies and social purity campaigns, as Frank Mort has argued, did not go entirely uncontested, and as I will now demonstrate, the repercussions affected the League directly.

Teresa Billington-Greig was the first of a number of League activists who held beliefs on radical sexual reforms to leave the League in a spate of resignations between 1910 and 1912. Another was Edith How-Martyn, who had been one of the leading proponents of the League advocacy of the need for greater information about sex for

Wynne Nevinson, *Life's Fitful Fever*, pp. 162-191.

⁹⁰Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, pp. 142, 195-197.

⁹¹This bill passed into law in December 1912. See Frank Mort, "Purity, Feminism and the State.." in Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, eds., *Crises in the British State*, p. 221

women and girls.⁹² Sources suggest that it was not simply that How-Martyn, Alison Neilans and other discontented women including Katharine Vulliamy, and Constance Tite, resigned from the League in April 1912 simply because they objected to Charlotte Despard's autocratic behaviour. Their decisions were also influenced by the existence of other societies and organisations where they could still support the suffrage campaign, and further their particular interests in sexual politics.⁹³ For example, in 1913, Alison Neilans, one of the initiators of the (in)famous Bermondsey Ballot Box Protest, became the first secretary of the newly merged Association of Moral and Social Hygiene (AMASH) which campaigned vigorously for increased protection of victims and more punishment for offenders of sexual crimes.⁹⁴

Another member who did not feel particularly conciliatory towards the WFL's "social purity" stance on sexual politics, was Teresa Billington-Greig. By 1912 she had become a prolific writer and journalist and in fulfilling her self-appointed role as critic of the women's movement, she was among those to raise doubts about the ideals which had resulted in the new Criminal Law Amendment Act. In her article "The Truth about White Slavery" printed in 1913, Billington-Greig claimed the stories of trappings had been over-exaggerated, and that women and girls, like herself, left home for reasons

⁹²*The Vote*, July 29th 1911, p. 176.

⁹³ Indications that the spate of resignations in and after April 1912 were not entirely acrimonious can be seen by the extent to which ex-members continued to speak occasionally at League meetings and also correspond with the NEC.

⁹⁴AMASH was formed in 1913 when the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of Vice joined with the Men's Association. See Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and her Enemies*, p. 26. Hilary Francis, Centre for Women's Studies, University of York, is currently researching this subject. In particular she has traced the work and ideas of Edith How-Martyn, Alison Neilans and Nina Boyle in the arena of sexual politics, both during and after their active involvement in the WFL.

other than that they had been procured. She claimed that this legislation did little for the women suffering through prostitution, because it did not get to the economic root of the issue. In criticising the alliance between social purity campaigners and suffrage societies she argued that the panic had been inflamed by the Pankhursts, and had "set women on the rampage against evils they know nothing about."⁹⁵

A leader in *The Vote* was quick to respond to her criticisms, yet these claims only served to emphasise how there had been a distinct shift in the WFL towards a social purity stance on sexual relations, which was in part a product of a desire to unite women in what had become an increasingly diversified movement:

we leave knowledge and comment to the experts, suffrage societies do not specifically concentrate on such details...their aim is to establish healthy and natural relations between men and women of which equal rights citizenship form a necessary part.⁹⁶

Whereas previously comments like those from Margaret Wynne Nevinson, which problematised the over-generalisation of women's sexual oppression, had been given considerable coverage in the League, similar arguments from Billington-Greig in 1913 were now strongly criticised, and officially distanced from the League.

This left the field very much open for increasingly powerful League members like Nina Boyle, and deputy *Vote* editor, Annie Smith, to promote additional issues on the dangers of male sexual abuse. These included campaigns around child sexual abuse. Annie Smith, writing in 1913, demonstrates the extent to which the language of social

⁹⁵Teresa Billington Greig, "The Truth About White Slavery", in *The English Review*, June 1913, p. 445.

⁹⁶*The Vote*, June 13th 1913, p. 106.

purity and male immorality permeated debates within the League. Smith, discussing the finding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and talked of her visit to a London Lock Hospital, asked *Vote* readers:

..But what of this maid with the solemn dark eyes? She was brought in a year ago; a five year old, a terrible case of criminal assault; her innocent and fair body broken by a man's cruel passion....⁹⁷

These and similar views, which emphasised rescue and protection, permeated perceptions in the League on sexuality during and after 1913. Yet they were not entirely or absolutely representative of all members' beliefs, as the debates on birth control at the 1914 WFL conference indicated. But those who did favour birth control and radical sexual reforms were marginalised within the League. This situation was to have repercussions in the 1920s, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Seven, and was to leave the League floundering on questions of women's sexuality and reproductive rights.⁹⁸

The protracted debates about sexuality in the League did not hinder the developing images of women as strong and capable individuals. There was strong criticism of those women who exercised flattery, naivety and weakness in order to further their own interests. The image of defenceless, exploited women was matched by images of individual, strong and rational women.⁹⁹ This often reached League members through short stories printed in *The Vote*, and the pageants discussed in Chapter Three. Gertrude Colemore's story of "The Nun" stands out through its hypothetical likening of a woman suffragist to a nun. It ended with the "nun" successfully encouraging a young middle-

⁹⁷*The Vote*, June 27th 1913, pp. 147-148.

⁹⁸See Chapter Seven, Section III, ii.

⁹⁹See the series of caricatures in *The Vote*, from October-December 1909.

class woman to join the suffrage struggle and to reject material pleasures and indifference.¹⁰⁰

Images of women as weak and defenceless, or as strong, rational individuals, were employed strategically by the League at different times to promote overall their arguments that women should not simply be confined and judged because of their sex. On another level it also promoted a positive image of womanhood in keeping with the positive and progressive visions integral to WFL ideas generally. Once again it is impossible to ignore the class distinctions which operated in the establishment of such images. It was still most often working-class women who needed saving and middle-class women who were serious and noble. The League members who had tried with partial success to promote the issues facing working-class women workers, failed to realise the need for similar consideration in the area of sexual politics.¹⁰¹ In spite of this failure to perceive the depths of class difference, the arguments of League members did lead to heightened awareness and often convincing challenges to sexual inequality in the period up to 1914.

This consideration of attitudes to women as wives and mothers, as workers, and as victims of male sexuality demonstrates the range of ways women's inequality was understood and challenged in the WFL. The contested positions, apparent

¹⁰⁰See *The Vote*, June 29th 1912, p. 175, "The Nun" by Gertrude Colemore. See Stanley and Morley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, pp. 96-99. Gertrude Colemore's other name was Gertrude Baillie-Weaver. In the obituary published after her death in *The Vote*, December 10th 1926, p. 360, she was noted as a very early member of the WFL.

¹⁰¹This point is also made by Frank Mort, "Purity, Feminism and the State...", in Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz, eds., *Crises in the British State*, p. 223.

contradictions, and the resignations of certain members indicate that there was no one feminism common throughout the League. On the contrary, there were sets of ideas grounded in demands for equality and an emphasis on sexual difference, which could be both complementary, conflicting and shifting. Up to 1918 the issues of motherhood and reproduction, economic power, class distinction and sexual identity in particular, were regularly renegotiated.

The one thread which ran through all these debates on a broader feminist analysis of gender inequality was the conceptual and strategic use of the call for "all women" to identify with their sex. The differences which were emerging particularly over class interests served to demonstrate to some members the problems and dilemmas which might ensue when this clarion call could no longer be justified in terms of women's demands for parliamentary voting rights. Not least this provoked fears about the future existence of the WFL itself. In the final section of this chapter I explore these debates and concerns about the future of the Women's Freedom League.

Section III: A COLLECTIVITY OF WOMEN

"If it never did anything else but bring women together in perfect understanding, and that new comradeship which we see everywhere, it would have been worthwhile to have lived and played a part in it."¹⁰²

When women in the League talked about their organisation, a steady and sometimes over-riding emphasis in their arguments focused on the extent of women's unity as a sex in "the Cause". Particularly in the early years after 1907, these arguments

¹⁰²*The Vote*, July 9th 1910, p. 125. Taken from an interview with Miss Gertrude Elliot, the President of the Actresses Franchise League.

were underpinned by the belief that women-only organisations were necessary in order to achieve equality. Yet as I argued in the previous section, the desire of some members not to break completely with their preferred political party, did lessen the practical effect of such rhetoric. Indeed, it is useful to understand that loyalty to the women's movement could compete with the longer established pattern of party political loyalties and their accompanying ideological perceptions of social, political and economic advancement.

Whatever their loyalties to the WFL, many members continued to develop their political identities in relation to political parties. However, these loyalties did not remain static or unaffected by the emphasis on the benefits and need for a *women-only* women's movement. On the contrary, party loyalties were both affected by and in some senses competed, with a diversification in ideas on the style and form of a permanent women's movement - or as some were now calling it, a feminist movement. This pressure came in the form of discussions among League members about the future of their organisation, and also through the interest in forging international links with women's organisations in other countries. In terms of the latter, an important organisation was the International Women's Suffrage Alliance which was formed in 1902, and held its first meeting in Berlin two years later.¹⁰³

¹⁰³See Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham*, pp, 9, 56, 62-63, for more details on the IWSA. Here Liddington notes how in 1906 the WSPU's membership application was opposed by Millicent Garrett Fawcett on the grounds of their militant policy. It was not until 1913 at the Budapest Conference that the WFL made any consistent attempts to affiliate to the IWSA. Their failure and subsequent success are recorded in Chapter Five and Chapter Six of this thesis. The constitution of the IWSA adopted at the Berlin conference emphasised that the object of the organisation was primarily to "secure the enfranchisement of women of all nations, and to unite the friends of woman suffrage throughout the world in organised co-operation and fraternal helpfulness." See *Constitution of the IWSA*, (IWSA, n.p., 1904).

In 1909 while still a committed and highly influential member of the League Teresa Billington-Greig opened the discussions on a role for the WFL after the vote had been won. She celebrated the women's suffrage movement as a new and powerful force and placed it on a par with the Conservative, Liberal and Labour parties. In the first edition of *The Vote*, she stated:

In comparison with the great forces which will strive in the arena - trained and wealthy forces that are centuries old - we are as a new birth, weak and poor. Yet we are so to mould things as to make this time of warring interests the stepping-stone to our triumph....¹⁰⁴

While women's distinct organisation was extolled as a progressive and positive force, it was also open to critical evaluation from League members. This had taken place earlier on in the League in the debates at the Annual Conferences in 1908 and 1909 which focused on the admission of men into the League as full members. The majority rejected any such moves, on the grounds that men would bring in party issues and would dilute women's influence.¹⁰⁵

For the next two years the evidence that distinct women's organisation did not necessarily equate with separatism, was moved to one side as League members across the country were bombarded with expressions of pride and triumph that women had proven their ability, and also the worth of organising independently from men. Journalist Beatrice Harridan's comments were analogous with many of those which appeared at regular intervals in *the Vote*, which celebrated:

¹⁰⁴*The Vote*, October 30th 1909, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵See Chapter One, pp. 60-61.

the new comradeship amongst women, which is a very real thing, and one of the most delightful and stimulating results of this long struggle to obtain citizenship...¹⁰⁶

At the same time a growing faction in the WFL had begun to explore in more depth the beliefs and visions which upheld this "new comradeship". Arguably, almost at the moment when women were acclaiming their success in joining together in a mass women's movement, so a questioning of that movement became more frequent. In asking such questions, members shifted their perceptions of a future equal society beyond the celebratory pronouncements and also beyond the parameters of the women's suffrage movement.

Teresa Billington-Greig was one member who increasingly became drawn to examining these all-encapsulating visions of gender unity. She was so disillusioned with what she saw that by the end of 1910 she came to believe that her own understanding of feminism was incompatible with her membership and work in the League. An early convert to the term feminism, Billington-Greig made her criticisms clear in her article, "Feminism and Politics", published towards the end of 1911. In it she claimed that suffrage societies had confined themselves to the boundaries of parliamentary politics and therefore to suffrage, and had in the process sacrificed a broader feminist rebellion. She claimed:

at this present time there is no feminist movement in the country, but only a suffrage movement - and chaos.

It follows naturally that there is no feminist organisation and no feminist programme. And though the first is not essential, the second is. It is possible for a movement to exist without machinery, but not without policy or purpose - and these latter are lacking...¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶*The Vote*, November 11th 1909. p. 28.

¹⁰⁷Teresa Billington Greig, "Feminism and Politics", *English Review*, 1911, reprinted in Fitzgerald and McPhee, *The Non-violent Militant*, p. 226.

Billington-Greig demonstrated a coherent understanding of the differences between feminism and suffragism, and made important contributions to this relationship in much of her work, which is still relevant today. Yet her arguments negated any relationship between League members' desire to organise with women *and* the development of a broader feminist analysis. Billington-Greig underplayed to a certain extent the important ideological connections members continued to make between organisation and programme, overlooking how, practically, the two had become dependent on each other. Therefore Billington-Greig's highly critical comments should not detract from evidence that her ex-colleagues were prepared to initiate discussion on the links between women-only organisation and their desire to challenge gender inequality. This occurred even to the extent that some proposed jettisoning the practice of women-only organisation altogether.

That such discussion was taking place in the WFL is clear in the brave decision taken in 1911, to publish an article written by League member and one of *The Vote's* first editors, Louisa Thompson Price.¹⁰⁸ In "Evolution and the WFL" she pleaded for the League to take a "great step forward" from focusing on "women's liberty" to "human liberty" and let men become members. She argued:

The WFL owes much to the brave and valiant men who have helped us by their sympathy and active support on many public occasions. I am of the opinion that if our League elected to be the pioneer Suffrage Society in throwing open its portals to men and women alike, our work would gain immeasurably by consolidation and expansion....Now is the day and the hour for this great step...¹⁰⁹

Her article provoked an immediate response and the letters published the following

¹⁰⁸For information on Louisa Thompson Price, see Appendix Five: Biographical Notes.

¹⁰⁹*The Vote*, November 4th 1911, p. 12.

week indicate a distinct change in member's opinions since 1909. The issue was no longer simply the demand for women's suffrage, but the form the WFL would take as a progressive feminist organisation working for gender equality. At this stage, it was by no means fully accepted that feminism was naturally associated with women only, rather than both sexes.

Probably in the light of a feeling of impending victory, opinion had turned in favour of allowing men to become League members in order to help in the 'feminist' task of changing society. It was argued by both men and women that men would be a great help, if they could give up their political allegiances and work together on equal terms in an independent movement. It would, claimed one, be a step to "real progress".¹¹⁰

In the middle of this debate, the announcement of the "insulting" Government Manhood Suffrage Bill, put something of a damper on this unanimity, and a spate of letters arrived rejecting the moves to admit men to the League. One unequivocal reply from Nina Boyle reminded readers that women still did not have voting rights, and so any thought of co-operation was premature. Even so, once opened up, the issue of the future of the WFL could not be silenced, and those in favour of a mixed membership were not significantly outnumbered by those against. Subsequently ideas about progressive co-operation between men and women made regular appearances in the Open Columns of *The Vote*.

¹¹⁰*The Vote*, November 11th 1911, p. 28, November 25th 1911, p. 58, December 2nd 1911, p. 68, December 7th 1911, p. 77, December 16th 1911, p. 89. Quote - November 11th 1911, p. 29.

That such a constitutional change still had to pass through the NEC was probably the most important reason why men were not admitted to the League. As I have argued elsewhere, the internal ruptures on this committee during 1912, prevented agreement on virtually any issue, let alone something as important as allowing men into the League. Therefore no immediate decision was taken. Soon after, the possibility of men as members became even more distant after the 1912 Special Conference. This had the effect of re-energising the beleaguered women-only advocates, and new influential figures, notably Nina Boyle, succeeded in ensuring that this principle regained ascendancy. However, this position was not mirrored elsewhere in the League, and almost on the heels of the abatement of the debate over male members, there followed a heated and protracted debate on party political allegiances.

The debate in 1912 which ran into 1913, ostensibly centred on the policy of supporting Labour candidates at by-elections with the purpose of ousting the Liberal candidate. Yet under the guise of discussions about which party would help them the most, members began to openly express their party political allegiances, to the extent that it seemed all delegates at the Annual Conferences in 1913 and 1914 had party political loyalties, and there seemed no conclusive majority in favour of either Liberals, Conservatives or Socialists.¹¹¹ The exposed expressions of party ties certainly boded ill for the WFL in terms of their continued existence in the same form after victory in the suffrage struggle. However, a shift was noticeable because now discussions centred not on what women could do for political parties, but on what political parties could and must do for women.

¹¹¹See Verbatim Minutes, 1913, pp. 45-55, and Verbatim Minutes, 1914, pp. 51-59, 95-124.

Evidence of political loyalties among members, however potentially damaging, did not come to dominate discussions about political activity in the WFL prior to 1914. Party interests in Britain were not the only consideration on the minds of League members in these years. An increasingly popular, dimension to League members' political interests lay in their growing links with women suffragists in other countries. Charlotte Despard, in addition to her sympathies with the labour movement, was concerned with international women's questions. This was reinforced through her attendance at the IWSA Budapest Conference in 1913, accompanied by her close friend, Kate Harvey.

Early the following year the two women imparted to *Vote* readers their interest in starting an "International Column". Their stated aims were:

....to join in one great international sisterhood, the women workers of the world....Are we ready to 'dare' all things for freedom not only for ourselves, but for the women of all nations....¹¹²

Members took up the interest, and in addition to articles in *The Vote*, women's activities in countries as far away as China were discussed in the branches.¹¹³ There seemed to be a desire to forge a great and powerful international women's movement, and this produced a sense of pride and purpose in making the movement in Britain as strong as possible.

Branch members' interests complemented the efforts of Nina Boyle to instill in the minds of League activists the need for a non-party, women-only society, which she hoped the WFL would become once votes for women had been obtained. Her efforts

¹¹²*The Vote*, January 2nd 1914, p. 161.

¹¹³"The Position of Women in China", *The Vote*, January 23rd 1914, p. 221.

were helped through the publication in *The Vote* of forceful articles. One written by Gertrude Colemore, sums up the arguments of the increasingly powerful group in the WFL who wanted their society to continue:

Look on a hundred years!....you will see wondrous things. Graves not doubt; graves in which will lie the mortal parts of men; but none so great as to contain the Woman's Movement. The form of it no doubt will have crumbled into dust, the present form of revolt, of struggle, of pain; but the spirit of it will be incarnate in the life of the world...You may kill, oh you who have the power, who have the prisons and the police and all the weapons of the law at your command. *You may kill, one woman or many; but you cannot kill the Movement. Nor can you slay the song that women are singing. Blood you may have if you will, but never silence...*¹¹⁴

These messages dominated members' visions of the future of the WFL in the crucial months before the outbreak of the first world war. They firmly set their sights on outlining a programme for the League once votes for women had been won. At the annual conference in 1914, resolutions addressed the following subjects; the exclusion of women from certain trades; the differentiation between women and men citizens; injustices to married women; and women's financial independence. These issues had been debated in branches and in *The Vote* for years, but now the question was whether they should officially become part of the League's programme.¹¹⁵ Charlotte Despard, while differing from her fellow members on certain issues, spoke for the whole League when she insisted:

...friends and colleagues, we are still face to face with an immense amount of work if another generation of women is not to go down to the grave in the same condition as we are today....¹¹⁶

Many women in the League did associate, or at least sympathise, with the ideal of a future feminist movement made up of women. Others were less convinced about

¹¹⁴*The Vote*, July 4th 1913, p. 164. (My italics)

¹¹⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1914, pp. 15, 21.

¹¹⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1914, p. 5.

the benefit of single-sex membership, but they nevertheless had come to believe that if men and women were to co-operate, it would be on issues which fundamentally concerned and affected women, both as equal citizens *and* as women.

Further developments were curtailed by the outbreak of the first world war in August 1914. In the following chapter I will consider years of war up to 1918, when a number of fundamental changes took place. These changes were in both the organisation of the League, and the style and focus of the feminist programme which members would to adopt after women's partial enfranchisement in 1918.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have demonstrated how the WFL developed critiques of gender relations which served to constitute a modern feminist agenda, which far outstripped demands for the vote. Yet in the same period League members contended with splits and diversities within their organisation and among women in society which served to weaken the WFL.

The WFL created an environment where members could develop and refine their political identities, be that as sex reformers, as socialists, or indeed as feminists. However this environment did not guarantee such that such women would or could remain in the League, or that members would reconcile themselves to the range of arguments and ideas, or the priority given by the leadership, for example, to women-only organisation. Yet, because of the openness and range of the debates which took place, at a national level, coupled with the establishment of local networks in local

branches, the WFL was well placed, both in terms of committed members and in principles, to forge ahead in the years after 1914.

The following chapters which explore the activities and ideas of the League in the subsequent period up to 1930, will demonstrate the considerable legacy of the years between 1907 and 1914 in later campaigns for women's equal status and recognition.



Plate 10: "At Last!"

CHAPTER FIVE

"KEEPING THE SUFFRAGE FLAG FLYING"

WFL RESPONSES TO THE YEARS OF WAR AND PARTIAL ENFRANCHISEMENT, 1914 - 1918

INTRODUCTION

Since 1907, the leadership and branch members of the WFL had constructed, though with many casualties along the way, a political agenda which was strongly focused on obtaining a representative, permanent, and effective political identity for women. However, the declaration of war on August 4th 1914 meant that members of the WFL had to make a series of complicated choices, some which were immediately apparent, and others which became significant at a later date.

In this chapter I explore the ways in which the war served to influence both League members' ideas on gender relations, their political demands and their social activities. In the first section I will consider the distinct response of the League to the war, which was manifested in the way members contributed to the upsurge in beliefs in both patriotism and pacifism within suffrage societies. The second section traces how strains of patriotism and pacifism were incorporated by League members into their activities, ideas and demands. I argue that members developed new areas of interest while to a certain extent preserved pre-war policies on political resistance and also towards different groups and classes of women. In the final section, rather than concentrating on the well-aired debate on "who won the vote for women?", I consider the immediate implications of partial enfranchisement on the League, coming as it did

during a devastating war.¹ In this way I will construct an interpretation of the war years as they affected the political culture and the political expectations of the League's membership. I conclude by evaluating the extent to which the conflict served as a bridge between what are commonly described as the "Edwardian Era" and the "post-war world."

Section I: THE "CRISIS" OF WAR

In this section I will present the range of opinions on the conflict expressed by League members in the period after August 4th 1914. In addition to immediate concerns about the war itself, the League faced changes in its internal structures and a re-evaluation of its aims and objectives which had gradually developed in the years since 1907. I firstly consider how League members negotiated two oppositional stances which dominated their social and political environments, those of "patriotism" and "pacifism". Secondly I look in more detail at the organisational changes and ideological shifts in the League in relation to their demands for equality between the sexes.

¹Two key approaches to this question can be found in Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 134-151 and Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1959*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1992), pp. 34-42. The debates revolve around three key issues: the impact of the pre-war suffrage campaign and activities after August 1914; party political manoeuvres; and changes in attitudes towards women through their work during the war. This last point has been considered from a slightly different perspective by Gail Braybon who explores the extent to which the experiences of war changed perceptions of womanliness and femininity, and of how 'public opinion' reacted to women. Certainly there were very significant changes, but any notion of absolute progress for women sits uncomfortably with evidence of women's experiences in employment, in the home and of relations between the sexes. See Gail Braybon's chapter on "Women's Public Image During the War, *Women Workers in the First World War*, (Routledge, London & New York, 1989 [1981]), pp. 154-172.

i) "The League Must Be Neutral...": Attitudes to Patriotism and Pacifism.²

Since the formation of the WFL in 1907 there had been no consistent or explicit policy of patriotism, anti-militarism or pacifism. Moreover, undercurrents in the League had produced distinctly mixed messages. On the one hand, it was the British government which denied women equal rights. Yet League members did not avoid drawing on a perceived identity as British women in demanding a measure which, they argued, would benefit the nation as a whole. On another level, the British state, in preceding years had been engaged in a number of militarist confrontations with other European nations, particularly Germany. This provided a good opportunity for more internationally minded suffrage activists to argue that if women of all nations had political equality, then their presence would prevent, or at least diminish, armed conflict.³

Jill Liddington, in her study of feminism and anti-militarism, has traced, what she terms the equal rights tradition outlined above, as well as a maternalist strand which rejected wars because of their cost to mothers, and a strand which equated violence with masculinity.⁴ Interestingly she identifies the former in the writings of Olive Schreiner, and the latter in the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, both of whom, as I argued in the

²Verbatim Minutes, WFL Eleventh Annual Conference, February 23rd and 24th, 1918, p. 58. Taken from a speech by League Treasurer, Dr Elizabeth Knight. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1918).

³See especially the activities of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, and the arguments of members, in Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham. Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820*, pp. 36-37. See also Anne Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women. Feminist Peace Campaigners of the Great War*, passim.

⁴Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham*, pp. 6, 8, 59-84.

previous chapter, were popular with the League's membership.⁵ All three perspectives although not obviously apparent, are significant to the League because they provide a framework for understanding the actions taken by League members in the period after war had been declared.

The League responded to the impending crisis by declaring members must intervene and prevent the war if at all possible. This stance was in no way unique, and existed in various forms across almost the entire women's movement on the eve of the declaration of war. These sentiments led to the calling of a "Women's Anti-War Meeting" on August 4th 1914 at Kingsway Hall in London, and among the leading suffrage figures present was Charlotte Despard, on behalf of the WFL.⁶ Once again she was to project her own views onto the League, and in these she was uncompromising. Despard's spiritual and socialist convictions provided the basis for her arguments that until women and men worked together equally, the "epidemics of armed strife" would continue. The war, she argued, was the decisive damnation of a corrupt society.⁷

However, while Despard's own particular leanings were to carry her towards pacifism and the Women's Peace Crusade later in 1917, the League did not follow her quietly or straightforwardly down this road. After the anti-war meeting on the eve of the hostilities had failed to influence the country's leaders, League officials held an emergency National Executive meeting on August 10th. At this meeting an official

⁵Jill Liddington, *The Long Road To Greenham*, pp. 65-70.

⁶Jill Liddington, *The Long Road To Greenham*, p. 78 and Anne Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women*, pp. 22-42 gives a full account of the meeting.

⁷*The Vote*, August 7th 1914, p. 263. See also Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, pp. 176-202, for a detailed study of Charlotte Despard's activities during the war.

course of action was outlined and published in *The Vote*. It ran:

The WFL feeling keenly the situation of the country at the present moment, have decided to abstain during the war from all forms of active militancy. The NEC of the WFL re-affirms the urgency of keeping the suffrage flag flying, and, especially now, making the country understand the supreme necessity of women having a voice in the counsels of the nation, and in view of the earnest desire prevalent in the ranks of suffragists to render service to their country at this critical time, the WFL are organising a Women's Suffrage National Aid Corps, whose chief object will be to render help to the women and children of the nation.⁸

The emphasis in this statement was three fold. Firstly, suffrage was to continue to be of prime importance to the League. This was a highly significant stance which was to colour the actions of the League throughout the remainder of the war. Furthermore, this attitude, along with the reference to continuing passive militancy, also demonstrated how the long and often painful discussions on militancy which had been held over the preceding years, had established it as a guiding principle.⁹ Secondly, the statement stressed how League members were keen to respond to the national crisis, no longer by trying to prevent it, but by acting to offset its disastrous implications. Thirdly, the choice of aid, towards women workers, mothers and children, emphasised how the League was keen to maintain a primary interest in women and children, and so build on their ideas about women's important role as mothers, and concomitantly their rights as workers.

This acknowledgement of women's particular concerns, and of the continuing need for equal citizenship, make it clear that the League did not simply cease all activity for the vote, and rush headlong towards support for the war and patriotic condemnation of

⁸*The Vote*, August 14th 1914, p. 278. (The records of this NEC meeting are missing.)

⁹See Chapter Three for discussion on the League's policy of militant resistance. of resistance.

the enemy.¹⁰ Instead it lends weight to the alternative series of arguments that present the war as a particularly difficult period for suffragists, feminists and the women's movement as a whole, and one during which activists responded in ways which continued to reflect the diversity of their demands and concerns.¹¹

In the WFL, the sense of a 'nation at war' did not cancel out entirely members' awareness of the long years of struggle with the Government, and the practices and languages of protest and revolt they had developed. Nor could the variety of concerns and debates over the sexual double standard, economic reorganisation and motherhood be subsumed into some kind of national unity. On the contrary the war, rather than signalling the end of the WFL, worked as a catalyst for the activities and debates of the membership, and in turn these reached right to the heart of the demands for equality with men, and an end to women's subordination.

The practical responses of the membership are discussed in more detail later. However, the expansion and definition of the positions which were voiced in the early months after war was declared were significant because they led to a number of changes which resulted by the end of the war in a League which had altered in both image and

¹⁰This argument has been levelled with some justification towards Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst. See Anne Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women*, pp. 35-42. However, it should be noted that they only decided to co-operate once all suffrage prisoners had been released. Another 'Pankhurst' version is given by David Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath. The Story of the Women of the First World War*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1966), pp. 45-80.

¹¹See Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, pp. 252-263; Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, pp. 116-133; and Les Garner, *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty*, pp. 40-41. An account of suffragists' activities in Scotland can be found in Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause*, pp. 209-214. Gail Braybon's work also can be located in this interpretation as she traces concerns of and about women workers in the war. See Braybon's *Women Workers in the First World War*, passim.

focus. The position of Charlotte Despard requires particular attention because of her position in the League and her influence on the membership.

From the outset of the war Charlotte Despard made known her views on the "criminal" war in articles in *The Vote*. She utilised a range of long standing arguments, appealing to members to remember their "fellow suffragists abroad" and "treat them with special kindness and consideration."¹² These words were followed with a plea for members to:

..remember that the truth of the life of the nations depends upon the women and workers of both sexes...If these combine, if these hold fast to the truth, it will be in their power, perhaps in the near future to stop war...¹³ .

Her influence spurred on attempts to build on the international spirit which had burst forth in the League in the aftermath of the 1913 International Women's Suffrage Alliance Congress at Budapest.¹⁴ Yet the moves in the League towards internationalism were dealt a blow when the NEC was informed in 1915 that the WFL was ineligible for affiliation to the IWSA because of insufficient membership numbers.¹⁵

The final outcome of these attempts to affiliate to the IWSA did not become clear

¹²*The Vote*, August 14th 1914, p. 280.

¹³*The Vote*, August 21st 1914, pp. 288-289.

¹⁴See Chapter Four, pp. 247.

¹⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 89. NEC Minutes, November 15th 1915, p. 7, January 22nd 1916, p. 30, and March 18th 1916, p. 55. There were rather confrontational exchanges between IWSA representatives and the League over the latter's claim to be "the premiere suffrage society" in Britain. Also relations were not helped by the criticisms made by Nina Boyle of the IWSA in October 1915 which are covered later in this chapter, on p. 260.

until late in 1915, and by this time Despard had moved beyond international sisterhood towards a pacifist stance on the war. Indeed, in much the same way as she had found a platform for her spiritual interests and her commitment to socialist ideas, so her views against the war worked their way into her speeches at League meetings. Equally her very presence on platforms at meetings, including those critical of the war, was often enough to associate the League with the sentiments expressed.¹⁶

In May 1915 Despard attended a meeting of the British Committee which had been formed after the 1915 Hague Women's Peace Congress. Along with other well known suffragists, she took a place on the executive committee of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Later her role in the Women's Peace Crusade, which attempted to raise support for an end to the war through peaceful negotiation, and campaigned to bring peaceful halt to the conflict, distanced her even further from the everyday work of the League.¹⁷

Yet Despard was not the only League member to hold strong views on the war. On the contrary she merely represented one of a range of perspectives adopted by women suffragists, from uncompromising anti-war and anti-state activities, to jingoist, white feather brigades. Far removed from Despard in terms of her attitude to the war, was Nina Boyle, who besides the President herself, was perhaps the most influential

¹⁶This reached the stage in 1917 and 1918 when complaints by League members against their beloved president were openly voiced. See the Verbatim Minutes, 1918, pp. 53-55.

¹⁷Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham*, pp. 105-106, and Anne Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women*, pp. 151-152. Wiltsher gives details of Charlotte Despard's tours of Scotland, Wales, the Midlands, Yorkshire and Lancashire on behalf of the Peace Crusade, see pp. 192-193.

figure in the League at this time. Boyle, in October 1915 launched a blistering attack on the editors of the IWSA journal, *Jus Suffragii*. In an article in *The Vote*, she condemned their concentration on pacifism and refused to accept the response of IWSA member, Mary Sheepshanks, that *Jus Suffragii* took a "neutral attitude", and "represented women of *all* countries."¹⁸ On the contrary, Boyle, never one to avoid confrontation, re-emphasised her belief that the disputed paper was "full of pacifist propaganda", and even more damning in her eyes, failed to prioritise the issue of women's suffrage.¹⁹

Nina Boyle's comments had a double edge to them which demonstrates the difficulty in separating attitudes over the war from the long standing demands of women suffragists. Officially she condemned any moves which detracted from the suffrage campaign by introducing issues which might split the women's movement at the point when the need for unity was paramount. Yet her underlying sympathies with a pro-war, national policy were never far from the surface, to the extent that her disgust with pacifism among women was barely disguised. While early on in the war, Boyle continued to focus her attack on the government for its failure to allow women equal rights, gradually her sympathies caused her to devote more time to activities which took her away from her work for the WFL. In May 1916 she requested, and was granted, a leave of absence from her position as Head of the Political and Militant Department. In this period she travelled to Serbia and did not return until March 1917, when she found her influence in the League had declined. Her own views in support of the war

¹⁸*The Vote*, October 15th 1915, pp. 784-5, and October 22nd 1915, pp. 801-2.

¹⁹*The Vote*, November 5th 1915, p. 810.

had by then become more vigorous.²⁰

The opposing stances represented by Charlotte Despard and Nina Boyle stand out among the League's membership because they were so vocally expressed in *The Vote*. Sporadically other members corresponded on their attitudes to the war. One argued without giving actual details of how to achieve it, that universal disarmament was the only answer to ending conflict.²¹ The relative absence of open discussion by other members on the rights and wrongs of war suggest that there was a tendency to marginalise any possible dissensions within the League itself, or at least confine discussion to more discrete circles. The most forthright discussion took place at the League's delayed 1915 Annual Conference which was convened in the October of this year. The debates centred on the concern that officials of the League were making themselves known through speaking for other organisations, and were doing a disservice to the League by clouding agreed policy and ideals.²² Yet even those delegates who strongly objected to their President's attendance at peace meetings, could not bring themselves to force her to choose between the League and the Women's International League, and in the event made a special case which allowed Despard alone the freedom

²⁰WFL *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 3, and NEC Minutes, May 13th 1916, p. 96. Eunice Murray took over the position during this time.

²¹ *The Vote*, November 12th 1915, p. 817. Middlesbrough member, Nellie Best, who had previously criticised the middle-class bias in the WFL, re-emerged in a different guise as a member of Sylvia Pankhurst's Workers Suffrage Federation. Her anti-conscription views led to her arrest and six month imprisonment in 1916. This reference is taken from Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham*, p. 108 who cites K. Weller, 'Don't Be a Soldier!' *The Radical Anti-War Movement in North London 1914-1918*, (Journeyman Press and London History Workshop Centre, London, 1985), p. 75.

²²Verbatim Minutes, WFL Tenth Annual Conference, October 16th 1915, pp. 131-136. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1915). Twenty-nine League branches were represented at this conference, see *The Vote*, October 22nd 1915, p. 794.

she desired.²³

This reticence to restrict the activities of their revered president should not be explained as mere indecisiveness or weakness on the part of League delegates, but rather as the foundations of an officially neutral policy on questions of war and peace. Even if it was not made explicit, it is certain that members were aware that their organisation contained women who were both for and against the war, in much the same way as it was tacitly acknowledged there were both socialists and Conservative supporters in the ranks. The absence of official policy on the war remained in force until the next conference held in February 1918. It was then that a decisive policy of neutrality was adopted. The League's treasurer, Elizabeth Knight, an increasingly influential figure, argued truthfully:

It is no good trying to keep pacifism out....there are far more members and branches who would withdraw if we were in any way implicated with militarism....²⁴

Her claims however, were only just endorsed as the vote which formally agreed on a neutral policy was passed after some shifting of positions, by one vote.²⁵ It is perhaps a credit to the long and arduous discussions held so often in the years before 1914, as

²³*Verbatim Minutes*, 1915, p. 136. By the next conference in February 1918, opinions had hardened towards Despard's pacifist links. However this was influenced by Despard's own decision to stand down as President of the League. Following this decision it was agreed that all NEC members and officials could speak on other platforms but only if they did so independently. See *WFL Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 5.

²⁴*Verbatim Minutes*, 1918, pp. 57-58.

²⁵*Verbatim Minutes*, 1918, pp. 73-83. This was a difficult conference for Despard, who was called to cast her deciding vote on the League's policy on the war after nineteen votes for and against were cast. In the event she refused to do so, claiming she was bound not to influence the League, although she showed no such reticence when she was again called to cast her deciding vote on the question of male membership. This is discussed on p. 296 of this chapter.

well as to members' activities during the war, that a commitment to women's suffrage was to be able to bridge this gulf between opposing attitudes on pacifism and militarism.

The desire to continue to prioritise the principles of equal suffrage and equal citizenship for women and men continued to unite the majority of members. This is clearly evident in the instructions to the two WFL delegates to the National Peace Congress held in May 1918:

...to put across the need of women for equality with men, and to emphasize that they are members of the WFL and not a pacifist society...²⁶

The crisis of war served to re-emphasise in members' minds the importance and the urgent need for a strong and united League. The majority of discussions and actions which took place as a result of the war were qualified by the League's own *feminist* agendas in relation to women's distinct organisation, demands for equality, and acknowledgement of sexual difference. However, this pattern took some time to emerge, and initially even the strongest determination to keep the suffrage flag flying for women could not overcome the practical and personally traumatic repercussions of war as they unfolded, both on the members and the organisational structures of the League. It is these practical consequences that I now consider.

²⁶NEC Minutes, March 23rd 1918, p. 75.

ii) "...The Premier Suffrage Society..." Changes in Internal Organisation and Policy in the WFL.²⁷

The effects of the outbreak of hostilities on the internal organisation of the WFL were unmistakable by the time delegates met for the Annual Conference in October 1915. Members gathered both to hear and to relate, how donations had become increasingly difficult to obtain, and how funds locally and nationally had fallen off sharply. Indeed it was recorded later that in 1915 income dropped to three quarters of the level in 1914.²⁸ The result of the inevitable cost-cutting exercises which followed was the decision to channel all available funds in to *The Vote*, to allow it to keep going as a weekly paper. This was carried out at the expense of employing travelling paid organisers who had been one of the most effective means of stimulating activity in remote branches, and also of keeping the NEC informed of local branch events.²⁹ It was not until March 1917 that the League gained enough money to employ another organiser, and in the intervening period branches had to rely on sporadic visits from NEC officials and unpaid workers.³⁰

One implication of this weakening of links between the National Committee and

²⁷Quote taken from discussion at 1915 Annual Conference, Verbatim Minutes p. 91. Also see Chapter Five, footnote no. 15.

²⁸WFL, *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 6. In 1916 there was another drop of £150 and in 1917 a further drop of £50.

²⁹Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 13.

³⁰Ex-WSPU member Miss Dorothy Evans was appointed as WFL organiser to work principally in the North Eastern Counties in February 1917. See *WFL Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 13. Evans resigned at the end of 1918. See NEC Minutes, February 3rd 1917, p. 190 and November 9th 1918, p. 143. In June 1915 the WFL moved its headquarters in London from Robert Street to less expensive premises at 144 High Holborn. They remained at this address until the League was disbanded in 1961. See *The Vote*, June 25th 1915, p. 653.

regional branches was that the latter had to rely even more on the time and commitment of their branch members. As the 1914 winter season approached branches in Dundee and Manchester and a number in London announced their decisions to suspend regular branch meetings, either to work on local ward committees or join in the meetings of other societies.³¹ More damaging still were those branches who simply stopped sending reports to *The Vote* and corresponding with the NEC. Possibly as many as half of the League's branches active before August 1914, disbanded in the period before January 1918. It was these organisational shifts in the strength of the League, together with the personal, social and economic upheavals experienced by members who faced new challenges because of the war, which altered patterns and levels of branch activity across different regions.³²

On a more positive note, for those branches who continued to have strong networks of members and supporters, the falling off of central interventions through organisers enabled them to plan their own responses to the war, and to form links with societies which they deemed the most beneficial. Although as I will argue in the next section, this took place broadly within the guidelines laid down by the NEC, many branches could and indeed did, build on the distinct local interests, successes and

³¹*The Vote*, August 14th, 1914, p. 299, September 11th 1914, p. 314, September 18th 1914, p. 331, October 2nd 1914, p. 338, and November 20th 1914, p. 398.

³²There is no detailed evidence of what happened to branches in the months between August 1914 and October 1915 because the NEC minutes are missing. However a number of branches disbanded, and this was probably due to secretaries resigning and the lack of replacements. However, these changes did not all occur immediately. For example, in *The Vote*, July 8th 1916, p. 121, it was announced that the secretary and the committee of the Manchester branch had resigned and the remaining members had decided to reform into a smaller WFL group.

contacts they had made before 1914.³³

However, some League branches that were used to working in co-operation with other suffrage society branches suffered as they found themselves increasingly isolated. In particular the Edinburgh branch of the League bemoaned the suspension of suffrage activity by their counterparts in the local Edinburgh NUWSS who had begun to concentrate their efforts towards "hospitals and other activities."³⁴ Moreover, while instances of joint work with WSPU branches had fallen off somewhat in the years after 1912, there was still shock and dismay among League branches at the almost total collapse of the WSPU in terms of suffrage activity.³⁵

This increasing isolation of the WFL among the three main suffrage societies needs to be explained in a wider context. In August 1914 the release of all their prisoners marked the end of WSPU violent militancy. Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst turned their attentions to the war effort and found a ready champion in Lloyd-George who capitalised on their organisational skills to promote women's need to work during the war.³⁶ This alliance with a Government the two Pankhursts had once vilified, left members in WSPU branches bereft. In 1915 a much reduced membership

³³These are discussed in Chapter Two.

³⁴Verbatim Minutes, Annual Conference 1915, p. 90. These comments were rather scathing of what has been described as a successful initiative; the Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service. See Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause*, pp. 210-211.

³⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1918, pp. 97-98, 102.

³⁶Arthur Marwick, *Women at War, 1914-1918*, (Croon Helm, London, 1977), pp. 43-44. The Pankhursts organised a women's war work procession which was funded by the Government. Details of these can be found in Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, pp. 231-234.

formed The Suffragettes of the WSPU, an organisation whose aims were to obtain suffrage as before. Yet even with the close links with the WFL, the number of WSPU branches never reached its pre-war levels.³⁷

Other League branches besides Edinburgh must have suffered through fewer opportunities for joint action with local NUWSS branches. The NUWSS itself had suffered from the split between anti- and pro-pacifist factions on its national executive early in the war.³⁸ The members who remained were on the whole self-declared patriots, who devoted their energies in the branches to aid work, leaving their leadership, led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett, to influence the government on suffrage legislation in 1916 and 1917.³⁹ It was due to this shift in emphasis of NUWSS branches away from suffrage, together with the collapse of the WSPU, that the WFL felt they could rightly claim to be the "premiere suffrage society" in Britain.⁴⁰

The fundamental shifts in local organisation in WSPU and NUWSS branches were in a small way offset by the League capitalising on their long-held ability to forge good

³⁷*The Vote*, November 5th 1915, p. 807, gives details of a protest meeting convened by members of the WSPU who objected to the actions taken by their leaders. Other details can be found in Stanley and Morley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, pp. 181-182.

³⁸Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage. Feminists in War and Peace, 1914-1928*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989), pp. 50-53.

³⁹See Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, Chapter Seven, "Winning The Vote", pp. 134-150, for details of the efforts of the leadership of the NUWSS to secure a suffrage measure.

⁴⁰The League made this claim in respect of their membership being larger than the other suffrage societies, including the Church Leagues and the United Suffragists, and because they considered themselves to be undertaking the most work in support of female enfranchisement.

relations with other women's societies. The League was still in the position of organising joint activities with Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes.⁴¹ Furthermore the League continued to liaise with other organisations working on behalf of women, including the Women's Labour League, Co-operative Guilds, the Fabian Women's Group, the National Union of Teachers, and the National Union of Women Workers.⁴² Yet provincial branches only sporadically appear to have reaped the benefits of such co-operation. More often the mass of suffrage activity took place in London, where the League organised meetings in Trafalgar Square, a number of theatres, and the larger parks.⁴³

The war did not prevent all discussions by League members on the women's movement and feminist policies. If anything, it served to highlight the necessity of fundamental changes in gender power relations which would prevent such a catastrophe occurring again. The discussions which took place at the 1915 annual conference were predominantly a continuation of conference discussions held in 1913 and 1914 on the policies the WFL would adopt once the vote had been achieved. As I have already argued, these discussions related to changes in laws, and attempts to influence the government through meetings and deputations, as well as the high profile challenges to sexual double standards and immorality.

⁴¹NEC Minutes, November 15th 1915, pp. 9, 17, March 18th 1916, p. 57, and May 5th 1917, p. 225.

⁴²NEC Minutes, December 18th 1915, p. 22, February 19th 1916, p. 44, May 13th 1916, p. 97, June 17th 1916, pp. 109-110, 112, December 16th 1916, p. 175, and *The Vote*, April 13th 1917, p. 183.

⁴³*The Vote*, December 3rd 1915, p. 838, NEC Minutes, January 22nd 1916, p. 35, April 15th 1916, p. 79, and May 5th 1917, p. 230. During 1917 suffrage activities in the branches increased as I demonstrate later in this chapter.

Nina Boyle raised these issues at the 1915 conference when she outlined her plans for a future League programme. Her suggestions included a reference to the "abolition of all sex inequality", and more specifically, the rights of women of native races; the codification of criminal law; a revision of the Statute book; audits of all party accounts; procedures whereby knowledge of the source of all cabinet ministers's income should be available; electoral changes which included a redistribution of seats; and measures to prevent the adulteration of food and drink.⁴⁴

While Boyle's outline of future WFL policy was a testimony of her own interests and concerns, particularly on criminal law, it also registered the diversity and breadth of members' interests, and an accompanying desire to open up the often secretive world of party political structures. As delegate, Mrs Huntsman commented, such policies "would be concrete things to discuss and might increase attendance at meetings."⁴⁵ This indicated that members were concerned with the falling-off of interest in women's suffrage in their communities and were searching around for issues to reverse declining levels of activity.

Nevertheless, conference delegates pushed ahead with their demands for equal suffrage. They also vigorously condemned the effects the hostilities were beginning to have on women's status as citizens and as workers. The League set out to champion the cause of the widows and wives of servicemen, the women who lost rights because of their marriage to "aliens", (defined as those born in hostile countries), and the women workers who were replacing male workers in war industries. Furthermore, memories

⁴⁴Verbatim Minutes, 1915, pp. 47-50.

⁴⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1915, p. 54

of the League's militant political resistance policy of refusing to obey those laws passed without women's consent, prompted some delegates to call for resistance to the compulsory registration of women.⁴⁶

However, any opportunity to act on the agreed policies was curtailed, because at the same conference it was agreed that in order to cut down on costs and expenses, future annual conferences would be non-compulsory.⁴⁷ In one move delegates had potentially cut off opportunities for future national meetings to refine their policies. They had placed the members of the NEC in a more powerful position to influence the direction and image of the League, and had marginalised the voices of branch members not represented on this committee.

At the very time when there had been general agreement about the national future of the League, delegates had, perhaps unwittingly, set off in the direction of devolution, towards greater local autonomy. When the remaining branches of the WFL met again at the next annual conference in January 1918, after a partial suffrage victory had been achieved, there was in effect a repeat performance in terms of policy discussions. However it was too late to draw in those branches which had collapsed in the period since October 1915.

The repercussions from the actions and decisions taken by the League in 1915

⁴⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1915, pp. 16-18, 37, 43. See also *The Vote*, October 8th 1915, p. 777.

⁴⁷Verbatim Minutes, 1915, p. 140. This decision applied to annual conferences for the duration of the war, and it was agreed that the NEC should consult the branches before taking any decisions.

cannot be judged in any simplistic way. In 1915 members returned to their branches with a common desire to demand equality for women, as well as pursue women's "particular concerns". They could continue established policies of resistance against women's lack of votes, or address newer concerns such as those for war widows and those dispossessed by war, or those which spanned the two, such as the campaigns for better pay and conditions for women workers, mothers and children. Members were left to interpret the priorities of the League as they saw fit. The overriding sense of the League in this period was one of continuity, set against a backdrop of great change, and it is this that I now explore in greater detail.

Section II: VIGILANCE AND COURAGE: "...TO PRESERVE WHAT WE HAVE GAINED AND....TO PUSH ON...."⁴⁸

This section explores the actions of League branches in relation to their long standing concerns, ideas and strategies, and those which were a direct response to the war. A recent study by Martin Pugh on women in the period after 1914 has served to qualify interpretations which present the first world war as marking the sharp climax of one era and the commencement of another. Pugh has made some useful points on the continuity between the years of war and the preceding years of high levels of suffrage agitation by members of the women's movement. However, his definitions of continuity as housekeeping and motherhood, and of discontinuity as wartime employment and "women in uniform" are rather too general to explain the actions and concerns of League members.⁴⁹ I will relate League members' action during the war

⁴⁸Charlotte Despard, "What Lies Before Us", *The Vote*, January 8th 1915, p. 456.

⁴⁹Martin Pugh, *Women And The Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1959*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1992). pp. 12-30.

to their pre-war concerns. In doing so I concentrate on the League's policies of political resistance and on the diversification of branch activities which on the one hand, reached right to the heart of the war effort, and on the other reached into the heart of local government.

i) "...In A Very True Sense...Militant..": Policies of Political Resistance, 1914 - 1918⁵⁰

There are a number of factors which indicate that despite the declaration of war strategies of resistance in WFL policy, and diversity in understandings of militant resistance, continued with distinct similarities to the patterns established in the WFL during 1913 and 1914. While the WSPU ceased their militant campaign, the WFL declared a suspension of active militancy, and this was taken by some to exclude passive resistance.⁵¹ A number of women personally demonstrated their commitment to passive protest by continuing to resist paying their taxes and by resisting other instruments of Government rule. Among these women were the League secretary Florence Underwood, who continued to refuse to pay income tax, and Dr Patch who, in March 1917, was summoned to the bankruptcy court for non-payment.⁵²

Even more notable in terms of resistance to the State were the actions of Nina

⁵⁰This quote comes from comments made by Charlotte Despard at the 1915 League conference, on the report of political activities by the League. See Verbatim Minutes, 1915, p. 8.

⁵¹This was later clarified at the Annual Conference in 1915. See Verbatim Minutes, 1915, p. 8.

⁵²WFL *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 8. Others included Miss McMunn of Oxford, Miss Raleigh of Oxbridge and Miss Evelyn Sharp. See also *The Vote*, January 1st 1915, p. 455.

Boyle over the Aliens Restriction Act introduced in 1915. Boyle, originally from South Africa, but claiming rights in no uncertain terms as a British citizen, was nonetheless required to give information on her movements to the authorities. On her refusal to do so, she was arrested and detained in October 1915 and as a result, missed the opening of the League's annual conference in London.⁵³ The following April after bringing court action, Boyle received an apology for illegal arrest and damages of £50/-. Her comments in *The Vote* summed up her feelings of triumph:

It is hoped that the Somerset-and-Avon police and the gentlemen who occupy the Bench will learn a little law before they tackle the next militant suffragist who disturbs their classic calm.....⁵⁴

Nina Boyle used her circumstances not only to show her patriotic indignation at being treated as an alien, but also to remind readers that militant suffragism was not dead, and indeed that resistance to authority would continue as long women were denied equality. Her temporary imprisonment also served as a means of drawing attention to the appalling state of conditions for women detainees in prisons.⁵⁵ The publicity and protests around Boyle's case amounted to nothing less than classic WFL militancy as it had been practised before the war, with its emphasis on both passive protest and on diversification into other areas where women suffered through their lack of effective political representation.

While such individual protests served as a focal point in highlighting women's oppression during the years after 1914, the practice of mass protest as seen during the census resistance in 1911 was not generally considered, and nor were public

⁵³*The Vote*, October 22nd 1915, p. 790.

⁵⁴*The Vote*, April 14th 1916, p. 989.

⁵⁵*The Vote*, October 22nd 1915, pp. 790, 798.

confrontations which courted arrest. Greater numbers stepped down their tax resistance, and this attitude probably contributed to the majority decision to reject plans to coordinate resistance to compulsory registration in 1915.⁵⁶ There was a small faction apparently in favour of this kind of resistance, and so the League, always willing to come to a compromise, agreed on a policy whereby individual members might protest if they felt compelled to do so, although no official League action would be pursued.⁵⁷

Arguably, the most striking new consideration which emerged in League discussions about political resistance, was the concern not to lose the interest that official bodies were tentatively showing in the League's organisational base and its work. Because of this, policies of resistance were noticeably stripped of their significance. Militancy was no longer the single primary factor dictating the relationship between the League and the State. In tracing the increase in official interest in the League, I now consider the diversification of branch activities in the years after August 1914.

⁵⁶This decline might also have been a product of the decision of the Women's Tax Resistance League to suspend activities in January 1915. See *The Vote*, January 15th 1915, p. 455. Later in *The Vote*, November 19th 1915, p. 825, Marion Lawson's letter was printed which tells of how she halted her protests on the advice of the WTRL. She did not however pay any of her taxes owed before the outbreak of war, claiming that her decision was made out of patriotic spirit rather than succumbing to the authorities.

⁵⁷*The Vote*, November 26th 1915, p. 829. At first there was strong condemnation of compulsory registration from *Vote* contributors although this declined shortly after.

ii) "...A Power, and Consulted on Many Issues...": Continuity and Changes in the Focus of League Campaigns and Demands.⁵⁸

During the war members of the WFL branches desired to build on their responsibilities as citizens, and to elicit a response from those authorities who had so blatantly ignored them in the past. While there were signs of moves by the authorities towards the recognition suffrage campaigners craved, League members were aware of the need to continue their cutting edge of criticism and confrontation with male controlled institutions, particularly the Government. At the same time they wanted to minimize intervention into their organisation, and prevent their activities being absorbed into local government systems of welfare and control, or the war effort as defined by the Government.⁵⁹

At the outset of the war, many members were still reeling in shock and considerable disorganisation, a situation which was not helped by August, the month when war was declared, being the traditional 'holiday' month when League activists scaled down branch and public meetings, and when most efforts were put into campaigns in selected holiday centres. Early indications of impending change were obvious when the 1914 WFL summer campaign on the Clyde Coast was brought to an early end after the announcement of the war.⁶⁰

Immediate action was necessary, and in seeking a role for the League, the NEC

⁵⁸This quote is from comments made towards the Middlesbrough branch's work at the 1918 Annual Conference. See Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 36.

⁵⁹In the last section of this chapter I follow up discussions on the future of the "women's movement" and an independent identity.

⁶⁰*The Vote*, August 14th 1914, p. 282.

skilfully latched on to the idea of forming the Women's Suffrage National Aid Corps (WSNAC) in the branches. This gave League members a definite and immediate purpose, and spurred them on to convene branch meetings. Consequently the stronger branches in Brighton and Hove, Middlesbrough, Sheffield, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Portsmouth and some in London, formed National Aid Corps in their areas.⁶¹ The WSNAC was coordinated by two officials working from Headquarters in London, who gave local WSNACs support in setting up workshops to provide employment for women put out of work by the recent changes in manufacturing output. Local members were also encouraged to set up aid programmes for needy mothers and children.⁶²

Spurred on by Charlotte Despard, three WSNAC workshops for unemployed women were established in London's poorer districts by the end of 1914; in South Hackney, Edgware Road, and in Nine Elms, and these set the pattern for a later scheme in Brighton in 1915.⁶³ While initially successful, it transpired that the workshops were not to be permanent as unemployment among women declined dramatically during 1915, and all but one were closed.⁶⁴ The League turned its attentions to more removed

⁶¹*The Vote*, August 14th 1914, p. 291,299, September 4th 1914, p. 306, September 11th 1914, p. 314, October 23rd 1914, p. 362, November 27th 1914, p. 406 and January 15th 1914, p. 406.

⁶²The Hon. Secretary of the WSNAC was Constance Maud, and the Hon. Treasurer Miss Lind af-Hageby, who was replaced by Mrs A.W. Thompson in February 1915. See *The Vote*, September 23rd 1914, p. 330 and February 26th 1915, p. 511. NEC Minutes, June 17th 1916, p. 119 record the decision to leave the WSNAC in abeyance as there was no need for their services in those areas where there had been offers made to work elsewhere.

⁶³*The Vote*, December 11th 1914, p. 420, and December 17th 1915, p. 868.

⁶⁴*The Vote*, March 26th 1915, p. 543.

demands for equal status for women workers. Such demands became an important focus of action on the behalf of women workers, especially after the League lost its National Service Organisation which was set up to find work for women, in October 1915.⁶⁵

In terms of actions around women workers rights and needs, the efforts of League members received a boost when in April 1915, the President of the Board of Trade, Mr Runciman, called together a conference of representatives from the NUWSS, the WFL, the United Suffragists, the East London Federation, the Women's Trade Union League, party political women's organisation and the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. Runciman's intention was to discuss women's employment and gauge the views of the representatives.⁶⁶ Those from the League, while appreciative of the recognition they had at last received as an official body representing women, demanded unequivocally a minimum wage for women and the recognition of the skills of 'expert' women. This compounded their already vocal demands for equal pay, remuneration for women receiving training, and crucially, the demand that women receive the same consideration in employment opportunities as men, *after* hostilities had ceased.⁶⁷

By advancing these particular demands, the League continued to intervene,

⁶⁵The split between the League and the National Service Organisation came during the 1915 annual conference over disagreements with the latter who were refusing to include the title "Women's Freedom League", claiming it did not impress prospective employers. It was a highly acrimonious discussion and shortly after the two organisers, Miss Parker and Miss Moorhead left the League's premises. See Verbatim Minutes, 1915, pp. 104-113, and *The Vote*, January 14th 1916, p. 891.

⁶⁶*The Vote*, April 16th 1915, pp. 573-574. Before this there had been a fair amount of heated correspondence between the League and government departments on women and war service, see *The Vote*, April 9th 1915, p. 570.

⁶⁷*The Vote*, March 26th 1915, p. 541.

somewhat uneasily, in the fray between trade unions which pitched the rights of male workers now in uniform or working under conditions dictated by the war economy, and newly employed women workers.⁶⁸ League spokeswomen were consistent in their criticisms of what they considered the tardy interest of employers and Trade Unions in women workers' rights. They laid down the gauntlet by demanding conclusive acknowledgement from the Government of women's concerns through the introduction of suffrage legislation. In keeping with their resistance strategies towards the Government, the League publicly declared that until this reform was assured, League members should emphasize that they gave their service to their *country*, and not to the Government which had "so flagrantly violated the constitution in regard to the citizenship of women."⁶⁹

Behind the perceived co-operation between State authorities and the League, there were very real tensions. The former remained far less concerned with women's equality than with the national economy and progressing in the war, while the League commentators maintained a strong emphasis on various aspects of women's equality in all their campaigns. In 1915, Nina Boyle reported to the NEC on her actions relating to the position of women in munitions factories and clerks in the war office. In February 1916, demands were reiterated for minimum wages for government workers and agricultural workers, with claims, probably by Boyle, that women's patriotism was "being openly exploited."⁷⁰ By this stage, some branches had sufficiently equipped

⁶⁸For details of these debates, see Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, pp. 60-111.

⁶⁹*The Vote*, March 26th 1915, p. 541-542.

⁷⁰NEC Minutes, December 8th 1915, pp. 25-26, and February 19th 1916, p. 45-46.

themselves with the knowledge to intervene in local politics, and the Glasgow branches' deputation to their local council over the refusal of tram companies to employ women, was certainly not an isolated action.⁷¹

The League continued to identify the needs of different women, including their working-class sisters. The pre-war concerns for unmarried mothers, housing, prostitutes, and protection for children from sexual abuse were re-emphasised during the war, both by the State, and also by League members themselves.⁷² The most striking example of this was the opening of the WFL Nine Elms Settlement in London's East End in 1914.

The Settlement was the brain child of Charlotte Despard who gave her own property in the overwhelmingly working class and deprived district of Nine Elms, over to the control of organisers appointed by the League. The Settlement was originally designed to cater for the children of working mothers and deserted children, and set about feeding them nourishing vegetarian meals and providing activities for them.⁷³ By 1917 the Settlement had proved so popular that it had moved to larger premises, and

⁷¹*The Vote*, March 26th 1915, p. 546. Interestingly in some League literature on women's work towards the end of the war, there is a sense of moves towards analyses which centred on women's right to absolute equality with men in the workplace. While this built on attitudes developed in the League prior to 1914, it does contradict the League's efforts to support working women through the Nine Elms Settlement and the Despard Arms. What ever the conflicting evidence, it is clear that the WFL was increasingly out of step with the increasing trade union membership among women workers and the new bodies formed to represent working women. The most important of these was the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations which is discussed briefly in Chapter Six, p. 316, and Chapter Seven, footnote no. 38.

⁷²See Chapter Four for details of pre-1914 WFL concerns.

⁷³See *The Vote*, December 17th 1915, p. 867.

was feeding between one hundred and fifty and two hundred children a day, as well as housing up to twenty-two children in the Guest House while their mothers were ill, confined or working.⁷⁴ Such activities did not mark any retreat from League members' long-standing opinion of women's crucial duties as mothers. However, compared with the League in the years before the war, they did mark a greater emphasis on community responsibility.

The issue of direct political equality continued to reverberate among League members and branches. "Keeping the suffrage flag flying" remained a very real concern, and campaigns for suffrage continued in regional areas, notably in Wales and Scotland. In 1915 a Southern campaign was organised which centred on Letchworth and resulted in re-energising the branch there. These larger campaigns ran alongside those run by League branches in Manchester, London and Middlesbrough in 1916 and 1917.⁷⁵ They were accompanied by mass meetings in London and at the Stockton by-election in 1917, where it was claimed that suffrage was "one of the leading notes in the campaign".⁷⁶

Joint work with other suffrage societies continued apace, and culminated in the deputation to the Prime Minister in March 1917, which witnessed the gathering together of twenty four suffrage societies, who met to hear assurances that women would be

⁷⁴WFL *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, pp. 14-15. A similar initiative was the opening of a fifty bed hospital for women and children in Kate Harvey's home. See Anne Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women*, p. 192.

⁷⁵*The Vote*, March 26th 1915, p. 546, and March 9th 1917, p. 142. NEC Minutes, February 3rd 1917, p. 195, March 31st 1917, p. 221, and September 1st 1917, p. 34.

⁷⁶*The Vote*, March 9th 1917, p. 143.

enfranchised.⁷⁷ Thus when the climax of the long suffrage campaign arrived, the League was able to reap the benefits of continuing strongly to promote their original demands for women's suffrage. Related issues concerning the passage of the long awaited Representation of the People Act are taken up in the final section of this chapter.

A survey of *The Vote* in the years between 1914 and 1918 indicates how demands for equality between men and women as well as initiatives designed to cater to women specifically, drew consistent interest from members. One unusual example centred on the practice of banning women from licensed premises during certain hours, while men enjoyed unlimited access. These actions infuriated some among the membership and attempts to rectify this injustice produced two distinct responses.

The first was promoted strongly by Despard who believed that women went into pubs for company rather than alcohol, and so the answer was to provide venues with one element, namely alcohol, missing.⁷⁸ Her subsequent response provided the inspiration for one of the most long standing League projects set up during the war, namely the opening of "The Despard Arms" in September 1915. Earlier in the March of this year plans had been made to open premises in Albany Street in London to allow women of the "poorer classes" to meet and discuss questions of interest.⁷⁹ Later these were modified, and the venue moved to the more middle-class area of Hampstead. The new

⁷⁷*The Vote*, April 6th 1917, p. 170, the meeting was held on March 29th. Previously a Joint Committee of Suffrage Societies had been convened on which the League was represented, see Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, p. 150.

⁷⁸"Mrs Despard on the Public House", *The Vote*, March 19th 1915, p. 537.

⁷⁹*The Times*, march 11th 1915, p. 5. See also *The Vote*, March 19th 1915, p. 537.

venture was sufficiently unusual to merit the attention of *The Times* which reported on the opening and the plans to:

...carry out Mrs Despard's ideas of a home where all comers may find refreshment and recreation. One of the aims....is to redeem a name that has gone down, the name "public house".⁸⁰

The "Despard Arms" remained true to its original aims and stayed open for four years. In June 1916 another meeting place, The Minerva Cafe, was opened by the League, which continued throughout the 1920s, even producing its own branch in 1924.⁸¹

The other response to denying women access to social venues was to demand absolutely equal treatment. This was favoured by branches in Portsmouth and Hartlepool whose members were apparently not so concerned with temperance, and instead demanded, and in Hartlepool won, some concessions. By 1918 their efforts proved a source of amusement as delegates at the Annual Conference were told of "...Those terrible drunken women at Hartlepool that were a scourge to the town because they were drinking beer that the men wanted..."⁸²

In addition to articulating demands for equality in social and economic life, as well as providing alternative social spaces for women, another of the WFL's most consistent campaigns during the war concerned the abuse of women through sexual exploitation. In 1915 the NEC protested against attempts to reintroduce a form of the Contagious Diseases Acts, which was included as section 40D of DORA. The proposed legislation

⁸⁰*The Times*, September 27th 1915, p. 5(d).

⁸¹*The Vote*, June 30th 1916, p. 1091. The Cafe was opened at League Headquarters at 144 High Holborn and was reported to sell "dainty vegetarian lunches."

⁸²Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 14.

provided for the arrest, examination and imprisonment of women suspected of passing on venereal disease to servicemen.⁸³ The League arranged public meetings in London, Edinburgh and Wales, and other provincial towns and invited members of other societies to take part.⁸⁴ At one Criminal Law Amendment Bill protest meeting in March 1917, the references to the "obnoxious clause...relating to the persecution of prostitutes", continued to be grounded in beliefs which had gained a dominant foothold in the League particularly after 1912, that women needed protection.⁸⁵ The war served to cement even this stance further, and it also served to generate demands by the League for other measures designed to protect women, such as raising the age of consent to eighteen.⁸⁶

League representatives coordinated a country-wide campaign which was grounded in an absolute rejection of the state control of vice. In addition to meetings and deputations on this matter, these concerns were the primary factor behind the formation of the Women's Police Volunteers which was set up soon after the war started. Initially the organisation had direct links with the WFL through Nina Boyle, although it acquired independent status soon after, due probably to the tacit encouragement from the authorities who saw benefits in women "policing" members of their own sex.⁸⁷

⁸³NEC Minutes, April 15th 1916, p. 83.

⁸⁴For example the United Suffragists, Northern Men's Federation, the East London Federation of Suffragettes. See also *The Vote*, January 1st 1915, p. 447, March 2nd 1917, p. 135, and March 9th 1917, pp. 137, 138.

⁸⁵*The Vote*, March 9th 1917, pp. 137, 138.

⁸⁶This was a prominent aspect of the Montgomery Boroughs campaign in Wales in 1917, see *The Vote*, April 6th 1917, p. 175.

⁸⁷For details see Edith Tancred, *Women Police*, (From the records of the National Council of Great Britain, London, [c. 1950]), pp. 1-3. Accounts differ on the role the WFL played in this initiative, Tancred does not mention the League, whereas in Stella Newsome's, *WFL*, p. 11 it is stated that Nina Boyle formed the Women's Police Volunteers and how it was conceived as a trained body of professional women "willing

Although the creation of the women's police patrols veered towards women controlling women, a number of Police volunteers, led by Nina Boyle, who were also members of the League, maintained an awareness of the abuses women suffered and refused to enforce curfews on women.⁸⁸ The League further compounded their assault on double standards by highlighting attempts at Government control by insidious inspections of the homes of servicemen's wives who received government allowances. The League continued to highlight reports of male violence towards women and children and the gross leniency of the sentences meted out to offenders.⁸⁹

This continued assault on sexual double standards, together with campaigns for equal pay and conditions for women workers, was the source of the League's most direct confrontations with the Government and authorities in the years of war, and it is clear that the League continued to position itself in opposition to the Government. Even the initiatives which were conducted in an apparently greater degree of harmony, like those to improve the health of mothers and children, still contained some underlying tensions.

The official interest in maternal and child health, and its relationship to liberal reformist politics, eugenicist and imperialist fears about the future health of the race,

to go anyway." For more details see *The Vote*, August 21st 1914, p. 286, and April 9th 1915, pp. 566-567.

⁸⁸Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 181. Linklater states that it was because of this that Nina Boyle lost her control over women police volunteers, it being taken up by two of the earliest recruits, Damier Dawson and Mary Allen.

⁸⁹In this campaign the WFL worked in alliance with the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene (AMASH) to collect information on cases and sentencing through Police Court rotas. See WFL, *Annual Report*, pp. 9, 12.

played their part in League members' arguments.⁹⁰ Importantly however there was also a strong focus on women's own interests in relation to the affects of ill health on mothers and their children. What was interpreted as the sudden official interest of Government departments and local authorities did not go unnoticed by more astute WFL members like Kathleen Turner, who voiced her reservations:

we hear a great deal of the 'liberal allowance' paid to soldiers' wives 'not always wisely spent' of 'dirt, ignorance and neglect' as causes of infant mortality, but not a word of the slum landlord, the sweated employer, or the food adulterator, not a word either of the laws which have deliberately placed a higher value on property than human life....Mr Walter Long said 'My mission is to ask the women of England to come out and help us in this task of social reform rendered doubly important by the war.' The women of Britain have been asking for years to have a share in making the law on which the welfare of the nation depends. They have long realised that it is only by wise laws wisely administered that social ills can be remedied and social conditions improved. British *women* did not need a European war to teach them the value of human life....⁹¹

Whatever their reservations, League branches did find themselves usefully placed to capitalise on the concerns of their local authorities in relation to the health of women and children. At the forefront of this exercise was the Middlesbrough branch whose members were actively involved in establishing the Middlesbrough and District Women's Council. This Council was formed in 1914 after the League had failed to obtain representation on the Citizens' Committee, and included members from many of the women's organisations in the area. One of its greatest successes was the opening of a Maternal and Child Welfare Clinic in 1915, for which they later received a £300 grant from Government funds to continue their work.⁹² Middlesbrough Women's

⁹⁰See for example Nina Boyle's comments in *The Vote*, August 7th 1914, p. 268 in relation to the welfare of "their country and their race".

⁹¹*The Vote*, November 5th 1915, p. 805.

⁹²Middlesbrough WFL Minutes, September 3rd 1914 and September 8th 1914. Two WFL representatives, Alice Schofield Coates and Mrs Walker, served on the council, and the former became its leading figure soon after. See *The Vote*, December 17th

Council representatives were also asked to join the local food control committee after the success of another of their projects, a communal kitchen, established in the town.⁹³ Their success was recognised by both the Ministry of Food and by delegates at the WFL Annual Conference in January 1918, where it was commented, "they are now a power, and consulted on many issues."⁹⁴

This type of activity, which was repeated on a smaller scale in some other branches, notably in Harrow, points to a considerable preservation and extension of political activity on the part of branch members as representatives of the WFL as opposed to being members of purely philanthropic or self-declared non-political bodies. This activity by members was grounded in demands for equality for women as workers and citizens, and for a recognition of sexual difference as mothers and victims of vice. Yet now these demands extended further and had greater effect because branch members, like the women in Middlesbrough, developed and used existing structures to implement their concerns about women and sexual equality, and succeeded in directing the energies of their branch to forms of political action which far exceeded equal suffrage.⁹⁵ In Chapter Seven I take up this liaison between League branches and local

1915, p. 857, and Verbatim Minutes, 1918, pp. 34-35.

⁹³William Robertson, *Middlesbrough's Efforts in the Great War*, (Jordison & Co Ltd, Middlesbrough and London, n.d.), pp. 187-188. In September 1917 Alice Schofield Coates reported that the kitchen served between 400 and 600 portions a day. The kitchens closed in early March 1919. Other branches who also set up communal kitchens include Sheffield and plans were afoot in 1918 in Golders Green. See *The Vote*, March 26th 1915, p. 543, and Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p.35.

⁹⁴Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 36, and William Robertson, *Middlesbrough's Efforts in the Great War*, p. 188.

⁹⁵The Middlesbrough and District Women's Council was certainly a success during the war. Possibly because of this success in 1919 their maternal and child welfare clinics were brought under the control of the Middlesbrough council. Alice Schofield-Coates

government authorities, and comment on the extent to which local League members developed their interests in local and national government.⁹⁶

Interaction between League members in other branches and their local authorities displayed similar degrees of tension and convergence. While endeavours such as communal kitchens, cheap cafes and restaurants, and clothing pools, met Government demands for war economies, many branch members missed no opportunity to raise and discuss their demands for political equality and women's concerns through their work in the community. For example, a correspondent to *The Vote* reported on the number of women using the League's communal kitchen in Sheffield, and its "other" important function as an "educational" forum.⁹⁷

The diversification of activities in the branches also took the form of more explicit acknowledgement of the personal effect of the war on both women and men. Branches including those in Croydon, Chester and Middlesbrough, all held socials and provided entertainment for service men and women and their families.⁹⁸ Earlier in the war a number of branches had directed their energies towards providing aid for Belgium

served on this committee, not in her capacity as secretary of the Women's Council but because she was an elected member of the Middlesbrough council. She served on the committee alongside other councillors, the mayoress and other women who were selected by the council. See Maternity and Infant Welfare Central Committee minutes, from June 1917, (Middlesbrough Public Records Office, CB/M/C 42/14), and Maternity and Child Welfare Committee minutes, from May 1919, (Middlesbrough PRO, CB/M/C 2/259). See also William Lillie, *The History of Middlesbrough. An Illustration of the Evolution of English Industry*, (Commissioned by the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgess of the County Borough of Middlesbrough, Middlesbrough, 1960), pp. 368-369.

⁹⁶See Chapter Seven, Section II.

⁹⁷*The Vote*, March 26th 1915, p. 543.

⁹⁸WFL, *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, pp. 12-13.

refugees, the Harrow branch went as far as opening their suffrage shop as a "headquarters for the Belgium Refugee Committee" in the area. Branch member, Margaret Huntsman reported in 1915:

...at times it resembles a cafe in Antwerp or Brussels...when our Belgium friends drop in for tea (6d per head). Our efforts at French and their efforts at English cause much merriment; and passers by often wonder what has happened to the serious minded suffragist...⁹⁹

Other branches also seemed to move farther away from suffrage politics, even to the extent of collecting funds for prisoners of war. The Chester, Glasgow and Sheffield branches did so, even though this officially contradicted official League policy which stated that no funds could be collected other than those specifically for suffrage work.¹⁰⁰ Because of the lack of direct control from headquarters, the Chester branch went even further and set up their own war savings scheme.¹⁰¹

Despite the patriotic impression such activities suggest, it does not follow that branches entirely dissociated themselves from their broader political concerns. The social events which were organised for service personnel were used as an opportunity to publicize women's suffrage demands. The response was mixed, but mostly well taken, as the sardonic reference to administering the "pill" in the Middlesbrough branch's report to *The Vote* illustrates. Even the Chester branch who were in the forefront of many distinctly patriotic gestures, held suffrage meetings in 1917 and were reported to be working distinctly "under a suffrage banner."¹⁰²

⁹⁹*The Vote*, January 22nd 1915, p. 471.

¹⁰⁰*The Vote*, January 21st 1916, p. 899, June 9th 1916, p. 1068, and March 2nd 1917, p. 135.

¹⁰¹*The Vote*, June 9th 1916, p. 1068.

¹⁰²*The Vote*, February 16th 1917, p. 119.

In addition to activities which directly related to the war, many branches were still inclined, albeit less often, to hold discussion meetings on a range of issues. Popular talks included "Feminism and Morality" and those which discussed the future of the WFL were accompanied by topics chosen by members on either their employment, voluntary work and travels abroad.¹⁰³ In these discussions and occasionally on the pages of *The Vote* a number of women did present their ideas for future work, and this increased as a women's suffrage measure drew near. One member, Mary Soames made the suggestion, which did not attract much response at this stage, of reorganising the League into a "women voters organisation", whose purpose was to teach women "the duties of citizenship."¹⁰⁴ Other discussion centred around the long standing debate on the relationship between suffrage and feminism. Alice Abadam spoke on this subject at meetings around the country, and the reportage in *The Vote* on her speeches illustrates that issues of defining feminism were very far from being outdated:

During the war there had been an enormous growth of individual feminist opinion; Women were now feminists almost more than suffragists, but they could not forget that suffrage was the key to the position, the door to be knocked down, the bar to be shattered. Feminism, the speaker declared, was a larger thing than suffrage; it went from earth to heaven and was co-existent with humanity itself. What is the feminist demand? is it law-making? The demand should be that all laws must harmonise with the life of the people and the conditions under which they live, and further, that there should be absolute equality of opportunity for men and women in every direction.¹⁰⁵

Her comments relate very much to those issues which were debated in the period before 1914, which are covered in Chapter Four. They indicate that the issues surrounding

¹⁰³*The Vote*, December 3rd 1915, p. 838: Miss Ruth Hinder (a teacher) on "Child Education in War Time", and January 21st 1916, p. 899: Mrs Whetton on "Famous Women in the Nineteenth Century".

¹⁰⁴*The Vote*, March 2nd 1917, p. 131.

¹⁰⁵Alice Abadam, "The Feminist Outlook", *The Vote*, March 2nd 1917, pp. 133-134. Abadam made this speech at Caxton Hall, London.

suffrage and feminism were far from resolved, and still in the process of reiteration and reemphasis. Indeed it was not until the mid 1920s that the League really faced the often painful and contentious question of defining feminism.

The scope and the extent of the activities around suffrage and other equality issues and women's concerns, demonstrates conclusively a continuing, although less "public" movement compared to pre-1914. In some ways the League was held back by the lack of unified momentum, but equally some individual branches and members flourished, so as to situate the League in a position where it could move beyond suffrage. The final section of this chapter explores the extent to which the League fulfilled its potential and also the extent to which members could, and also wanted to break the practical and ideological connections between suffrage and wider feminist concerns.

Section III: ORGANISE WOMEN!: RESPONSES TO THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACT OF 1918

The announcement that women over thirty were to be enfranchised by an act of Parliament in 1918 was to have a series of profound implications for members of the League and for women in general. Some were immediately apparent, while other had wider reaching implications for women's political identity and concepts of women's equality.

The most immediate change to be recognised by members of the League was that women, after years of struggle, had now acquired a legitimate political identity. Despite the dislocation of the war, and the other priorities which had come into many suffrage

activists lives, there were still plenty willing to herald the new age of representative government in Britain.¹⁰⁶ Having worked for so long and so intensely for the principle of female enfranchisement, the WFL followed the progress of the cherished legislation closely. Branches and workers from headquarters held public meetings and corresponded with Government ministers and members of Parliament. The result of their efforts and those of their fellow suffrage campaigners, was the announcement in *The Vote* on January 18th 1918, of "Our Great Victory", when the House of Lords followed the Commons in passing the bill by a good majority.¹⁰⁷

Some historians have remarked that the proclaimed triumph of this legislation outweighed the actual achievement for women, and have pointed to the lack of emphasis by suffrage campaigners on the continued inequalities between men and women, and the exclusion of all women under thirty. Yet this did not go un-noticed by many closely connected with the campaign, and was summed up by Laurence Housman in a letter to Fred Pethick-Lawrence in July 1917:

...the Parliamentary situation fills me with mild amusement, but no gratitude. The main thing to the good is that the restriction is on thoroughly ridiculous lines, and will have to go, before many years are over. I could have wished for that reason that the restriction had been more farcical still - against red hair, or in favour of double chins: But it is bad enough to be only quite temporary....¹⁰⁸

His comments mirrored many others who felt that it was only a matter of time before

¹⁰⁶There were still over thirty WFL branches active in 1918. See *The Vote*, February 8th 1918, p. 143, for a list of thirty-three branches still sending in money to the national treasury. See also *The Vote*, February 1st 1918, p. 131 which gave details of the Victory Dinner at the Lyceum Club in London.

¹⁰⁷*The Vote*, January 18th 1918, pp. 113-114. Commons: 385/55, Lords: 134/71.

¹⁰⁸Pethick-Lawrence Papers, Trinity College, Cambridge, P-L 6 236. Letter dated July 5th 1917.

all women had the vote. However the decision to continue to discriminate against women in relation to the parliamentary suffrage did potentially contain some benefits, as well as the obvious constraints. Demands for equal suffrage might still unite old comrades, who could at the same time pave the way towards improving women's status, and by association, society as a whole. The negative side was that past experience had shown that there was no absolute consensus on where women should make progress, nor where they still had to emphasize their lack of equality.

The months in early 1918 were not therefore ones of endless celebration. On the contrary a survey of the League immediately after the announced bill and in the last year of the war, demonstrates that the League was conscious not to let the progress in suffrage obscure their other demands. Activities by the League in a wide range of other campaigns, including equal pay and equal opportunities and equal treatment under the law were reported. Charlotte Despard, a stalwart of a wider vision for change, expressed her own feelings on this question. She wrote:

The first phase of our battle is over...let us say at once that it is with no exultation, no rapture of gratitude, that we acclaim our victory, rather with wonder that such an elementary act of justice should have been so long delayed....They talk of reconstruction. We prefer the word construction.... To the man-woman commonwealth of the future we look for the building up of such a society as has never been in the world before...The form our union shall take, its relation to other organised bodies, its constitution, and the principles by which it will be guided will be for the members themselves to decide....whatever their decision may be, it will be worthy of themselves and of the Cause they serve.¹⁰⁹

Others echoed her statements with action. In Wales for example, the Montgomery Boroughs branch was supporting the strike of local teachers who were protesting against

¹⁰⁹*The Vote*, January 18th 1918, p. 116.

the withholding of agreed pay rises.¹¹⁰ In others, and at Headquarters, members were still engaged in a vigorous campaign against the introduction of Regulation 40D. Their demands did not ultimately lead to its repeal in war time, and it was not until the declaration of the armistice later in 1918 that the WFL could celebrate the "death of 40D."¹¹¹

The emphasis given to celebrations and discussions about the implications of partial enfranchisement, rather than being heralded as a culmination of WFL activities and demands, were instead part of a conscious attempt to reintegrate the rather disparate forces of the League. Moreover there was a strong desire to mark out a new system of government in which women would play an equal part. With this in mind, Nina Boyle, in an article entitled "Our New Power", set about discrediting the new spirit of interest in women shown by the political parties. She claimed that their appeals to women were merely a "camouflage" to obscure their desire to defend their own positions, and to deflect the threat of women who "now have power." Her vision was that women would be a distinct force in the country and not simply integrated into existing political parties and structures. She argued:

we have won power to do more than support men. We have won power to get and to do things that women choose and want. There is no question so great that now we may not dominate and control it - if we choose....The cry of 'organise women' is for ourselves, not for men. It is for us to 'organise' - to thrash out our needs, desires, our meanings, our intentions, and to organise to secure them. We do not need men and their parties to do this for us...¹¹²

¹¹⁰*The Vote*, March 1st 1918, p. 167.

¹¹¹See Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, pp. 186-187, and also *The Vote*, February 1st 1918, p. 131 and November 29th 1918, p. 477.

¹¹²*The Vote*, January 25th 1918, pp. 124-125.

Her triumphant words reflected very real fears among the leaders and members of the Conservative, Liberal and Labour parties, that women would set up their own political party. One delegate at the Conservative conference in 1917 articulated this when he said his greatest fear was of "the possibility of there arising in this country a Women's Party and a Men's Party."¹¹³

However discussion among the members of the WFL on their future structure at the 1918 Annual Conference of the League, shows that despite the fears of the political parties, the choices open to them were not straightforward or uncontentious. I will now argue that the resolutions passed at the 1918 conference indicate that Nina Boyle's words were not idle pontification, nor were they entirely representative of the League's membership as a whole.

Looking at the verbatim minutes of this conference which stretched over two full days, it is apparent that there was no straightforward agreement on what equality meant, and perhaps even less on the best way to proceed. The NEC tabled a resolution outlining a policy directed towards obtaining "full political equality of women with men", yet this was met by demands from delegates for more details.¹¹⁴ After discussion delegates finally agreed that equal suffrage should still come first in the League's priorities, which perhaps represented a desire not to loose the bonds of unity which had held suffrage activists together. The other main points centred on securing an end to encroachments on women's liberty, and the return of independent WFL

¹¹³Martin Pugh, *Women And The Women's Movement in Britain*, pp. 63-64.

¹¹⁴Verbatim Minutes, 1918. p. 89-90.

candidates to Parliament as a means to achieving equality.¹¹⁵ Arguably in many ways, it would have been difficult to represent all the concerns developed and directions travelled by the membership in the last ten years in *any* resolutions tabled. This sentiment was present in the comments of League member Mrs Corner who was attending the conference, who pointed out:

...that sticking to the franchise has never involved avoiding touching other things that were for the good of women and children, or humanity in general. If we had really stuck deliberately to the franchise, we should never have done anything but direct, political, Parliamentary work. Every work we have ever taken up, every Education Committee we have formed has been work to try and get children better fed and better educated in the schools, that has not been direct work for the franchise. It is quite impossible for any society that is formed to secure more votes, or to secure equality of rights, to avoid touching all those reforms that do come in before we can get equality - they all tend towards equality...¹¹⁶

Her comments portray the difficulties in defining a clear and consistent policy, yet they also signify how the League was growing into its diverse "multi-focus" identity. By 1918 League delegates had identified and prioritised sets of concerns and demands and firmly stamped these with the interests of women's equality.

The 1918 "Victory Conference" also provided the setting for the official resolution of long standing questions which had continually badgered the League. Perhaps the most significant of these was the question of male membership. When the issue was once again raised, the effect of partial enfranchisement was strongly felt. For example, Eunice Murray was insistent that the League should not impose its own "sex", and interestingly, "class" barriers, implying rather mistakenly that none now existed inside

¹¹⁵For full details of the discussions on future policy, see Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 96, and WFL, *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, pp. 4-5. A report of the conference can be found in *The Vote*, March 1st 1918, pp. 161-166.

¹¹⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 35.

the League. She argued that men should be admitted, but only if they were prepared to work in line with League policy. Others were less convinced, arguing that they were members of a *Women's Freedom League* and focused on women's matters which men could not understand.¹¹⁷

The split in opinion among delegates was evenly balanced with each side receiving nineteen votes apiece. The matter was resolved by Charlotte Despard who in one of her last tasks as President made her feelings clear, and cast her decided vote "for the men."¹¹⁸ More important perhaps than the vote itself was its timing. Interestingly, this decision had been taken when, perhaps for the first time, men were not clamouring to join the women's suffrage movement. Women's suffrage had been achieved in part at least, and with full male adult suffrage and the increasing importance of the main parliamentary political parties, men had other directions for their energies. Those League members in favour of male membership had it seemed, overestimated the interest men would show in what were still deemed "women's concerns."¹¹⁹

At the conference delegates were urged to lay down firm guidelines on the form of future militancy. Delegates spoke in favour of continued passive resistance on the part of women who remained unenfranchised, whereas others felt the time had now come, because of partial enfranchisement and the war, to cease such practices. In the

¹¹⁷Verbatim Minutes, 1918, pp. 159-160.

¹¹⁸Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 161.

¹¹⁹There are no subsequent references to men joining the WFL after this constitutional change. Certainly throughout the 1920s women continued to hold all official posts in branches and at headquarters. The League remained controlled and defined by women.

event twenty-eight votes were cast for the resolution to allow the NEC to decide on any policy changes in relation to militancy, and this indicates strongly militancy's lack of central importance to most League members by this stage.¹²⁰ However, as I will show in later chapters, discussions on militancy were to re-emerge in a different light later in the 1920s.

The League had set down a path for its future work, which both acknowledged past betrayals and continued inequalities, while at the same time capitalising on the sense of achievement and purpose which partial enfranchisement had generated.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have revealed a number of fundamental changes which took place within the WFL between August 1914 and mid 1918. Organisationally the League was more decentralised and while it had succeeded in forming a few new branches, it had lost approximately half of those active before August 1914. Yet equally, the war served to emphasize concerns in the League with women's equality and also with women's distinct concerns. At the same time the shifts within the WFL in policy and in organisation created an environment where women were able to take effective power particularly in community affairs and in local government. Many of the initial moves in this direction had already been made prior to August 1914, and the war had served as a catalyst, rather than a cause, of these developments.

The war also had the effect of splintering the old women's movement, yet this

¹²⁰Verbatim Minutes, 1918, pp. 153-154.

should not be overstated. I have demonstrated how, unlike a number of other suffrage societies, the WFL, remained intact, or at least in a position to re-establish a national identity after the conference in February 1918. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, it was the years immediately after partial enfranchisement that were to be crucial in the changes and rifts in the women's movement. The extent to which the women's movement and the WFL in particular, had prepared themselves for life in the enfranchised world still had to be learned.



Plate 11: Justice For Women At 21!

CHAPTER SIX

"CONTINUAL VIGILANCE, SELF SACRIFICE AND EFFORT"¹

THE TRANSITION TO A NON-PARTY FEMINIST ORGANISATION, 1918 - 1930

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I trace the processes through which the League developed its organisation and conceptual basis within a changing political, social and economic climate in Britain in the years between 1918 and 1930.² Following partial enfranchisement in January 1918, the WFL made substantive progress in terms of setting down its political intentions and future campaigns and demands. These plans had to take into account internal organisational changes, external shifts in the actual and symbolic character of the women's movement, the creation of a mass electorate, and party political machinations and, after the armistice in November 1918, the implications of victory and the challenges of a post-war society.

In early 1918 the WFL considered themselves, and were, well positioned to forge ahead and face new challenges. In 1919, membership numbers across the country were much the same as they had been prior to August 1914, at approximately 5,000.³ Even

¹Taken from Alice Schofield Coates's speech to the Seventeenth Annual Conference, April 5th 1924, p. 2. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1924).

²There is a growing literature on feminist activity and women's organisations in the 1920s. See the introduction to this thesis, footnote no. 43. For pioneering texts in recent years, Jane Lewis, "Beyond Suffrage: English Feminism in the 1920s", in *Maryland Historian*, No. 6., 1975, pp. 1-17, covers the activities of the NUSEC, and David Doughan's, *"Lobbying For Liberation" British Feminism 1918-1968*, (City of London Polytechnic, CLRS, London, 1980), gives an overview of feminist organisations.

³According to Elizabeth Knight at the 1919 annual conference, the League had approximately forty branches. It was noted that the number of new members joining

the fact that there were almost half the number of branches, and others in the process of disbanding, was offset by active attempts to establish new branches. In terms of policy, the influences on the WFL were rather different, as members faced years of readjustment, caused by a much depleted sense of national purpose compared with pre-franchise levels. Members contended with splits in the old movement, made all the more painful by the divisions among old comrades in struggle, and by a realisation that they needed, and wanted, a united movement, and a sense of old suffrage strengths, incorporated into the new non-party women's movement.

In the first section I argue that the League continued to be bound by older organisational practices, while facing up to new influences and concerns. In the second section, I will trace how contradictions in concepts of gender equality affected the League's political programme. I highlight the advancement of liberal concepts of self-interest and independence, especially in relation to state welfare as it affected women. I argue that changes were enacted to preserve the League which in turn were carried out at the expense of the activities and concerns of local League members. In the last section I consider how the rifts in the national and international women's movement affected the League, and how influential League figures tried to secure the existence of their organisation by constructing a forward looking equality programme which relied on the League's militant past.

the League had declined from war-time levels. This suggests that there had been an increase in membership to the remaining branches of the League after 1914. See Verbatim Minutes, Twelfth Annual Conference, April 5th 1919, p. 44. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1919).

Section I: "WE GREET THE UNKNOWN WITH A CHEER!": NEW CHALLENGES AND A NEW ORGANISATION⁴

i) New Challenges: "...A Wedge in the Party System....."

League members were inspired by the announcement of a general election set for December 1918, and galvanised into action by the rushed passage of the bill enabling women to stand as parliamentary candidates.⁵ League activists lost no time in pushing home the effect of this act, with articles in *The Vote* like the one by Maud Arncliffe Sennett, on "How I Would Reform the House of Commons."⁶

The groundwork for the entry of women into Parliament had been undertaken earlier, particularly in discussions held during the annual conference in February 1918. Delegates had voiced their belief in women's ability to challenge party politics, and followed this through by passing a resolution in favour of running independent WFL candidates in parliamentary elections. In the words of one delegate, this would "drive a wedge into the party system....that might actually destroy it."⁷ Continuing in this vein another resolution was passed which instructed League branches and members to support all women candidates irrespective of their party platform as long as these candidates endorsed the objects and policy of the League.⁸

⁴This title is taken from an article in *The Vote*, December 27th 1918, p. 25.

⁵"The Open Door To a Representative Parliament." *The Vote*, November 1st 1918, p. 444. This legislation, which was passed by 274/25 votes, contained obvious anomalies in that women over 21 could stand, but not vote until they were 30.

⁶*The Vote*, November 1st 1918, p. 446.

⁷Verbatim Minutes, 1918, pp. 97-98.

⁸WFL *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 4.

The fact that there was not an overwhelming majority in favour of running League candidates, gave room for the opinion of other members, who were more committed to party politics. Alice Schofield Coates, an increasingly influential figure on the NEC and a Labour party activist in Middlesbrough, expressed her deep reservations about running WFL candidates, and pointed out:

if you are going to adopt women candidates you are going to make a party and that party must have a programme....she [the WFL candidate] must vote on other issues besides women's issues....Are we prepared at this stage to take on that responsibility of forming a distinctly women's party, as the Pankhurst lot....⁹

Yet Alice Schofield Coates's warning went unheeded, largely because to admit women's possible lack of influence before the challenge of the election had already begun was contrary to the sense of victory felt by many members.¹⁰ Nor did it correspond with plans to develop the League into a powerful force in politics.

As the December approached, the reservations expressed eight months earlier by Schofield Coates rebounded, when it became clear to the League's leadership that both a lack of finances and a lack of a workable parliamentary programme ruled out the possibility of any WFL candidates standing in the forthcoming election. Rushing over the practical barriers, *The Vote's* editor began to list the women planning to run for election, and was gratified to see that no less than five League members, past and present, among them. The presence of Charlotte Despard, Edith How-Martyn, Emily

⁹Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 108. Her reference to the Pankhursts related to their actions in forming a Women's Party. Christabel Pankhurst stood as the only candidate in the December general election. The party disbanded a few years after her failed election attempt. For additional comments see Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries. Portraits of British Feminists Between The Wars*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987), p. 35.

¹⁰After discussion the resolution supporting all women candidates was carried by 22/15 votes.

Phipps, Eunice Murray, and Nina Boyle turned League members' attentions away from their inability to storm Parliament immediately with their own official League candidates.¹¹

Members placed their greatest hopes on Charlotte Despard who, although no longer the League president, still mustered the admiration and devotion of her colleagues in the League. Moreover, Despard, standing for Labour in the Battersea district, where she had worked long and hard for its residents, was seen as one women candidate with a good fighting chance of election.¹² League members led by Alix Clark, rallied to Despard's cause in the area by establishing their own committee rooms and speaking at her meetings. Members were also dispatched to set up rooms in Hendon and Chelsea where Edith How-Martyn and Emily Phipps, were standing as independents.¹³ After concerted efforts in these constituencies, there were high hopes in the run up to the ballot and members awaited the results with anticipation.¹⁴

When the results were announced in late December, two weeks after polling, neither Despard, How-Martyn nor Phipps were elected.¹⁵ Among the nineteen female candidates who finally stood, only one, Constance Markievicz, standing for Sinn Fein, was elected and who, because of her rejection of the validity of British government in

¹¹*The Vote*, November 22nd 1918, p. 405 and January 3rd 1919, p. 33. Emily Phipps stood in the interests of women teachers.

¹²Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 201.

¹³WFL, *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 23.

¹⁴*The Vote*, December 20th 1918, pp. 17-18.

¹⁵*The Labour Year Book*, (British Political Series, Political Party Year Book, 76), (Harvester Press, Brighton, 1972), p. 413. Despard came a poor second to the coalition candidate: 5,634 votes to 11,231 votes. See also *The Vote*, January 3rd 1919, p. 33.

Ireland, refused to take her seat. "Patriotic fervour", instances where women candidates had not been wholeheartedly supported by their fellow party members, and even outright hostility to women candidates, all influenced this course of events. The jibes directed against Charlotte Despard's pacifism by her coalition opponent, accorded with the overwhelming support for candidates committed to "winning the peace". These sentiments furnished the victory for the war time coalition government which took 478 seats of the possible 707.¹⁶

The WFL masked their immediate sense of disappointment at defeat with coverage in *The Vote* of celebrations for the three pioneer candidates they had supported in the "historic election." Reports attempted to rally frustrated members, but these had become rather muted in comparison with previous heady discussions about obliterating party politics altogether.¹⁷ One article entitled "Why?" perhaps summed up the true feelings of League activists, when it commented "all our pretty ones, all massacred?" Even the references to Markievicz did little to hide the sense of despondency.¹⁸

The election results had cemented earlier suspicions that the party system was more ingrained than some League members had imagined, or had wanted to believe. The Labour party, who were disappointed with their sixty-three seats, which still marked an increase of twenty, and the Conservatives with their two-thirds of coalition seats, had certainly benefitted from the increase in the electorate and their hurried rush to

¹⁶See Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 200. See also Noreen Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1977), p. 7.

¹⁷"Women Pioneer Parliamentary candidates honoured at the Lyceum Club", *The Vote*, January 3rd 1919, p. 33. See also *The Vote*, January 17th 1919, p. 53.

¹⁸*The Vote*, January 10th 1919, p. 47.

incorporate women into their party systems.¹⁹

The League was now faced with the stark realisation that it would take longer and be more difficult to break the party system and assert their own programme. Attempting to make the best of this, an article in *The Vote* had already summed up the peripheral position the League would occupy in Parliamentary politics:

...no matter who gets in or who is left out - or what the *personnel* of the new Government may be, the case of the WFL is clear - we must see that women are everywhere in our national life, sharing control and responsibilities with men, and securing equal rewards and opportunities...²⁰

The statement reaffirmed the League's official non-party principles, yet these words could only reflect on the fundamental political changes which were taking place: changes that would see the Conservative and the Labour parties forge ahead in the coming decade.²¹ In the same period during the 1920s, League activists were facing up to the series of important shifts and realignments which were occurring in their own organisation and also in the women's movement as a whole.

ii) The New Organisation, 1918 - 1926: A Two-Tier WFL?

After 1918, the League continued officially to endorse the democratic principles which had been so crucial in previous years to its internal organisation, namely that the annual meeting of branch delegates would continue to be the ultimate policy-making

¹⁹Noreen Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties*, p. 7.

²⁰*The Vote*, December 27th 1918, p. 25.

²¹Maurice Cowling and Michael Bentley, *Party Politics Between The Wars*, (Sussex Tapes, East Ardsley, Education Production Ltd, 1972). The difficulties faced by many League members over the non-party policy is discussed in detail in Chapter Seven, Section II, i.

body of the League. As before, this stated principle belied the extent to which certain individuals came to exert disproportionate influences on League policies and programme. It also belied the extent to which individual branches developed their own agendas within their branches, making their need of the national organisation less crucial. During the war a distinct devolution had been evident, at the same time as certain individuals cemented their positions on the NEC, aided by the absence of the yearly elections to this body in 1916 and 1917.²²

While certain issues were settled, including male membership, the position of the President, and organisation in the branches, underlying shifts were not explicitly discussed. One notable casualty was a lack of discussion on the extent of the influence wielded by figures at headquarters and on the NEC between 1918 and 1921. Consequently a select number of national figures designed a national identity for the League based on their own concerns and beliefs. This identity was in many ways different from that generated by the various League branches and by ordinary members, a point I take up in Chapter Seven.²³ To develop further the concept of a two-tier WFL, it is necessary to examine the configuration of the NEC after 1918. This requires detailed explanation in relation to regional representation.²⁴

Charlotte Despard, so long at the hub of League activities and identity, stood down as President in 1918, claiming her commitment to the Women's Peace Crusade prevented her from devoting herself so fully to the WFL. Sensing that no one could

²²See Chapter Five, pp. 269-270.

²³See Chapter Seven, Section III.

²⁴See Appendix Three.

replace her, the conference delegates decided to allow the position of League President to lapse. By 1922, Despard's connections with the League had become largely symbolic, as she held no official posts, and had moved to Ireland to take her part in the Irish independence movement. However, she spent periods of each year in Britain and never missed the birthday celebrations held by the League in her honour every July.²⁵

In the wake of the crucial 1918 conference, there were four other departures, including Nina Boyle and Eunice Murray. While Nina Boyle's resignation was provoked by her anger that "her work and opinions were not considered important enough", her friend, Eunice Murray, left with a much heavier heart:

...I do not really feel that the WFL will, in my opinion, be a strong League...I feel I have worked for the vote and longed for the vote and won the vote in order to use it, and to use it in a big, national way...I feel I want a broader, a big national programme, imperial, international and national. I cannot tell you how much the Freedom League has been to me...²⁶

Her comments to the conference summed up how partial enfranchisement, and the war had served to alter members' political expectations.

Of the three officials, and twelve elected NEC members in 1915, eight were still in the same positions following the 1918 elections. These eight were the treasurer, Elizabeth Knight and the secretary, Florence Underwood, and on the NEC, Charlotte Despard, Mary Neal, Anna Munro, Alice Schofield Coates, Alix Clark and Sarah

²⁵Margaret Mulvihill, Chapter Ten: "The Call To Ireland: 'You Must Go Yourself'", *Charlotte Despard, A Biography*, pp. 127-139, and subsequent chapters.

²⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1918, pp. 151-152. Her departure did indeed seem a wrench as only one year before her semi-autobiography novel, *The Hidden Tragedy*, (C.W. Daniel Ltd, London, 1917), had been published, and was dedicated "To my colleagues, friends and fellow-workers in the Women's Freedom League."

Whetton. All but Charlotte Despard and Alix Clark, continued to hold national positions up to 1930.

In elections after 1919, they were joined by Clare Neal, Mrs Pierotti, Mrs Dexter and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, who all became well established figures. Between 1922 and 1926, all eleven were re-elected four or more times out of five, with the exception of Mrs Pierotti who did not stand in 1924 and 1925, and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence who only joined the League in 1926.

Of these eleven women almost half were from the regional branches, with five representing branches outside London areas: Alice Schofield Coates in Middlesbrough, Clare Neal in Swansea, Alix Clark in Montgomery Boroughs, Mary Neal in Manchester and Sarah Whetton in Portsmouth. As Appendix Three indicates, representation from other areas increased slightly towards the end of the 1920s with one member each from Leeds and Darlington. Therefore, while the regional representation appears fairly high, it was concentrated in relatively few branches, and then only in those branches which had been active and well organised prior to 1914.²⁷

Following Charlotte Despard's decision to stand down as President in 1918, the

²⁷Scottish members' presence on the NEC was distinctly sporadic in the 1920s, marking a significant decline from previous years. Even the passage of a resolution guaranteeing a place for a Scottish representative on the NEC did not result in great enthusiasm for such a post. At one stage the post was shared between five members. The travelling distance to London, and the numerous commitments of members were the reasons given for this state of affairs.

In 1926 Eunice Murray rejoined the League and from 1926-1928 served as the joint Scottish representative. Apparently she had changed her earlier opinions on the future of the League, although she was not the only one to do so. Muriel Matters, heroine of the grille protest, rejoined the League in Hastings in the 1920s. See *The Vote*, June 10th 1927, p. 183.

League had no official figurehead until 1924. The attempts of some members to reintroduce the position of president finally succeeded in this year, and Alice Schofield Coates, by now a prominent local politician in Middlesbrough and a Justice of the Peace, was elected.²⁸ In 1925 she declined to stand again, probably due to the pressure of her commitments in Middlesbrough, and was succeeded by Anna Munro, another long-standing NEC member and a popular figure in the League.²⁹

In 1926 Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, another casualty of the Pankhurst autocracy in the WSPU, and later co-founder of the Votes for Women Fellowship, was elected as President of the League.³⁰ Pethick-Lawrence held the post until her resignation in 1935, and although never involved in the League to the extent of her predecessors, she regularly attended meetings, annual conferences, and spoke for the League.³¹ Presenting a somewhat different picture, Brian Harrison has argued that much of her time in the inter-war years was spent supporting her husband who had become a Labour MP.³² Although she accompanied Fred Pethick-Lawrence on extended trips abroad to India in 1926 and later to South Africa, while there she actively promoted women's

²⁸NEC Minutes, May 10th 1924, p. 7.

²⁹Verbatim Minutes, Eighteen Annual Conference, April 25th 1925, p. 41. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1925). See Appendix Five for biographical notes on Anna Munro.

³⁰Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World*, (Victor Gollancz, London, 1938), p. 331.

³¹NEC Minutes, November 26th 1927, p. 328, Pethick-Lawrence Papers, P-L 7/25: *The Lecture Recorder*, June 1931, pp. 4, had a speech by her on "Current Politics Affecting Women", made at a meeting held under the auspices of the WFL.

³²Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries*, p. 258.

rights causes.³³ She held national positions in two other women's organisations, and spoke with admiration and affection of the League in her autobiography published in 1938.³⁴ Though she sustained her interest in organised feminist politics in these years, her influence in the WFL was perhaps marginalised by the dominating views of its long-standing members.

Among the leaders of the League in the 1920s, the two who dominated were Elizabeth Knight and Florence Underwood. Between them they wielded enormous control on the everyday administration, correspondence and liaison responsibilities at Headquarters, as well as controlling *The Vote*.³⁵ The authority of Knight and Underwood, who were close friends, was felt in many ways by individuals in the League, and also at meetings of other organisations which were attended by either or both women, on behalf of the League. Knight and Underwood worked long and hard for the League and their influence increased as the minimum number of times the NEC met each year was reduced to six in 1922.³⁶ Despite their considerable control over League policy, both tended to avoid the full glare of publicity, to the extent that very little was ever recorded in League literature of their personal circumstances or their activities. This much can be gathered from Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in her autobiography when she commented on how Elizabeth Knight "...shrank with aversion

³³Pethick-Lawrence Papers, P-L 6 124(1) and P-L 6 126(1), Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World*, pp. 337-338.

³⁴Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World*, pp. 331-333. She was on the committees of the Six Point Group, and the Open Door Council and remained a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

³⁵See Chapter One, Section II, iv.

³⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1922, pp. 72-73.

from publicity or applause..."³⁷

Sources do suggest that Knight and Underwood came from very different backgrounds. Elizabeth Knight was a member of the wealthy Knights Castille family, and a trained doctor. She had property and links with League branches in Ipswich and Kensington, and rose to prominence largely through her generous financial donations.³⁸ Florence Underwood rose to prominence first as the secretary of the Clapham branch of the League, and again when she was appointed to the paid position of national League secretary. Her need for permanent paid work, did not however prevent her from taking a holiday in Paris in September 1911, from where she returned with good reports of her French counterparts.³⁹ She, like Knight, was remembered as one who preferred to avoid the limelight:

She had remarkable ability combined with humility. She was firm and single minded, but always gentle and considerate, and ready to help all. The cause was everything - Florence Underwood did not matter.⁴⁰

These sentiments echoed earlier praise at League annual conferences in the 1920s, when Florence Underwood was thanked profusely for her work.⁴¹ Her influence becomes all the more evident from reports of her actions in the minutes of NEC meetings. On many occasions she voiced her strong views and acted on her concern not to allow the

³⁷Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World*, p. 322.

³⁸Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, p. 155. See Appendix Five.

³⁹*The Vote*, March 18th 1911, p. 255, September 2nd 1911, p. 233.

⁴⁰Stella Newsome, *A History of the Women's Freedom League*, (WFL, London, 1958), pp. 19-20. Stella Newsome was a member of the League, and from 1933 she was the Honorary Secretary of the Mid-London branch. See *The Vote*, June 16th 1933, p. 187.

⁴¹Verbatim Minutes, Twenty-First Annual Conference, April 28th 1928, p. 8. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1928).

WFL to deviate from its official policy or split its membership. For example, Underwood was anxious not to allow the issue of birth control to divide the League, and constantly declared in correspondence that it was outside the remit of the League, even though no conference resolution had been passed to this effect.⁴²

Knight's and Underwood's centralising tendencies created a firm organisational base for the League, but also an unequal power balance between local and national organisation. When branches attempted to contest this power imbalance, they found their hands all but tied. This was demonstrated at the stormy annual conference of branches in 1922. The spate of resolutions from branches proposing changes in organisational practices, management at Headquarters, the election procedure of NEC members and plans to relocate conferences out of London, had come too late. The tone of some officials was distinctly hostile to change, and Elizabeth Knight made her views very clear when she threatened to resign if she was ordered to work with a finance committee.⁴³

To some degree this centralisation saved the League as well. When other organisations were disbanding or reforming under different guises, the League survived, and was able to develop new relationships with emerging organisations. In 1918, the League, along with a number of other women's suffrage societies, notably the NUWSS and the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society, had refined their programmes, and had

⁴²NEC Minutes, April 23rd 1926, pp. 188. Her comments on this occasion came after the NUSEC had invited the League to send representatives to a conference on birth control.

⁴³Verbatim Minutes, Fifteenth Annual Conference, April 29th 1922, p. 70. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1922).

officially incorporated a wider perspective, while at the same time continuing to demand *equal* suffrage legislation.⁴⁴ However other smaller suffrage societies were not in a position to take on these new challenges. There was a widespread lack of purpose after the 1918 franchise act, because some societies had been motivated largely by direct suffrage issues, rather than by wider feminist demands. After years of war some suffragists seemed to prefer to join other organisations than rebuild their own societies again. For example the Men's Liberal Suffrage Society decided to disband in December 1918, and in *The Vote* their "good example" of giving the balance of their funds to the WFL, was noted.⁴⁵ Many men and women, once active in the suffrage campaign, redirected their political energies to other organisations, especially the parliamentary parties. Where once suffrage had dominated their political lives, now they would take on the issues and campaigns of their chosen organisations.

The suffrage networks, and the bulk of the suffrage societies did not collapse immediately after partial enfranchisement in 1918. On the contrary, it was a process of slow and uneven diffusion. In June 1918 there were twenty woman suffrage societies working within the Federated Council of Suffrage Societies, yet only a handful appear to have been in existence by the early 1920s. A few, including the much reduced Church Leagues, and also the Actresses Franchise League, appear to have continued, yet the more obscure, like the Gymnastic Teachers' Suffrage Society, disappeared without

⁴⁴Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Great Britain*, pp. 50-51. See Leonora de Alberti, "The History of the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society (now St Joan Social and Political Alliance)", in *The Catholic Citizen*, October 15th 1928, pp. 77-81.

⁴⁵*The Vote*, December 27th 1918, p. 27.

trace.⁴⁶ New organisations for women emerged. In 1915 the Women's Institutes had been set up in rural areas with the purpose of educating women on a variety of social and political questions, and practical skills.⁴⁷ From 1918, National Women's Citizen's Associations were formed through the efforts of the National Council of Women and NUSEC, and began to work in local communities promoting the concerns of their women citizen members.⁴⁸

The WSPU, once the sister society of the League, had disintegrated into the short-lived Woman's Party, and it was not until February 1921 that a number of old members came together to form the Six Point Group. Their programme centred, as their name suggested, on six points: legislation on child assault; the unmarried mother and her child; widowed mothers; the guardianship of infants; equality in the Civil Service; and equal pay for teachers.⁴⁹ Another important event for 1920s feminism was the

⁴⁶*The Vote*, June 14th 1918, p. 283. See also *The Vote*, July 22nd 1927, p. 226, for references to Adeline Bourne speaking at a League-organised suffrage rally on behalf of the Actresses Franchise League.

⁴⁷See Deidre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty. Women Between The Wars, 1918-1939*, (Pandora Press, London, 1989), p. 120 for one of the few references to the Women's Institute movement. She cites an article from *The Manchester Guardian*, May 24th 1922, entitled, "The needs of village women". This was followed by the setting up of Townswomen's Guilds. See Mary Stott, *Organisation Women. The Story of The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds*, (Heinemann, London, 1973).

⁴⁸M.E. Alford, *During Six Reigns: Landmarks in the History of the National Council of Women of Great Britain*, (NCW, London, c. 1953), p. 9. and [anon.], *National Women Citizens Associations 1918-1968*, (N.W.C.A., London, n.d.), pp. 3-7. The WFL affiliated to the National Council of Women (NCW), and after 1923 a League representative served on its executive committee. From October 1927 until February 1927, Florence Underwood took this job. See NEC Minutes, October 10th 1925, p. 122 and February 12th 1927, p. 243. Anna Munro regularly attended NCW annual meetings.

⁴⁹This programme was altered shortly after to include equal suffrage. See Dale Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man*, (Pandora Press, London, 1984), pp. 171-174, and Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989), p. 137. Alberti discusses at length the links and confrontations between the Group and NUSEC. The

foundation of the journal, *Time and Tide* in May 1920. Its editor, Margaret Rhondda was a key figure in the Six Point Group, and after 1921 this journal became the mouth piece of the society.⁵⁰

Other specialised organisations continued to organise in the 1920s, notably the National Union of Women Teachers, which continued to develop strong links with the League. The Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations (SJCIWO) and the Women's Co-operative Guilds represented the interests of working-class women.⁵¹ Across the party political divide, Liberal and Conservative women's organisations continued apace.⁵² These were joined by new societies such as the

records of the Six Point Group are housed in the Fawcett Library, London relating mainly to the society in the period 1930 to 1980. Dorothy Evans, the WFL's organiser in 1917 and 1918, became a member of the Six Point Group, see *Dorothy Evans and the Six Point Group*, (Six Point Group, London, 1945), pp. 71, in Six Point Group Archives, E.1, File 1.

⁵⁰Dale Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man*, pp. 6-18. Spender's book contained reprinted articles from *Time and Tide*, and the announcement of the formation of the Six Point Group can be found in the edition published on February 25th 1921.

⁵¹*The Labour Year Book, 1919*, (British Political Series, Political Party Year Book 76), p. 321. This committee was formed in March 1916 and officially merged with the Women's Labour League in March 1918. The Women's Co-operative Guild was represented on the SJCIWO. The officials of the SJCIOW represented the various women within the labour movement and included Mary MacArthur, Margaret Llewelyn Davies and Dr Marion Phillips. For more details of the Women's Co-operative Guild during the 1920s, see Jean Gaffin and David Thoms, *Caring and Sharing: The Centenary History of the Co-operative Women's Guild*, (Co-operative Union Ltd, Manchester, 1983), Chapter Four: "Growth and Adjustment: The Guild Between The Wars", pp. 83-109. See also, Gillian Scott, "The Working Class Women's Most Active and Democratic Movement": The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1883-1950", (D.Phil, University of Sussex, 1986).

⁵²See Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*, pp. 46-69 and *The Liberal Woman's News* published by the National Women's Liberal Federation, 72 Victoria Street, London. In the October 1926 edition, p. 144, there is a letter from Alice Dilks, previously a member of the WFL, and now resident in France, (see Appendix Two), commending the paper and displaying her sympathies with Liberalism. This is one instance of ex-League members going back into the political parties they had favoured before woman's

Electrical Association for Women, which was formed in 1927 with the purpose of educating women on uses of electricity, and which appears to have been a response to the age of consumer goods and technological advance. *The Vote* continued its all-welcoming attitude, and reported on the activities of these organisations.⁵³

The Women's International League continued to represent women's pacifist and international interests and, to a certain degree, so did the International Women's Suffrage Alliance.⁵⁴ Links between the League and women's organisations overseas extended beyond the IWSA as 1925 saw the formation of an International Advisory Committee to the National Woman's Party of America, and the election of Elizabeth Knight as the WFL representative.⁵⁵

Nationally, the most important move, in terms of the realignment of the old suffrage societies, was the decision to reorganise the Consultative Committee of Women's Organisations, which had first met in 1916.⁵⁶ This committee was

suffrage demands created difficult choices for women.

⁵³Examples of coverage in *The Vote* can be found in the following editions, January 7th 1927, p. 3, January 21st 1927, p. 21, July 8th 1927, p. 210, and September 30th 1927, p. 308. *The Vote* also reported the activities of the League of National Representation of Women Committee. In December 1919 Elizabeth Knight and Mrs Metge failed to gain election on the committee. However by 1922 the League had succeeded in their attempt and Mrs Mustard and Mrs Holmes were chosen as representatives. See NEC Minutes, December 13th 1919, p. 53, January 22nd 1921, p. 170 and December 2nd 1922, p. 103.

⁵⁴The WFL finally managed to affiliate to the IWSA in 1926 as I discuss below. For further details of international feminism in the 1920s see Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, pp. 86-90, 191-217.

⁵⁵Blanche Wiesen Cook, ed., *Crystal Eastman on Women and Revolution*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978), p. 165, for a reprint of Crystal Eastman's "International Co-operation" in *Equal Rights*, May 9th 1925.

⁵⁶NEC Minutes, November 26th 1916, p. 167.

reconvened in 1921 under the chair of Nancy Astor. The WFL soon affiliated, and by 1923 were among sixty-two women's organisations. The representatives decided that the committee should "serve as a clearing house of ideas and a piece of machinery by which different groups can act together."⁵⁷ The Consultative Committee was important because it marked a formal attempt to articulate a united voice on behalf of women's organisations on parliamentary bills and state matters. Yet it was significantly weakened by the absence of those women's organisations representing the working-classes who were active in the Standing Joint Committee referred to above.⁵⁸

The wealth and diversity of organisations of women in the 1920s indicates the continued support and appeal of distinct female organisation in social, cultural and political areas. Yet changes had taken place, and the women's movement could no longer rely on the vote to unite its disparate forces. The WFL now faced the task of seeking out *new directions in their challenge to gender inequality, while at the same time, trying to keep the movement united.*

⁵⁷Consultative Committee of Women's Organisations, *Annual Report, 1922-1923*, pp. v, 13-14. See also regular reports on the work of this committee in *The Vote*, for example, July 8th 1927, p. 210. See also NEC Minutes, November 3rd 1923, p. 181, and October 10th 1925, p. 124.

⁵⁸Consultative Committee of Women's Organisations, *Annual Reports, 1922-23, and 1925-1926*. The Consultation Committee was dissolved towards the end of 1928. The NEC allowed the League's two delegates, Florence Underwood and Marian Reeves a free vote on this matter. See NEC Minutes, September 29th 1928, p. 411, and December 1st 1928, p. 424.

Section II: SEEKING "...THAT VICTORY WHEN WE SHALL BE EQUAL..."⁵⁹: THE SEARCH FOR A FEMINIST PROGRAMME

In this section I consider the debates, discussions and confrontations which took place among League delegates, NEC members, and connected parties in the years from 1921 to 1927. These debates centred on defining a feminist programme in which members of the League could work towards their goal of women's emancipation. These discussions acquired a greater sense of purpose from 1923 when Alice Schofield Coates expressed the general fears about declining interest in the League. She announced:

...at any time women may suddenly awaken to the need of getting what we are anxious they should get...they do not seem very anxious about themselves....⁶⁰

The League's challenges to gender relations in the 1920s continued to be articulated on various fronts. The dominant themes remained the same as those prior to 1918, and focused on woman as equal citizens, as workers, as wives and mothers and as vulnerable sexual victims. Yet in the 1920s there was a much greater emphasis on obtaining change through legislation in order to achieve equality with men. Perhaps those League members who had spent so many years demanding Parliamentary representation were now determined to prove its effectiveness.

While there was still some acknowledgment in the calls for equality for women in all aspects of law, whether single, or married, in paid or unpaid work, of women's diverse experiences and situations, interest in working-class women continued to be grounded in League members own understanding of these women's needs. Almost all

⁵⁹From a speech by Alice Schofield Coates, Verbatim Minutes, Sixteenth Annual Conference, April 28th 1923, p. 92. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1923).

⁶⁰Verbatim Minutes, 1923, p. 92.

recognition of the demands of women-workers themselves, and their representatives, was marginalised. Instead, the League raised its standard for equal pay for equal work, and an end to what they described as restrictive legislation towards women. In the area of sexual politics the League had also formalised a somewhat contradictory message that women, of all classes, but particularly working-class women, needed protection from male sexual advances.⁶¹

This section traces the contradictions in the League whereby a strict equality policy still stressed sexual difference between men and women. Such contradictions were not in the main raised by members on questions of housing, education or penal reform, but on those directly connected with state payments to mothers and widows, and protective legislation.

i) Equality Before The Law: Standing By "Our Rules"⁶²

A very important thrust of the WFL's policy on equality up to 1928 was the continued demands for equal suffrage. Yet while this continued to be raised at every possible opportunity, it was at the same time clearly understood by the majority of members that it could no longer serve as the single guiding principle.⁶³ Demands for equality translated quite straightforwardly into resolutions which backed the principle

⁶¹I trace the factors which led to working-class women's exclusion from the League in Chapter Seven, Section II, iii.

⁶²For reference see Chapter Six, footnote no. 72.

⁶³Resolutions for equal suffrage were constantly endorsed at annual conferences, see WFL, *Annual Reports* 1919-1928. By 1925 the demand for equal suffrage was included as one of many related to equal rights between women and men, see WFL, *Annual Report*, 1925, p. 3.

of absolute equality of women with men in all areas of public life. Hence League members and branches campaigned for women magistrates, judges, and jurors. They refused to be silenced in their communities when demanding women candidates in parliamentary and local council elections. They capitalised on the election of women as Poor Law Guardians and busied themselves getting women onto other local bodies.⁶⁴ Not only did members concentrate their efforts on demanding equality, but they made concerted efforts to get women involved in politics, and to prove, in the words of one article in *The Vote*, that:

women throughout the country, through their various organisations, will succeed in rousing the general public to take an intelligent and effective interest in their local affairs.⁶⁵

In 1921 conference delegates were united in their denunciation of the Conservative Government's failure to honour the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act passed in 1919, pointing out the refusal to appoint women diplomats in the Indian Civil Service, condemning the enforced celibacy of women in the Civil Service in Britain, and the restrictions on the employment of married women in some areas of work.⁶⁶ In a straightforward analysis of women's lack of equal status, the League fought the exclusion of women from some universities, and women workers' lack of equal pay. Furthermore, in the dire unemployment of the early 1920s, the League demanded that women receive equal access to the employment initiatives being set up in the land "fit

⁶⁴All these actions were endorsed by resolutions at Annual Conferences. See WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1915-1919, pp. 4, 16-17, 1919-1922, pp. 2-3, 1922-1923, pp. 3-4, 1924-1925, pp. 3-5, 1926-1927, pp. 3-5, 1927-1928, pp. 3-6, 1928-1929, pp. 3-6. [WFL, *Annual Reports* for the years 1923-1924, 1925-1926 and 1929-1930 are missing].

⁶⁵*The Vote*, November 5th 1926, p. 348. This quote comes from an article written in the period before municipal elections.

⁶⁶WFL, *Annual Report*, 1919-1922, p. 17.

for heroes."⁶⁷

There was much to occupy League delegates as they continued to highlight the lack of equal status accorded to women in the area of sexual relations. The resolutions against laws on soliciting which victimised women, provoked rousing campaigns reminiscent of earlier years. In cases of illegitimate children and infanticide, majority League opinion weighed heavily towards equal accountability for both parents.⁶⁸ The well established commitment to protection for vulnerable women was manifested in repeated resolutions in the 1920s demanding a rise in the age of consent to eighteen for women, with a similar measure for young men.⁶⁹

Sardonic comments by one League delegate that a "Married Women's Freedom League" was needed, seemed to have a basis in truth, given the long discussions on rights for married women. Equal guardianship, inheritance, and tax anomalies all came under scrutiny and were found wanting.⁷⁰ In 1925 British passport regulations received

⁶⁷Admission to Universities: WFL, *Annual Report*, 1919-1922, p. 3. Equal Pay: WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1919-1922, p. 18, 1924-1925, p. 3, 1926-1927, p. 4, 1927-1928, p. 4, 1928-1929, pp. 4, 5. Unemployment: WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1919-1922, pp. 3, 17, 1922-1923, p. 4, 1924-1925, p. 3, 1926-1927, p. 4, 1927-1928, p. 5.

⁶⁸WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1919-1922, pp. 2, 3, 17, 18, and 1922-1923, p. 4.

⁶⁹WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1919-1922, pp. 2, 17, 1922-1923, p. 4, 1924-1925, p. 3, 1926-1927, p. 4, 1927-1928, p. 4, 1928-1929, p. 4. For an article on raising the age of marriage, see *The Vote*, December 9th 1927, p. 348.

⁷⁰Verbatim Minutes, 1920, p. 96. Equal Guardianship: WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1922-1923, p. 4, 1924-1925, pp. 3, 4, 1926-1927, p. 4. Separate tax assessments for husbands and wives: WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1915-1919, p. 17, 1922-1923, p. 3, 1926-1927, p. 4, 1927-1928, pp. 4, 5. 1928-1929, p. 4. Inheritance: WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1924-1925, p. 4, 1926-1927, p. 5, 1928-1929, p. 5. The League also demanded that British women should have the right to keep their nationality on marriage to foreign nationals. See WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1915-1919, p. 4, 1922-1923, p. 3, 1924-1925, p. 4, 1927-1928, p. 4, 1928-1929, p. 5.

the attention of delegates at the annual conference. Many attending were outraged to hear that a married woman had to have her passport signed by her husband. The Portsmouth representative seemed to speak for them all when she asked incredulously, "you mean, my husband can go abroad without my sanction, but I could not without his?"⁷¹

On the surface, all such discussions seem to correspond with a direct demand for equality between the sexes. This related to the League's programme but also to the members' endorsement of prevailing liberal principles of the rights of the individual. However, evidence from the discussions at annual conferences and NEC meetings, indicates that this commitment to absolute individual equality was not extended to all aspects of League policy, and certainly did not always include the equal rights of men. For example there was some resistance from League members when attempts were made at the League conference in 1923 to pass a resolution on inheritance. Many delegates rushed to support the resolution demanding it be made illegal for a husband to will away all his possessions from his wife. Yet it was not passed unanimously because the Portsmouth delegate added an amendment for discussion, to the effect that the same should apply for women, commenting:

...I think that it is most necessary, we are out for equality, and not only for our own sakes, and if we are out for equality, we must stand by our rule..⁷²

At this conference, the amendment was lost, with the majority, diverging from a strict equality position. Instead they backed the comments of another delegate who argued that "women had not the same choices or chances to accumulate as men....and they

⁷¹Verbatim Minutes, 1925, p. 11 (afternoon session).

⁷²Verbatim Minutes, 1923, p. 54.

might want to leave what little they had to their children..."⁷³ Thus, League members accepted and adapted liberal principles of individual equal rights in much the same way as unenfranchised members before 1918 had incorporated and altered liberal principles of citizenship and democracy.

As I will show in the following chapter, the issue of inheritance rights was not the only instance when League members' declarations of equality were tested for their conviction. This particularly applied to birth control and divorce, two of the most contentious issues faced by members of the League in the 1920s.⁷⁴ Because tensions over these issues arose between the leadership and some branch members, I have saved discussion until the final chapter which considers League branches in the 1920s. League members's attitudes to gender equality were also complicated in relation to questions of welfare reform, especially when it was clear that such reforms were not always directly linked with equality issues.

ii) Housing, Education and Penal Reform: "Thinking Women and Educationalists..."⁷⁵

Housing, education and penal reform were certainly not new concerns to members of the League yet in the 1920s they acquired a much greater significance in policy and discussions, and were reported alongside the League's "political" activities which described campaigns for equal political and economic rights. One only need to look at the reports of meetings held, and actions taken in the League's *Annual Reports* to find

⁷³Verbatim Minutes, 1923, p. 54.

⁷⁴See Chapter Seven, Section III, ii.

⁷⁵For reference see Chapter Six, footnote no. 76.

out the extent to which League members invested their energies in this type of welfare activity.

When it was argued by one League member in 1925 that education should not be a matter for discussion at League conferences, other delegates quickly jumped in to contradict. The Mid-London delegate spoke for many when she referred to her fellow members as "thinking women and educationalists".⁷⁶ Such comments embodied a wider vision of social change, which members interpreted as a rightful and natural consequence of citizenship. This was manifested in attempts to influence the government's policy on the provisions of the welfare state. The legislation on education in the 1919 act was heartily welcomed by the League, as were the proposals on housing made by the Tudor Walter Committee, published in the same year.⁷⁷

On the other hand, only a few years later the housing and education reforms provided the League with ammunition for a continuing critique of the failures which resulted from male-dominated government. This proved the case in 1922 when it emerged that the newly elected Conservative Government, concerned with public spending in an unstable economic and political climate, was backtracking on the provisions outlined in these Acts.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1925, p. 18.

⁷⁷Noreen Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties*, (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1975), pp. 107, 118-124. An outline of educational issues and how they related to women and girls in the inter-war years can be found in Deidre Beddoe, Chapter Two: "Education", *Back To Home and Duty*, pp. 34-47. For an overview of housing issues see Beddoe, Chapter Four: "Home and Health", pp. 89-113.

⁷⁸Noreen Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties*, p 70.

Emboldened by the knowledge provided by their members in the embattled teaching professions, the League officially and sternly condemned the cuts proposed by the Geddes committee in 1922. The "Geddes axe", as it became known, came down on funds not only for education reforms including nursery schools and continuation schools, and house building, but also on women police. By targeting the mines, the Geddes committee sparked industrial unrest among mining communities.⁷⁹

Resolutions were passed by delegates in 1922, demanding that the 1918 Education Act be put into "full and immediate operation", and urged League members to "work against economies in education."⁸⁰ The influence of League teacher members was present in resolutions supporting reductions in class sizes and an extension of the school leaving age to sixteen, with provision for those who wished, to eighteen.⁸¹ Longer term proposals which had been circulated previously, were again discussed, and were

⁷⁹Noreen Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties*, pp. 35-36, 70, 123. On the unrest in mining communities the WFL official line was to sympathise with all those affected by the cuts, but to concentrate on those issues which they believed directly were the concern of the League. At the first NEC meeting following the general strike in May 1926, Florence Underwood reported that the WFL "had joined with other women's organisations in their work for conciliation", and that they had managed to bring out *The Vote* during that week. See NEC Minutes, June 26th 1926, p. 206, and *The Vote*, May 7th 1926, pp. 145, and May 14th 1926, p. 150.

⁸⁰Verbatim Minutes, 1922, pp. 32, 37-38. These economies included teachers pay, and a resolution in 1925 condemned the different scales put into effect by the Burnham Award. See Verbatim Minutes, 1925, p. 22, 25. See Hilda Keen, *The Lives of Suffragette Teachers*, pp. 99-100 for discussion of the adverse effects the Burnham award had on women teachers' status and pay. Alison Oram's "Embittered, Sexless or Homosexual": Attacks on Spinster Teachers 1918-1939", in Arina Angerman, et al., eds., *Current Issues in Women's History*, (Routledge, London, 1989), pp. 183-202, examines the experiences of spinster women teachers caught between official double standards of pro-marriage for women, and the sacking of women teachers on marriage.

⁸¹Verbatim Minutes, 1925, pp. 17-18, 24. This was not universally endorsed as some thought it wrong to keep young people at school if it was not in their interests. See *ibid*, p. 21.

intended to influence the nature of the curriculum taught in schools. In 1924 the Middlesbrough branch sent in a resolution proposing that girls and boys be taught hygiene and simple household duties, including cookery and sewing. However the same teachers pushing for reform on class sizes voiced their reservations, which were touched with agonizing realism. Clare Neal, still a teacher in Swansea, commented that male heads of boys schools would never agree to such an inclusion. Yet such pessimism in the difficult and conservative political climate, had not completely obliterated League members' desire to alter gender inequality and the conference duly voted to carry the resolution.⁸²

Housing as with education issues, occupied an important place in the WFL's programme in the 1920s. A number of branches continued the path set by their counterparts in previous years, by working hard for the provision of lodging houses for women.⁸³ The League demanded that women's advice be sought when building houses and that funds be made available for slum clearance.⁸⁴

On penal reform the League took a humanitarian stance, and were agreed on demands for progressive, rather than punitive punishment. As I will discuss in the next

⁸²Verbatim Minutes, Seventeenth Annual Conference April 5th 1924, p 68. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1924).

⁸³Resolutions on housing: WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1915-1919, p. 16, 1919-1922, p. 18, 1924-1925, p. 4, 1926-1927, p. 5, 1927-1928, p. 6. Elizabeth Knight and Florence Underwood also supported by attending the opening of the second Cecil House in Caledonian Road in November 1927. See NEC Minutes, November 26th 1927, pp. 348-349. See also article in *The Vote*, December 10th 1926, p. 389, and the correspondence from Helen Archdale, chair of publicity for the Women's Pioneer Housing Society Ltd, in *The Vote*, November 18th 1927, p. 367.

⁸⁴Verbatim Minutes, 1923, pp. 25-26.

chapter, some members were successfully insistent that the League should support attempts to abolish the death penalty.⁸⁵ These demands were linked to the welfare of women prisoners which included resolutions and campaigns designed to make sure that no child should be born in prison, and that prisons should be run by women officials.⁸⁶ Some delegates disagreed, commenting that the best person should be appointed, regardless of sex. Invariably these were barely noticed, as the strong support of Florence Underwood and Elizabeth Knight ensured demands for these reforms were continually placed among the main points of League policy.⁸⁷ Moreover, when reforms were mentioned in relation to Holloway prison, members who had experienced life within its walls may well have added strong support to the words of Florence Underwood when she commented:

it seems grotesque at this time of the day that this women's prison should have a MAN Governor. Surely women's prisons should be governed and staffed entirely by women?...Why is it that women return again and again to prison? May it not be because of the defect of our prison system in the way it affects women? And would not women on the Prison Commission seek to find out what the defect was?⁸⁸

In other areas, League members suspended their concerns primarily for women, to allow other reforming ideals to surface such as cruelty to animals, and I discuss these in the

⁸⁵Hastings branch, see Chapter Seven, pp. 386. The WFL was affiliated to the National Council for the Abolition of the Death Penalty and in 1928 the NEC agreed to circulate a petition among NEC members in support of these demands. See *The Vote*, November 13th 1925, p. 365, and NEC Minutes, September 29th 1928, p. 413.

⁸⁶On these issues the League leadership liaised with the Howard League for Penal Reform, and Elizabeth Knight and Florence Underwood were heavily involved, which perhaps explains the central place of penal reform in WFL campaigns. See *The Vote*, June 24th 1927, p. 195, and April 8th 1927, p. 108.

⁸⁷These issues were prominently featured in *The Vote*. See for example, "Women and the Prison Commission", April 8th 1927, p. 108.

⁸⁸*The Vote*, February 25th 1927, p. 60.

following chapter.⁸⁹

This sub-section has highlighted the ways in which the WFL's visions of an improved and equal society contained aspects of welfare reform. However their policies on housing, education and prisons also accentuated an awareness of equality and gender difference. The skirmishes which occurred in discussions on penal reform in particular, highlighted a diversion from the policy of strict equality. Yet it is not enough to explain this in terms of a commitment to equality while also recognising sexual difference in terms of welfare reforms. On the contrary, social welfare reform was acceptable to the majority of League delegates on certain questions, yet not on others. Dominating these discussions were questions of the endowment of motherhood and protective legislation, and it is here that profound dilemmas in League ideas can be clearly understood.

iii) The Endowment of Motherhood and Protective Legislation: Weakness and Division "Under The Cloak of Equality"⁹⁰

The questions of the endowment of motherhood and protective legislation were not new issues for the League in the 1920s.⁹¹ As I stated in Chapter Four, both had been subject to attention from members prior to 1914. Endowment was considered rather abstractly, with some more insistent than others that mothers should receive remuneration for their domestic and reproductive work.⁹² Certainly there were no

⁸⁹See Chapter Seven, Section III, i.

⁹⁰For reference see Chapter Six, footnote no. 109.

⁹¹The League tended to refer to the issue of payments to mothers as family endowment as in *The Vote*, May 1st 1925, p. 139. Here I employ the term endowment of motherhood.

⁹²See Chapter Four, Section II, i, ii.

definite campaigns or long term moves on the part of the League as a whole in support of these proposals. By contrast, issues around protective legislation were grounded, prior to 1914, in more definite beliefs, that no legislation should be directed towards women's work that did not apply equally to male workers. As I commented in Chapter Five, this platform placed the League in opposition to the majority of organisations directly representing women working in industry.

The League's absence from any attempts to introduce endowment or protective legislation, did not prevent other campaigners for women's rights from undertaking long campaigns with these objectives in mind.⁹³ Moreover, Eleanor Rathbone and the Labour women MPs were partially successful in their demands for such measures, and were helped along by the moves towards institutionalised state welfare provision which escalated during the first world war, and which remained evident at the beginning of the 1920s. This shift did not go unnoticed by League activists, especially in relation to the increase in interest around questions of endowment.⁹⁴

The discussions held among delegates at the League's annual conferences early in

⁹³Monica Seldon, "The Integration of Motherhood: Eleanor Rathbone and the Idea of Endowment. 1900-1920" (M.A. Dissertation, University of York, 1989.) Seldon examines the debates around endowment and the developments of ideas in relation to the family in this period. She demonstrates how these ideas developed from the beginning of the twentieth century, spanning the period covered in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis. See also Pat Thane, "The Women of the British Labour Party, 1906-1945", in Harold Smith, ed., *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 138-139. Thane finds disagreement on protective legislation present among Labour women, but the majority was apparently in favour, although hoping that the need for it would eventually disappear.

⁹⁴In 1919 the League sponsored a conference to examine the issue of the endowment of motherhood. No firm League policy was made. See NEC Minutes, January 4th 1919, p. 149, and February 15th 1919, p. 158.

the 1920s are significant in that they did not clearly reflect either arguments for women's independence from men and the state, or arguments for the right of women for remuneration from the state in recognition of their unpaid work. Instead there were echoes of both sentiments in the arguments of some League members, and others who declared themselves "very undecided". Another strain of argument emphasised concern about the state of the nation's finances. Elizabeth Knight was unusually vocal on this point and expressed her opinion to delegates in 1920 that Britain could not go on "borrowing money." She commented:

you say it will lead to a redistribution of wealth....it may...but it will bring just as many to the brink of starvation...taxes will go up enormously...and taxes are never felt by the rich, but by the "small people"....⁹⁵

While appearing to be the antithesis of defined League policy, because she made absolutely no reference to women's interests in the matter, Knight's arguments were highly topical in the early 1920s. As Pat Thane argues, many British citizens tended to accept state intervention as an "unfortunate necessity", yet this did not prevent reaction from setting in, especially after the war.⁹⁶ More significant still were the prevailing attitudes which accepted the family wage, along with assumptions regarding the family in general which Jane Lewis has argued, continued to affect welfare policies towards adult women.⁹⁷ Arguably, it was this continuing belief in the family wage which

⁹⁵Verbatim Minutes, Thirteenth Annual Conference, April 24th 1920, p. 81. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1920). Elizabeth Knight continued this critique in her review in 1927 of Eleanor Rathbone's *The Ethics and Economics of Family Endowment*, commenting in an otherwise encouraging review, "where is the money going to come from?". See *The Vote*, September 23rd 1927, p. 302.

⁹⁶Pat Thane, *The Foundation of the Welfare State*, (Longman, London,1982) p. 154.

⁹⁷Jane Lewis, "Dealing With Dependency: State Practices and Social Realities 1870-1945", in Jane Lewis, ed., *Women's Welfare, Women's Rights*, (Croon Helm, London, 1983), pp. 32-33.

influenced the views of League members. Hence when in 1922 the only resolution of the decade was passed in favour of the endowment of motherhood, it included a clause stating such benefits should only go to mothers in families *without a breadwinner*.⁹⁸

Subsequent to the passage of this resolution, the League turned its attentions away from the endowment of motherhood, to the related question of widows' pensions. Again strains of realism could be attributed to this shift as, in the years leading up to the Widows', Orphans, and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act of 1925, much debate at League conferences centred on the apparently attainable demands for payments to widows. One League activist, Mrs Mustard, in 1923 when calling for conference support for pensions for the upbringing of the children of widows, explained how it was this issue which "really brought me into the suffrage movement..".⁹⁹ This delegate's strong feelings do seem to have been evident among other members of the League as the conference unanimously passed a resolution in support of pensions for widows with children. References to "unfortunate necessity" were voiced barely a year later, in annual conference discussions on a resolution which proposed paying pensions to all widows, including those without dependent children. After a lengthy debate, it became evident that such moves were not supported by the majority who were only prepared to accept such payments for "necessitous" widows.¹⁰⁰

What these debates do show is the extent to which the League distanced itself

⁹⁸Verbatim Minutes, 1922, pp. 94-98. See WFL, *Annual Report*, 1919-1922, p. 3, for the exact wording of the resolution.

⁹⁹Verbatim Minutes, 1923, p. 72.

¹⁰⁰Verbatim Minutes. 1924, pp. 69, 70, 71.

from its explicitly stated policy with its over-riding concern for promoting women's equality in law and an end to victimisation through gender. Yet the tortuous debates among League delegates on questions of endowment and widows pensions did appear a divisive issue in the League. Arguably these particular welfare reforms were put into a different category from prison reform, and housing reform. The outlook of the majority of the membership was to support state investment in housing and prison welfare, whereas on questions of direct state financial aid for all women, opinion was mixed. Matters of national finance and individual interest served to splinter this overall commitment to women's equality.

The debates and concerns over national finance and individual interests can be seen from another perspective by exploring the influence of liberal concepts of equal rights on League members's perceptions of women's equality with men. Support for and rejection of these beliefs can be clearly identified in discussions held in 1925 on the contributory nature of widows' pensions. Mary Neal, from the NEC countered a resolution condemning the contributory nature of widows' pensions, arguing that she was strongly in favour of all contributory schemes, and believed in the "independence of our people."¹⁰¹ While the ultimate passage of the resolution against contributory pensions testifies to the fact that liberal equal rights principles were not directly or universally transferrable onto League concepts of women's equality, the underlying connections do emerge. Further evidence of this can be seen in discussions held in the same year on the endowment of motherhood, once again at the heart of debates among

¹⁰¹Verbatim Minutes, 1925, pp. 29-31.

women's organisations.¹⁰²

In 1925 the League invited Isobel Goddard of the Family Endowment Society to speak on the endowment of motherhood at their annual conference.¹⁰³ After a forthright, yet inconclusive debate, *The Vote*, motivated perhaps by a desire for the League to come down firmly on one side or another, printed articles by Isobel Goddard and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the former strongly in favour, and the latter strongly against. Fawcett's argument, couched in liberal terms which stressed parental obligation and the need to "develop individual responsibility", did little to further the debate taking place in the League.¹⁰⁴

Perhaps because of a lack of convincing alternative arguments to endowment, beyond the need to put equality issues first, which in other areas they had failed to do, the response of the League was to remain inconclusive. However such indecision did not cripple the League because Florence Underwood, like her colleague Elizabeth Knight, supported the view that issues of direct equality, like equal pay for equal work, were more pressing.

The demand for absolute equality for women and men in the work place was yet

¹⁰²Following the passage of the act on widows pensions, *The Vote* ran a number of articles, see July 3rd 1925, p. 212, September 18th 1925, p. 278-279, and M.I. Neal's "Pensions At Last!", October 9th 1925, p. 325. Following this legislation attention appeared to return to the question of endowment. This was succeeded by articles in *The Vote*, including; "Should Wives Have Wages?", December 24th 1926, p. 403, and two entitled "Family Endowment", January 27th 1927, p. 3, and October 21st 1927, p. 333.

¹⁰³Verbatim Minutes, 1925, pp. 42-59, and reported in *The Vote*, May 1st 1925, p. 139.

¹⁰⁴*The Vote*, June 12th 1925, p. 189.

another volatile chord in League debates on their feminist programme. The League's strong commitment to this principle necessitated an absolute rejection by the League of protective legislation towards women workers. Whereas the majority of League members tended to be more favourably disposed to direct welfare payments from the state, there were few signs of such support on the issue of what many members described as *restrictive* legislation towards women workers.

This attitude was particularly meaningful in the 1920s because moves in favour of protective legislation, which had gained the support of the increasingly powerful Labour Party, had begun in earnest. This support was especially evident during the brief term of Labour government in 1924. In policy debates at League annual conferences, and in copious literature and articles in *The Vote*, representatives of the League blocked even the slightest attempt to lower their guard against restrictions to women's work.¹⁰⁵ Although this prompted the severance of at least one League branch, early in the twenties, the League's leadership, in particular Florence Underwood, were not unduly concerned. On the contrary they were comfortable in the knowledge that their views at this stage reflected those in other non-party women's societies, especially the NUSEC and the Six Point Group.

However, League officials and members had their convictions severely tested after the middle of the decade in a painful encounter with a number of women Labour MPs. Marian Phillips, Margaret Phillips, and Ellen Wilkinson especially, were the very women

¹⁰⁵For examples see *The Vote* : "Women Workers Want Equality", September 18th 1925, p. 300, "Tuppence An Hour!", May 22nd 1925, p. 164, "Equal pay for Equal Work", April 1st 1927, p. 100, "Menace To Women's Workers", October 14th 1927, p. 325, and "The Physique of Women in Industry", December 23rd 1927, p. 406.

the League had so wholeheartedly supported in their election campaigns. In 1924 Alice Schofield Coates and others in the Middlesbrough branch, received heartfelt thanks from Ellen Wilkinson at a League dinner held in her honour after her successful election campaign in Middlesbrough East. At this dinner she promised "she would do all she could for equal franchise demands", yet because of emerging differences over protective legislation, this early friendship was to be placed under severe strain in the months and years that followed.¹⁰⁶ Equally, the League's encouragement to the short-lived Labour government of 1924 ended in disillusionment and anger that the Labour government had done so little "on behalf of women's interests".¹⁰⁷ The rupture was decisive and although individual members continued their links with the Labour Party, the League never again could be considered to have had a close relationship. The Labour Party had proved themselves as a party capable of government, however short-lived, whereas the League found themselves running against a tide of a highly effective and powerful party political system, and equally effective women MPs.

This was emphasised in WFL/Labour debates over protective legislation in 1927. Trying to promote a direct equality position, and therefore critical of protective legislation, League sponsored speakers found themselves no match for the sharp tongues of Labour women MPs. Ellen Wilkinson was particularly scathing in her response to the arguments of Miss Doris Stevens, the president of the National Women's Party of America.¹⁰⁸ Stevens had traced prohibitions placed upon women to ancient taboos,

¹⁰⁶*The Vote*, December 5th 1924, p. 387.

¹⁰⁷*The Vote*, October 17th 1924, p. 333.

¹⁰⁸For more information on the National Woman's Movement see Christine A. Lunardini, *From Equal Suffrage To Equal Rights, Alice Paul and The National Woman's Party, 1910-1925*, (New York University Press, New York & London, 1986), passim.

and the conception that woman was filled with a capacity for evil. Wilkinson's sharp reply was recorded by *The Vote*:

Miss Wilkinson opened the negative by brushing aside the idea of ancient voodooism and said she was concerned with the facts of to-day. She accused feminists of being middle-class sitters in drawing rooms, deciding that they know what the industrial woman needs. She would, she said, fight them to the death; under the cloak of equality, they were arrayed on the side of the exploiters of labour...¹⁰⁹

In the attempts to counter such claims, it was the arguments of Minerva Club branch member, and subsequent League president, Marion Reeves, which really hit home to readers of *The Vote*.¹¹⁰ Reeves stated that protective legislation for women was undesirable because it was detrimental to women's status as citizens. She claimed, that as citizens, women wanted a:

"Fair field and no favour". Women should be legislated for as citizens and not classed with "Children and young persons"....Artificial legislation tends to keep women as the subject sex, and restricts choice of occupation; it also tends to relegate women to lowest paid jobs...¹¹¹

Her arguments that any concern about adverse affects on women in industry must also be directed towards male workers, had a firmness which found favour with many League members. On the opposing side Marian Phillips argued that "women are not as tough as men" and that "potential mothers need protective legislation."¹¹² Caught in the middle were the industrial women workers, who were caught between two opposing

¹⁰⁹*The Vote*, February 4th 1927, p. 27.

¹¹⁰Marian Reeves became the last President of the League, and it was after her death that the League disbanded. See Stella Newsome, *A History of The Women's Freedom League*, p. 17, *WFL Bulletin*, September 22nd 1961, pp. 1-2, and *Calling All Women*, February 1962, pp. 4-5.

¹¹¹*The Vote*, December 23rd 1927, p. 405. Reeves made these comments in a debate with Marian Phillips which was held at the WFL's Minerva Club, London.

¹¹²*The Vote*, December 23rd 1927, p. 405.

principles, and whose own voices were very rarely heard.¹¹³

The weaknesses in the League's arguments were reinforced by the fact that they could not even claim to speak for women workers, and because of their rigid stance, the possibility of bridging any gaps grew even more remote. Such difficulties were not only present within the WFL, but were to rupture domestic feminist politics, and relations among women's organisations internationally. This occurred when definitive steps were taken by Eleanor Rathbone in 1925 to introduce "new" feminism which emphasised women's particular needs, and which was seen as distinct from previous straightforward "equality" feminism.¹¹⁴

¹¹³This concept of assumed knowledge on the part of those social investigators who thought they could speak for working women even though the working women themselves were rarely consulted, has been developed by Helen Rogers (Centre for Women's Studies, University of York), in her unpublished conference paper "'The Good Are Not Always Powerful, Nor The Powerful Always Good': The Politics of Women's Work in the London Needle Trades, 1841-1864', given at the National Women's History Network Conference, London, September 1993. See also Anne Phillips, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 103, who comments briefly on how this direct connection between working-class women and motherhood had adverse effects as they lost the ability to articulate demands both for working-class mothers, and women working in industry.

¹¹⁴Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, p. 164.

Section III: MANIFESTATIONS OF THE 1920S FEMINIST MOVEMENT: "THOSE WHO KEEP THIS MOVEMENT ALIVE BY DOGGED PERSISTENT WORK.." ¹¹⁵

In the previous section I have indicated the underlying difficulties and weaknesses encountered in the League's search for a feminist programme. While contending with these issues, the League's members and officials devoted time and energy to building up their organisation. Their over-riding message was that there was a continuing need not only for the WFL, but also for a non-party women's movement. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Seven, this was achieved by negotiation, co-operation and a tacit acceptance, however grudging on the part of branch members, of two tiers of interest in the League: one concerned with national policy, and the other with developing activities in local branches.

In this final section I trace the League leadership's interactions with the British and international women's movements in the 1920s, firstly by exploring how the League negotiated and was affected by the emergence of "new" feminism and the redefinition of "equality" feminism. Secondly I consider how officials argued that the League needed to continue to build on the long-standing demand for full political equality for women. This involved the rewriting of past experiences in the militant campaign in order to construct an identity which would take them forward into the 1930s and beyond.

¹¹⁵Taken from a speech by the Chair at the 1928 annual conference of the League. See Verbatim Minutes, Twenty-First Annual Conference of the WFL, April 28th 1928, p. 8. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1928).

i) "..New Vistas Opened Up": National and International Encounters with "New" and "Equality" Feminism, 1925 - 1928

In the sparse histories of feminism and women's organisation in the 1920s the "split" between "new" and "equality" feminism has characterised many historians' assessments of women's political activity in the period.¹¹⁶ The term "new" feminism was used in order to highlight firm moves by some feminists in NUSEC to incorporate issues of reform for women, rather than continuing to challenge their lack of political, and economic equality with men. Those who continued to maintain, and even strengthen their emphasis on prioritising equality for women in all spheres of life were described as "equality" feminists.

Recently Johanna Alberti has explored the split between "new" and "equality" feminists through the debates between NUSEC members, and those in the Six Point Group writing in *Time and Tide*. While Alberti acknowledges that there were significant distinctions between and among the members of these organisations, on closer scrutiny she characterises the split as "facile." She contends that the differences between the two groups were very narrow indeed, albeit highly significant.¹¹⁷

It is not useful to classify the WFL in terms of the divide between "new" and

¹¹⁶See Harold Smith, "British Feminism in the 1920s", in Harold Smith, ed., *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, (Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1990), pp. 47-65, and Martin Pugh, Chapter Eight: "The New Feminism and the Decline of the Women's Movement in the 1930s", *Women and the Women's Movement*, pp. 235-244. Pugh terms this period an "awkward crossroads" and attributes what he sees as a decline in the WFL, to their failure to incorporate the issues raised by new feminism. Anne Phillips, *Divided Loyalties*, pp. 98-102, criticises the "novelty suggested by the term", and analyses it in relation to an incorporation of the concerns of working class women.

¹¹⁷Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, pp. 164-165.

"equality" feminism since both strains of thought were evident in the League's feminist ideas. The League managed to bypass the damaging rifts within NUSEC and between NUSEC and the Six Point Group.¹¹⁸ It continued to formulate its demands and its policy in a language of equality and tended to overlook the contradictions in its programme which contained elements of sexual difference. However, the rifts in the other organisations were significant for the WFL because they affected the very character of the non-party women's movement of the 1920s.

Alberti has pointed out that there was nothing particularly "new" in Rathbone's arguments.¹¹⁹ Indeed the "enrichment" in relation to demanding social and welfare reforms to improve the conditions of women's lives had been taking place in women's organisations for many years. The WFL had been engaged in such endeavours since the early 1910s. The crucial difference in Rathbone's statement was that she was prepared to confront directly the inconsistencies in feminist ideas which either explicitly failed to acknowledge equality *and* an emphasis on sexual difference, or had become congested with difficulties at every turn.

Whereas a group of members in NUSEC and the Six Point Group angrily denounced any moves towards "new" feminism, the WFL only intervened officially on one occasion. This came in the form of an article published in *The Vote* in September 1925 entitled "Political Equality FIRST". It agreed with sentiments expressed in a recent article in *Time and Tide*. *The Vote* concurred that it was now time to complete

¹¹⁸Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminist in War and Peace, 1914-1928*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989), Chapter Seven: "New and Old Feminist", pp. 164-190.

¹¹⁹Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, p. 164.

the work "left unaccomplished seven years ago." This meant obtaining equal political rights and working towards the removal of the ban on women entering the House of Lords. The article ran:

We are convinced that the political inferiority of women is at the basis of the present unequal status and economic inferiority of women compared with men. We are also convinced that unless women's organisations unite to concentrate with vigour on securing political equality, it will not be achieved during the life of this Parliament.¹²⁰

It would have been inconsistent if the League had rejected social and welfare initiatives outright, and instead what was questioned was the actual *emphasis* given to these issues. Eventually members would be forced to take firmer steps in the growing divide between "new" and "equality" feminists. Events within the international women's movement highlighted how significant and difficult these choices were.

After repeated attempts, the WFL finally managed to affiliate to the International Women's Suffrage Alliance in 1926, in time for the Paris Congress of delegates held in April of this year.¹²¹ This success was muted by the fact that they entered just at the time when divisions between "new" and "equality" feminists began seriously to disrupt the work of this alliance. The two League delegates Anna Munro and the newly elected president Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence were accompanied on the trip to Paris by five other members, including the indomitable Elizabeth Knight and Florence Underwood.¹²² The European/American bias in the concerns of the IWSA was evident

¹²⁰*The Vote*, September 25th 1925, p. 308.

¹²¹*The Vote*, June 11th 1926, p. 182.

¹²²WFL, *Annual Report*, 1927, p. 10. Other League delegates were Mrs Mustard, Mrs Northcroft and Mrs Turriff.

in the reports of the activities undertaken in the two years since the last congress.¹²³ Assembled delegates heard reports from the five commissions which had been set up to discuss the following issues: equal moral standards, the conditions of work for men and women, the unmarried mother and her child, the nationality of married women, and family endowment.

Later, Florence Underwood, the League's correspondent on the congress reported back to readers of *The Vote* that the WFL delegates "gave their full and undivided support to every resolution which aimed at securing complete equality of women with men no matter what heading the discussions came under."¹²⁴ In the same way as the League had pushed equality demands in Britain, so its delegates supported "those resolutions on the agenda which were in conformity" with the League's domestic policies. In return, they were disappointed that their resolutions for women doctors and women governors in women's prisons did not pass.¹²⁵

Amid the perhaps exaggerated celebratory reports coming back from the Congress, Underwood's report to *The Vote* could not ignore what she termed a "considerable difference of opinion" over protective legislation which emerged in discussions on the findings of the Commission on Conditions of Work for Women. The German delegation, supported by the delegations from the United States, Austria, Switzerland

¹²³While there were some women's societies from non-European countries, among the societies which had assembled from over forty countries, they were by far outnumbered in terms of influence by the former. See *The Vote*, June 11th 1926, p. 181. At this conference, in addition to the WFL, societies from the following countries were admitted: Peru, Turkey, Cuba, Bermuda, Porto Rico, Luxembourg and Portugal.

¹²⁴*The Vote*, June 11th 1925, p. 180.

¹²⁵WFL, *Annual Report*, 1926-1927, p. 10.

and Italy, added an amendment to the resolution condemning all restrictive legislation, demanding that maternity provision be made available for women. The impasses only receded when the German delegation were persuaded to withdraw their amendment.¹²⁶

This apparent compromise only covered over more fundamental differences of opinion which divided those organisations present. Indeed the finely constructed unity was severed following the decision to refuse the application to affiliate by the anti-protection National Women's Party of America. The bitter comments of journalists like Crystal Eastman, the outrage of some societies, and the subsequent refusal of the IWSA committee to reject all protective legislation outright, led to the formation of the Open Door International in 1929 which was set up as a rival international umbrella organisation.¹²⁷ There was an apparently unbridgeable divide between "new" and "equality" feminists and the considerable range of positions in between were not clearly enough defined to counter the two extremes. Certainly the WFL was uncomfortably and unclearly placed.

Such events suggest that by the second half of the 1920s, there were two broad paths taken by women's organisations. One was to confront the dilemmas and difficulties within feminism and the other was to concentrate on maintaining

¹²⁶"The Paris Congress", *The Vote*, June 11th 1926, p. 181-182.

¹²⁷This organisation was the offspring of the Open Door Council, formed in Britain on May 5th 1926 because of worries about the moves taken by other women's organisations in support of protective legislation. The WFL forged links with the Open Door Council, but did not come down wholly on their side, as they still maintained links with NUSEC. See Open Door Council, *First Annual Report*, May 5th 1926 - August 4th 1927, pp. 5-8. For formation on Open Door International, see Open Door Council, *Annual Report*, 1929-1930, pp. 2-4. The President was Crystal Macmillan. The archives of the Open Door Council and Open Door International are housed at the Fawcett Library, London.

organisational unity across the movement, at the expense of consistency of policy. While claiming to adhere to the first, the leadership of the WFL chose the second path. Although this strategy continued to attract supporters to the League, there was no guarantee that this would be the case in other feminist societies. By the end of the 1920s, the mass non-party women's movement was cracking under the weight of its own diversity and in the final part of this chapter I consider the response of the League to this course of events.

ii) Looking Back In Order To Go Forward: Representations Beyond the Final Victory in Suffrage

The final part of this chapter traces the climax of the WFL's campaign for equal suffrage. Woven through the actions of the League in the final campaign leading up to the 1928 Representation of the People Act, is another thread which indicates that concerns with the suffrage, and the long campaign undertaken by the League, continued in another form beyond 1928. I will show how throughout the 1920s League members responded to their partial inclusion into citizenship by drawing on their past identity and by developing a sense of their own history in relation to the militant suffrage campaign.¹²⁸

Following the passage of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, the League continued a vocal and consistent campaign for equal suffrage legislation. In this endeavour, they continued to draw on long standing arguments that gender, and indeed

¹²⁸A significant shift which is worth noting at this point, is that in these histories the WFL now accepted contrary to discussion in 1918 that militancy ended in 1914. Their understanding of militancy did nevertheless remain distinct from that in the histories of the WSPU.

age, should not be a barrier to equal citizenship. While League members were aware that no legislation would be introduced immediately, they still seemed somewhat unprepared for the extent to which their demands were marginalised by successive parliaments. This rather depressing state of affairs altered in 1926 when optimism grew that finally the government would introduce equal franchise legislation.

It is necessary to explore another explanation for the League's continued heavy emphasis on equal franchise after this point. This can be found in the desire to maintain a sense of identity through which the women's movement could retain some meaning for women. This was evident early on in the 1920s in the League, when the abnegation by the government of commitment to the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 provided the opportunity for Alice Schofield Coates, as chair of the League's 1923 annual conference, to draw strength from their predecessors in the struggle for women's emancipation. She commented on the actions of the government:

The British Electorate will not for long tolerate this injustice, which is a survival of an attitude of mind which is quickly changing as education advances. We have only to compare the accepted position of women to-day with that of 60 years ago, to see how wonderfully we have advanced. All honour to the pioneers whose task was so much harder than ours!¹²⁹

Such references amounted to a construction of a shared past for League members and other suffrage campaigners. This construction proved attractive to the other women's organisations active in the 1920s and resulted in 1926 with the formation of the Equal Political Rights Campaign Committee. This committee united members from different non-party women's organisations, in the plans to organise a large Equal Political Rights

¹²⁹WFL, *Annual Report*, 1923, p. 5.

Demonstration in Hyde park in July 1926.¹³⁰

The League mustered a strong contingent for this demonstration which was led by figures from the past, notably Charlotte Despard, and current influential leaders, including Emmeline Pethick Lawrence and Elizabeth Knight.¹³¹ Although NUSEC, the NCW and the London Society for Women's Service subsequently declined to join the Equal Political Rights Campaign Committee on a permanent basis, support from the Six Point Group and the League ensured its future continuation. The League continued their campaign for equal suffrage, the high spots of which were the deputation to the Prime Minister in March 1927, large public meetings, and a number of poster parades demanding "Votes for Women at 21!".¹³²

The culmination of their efforts came in April 1927 when the government announced they were to introduce a bill ensuring equal suffrage rights for men and women. It appears there was still a strong desire in the League to continue to capitalise on the publicity which surrounded the upsurge in interest on suffrage issues. These sentiments were emphasised by Anna Munro who declared it was:

¹³⁰See NEC Minutes, July 26th 1926, p. 210. The League delegates on this committee were NEC member Miss E. Berry and Elizabeth Knight.

¹³¹WFL, *Annual Report*, 1926-1927, p. 9. Speakers in Hyde Park for the League included Margaret Wynne Nevinson, Mrs Mustard, Mrs Whetton, Mrs Flowers, Mrs Zangwill, Alice Schofield Coates, and Anna Munro.

¹³²See the photograph on p. 299. NEC Minutes, October 8th 1927, p. 320, refers to plans for one of the League's poster parades. These were deemed particularly important by the League in the face of unacceptable proposals to decrease the voting age for women to twenty-five rather than twenty-one. See *The Vote*, "Should Women Have The Vote At 21?", October 21st 1927, p. 333.

...an occasion for joy, not the joy of those who put off the armour after victory, but the joy of those who put on the armour for the victorious stage of our long warfare for the full political equality of women and men...We need to re-learn some of the lessons that we learnt 20 years ago: *That the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, and the capacity for taking endless pains..*¹³³

The culmination of the League's own personal struggle for equal voting rights came on July 16th 1927 in Trafalgar Square, where they managed to gather representatives from forty-two other women's organisations. Among the speakers was Charlotte Despard, greeted with the traditional enthusiasm, and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. It was a testimony to the links the League had forged in past years that representatives attended from the Six Point Group, NUSEC and the Open Door Council who, on this occasion, apparently managed to overlook their differences. Even more impressive was the attendance of representatives from both the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations, the Women's Co-operative Guild, and the Women's International League. Previous League members attended now representing other bodies, and long standing colleagues from the NUWT, the Women's National Liberal Federation, and the St Joan's Social and Political Alliance all took their turns to speak to the assembled crowd.¹³⁴

Equal suffrage finally arrived in 1928. After twenty-one years in existence the League's basic and initial demand had been won. Nevertheless, unlike the euphoria in 1918, this legislation did not spark such celebrations, nor was there a dramatic change in the League's programme, or the sense of a new era. The old women's suffrage societies had significantly changed and were now presenting themselves as non-party

¹³³WFL, *Annual Report*, 1926-1927, pp. 5-6.

¹³⁴*The Vote*, July 22nd 1927, pp. 225-227.

feminist organisations, campaigning for changes in many aspects of women's position and status. Each had chosen their own paths and outlined their different programmes. Where suffrage societies had disbanded, single issue organisations emerged.

It was true that there were divisions among members of feminist organisations on certain crucial issues, yet this was hardly surprising. The 1920s had proved conclusively that the previous image of unity was based on a coalition grounded in demands for the vote. This point provides the key to understanding why the League constructed a history of their own part in the militant suffrage campaign. Because it had not proved possible to replace suffrage as a way to unite the various women's organisations, the League continued to highlight suffrage even after it had been achieved for all women. This practice maintained a sense of shared identity, at most across the non-party women's movement, and at least, within the League itself.

The League in one sense was fighting a battle for the continuation of a women's movement which had already divided. While some political campaigns were weakened by disunity and diversity, the Suffragette Fellowship which had been formed by Edith How-Martyn in the 1920s, concentrated its efforts on joining together to celebrate and enshrine in memory the great suffrage struggle. The Fellowship proved very popular with suffrage activists, although while it did actively promote feminist demands, by its very nature it excluded women who had not been involved in the suffrage campaign from joining.¹³⁵

¹³⁵Diane Atkinson, *Suffragettes*, (Museum of London, London, 1988), p. 15, refers to the formation of the Suffragette Fellowship. Little has been written about this organisation. Material can be found in the Suffragette Fellowship's newsletter, *Calling All Women*, 1951-1977.

The WFL did not benefit particularly from the increase in writing by participants in the suffrage struggle of previous years. Very few League members wrote biographies, and certainly produced nothing to match Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement*, or Ray Strachey's '*The Cause*'.¹³⁶ Furthermore, the League's work did not seem to receive a balanced review, especially in '*The Cause*'. NEC members were outraged at the comments Ray Strachey made about the WFL in '*The Cause*', which was published in 1928, and demanded "immediate corrections."¹³⁷ Future studies on the representation of the suffrage campaign in the 1930s and after, might want to follow such points through when exploring why the WFL has been so marginalised from suffrage historiography.

It is also worth bearing in mind that in the literature published by the League on their own history, certain crucial issues faced by the leadership in the 1920s were marginalised. This is evident in the pamphlet *Hats Off To The Past, Coats Off To The Future*, written by League member, Mrs Gerard, and published in 1932. She carefully documented some of the League's "outstanding" militant protests in the period up to 1914, and covered the war period briefly, yet completely overlooked the difficulties the League faced in the 1920s as they shifted from a militant society to a non-party feminist

¹³⁶See E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, reviewed in *The Vote*, March 13th 1931, p. 86, and Ray Strachey, *The Cause*, (G. Bell & Sons Ltd, London, 1928). Other suffrage biographies which were well reviewed by League members included Dora Montefiore, *From a Victorian To a Modern*, in *The Vote*, October 14th 1927, p. 326, and Ray Strachey's *Women's Suffrage & Women's Service*, in *The Vote*, October 21st 1927, p. 334

One of the few League members who published autobiographies in their lifetimes was Margaret Wynne Nevinson, *Life's Fitful Fever*. While she recounts her activities in the League up to 1912, she was not deeply involved in the League thereafter, and her account of the suffrage campaign reverts to a standardized account promoted in WSPU histories published previously. See pp. 191-224, 235-250.

¹³⁷NEC Minutes, March 9th 1929, pp. 11-12.

organisation. It is possible that such absences were the result of a carefully constructed plan to draw new members into the League in the 1930s:

Let those who were not privileged to take part in the fight for political freedom, who were prevented by age, circumstance or perhaps want of conviction, spend no time in useless regrets but go straight ahead and take their full share of responsibility for the fight still to win, and so do something for their day and generation.¹³⁸

That this call for new members failed, was due to the unresolved difficulties between allowing a diversity of political identities, while at the same time requiring one supreme identity grounded in demands for women's equality with men in order to maintain the League as a national organisation. These tensions were to be fought out and resolved in the following decades.¹³⁹

CONCLUSION

These final comments regarding the failure of the League to draw in new members, present a rather dismal picture. Yet while this was true in terms of the League's status and influence on national politics in Britain and in international feminist politics, members had come a long way down the road of citizenship. They had travelled a long and difficult path in relation to developing feminist ideas; the paradoxes and dilemmas of liberal feminism were now more clearly revealed.

The League was by no means unique in the difficulties it faced in developing clear

¹³⁸Mrs Gerard, *Hat Off To The Past, Coats Off To The Future*, (WFL, London, [1932]), p. 10.

¹³⁹The WFL finally disbanded in 1961 after the death of its President, Marian Reeves. It appears that no other member was prepared to take over the responsibility. See *WFL Bulletin*, November 17th 1961, p. 1.

and consistent feminist ideas. Yet, their insistence on pressing for equality, while incorporating interest in welfare reforms, did succeed in bringing in women from other old societies, even if large numbers of women entirely new to women's distinct organisation were not attracted. An interest in what the League had to offer in the 1920s was felt perhaps most strongly in the branches. Here the members would work hard to establish both a place in local politics for their demands and concerns and they would continue to build on their social networks forged in earlier years. Therefore in the final chapter I trace the activities of branch members and present an account of the challenges which were encountered by the second tier of the League in the 1920s.

FREE AND INDEPENDENT.



Three Leaders (together) "WANT A PILOT, MADAM?"
New Voter "NO, THANKS."
Kind permission of the Progressives of Omaha, June 27, 1924.

Caption: The Three Leaders (*together*) "Want A Pilot, Madam?"
New Voter "No, Thanks"

Plate 12: Free and Independent

CHAPTER SEVEN

WOMEN CITIZENS IN "LIVE LOCAL ORGANISATIONS"¹

THE DIVERSIFICATION OF POLITICS IN LEAGUE BRANCHES, 1920 - 1930

INTRODUCTION

In this final chapter, I explore the extent to which the official, yet ambivalent, equality programme of the League, as outlined by the National Executive and endorsed at annual conferences, was followed through in League branches in the 1920s. My purpose is to show the ways it was possible for the League to have meaning to women at a local level as well as at a national level. The material in this chapter will identify a series of connected, yet distinct trends in the development by women of political identities. I argue that there were very real difficulties faced by members in attempting to pursue their concerns for gender equality as well as their own political objectives. In consequence while members followed a policy of woman-centred party independence, some also became involved in local party politics. It was such varied connections which served to generate individual and collective political identities among League members.

In the following sections of this chapter I will consider the strengths and weaknesses in branch organisation in the 1920s. I will consider the difficulties which emerged among members in relation to party and class interests, and the extent to which official visions of the League as a powerful and distinct non-party women's organisation in the pursuit of equality for women were obscured.

¹For reference see Chapter Seven, footnote no. 31.

Following on from earlier chapters, I explore the extent to which ordinary members continued to develop and integrate a wide range of concerns and issues into their branches, and trace their attempts to incorporate them into official League policy.² The implications of such exchanges in ideas were two-fold, firstly they generated a sense of identity among some branches, and an accompanying purpose and status in their communities. Yet such was the range of activities and beliefs that the League was perceived in different ways; as a communist organisation by members in Dunoon, and later as a hinderance by its own members to the establishment of a broader based feminist programme.

Section I: "PEOPLE ARE AFRAID OF US NO LONGER": PATTERNS OF ACTIVITY IN LEAGUE BRANCHES, 1919 - 1930³

This section explores continuity and change in the League's regional branch organisation, activities and membership in the period immediately following the passage of the 1918 franchise act. Firstly, I will give a brief summary of the regional shifts in League branches since the pre-1914 period. This augments the information in Appendix Three, which gives details of all forty-nine League branches active from 1920 to 1930.

²Specifically, see Chapter Two.

³Title taken from Portsmouth branch notes, in WFL, *Annual Report*, 1919-1922, p. 21.

i) An Overview of League Branches, 1919 - 1930⁴

In a previous chapter I have indicated various reasons why almost half of the branches listed by the League in 1914 had disbanded by 1920.⁵ These included the dislocation of the war, and the passage of women into other organisations, including party organisations, following the 1918 franchise victory. However beyond these obvious markers, there are few general patterns, as in individual branches opinion on the future and status of the League was often mixed. Furthermore the particular circumstances of the 1920s were to affect the formation and nature of League branches.

What follows is an examination of such themes as the continuity and input of organisers and officials, local municipal representation, networking with other local women's organisations and links with the League's headquarters in London in those areas of Britain where the League was strongest in the 1920s.

In Scotland there was a notable decline in levels of activity compared with the period between 1907 and 1914. This was forcefully pushed home when in June 1919 members in Dundee finally decided to disband their branch. Although in the branches in Edinburgh and Glasgow no such drastic moves followed, both faced splits among their membership. In 1920 the Edinburgh delegate recalled the split in her branch in 1918, and commented how "many of the members contended that what women had been fighting for was accomplished". She reflected that there was nothing tangible to keep

⁴Sources are WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1915-1919, 1919-1922, 1922-1923, 1924-1925, 1926-1927, 1927-1928, 1928-1929, *The Vote*, 1918-1930, and NEC Minutes, 1918-1930.

⁵See Chapter Five, Section I, ii.

the branch together, and that these former members "would not work for a set of principles." Instead, she argued they needed a "rallying cry" not just to attract the "woman reformer, but the average woman."⁶

The malaise in Scotland continued until the middle of the decade until, through the efforts of two organisers, Miss Brimson and ex-WSPU member, Lilian Lenton, members in Glasgow and Edinburgh rallied together. Also through Lilian Lenton's efforts, two branches were formed on the Clyde Coast in Dunoon in 1925 and in Rothesay in 1926.⁷

Lilian Lenton also visited League branches situated in the north of England, and like her visits throughout the 1920s, these branches were few and far between. Notable for their activity and strength, were the branches in Middlesbrough and in Liverpool, both areas having seen League activity from the earliest years of the League's existence. The Manchester branch became something of a ghost branch in the early 1920s, with the only representation coming from NEC member, Mary Neal. The other exceptions to what was a distinct lack of activity in the north of England in the early part of the decade, were the Nottingham branch formed in 1918, which lasted until 1921, and the Hull branch which was active in fits and starts until 1925.

Branches in Darlington and Gateshead and Sheffield, Leeds and Bradford were all formed towards the end of the decade, and were the result of a reversal in the practice

⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1920, pp. 64-65.

⁷WFL "Clyde Coastal Campaigns" continued to be held in the summer months during the 1920s. Later these were organised by Lilian Lenton. See NEC Minutes, October 9th 1926, p. 214, September 29th 1928, p. 406, and June 29th 1929, p. 46.

of headquarters to concentrate its efforts almost exclusively in areas which already had strong branches. It is possible that this resurgence of regional strength was also the result of splits in other non-party women's societies which allowed the League to capitalise on their relative isolation as a non-party political national women's organisation campaigning on a variety of issues.

While members in Scotland and the north of England complained with justification that their distance from the League's London headquarters put them on the periphery of the League as a whole, this should not be considered in isolation. It was certainly not the case that League activity centred in London districts in the 1920s. Indeed in London there was also a distinct decline in branch numbers. Whereas once a multitude of branches had thrived in the active environment of London, in the years after 1918 the close proximity of many served to leave them bereft of members and searching for new angles to their work. The ebb and flow of short-lived branches only stabilised with the appointment of a permanent London organiser in 1929.⁸ In the areas surrounding London the branches in Letchworth, Newbury and Thames Valley were rather short lived. All lacked motivation, and the members willing to take the burden of responsibility for organising the branch.

The two areas where the League was strongest in the 1920s were the South East corner of England and Wales. Thanks to committed officials, and the long-standing involvement in suffrage of members and organisers dating back to the early 1910s, the

⁸Miss Auld was appointed in April 1929. There had been two previous London League organisers, Miss Winifred Giles who died suddenly in her second month at work, and Miss Cockle who resigned in April 1928 after seven months. See NEC Minutes, June 11th 1927, p. 281, July 16th 1927, p. 300, October 8th 1927, p. 313, April 27th 1928, p. 379, and April 12th 1929, p. 27.

upsurge in regional branch formation in the north in the late 1920s occurred in the south-east of England much earlier. In Kent, League branches in Hastings, Bexhill and Ashford were established, and by capitalising on pre-war suffrage networks, picked up some members from other women's societies. However, it was the branch in Portsmouth, whose members were the most active. Indeed Portsmouth stands out among all other branches nationwide for its highly vocal conference representatives, dedicated officials and also activity in local campaigns and liaison with other local organisations in the area.

The two branches in Wales, Swansea, and Montgomery Boroughs; also continued to enhance their strong local networks. Interestingly they did not often complain of any isolation from the League and this seems due to their involvement in local political activity and municipal affairs. Both the Swansea and Montgomery Boroughs branches, as well as many of the other areas discussed above, contained members who were Poor Law Guardians or on local councils and committees.⁹

For the remainder of this chapter, I concentrate on a cross-section of seventeen of the forty-nine active branches. Middlesbrough, Portsmouth, Hampstead, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Montgomery Boroughs and Swansea, had been formed between 1907 and 1911, Ashford, Bexhill, Hastings, Hull, Nottingham, and Wallasey, formed between 1918 and 1922, and Thames Valley, Minerva Club, Bradford, and Leeds after 1924. Based on the capitation fees paid by these branches, membership numbers varied from

⁹Pugh gives precise details of the increase in the election of women to local government positions, in England and Wales, 1914-1937. However, he makes no reference to the WFL in relation to this increase. See Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, pp. 56-61.

anything between nineteen members in Wallasey in 1923 to two hundred and sixty-two members in Montgomery Boroughs in the same year. Broadly the average across all seventeen branches, excluding the latter, was between thirty and sixty for any one year.¹⁰

The members of these branches did not simply cling on to by-gone memories of the militant campaign. On the contrary, they attempted to build on the links made previously, and to develop new issues in relation to women's demands and in some cases labour interests, in the hope of realising a reformed and equal society.

ii) "The Work Continues With Great Vigour and Enthusiasm."

Old Comrades - New Members: The Experience in Ashford, Bexhill and Hastings

The decision to form League branches in the south-east of England might seem obscure considering that no branches had ever prospered prior to 1918.¹¹ However, on closer scrutiny the reasons behind the decision to form the branches in Hastings, Bexhill and Ashford become clearer. One was the belief that women in these towns were favourably disposed to independent women's societies. This was certainly evident in Hastings, where there were local branches of both the Women's Citizen's Association

¹⁰Capitation fees were paid to League headquarters annually, and were levied at 6d per member.

¹¹See *The Vote*, August 27th 1910, p. 206 for a report of successful holiday work carried out by the League in Hastings and Bexhill. However no action was taken towards forming League branches at this stage.

(WCA) and the National Council of Women (NCW).¹² Yet, precisely at the time when the League branches in the south east were being set up by the permanent WFL organiser in the region, Miss Maud White, it was announced in the local paper that the NCW branch and the Hastings WCA had decided to amalgamate. It was considered "there was not enough room for both organisations", and that they were "continually overlapping...[and]..hindering each other's work."¹³

However, such fears about a duplication of work did not seem to hinder the formation of a League branch in the town. Moreover, the new branch succeeded in attracting members from the existing local women's organisations. Generally this followed a pattern evident in the pre-enfranchisement period, where there was a certain degree of overlap between women's societies, but no apparent antagonism.¹⁴

Many participants in the suffrage campaign still felt roused by demands for equal suffrage, especially as the watershed of thirty seemed so unfair. The League may have appealed to these women in Hastings, Bexhill and Ashford, because arguably more than any other women's society, the League continued to place demands for equal suffrage high on its programme.¹⁵ Furthermore, the long years of endeavour by activists in the various suffrage societies and the knowledge gained on barriers to women's equality, served as an added impetus for women suffrage activists to join the fledging branches

¹²*Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, June 21st 1919, p. 5, col. 4, and June 28th 1919, p. 4, col. 5.

¹³*Hastings & St. Leonards Observer*, June 28th 1919, p. 4, col. 5.

¹⁴See Chapter Two, Section III.

¹⁵See Chapter Six, pp. 311-313.

of the League in the south-east.

In Hastings, Kate Rance, who was to become one of the leading members of the League branch in the 1920s, had previously been a member of the Hastings NUWSS and the Women Citizens Association.¹⁶ Two other suffrage activists from the Hastings region, Miss Thomas and Mrs Darent Harrison, also joined the League branch, the latter having acquired a certain notoriety during the years of militant activity, for barricading herself into her home when resisting her taxes.¹⁷ Similarly in Ashford, Mrs Willis who joined the League branch, had previously been a prominent member of the NUWSS in the town.¹⁸

Therefore, despite the lack of a WFL presence in these towns in the period prior to 1919, there was no lack of women who had participated in both law abiding and militant suffrage activities. Another possible reason why women in these towns were drawn to the WFL, or at least remained active members, was the hope that it might offer opportunities to bring in a wide variety of concerns, which could lead to possible action in the area. Those which appeared to interest the members in Hastings, Ashford and

¹⁶See *The Vote*, August 8th 1924, p. 263. It lists Miss Kate Rance as the treasurer of the League branch and Miss Willis as a member of the committee. Both were members of the Hastings branch of the Women Citizens Association. See reference in footnote no. 13. Isabel Willis of the Hastings branch was also a member of the St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance until her death in 1926. See *The Vote*, May 28th 1926, p. 167.

¹⁷Stella Newsome, *A History of The Women's Freedom League*, p. 3.

¹⁸A.J.R. ed., *The Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who*, p. 66. Hastings was unusual in having its own independent women's suffrage organisation, the "Hastings and St Leonards Women's Suffrage Propaganda League, which was listed in the above publication. Bexhill also had a branch of the NUWSS, although of the three, only Hastings had a WSPU organiser in the years up to 1914.

Bexhill included demands for women police, more women magistrates and councillors and the abolition of capital punishment, and I discuss these in more detail in later sections of this chapter.¹⁹

"Live" Local Organisations

More generally the factor which maintained the interest and commitment of League members over the entire country, appears to have been the sense of continuity the League represented. Internally, in many of the branches which continued to organise in the 1920s, there was the important element of continuity in branch officials, on whom the greatest responsibility for organisation and motivation of branch members had fallen.

In some branches, the election of officials appears to have been largely nominal. This was the case in Portsmouth where Sarah Whetton, the Honorary Secretary since 1910, continued in this post throughout the 1920s. This stability was repeated by the Honorary Secretary of the Swansea branch, Miss Jelly and by Alix Clark in Montgomery Boroughs.²⁰ During the 1920s the broad style of organisation which had been formalised across the League by 1912 continued. Officials were still elected by branch members, and committees still operated in many areas. However, as in the pre-1918

¹⁹For example see; the *Hastings & St. Leonards Observer*, July 12th 1919, p. 7, col. 5 for a report of a League branch meeting on women in local government addressed by Edith How-Martyn.

²⁰*The Vote*, October 7th 1927, p. 319, June 8th 1928, p. 183. NEC member Clare Neal was an active member of the branch from 1912 throughout the 1920s. See *The Vote*, March 30th 1912, p. 280, and November 18th 1927, p. 367. Clark's domination in Montgomery Boroughs was made painfully clear when, because of her absence through illness in 1927, there was an almost total lapse in activities. See WFL, *Annual Report*, 1926-1927, p. 23.

period, in the less well established branches, or those experiencing a lack of enthusiasm, it was more difficult to find permanent officials. In these branches the post of secretary was particularly unpopular, as it was known to be a difficult and time-consuming post.

Before 1918 branch premises in the form of shops, club rooms or meeting rooms were a luxury reserved for the well-off or well-organised branches. In the 1920s such premises were even more of a rarity, but were still sought after as members realised it gave the branch the impression of permanence and status both to its members and the public. They were still found to be essential as a central contact point and a venue for meetings, and events. These included the numerous discussions, jumble sales and whist drives that were staged by branches in these years.²¹

Venues varied from the plush surroundings of the local Albany hotel in Bexhill, to the Montgomery Boroughs premises known affectionately as "The Hut."²² In Portsmouth the premises in Kent Road were shared by a number of women's organisations, and this facilitated joint activity in the town.²³ Locally this burgeoning of available and permanent premises which could be used by branches, mirrored the larger clubs, meeting rooms, and cafes opening in London. For example, the Isis Club for women and supporters of women's interests and rights, was used by the Hampstead

²¹See WFL, *Annual Reports*, "Branch Reports", for details: 1915-1919, p. 25-32, 1919-1922, pp. 18-21, 1922-1923, pp. 16-19, 1924-1925, pp. 20-24, 1926-1927, pp. 18-23, 1927-1928, pp. 23-27, 1928-1929, pp. 23-28.

²²WFL, *Annual Report*, 1924-1925, p. 22. *The Vote*, April 7th, 1922, p. 111. The Middlesbrough branch continued to meet at premises called the "Suffrage Rooms" or the "Suffrage Cafe", until 1925/6, and in Ashford in 1919 a short-lived "WFL Club" was established. See WFL, *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 20.

²³See *The Vote*, April 12th 1918, p. 210, October 10th 1924, p. 327. Portsmouth Women Citizen's Association, *Annual Report*, April 1st 1920 - April 1st 1921.

League branch for their meetings from 1924.²⁴ London members could also meet at the WFL's Minerva Cafe, which had been opened during the war and was still running at a considerable profit.²⁵

Regular monthly, fortnightly or occasionally weekly meetings continued to be established practice in the branches, and the year continued to be divided by seasons, with a holiday period during July and August. While such continuity was reassuringly familiar, there was also a distinct decline in the spontaneity, and the sense of rebellion and protest among the branches. This was reflected in the decreasing frequency with which League branches met. For example, the Middlesbrough branch, which prior to 1914 had met at least once a week, in 1921 held only six branch meetings, four public meetings, socials, and two jumble sales.²⁶ Such a change did not mark a dramatic decline because during the years of the war there had been a gradual falling off of the number of times the branch met. Nor should it be seen as an indication of steady or inevitable decline, as this level of activity in Middlesbrough stabilised, and even increased after 1921.²⁷

During the course of the decade the boundaries between different types of

²⁴*The Vote*, May 11th 1923, p. 151 reported a meeting there with a speech by Margaret Wynne Nevinson on the Housing Bill. In 1924 the branch held their annual general meeting there, see *The Vote*, June 13th 1924, p. 191.

²⁵See Chapter Five, footnote no. 81. Some proceeds from the cafe went to help *The Vote*. In 1929 the NEC of the League arranged most discussions and public meetings there. See NEC Minutes, March 9th 1929, pp. 12-13.

²⁶WFL, *Annual Report*, 1919-1922, p. 20.

²⁷*The Vote*, August 20th 1923, p. 231, the decision to hold monthly members meetings and weekly committee meetings was taken. See WFL, *Annual Report*, 1928-1929, pp. 26-27 for an account of their activities in this year.

meetings organised by the branches underwent changes. Often after a social event or discussion meeting, a very short business meeting would be held which sometimes simply planned the next event, and only very rarely were there any signs of urgency and excitement as the next event was planned.

Two discussion topics which were especially popular across the branches in the mid 1920s, were League member, Dr Octavia Lewin's talks on the rather obscure subject of nasal hygiene, and Elsie Morton's meetings designed to demonstrate the benefits of proportional representation.²⁸ This last subject attracted members attention during 1923 and 1924 as a possible way to get more women into parliament. Mock elections were held in a number of branches, although any direct connections with Liberal party policies were not dwelt on.²⁹ Other topics discussed by branch members mirrored concerns discussed at annual conferences in the 1920s, and consistently included: equal opportunities, equal moral standards, married women, care of children, housing, education, and international questions.³⁰

²⁸Octavia Lewin must have taken her subject from her experiences as a clinical assistant at the Central London Throat and Ear Hospital, (see Appendix Five). She spoke on how to avoid illness through correct breathing and hygiene. Her talk in Ashford was recorded as "quite one of the most successful women's meetings ever held": *The Vote*, June 16th 1922, p. 191. Portsmouth, *The Vote*, February 10th 1922, p. 47, Edinburgh, *The Vote*, October 26th 1923, p. 343, Hull, *The Vote*, November 10th 1922, p. 359, Glasgow, *The Vote*, October 26th 1923, p. 343.

²⁹Proportional Representation: *The Vote*, April 27th 1923, p. 135, November 23rd 1923, p. 375, February 22nd 1924, p. 63.

³⁰Equal Opportunities: *The Vote*, January 20th 1922, p. 23, March 7th 1923, p. 79, February 25th 1927, p. 63, WFL *Annual Report*, 1928-1929, p. 27. Equal Moral Standard: *The Vote*, June 1st, 1923, p. 175, December 2nd 1927, p. 383. Married Women: *The Vote*, October 20th 1922, p. 335, March 24th 1923, p. 96, October 12th 1923, p. 327, December 5th 1924, p. 391. Care of Children: *The Vote*, January 6th 1922, p. 7, April 21st 1922, p. 127, May 19th 1922, p. 159, April 18th 1924, p. 127, May 16th 1924, p. 159, December 5th 1924, p. 391. Housing: *The Vote*, March 9th 1923, p. 79, March 30th 1923, p. 103, (check), February 22nd 1924, p. 63, October 3rd, 1924, p.

Occasionally in the best organised and most active branches, meetings were held and campaigns developed which related to issues specifically concerned with their local environment. Especially active in this area were the Portsmouth branch members who in 1921 organised a joint meeting with the Women Citizen's Association to demand more local women Justices of the Peace, and to publicize the work of local members in monitoring police court cases concerning women and children.³¹ Later in 1923 the Portsmouth branch earned the description of a "live local organisation" when it galvanised all the local women's societies in the area into action over the failure of local Guardians to appoint a woman relieving officer. Such was the strength of feeling among women in Portsmouth that the authorities were forced to step down.³²

Such a conclusive change in image was felt to varying degrees in other branches across the country. It was not simply that the League had changed the focus of its concerns, but that with the realisation that women now had citizenship rights which they were using to influence local government, they were treated with more respect and consideration by local authorities and the press.³³ The issues of housing, education,

319. Education: *The Vote*, October 20th 1922, p. 335, (check), November 2nd 1923, p. 351, January 25th 1924, p. 31, May 9th 1924, p. 151. International Questions: *The Vote*, November 16th 1923, p. 367, April 18th 1924, p. 127, May 2nd 1924, p. 143. See also WFL, *Annual Reports*, 1920-1930 for additional references.

³¹ The meeting was reported in the local paper under the heading 'Women Citizens, "Live" Portsmouth Organisation". The reporter wrote of how what had impressed him most was the "keenness and enthusiasm displayed by the members". He went on to write sympathetically of the Portsmouth WCA and WFL visits to the police courts, so that "women there might feel they had the sympathy of their own sex". See *The Hampshire Times*, October, 7th 1921, p. 2.

³²Verbatim Minutes, 1923. p. 34, and *The Vote*, February 2nd 1923, p. 71.

³³After the publicity in 1918 the press generally cut back drastically on their reporting of the activities of local women's organisations like the WFL.

and health specifically, were all acknowledged as concerns of the League by its members. These issues remained woman-centred, but during the 1920s they became increasingly party defined. Before I consider the relationship between party politics and the League's own political programme, I will first consider certain weaknesses in the continuity in League activities. Indeed there was one facet of distinct discontinuity which was manifested in the severance with labour politics and the breakdown of links with industrial movements.

iii) "Dealing With the Labour of Men and Women": The Severance of the League from Labour Politics³⁴

After 1918 it became evident that League members as a whole did not intend to directly associate themselves with an explicitly socialist programme of reform. The one attempt made by the Newcastle branch at the 1918 annual conference to introduce a "revolutionary programme", was rejected by the efforts of a group of delegates and national officials.³⁵ However, in the years immediately after 1918 an awareness of socialist demands among League members was still considerable.

Previously the League had spent time and effort in negotiating advantageous relationships with the labour movement. The result of this had been double-edged, as the League remained critical of the lack of support received for their demands for women's suffrage, and equality for women generally. However, the League, spurred on by Charlotte Despard in particular, had remained anxious to respond to the needs of working-class women. This had been partially successful as the League gained a high

³⁴For reference see Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 14.

³⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1919, pp. 116-119, 172-174.

profile for its actions in support of industrial women workers, although it had never directly sustained working women's active and central involvement in League branches.³⁶

The granting of the franchise to a large proportion of the adult population had the effect of foregrounding perceptions of class position and identity in social and cultural media as well as in political debate. As Ross McKibbin has argued, by 1918, in Parliament and in the political parties, "society's relations with the working-class had at last become the central political problem...".³⁷

Any analysis of working-class members in League branches in the 1920s is even more difficult than for the period up to 1914, and this in itself is revealing of the League's attitudes to class interests in the 1920s. There was a sharp decline in these years in discussions which directly considered the views of working-class women, and also a decline in discussions about the need to attract working-class women into their ranks.

This decline was a product firstly of increased unionisation of the industrial working-classes during the years of the war, and in particular women's industrial organisations forming themselves together under the umbrella of the SJCIWO and aligning with the Labour party. Equally with the merging of the Women's Labour League with the Labour party in 1918, women were directed toward the newly formed

³⁶See Chapter Two, Section II, iii.

³⁷Ross McKibbin, "Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the 'Public' in Inter-war Britain", in *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991), p. 259.

women's sections.³⁸

Therefore the League, already distanced from working women, faced an ever increasing practical gulf between their programme and activities, and those of the working-classes, especially those associated with the Labour party. The nervousness this generated was expressed in the League through occasional, inconclusive debates about the meaning of class, yet deflected in fears that this analysis could split women. As I will now demonstrate through the experience of the Nottingham branch of the League between 1918 and 1921, the over-riding tendency in the League was to maintain its principles of equality when considering the issues facing working-class women, both as workers and as mothers. The lack of direct representation of working women's own demands led to the severance of the League from such concerns.

"Enrol Us": The Nottingham League Branch, 1918-1921

The League's first concerted interest in the Nottinghamshire area came with a campaign held to coincide with the Labour party conference in the city in January 1918.³⁹ Charlotte Despard later commented that during the League's campaign women had been "coming to us with money saying 'enrol us'", and this was reflected in the

³⁸Labour Party Year Book, 1924, pp. 9, 13. At the London conference of the Labour Party in 1923 it was reported that there were 1,000 women's section, with an estimated membership of 120,000. By 1924, the SJCIWO represented twenty-one national organisations and over one million organised women.

³⁹*The Vote*, January 18th 1918, pp. 114, 117. It was at this conference that the new constitution was proposed which included admitting women as full members, along with the controversial Clause IV on the common ownership of the means of production. See Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983 [1974]), pp. 91-106.

enrolment of fifty members in the new Nottingham branch.⁴⁰

From the beginning the Nottingham members stood out through their determined efforts to work with organisations representing industrial workers' interests. To this end they were instrumental in the formation of an Equal Pay Council whose purpose was to represent "all the bodies dealing with the labour of men and women.." Members held joint meetings with a number of organisations, including unions, while also, and more in keeping with the actions directed from League headquarters, they helped to form a Women's Police Court Association to monitor the proceedings relating to women in the courts.⁴¹

The Nottingham branch delegate came to the 1919 annual conference of the League with resolutions from her branch calling for the League to become active in the promotion of trade unionism among women workers, as the necessary first measure for demanding and obtaining an improvement in their working conditions. She added that in her experience, the trade unions "would be glad of WFL co-operation".⁴² Although some concerns were voiced by other delegates who appeared uneasy with the proximity to the arena of class tensions and industrial confrontation, the resolution was passed by a good majority.⁴³ However, the Nottingham branch's attempt to foster greater links with the labour movement, while at the same time maintaining the League's distinct women-centred identity, seemed particularly isolated. Moreover, their efforts

⁴⁰Verbatim Minutes, 1918, p. 14, and *The Vote*, February 1st 1918, p. 180.

⁴¹WFL, *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 29.

⁴²Verbatim Minutes, 1919, pp. 33-34.

⁴³Verbatim Minutes, 1919, p. 34.

accentuated the general trend in the League to move away from direct involvement with industrial organisations, and strikes.

In 1920 the Nottingham branch sent in a resolution on protective legislation for discussion at the League's annual conference. The delegate pressed that the exception to the League's stand against protective legislation should be their support for the prohibition of employment of pregnant women and the provision of full maintenance for a period of at least four weeks after childbirth.⁴⁴ After some debate, the vote went strongly against the resolution by twenty-five votes to four, an outcome which reflected the firm stance in the League against any form of protective legislation. On this occasion the predominantly middle-class majority used liberal concepts of individual rights to insist on equal treatment for women workers, as citizens, with the right to decide what they themselves thought best.⁴⁵

The case of the Nottingham branch does not in any way prove that it was exclusively or even predominantly made up of working-class members. On the contrary, it was the case that the members of this branch displayed an awareness of class distinctions, and were prepared to discuss them and act practically in ways to confront class and sex/class oppression directly through liaison with labour organisations. They had tentatively outlined a way to bridge the gulf between the demands of working-class women and the majority of League members. However their plans were rejected. They had not contended with what were perhaps the long memories of members concerning

⁴⁴Verbatim Minutes, 1920, p. 44.

⁴⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1920, pp. 45-47. The only exception to this belief that women should decide for themselves was in the area of sexual politics. See Chapter Six, footnote no. 69.

the perceived betrayal of women's demands by Labour, nor the ambivalence over class distinctions which made many League members apparently so uncomfortable. That these tensions could not be contained within the League in this case, would seem to be realised by the decision of the Nottingham branch to disband in 1921.⁴⁶

This was not to be the last time the League appeared to shy away from controversial, and possibly divisive issues. It occurred again towards the end of the 1920s when there was to be even greater dissension within the League as branch delegates fought over official and unofficial policies with a number of their appointed officials. I consider these issues in greater detail in the final section, but I stress them here in order to signal how such confrontations were the product of a complicated process during which League members *developed particular political identities as* citizens and voters, and also as members of the non-party WFL.

This section has highlighted not only a continuity in branch activity from the pre-1918 period, but a discontinuity and a weakness in relation to class consciousness. Members' concerns were more consistent with pre-1914 interests in terms of their continued interest in social and political reform. In the following section I explore both how this interest overlapped with party political interests, and also the response of League members to the tensions which emerged.

⁴⁶NEC Minutes, March 12th, 1921, pp. 187-188. The Manchester branch was another one apparently interested in industrial questions. In January 1920 the branch organised a local conference on "the position of women socially and industrially", and their work seemed to go well in this year. Yet by 1922 no annual report was submitted by the branch, and there were no entries in *The Vote*, and no correspondence with the NEC. To all intents and purposes this branch seems to have disbanded, possibly disillusioned with the lack of support for their actions from the rest of the League.

Section II: "IF WE ADOPT ANY POLITICAL PARTY WE SHALL LOSE OUR IDENTITY ALTOGETHER": A WILLINGNESS TO ENTER POLITICS, 1920-1930.⁴⁷

In the 1920s, despite the setback of the December 1918 general election, the majority of branch representatives continued to press for independent League candidates in local elections, and for the League to stand its own candidates for Parliament. The message which was forcefully put by all branches was "appoint women" to public office. Yet this was problematised by a new confidence among the members in the expression of their party loyalties. This had become common across much of the electorate, both male and female. There followed a series of highly difficult debates during the first half of the 1920s, which were only settled when the League began to accept a pattern where party interests were tolerated. In turn this made way for a number of successful entries into local politics by League members.

i) "Sinking Our Principles"

In 1918, amid the plans to launch women fully into political citizenship, attention was paid to the political programmes of the three main parties. The Portsmouth branch in this year arranged a series of three meetings to which Conservative, Liberal and Labour representatives respectively were invited to speak.⁴⁸ In spite of the pleas at the most recent annual conference for a policy of support for non-party League candidates, Sarah Whetton's comments to her branch diverged from this stance. A report in *The Vote* recalled her words:

⁴⁷Verbatim Minutes, 1919, p. 53. Taken from the words of a conference delegate.

⁴⁸*The Vote*, April 12th 1918, p. 215, April 26th 1918, p. 231, June 7th 1918, p. 274, and June 14th 1918, p. 282.

...whether we liked it or not, the party system was with us at present, and it was the party in power which could bring about the needed reforms. Therefore it was the duty of new voters to study the programmes of the different parties...⁴⁹

Sarah Whetton's comments reflected a general trend across other League branches whereby the *official* practice to support women candidates irrespective of party, was outweighed by the *unofficial* practice of supporting either League candidates or those representing members' own preferred political parties. It became evident early on that the fact that a candidate might be female was simply not enough. A member from the ever vocal Portsmouth branch recalled a discussion held over whether to support a woman Liberal candidate standing in a local election, "If we as a League had supported her, our members would have left us."⁵⁰

Such tensions were not missed by delegates attending League annual conferences, and in 1919 they resulted in the incorporation of the crucial words "if possible" into the policy instructing League members to support women candidates irrespective of party.⁵¹ Still this did not satisfy some members and the policy was again amended in 1922 to reflect their preferences. At this conference it was decided that branch and headquarters both had to agree to support women candidates. An unusually long speech by Elizabeth Knight in 1923 acknowledged that changes had occurred:

We know it is practically impossible for an independent women to get into Parliament now. The only women we can get in are Party women. We do not stand for any Party in the League, therefore we must work for women of any Party who are suitable. There is no hard and fast line we can draw....many women would vote against their Party for the sake of getting women in if they were really keen suffragists. There are also a large

⁴⁹*The Vote*, April 26th 1918, p. 231.

⁵¹Verbatim Minutes, 1919, p. 61.

⁵WFL, *Annual Report*, 1915-1919, p. 16.

number of women who are not keen Party women, and the woman candidate should get their support...we do not know how many years it will be necessary, but I think for the present that is what we ought to do...⁵²

Yet, if her words were accepted by the silent majority, this did not prevent two branch delegates from fiercely defending their respective male MPs. The Hastings delegate, who was also a member of her local Labour party, even threatened to resign if she was forced to work for a woman against the male Labour candidate. Alix Clark representing the Montgomery Boroughs branch made a more practical speech and referred to how their local member was "an excellent man" and a strong League supporter, who even made up the deficiencies in branch funds.⁵³

Such divisions were not helped by the knowledge that women were actually deserting the League for party organisations, and the period from 1923 to 1925 saw an all-time low in the number of League branches. It was Sarah Whetton who summed up an emerging feeling among the membership which served in one sense to prevent a further decline:

We are never going to get any numbers of women in the House of Commons until we sink our political opinions and work for women. It has taken me a long time to come to this point of view...I do feel interested in a certain Party, and if we had a good number of women in the House of Commons, I would join that political Party, but at present I think it is my duty to hold myself as a free lance so that if women in my district put up I shall feel I can work whole-heartedly for them without opposing any political Party.⁵⁴

Along with her branch, Sarah Whetton remained true to her words, and in 1925 reported how she and her branch had indeed sunk their principles and worked for the Labour

⁵²Verbatim Minutes, 1923, p. 35.

⁵³Verbatim Minutes, 1923, pp. 37, 38, 39.

⁵⁴Verbatim Minutes, 1923, p. 41.

party candidate, Jessie Stephen in her unsuccessful bid to win a parliamentary seat in Portsmouth.⁵⁵

By 1925, there was a broad-based acknowledgment that members could develop loyalties to both the League and parliamentary parties. When accepted, it proved possible to reassert the League's status in relation to the political process in Britain. This status was outlined by Anna Munro in 1925 when she argued:

We are very much alive and the significance of our 'aliveness' is that now many of us have got the vote, we have got dragged, willingly or unwillingly, into all kinds of activities which includes other political parties, and they are always urging us that there is no need now for the WFL, the work is already done by these other people...we are alive and awake all the time to the necessity of watching women's interests, we wake up other people and they often take up our ideas and carry them through.⁵⁶

Subsequently, the necessity of "watching women's interests" characterised the official thrust of the League's political programme in the branches. While some branches were later to object to the boundaries on definitions of women's interests, this statement did outline one reason for the renewed energy which led to an increase in the number of League branches in following years.

In one sense, the League had moved on very little from their original position of being concerned with women's issues, yet there had been significant changes on another level. This was that League women were now entering politics officially as local councillors and as Guardians, and were attempting to carry through their long-standing demands for women to have a say in the decision-making process in Britain.

⁵⁵WFL, *Annual Report, 1924-1925*, p. 23, *The Vote*, October 31st 1924, p. 345, and November 29th 1924, p. 46.

⁵⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1925, p. 26.

ii) A Power in Politics

The most prominent pioneer of League members' entry into local politics was Alice Schofield Coates who became the first woman councillor elected on a Labour party platform in Middlesbrough in 1919.⁵⁷ At the League's annual conference in 1924 when she was asked to serve as president of the League, she agreed but acknowledged to delegates:

...I am a Party woman, but you probably know that first and foremost I have been WFL. I have always worked for women, but at the same time I am a Party woman. I am a Councillor and have Party colouring, but it never interferes with my allegiance to the Women's Movement. I should always defy any Party that I was associated with if it did not back up my position on the woman's question...⁵⁸

Her declarations of dual interests between the Labour Party and maintaining a woman-centred independence were not necessary for every League member who succeeded to a position of power in their local communities. On the contrary, Alix Clark was to become something of an institution in Newton in mid-Wales. In 1922 she, and another League member, Mrs W.R. Williams, took the pioneering step and stood as the first independent WFL candidates for their local council elections. In the considerable attention the campaign received in *The Vote*, it was reported as a "great source of satisfaction" that the campaign had been run "entirely under the flag of the WFL....with hundreds of men, women and children" wearing the colours of the

⁵⁷William Lillie, *The History of Middlesbrough*, p. 468. Alice Schofield Coates represented Ayresome Ward from 1919-21, and Grove Hill Ward, 1923-1926. She was followed shortly after by her sister-in-law and ex-WFL activist, Marion Coates Hansen, who represented two wards in Middlesbrough from 1919 until 1935. Both stood for the Labour party.

⁵⁸Verbatim Minutes, 1924, p. 60.

League.⁵⁹ When the results were announced, Mrs Williams had succeeded in her election attempt, although Alix Clark had to be satisfied with her appointment as a Poor Law Guardian.⁶⁰

A similar course of action was taken by the Portsmouth branch in 1926, when after once again nearly splintering over the issue of supporting party candidates, the branch decided to run one member, Mrs Mary Ann Poole as an independent WFL candidate for the Town Hall ward in the local elections. Mrs Poole, who had previously run on a Labour ticket, was again unsuccessful, but the endeavours of the branch did not go unnoticed by the League membership.⁶¹

By 1926 the various thrusts of party alignment and League independence resulted in the branches of Middlesbrough, Bexhill, Glasgow, Hastings and Montgomery Boroughs, having one or more of their fellow members on their local council.⁶² Moreover the branches in Swansea, Portsmouth, Wallasey and Hull had all supported the unsuccessful campaigns of one or more of their members.⁶³

⁵⁹*The Vote*, March 24th 1922, p. 95, and April 7th 1922, p. 111.

⁶⁰*The Vote*, April 7th 1922, p. 111. Alix Clark stood in 1925 in the Montgomery County Council elections. See *The Vote*, February 27th 1925, p. 65. Also in this year she was returned unopposed as a Guardian, see *The Vote*, March 27th 1925, p. 102.

⁶¹NEC Minutes, October, 1926, WFL, *Annual Report*, 1926-1927, p. 21, and *The Hampshire Telegraph*, October 29th 1926, p. 10 and November 5th 1926, p. 10, and *The Evening News & Southern Daily Mail*, October 29th 1926, p. 4.

⁶²Middlesbrough: see footnote no. 57, Bexhill: Mrs Christine Meads, *The Vote*, November 10th 1922, p. 359 and WFL, *Annual Report*, 1926-1927, p. 20, Glasgow: Barlie Mrs Bell, *The Vote*, March 18th 1927, p. 87, Hastings: Miss Annie Lile, J.P., *The Vote*, November 11th 1923, p. 367, Montgomery Boroughs: see footnote no. 60.

⁶³Swansea: Mrs Fuller, NEC Minutes, October 9th 1926, p. 217, Portsmouth: see footnote no. 61, Wallasey: Mrs Andain, March 7th 1924, p. 79. Hull: Mrs Raney, *The*

Furthermore, four branches, Swansea, Hull, Wallasey and Montgomery Boroughs had members who were Poor Law Guardians.⁶⁴ Both the women Guardians and women councillors directed much of their energies after election towards local welfare issues. In addition many fought against the tide in national government which had turned towards stricter monitoring of contributions and benefits.⁶⁵ For example, in 1922, Mrs Raney, the secretary of the Hull branch, and a Guardian, galvanised the entire branch towards aid relief in a manner reminiscent of League concerns during the first world war. The branch established a WFL Relief Fund and could report proudly on their achievement in supplying sixty mothers with dried milk, and providing general supplies to the needy.⁶⁶ Alix Clark in Newton extended her branch's involvement in welfare work, by organising a series of entertainments for the local institution. At Christmas 1923 it was reported that the branch had provided tea for over eighty residents, with cakes for the sick women, cigarettes for the men, and toys for the children.⁶⁷

Vote, October 27th 1922, p. 343. Also in the Leeds branch, member Kathleen Chambers was a serving councillor in 1926, before the branch was formed. Later in 1928 the new Bradford branch announced their intention to support the local election campaign of three of their members, one of whom was seeking re-election, see *The Vote*, October 26th 1928, p. 347.

⁶⁴Swansea: Mrs Fuller, January 4th 1924, p. 15, Hull: Mrs Raney, April 7th 1922, p. 111, Wallasey: *The Vote*, October 21st 1927, p. 335, Montgomery Boroughs: see footnote nos. 59, 60. Middlesbrough and Portsmouth tried to get women among their members elected as Guardians, see, *The Vote*, April 13th 1924, p. 119, and March 27th 1925, p. 162. A good number of branch also had members who were appointed as Justices of the Peace.

⁶⁵See Chapter Five, Section II, ii.

⁶⁶*The Vote*, September 1st 1922, p. 279.

⁶⁷*The Vote*, January 12th 1923, p. 15, January 4th 1924, p. 422, January 25th 1924, p. 31.

Whereas during the war such actions were welcomed as humanitarian gestures, in the 1920s, League branches and members encountered official constraints from local councils and committees. On one occasion in Newton in 1924 the local Board of Guardians stated that no donations could be given to residents at the local institution without first being sanctioned by the Board.⁶⁸ Later in the same year they proceeded to withhold some items donated to the local institution by the Montgomery Boroughs branch. Such was the sense of outrage that Charlotte Despard, now a symbolic figurehead of the League, paid a visit to the area to attend the branch's protest meeting, and herself reported to *The Vote*, that Alix Clark:

...in the clearest words, temperate but strong...exposed the abuses in administration that she had discovered. We presume that Guardians of many years standing and workhouse officials objected to Miss Clark's intrusion on their peaceful slumbers...⁶⁹

Such challenges by League members to the policies and practice of the authorities they now represented, demonstrated a continued friction between some League branches' political agendas and the official policy of local Boards and authorities. This was similar to the trend identified by Patricia Hollis in her study of women in local government in an earlier period.⁷⁰ Nor were the challenges always confined to those branches with members in positions of power. In Hampstead, for example, the branch took on the might of the London County Council in 1927 and 1928 on the issue of lodging houses for women, and also on the hours of work of women in the

⁶⁸*The Vote*, April 11th 1924, p. 119.

⁶⁹*The Vote*, October 17th 1924, p. 335.

⁷⁰Patricia Hollis, *'Ladies Elect': Women in English Local Government, 1865 - 1914*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987), Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten, pp. 392-484.

confectionery trade.⁷¹

In the same period, as members anticipated full and equal citizenship, other branch activities increased. In Edinburgh, for example, the League branch successfully campaigned alongside members of the Edinburgh Society for Equal Citizenship, the Women's Co-operative Guild and the local women's Labour sections for the defeat of the Edinburgh council's attempts to apply compulsory powers of detention for suspected carriers of venereal disease.⁷² This one action was indeed reminiscent of the unity of purpose attained between women's societies in local districts in the militant era.

By the later years of the 1920s, local branches had in some cases successfully carved out a part supportive, part antagonistic niche in their local communities in relation to the parties in power. This found expression in local welfare provision, Poor Law institutions, and in child welfare. However, toward the middle of the 1920s, party politics had succeeded in dominating government both nationally and, to a lesser extent, locally. From this point, welfare provision and education would no longer be divided between local councils and independent committees and Boards of Guardians, nor would it continue to be as distinct from national political trends. Indeed, as early as 1925 the Conservative government had begun to investigate ways to bring overspending Boards of Guardians into line, and this culminated in plans to abolish the Boards of Guardians altogether.⁷³ Not surprisingly the League objected to these proposals, declaring from

⁷¹*The Vote*, January 21st 1927, p. 23, March 16th 1928, p. 87, and Verbatim Minutes, 1928, p. 66.

⁷²WFL, *Annual Report*, 1927-1928, pp. 3, 17-18 and *The Vote*, May 13th 1927, p. 151.

⁷³Pat Thane, *The Foundation Of The Welfare State*, pp. 186-187.

their considerable knowledge, that the new system would be cumbersome and out of touch with the people it was meant to serve. This was compounded by the fears that such moves would deprive women Guardians of their previous influential positions in local communities.⁷⁴

League protests notwithstanding, changes were made to the existing structure of welfare provision, and the Local Government Act passed in 1929 abolished Boards of Guardians, and replaced them with Public Assistance Committees under direct local government control.⁷⁵ Fears in the League of the effect this would have on the proportion of women locally in positions of power were well founded. In Swansea for example, the League branch reported that the local council was refusing to co-opt women Guardians on to the new assistance committees.⁷⁶

This situation was in some ways rather a dismal end to what had been a relatively productive decade for League branches, and especially for individual members in terms of their growing influence in local politics. Moreover, the League branches were threatened with a loss of the influence that had been gained by some members who had served as Guardians. More positively, in a limited way there were still opportunities for branches to build on the successes of their elected council members, even those who had stood on party platforms, because the lasting effects of the new legislation were not to

⁷⁴For examples of League opinion, see *The Vote*, J.M. Tooke, J.P., "The Abolition of Boards of Guardians. A Set-Back To Women?", August 27th 1926, p. 269 and M.I. Neal's "Proposals For The Reform Of The Poor Law", December 31st 1926, p. 411.

⁷⁵Pat Thane, *The Foundation Of The Welfare State*, pp. 185-189.

⁷⁶NEC Minutes, October 5th 1929, p. 61.

be felt until later in the following decade.⁷⁷

A pattern can be traced, which identifies how *some* League women in a number of branches did achieve political power and influence, though perhaps not to the degree that had been envisaged by the League in the years before 1918. Any collective expression of influence by the League as a united organisation was lacking. Individual political identities, which incorporated both party loyalties and loyalty to women's distinct interests, had replaced the ideas of a collective and powerful political identity common across the entire League.

Section III: ABANDONING "HIGH CORSETS AND LONG SKIRTS"? THE EXPRESSION OF A RADICAL POLITICAL CULTURE IN LEAGUE BRANCHES, 1920 - 1930.⁷⁸

This final section considers how the years spent discussing a wide variety of issues corresponded to members' visions and ideals in the 1920s. Many interests such as prison and food reform remained, as newer ones including international peace initiatives and animal cruelty, were pushed higher up the League's programme. Yet it was found to be extremely difficult to squeeze all concerns about a new, more moral, kinder world into the League's official equality programme. As concerns about unity in the League intensified, so attempts were made to narrow down the broad base of concerns expressed by League members, and it is this process that I trace in the final section of this chapter.

⁷⁷Pugh has commented on the set-back to women in local government with the abolition of Guardians. See Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, p. 57.

⁷⁸For reference see Chapter Seven, footnote no. 85.

i) Developing Diverse Programmes "...In The Name of Humanity..."

In the aftermath of the war, a stronger emphasis on humanitarian issues emerged from League branches. Such concerns first surfaced in 1921 when members, galvanised by the civil war in Ireland, organised a mass meeting in Trafalgar Square in July, calling for peace with Ireland. Although the responsibility fell on headquarters, the Hastings branch also arranged an open air meeting in the town calling for the cessation of hostilities and a negotiated settlement. The resolution put by the League was actually extremely carefully worded so as not to offend either side, with the main priorities being peace and an end to suffering.⁷⁹

Members from Hastings raised another humanitarian issue in the League at the annual conference the following year. Their delegate proposed a resolution calling on the government, "in the name of humanity" to intervene to prevent the death of millions of Russians through starvation.⁸⁰ The large majority in favour indicates that many members wanted to see an end to the desperate suffering in this country, yet equally they could not fail to be aware of the strong feeling running against the ruling Bolsheviks. Indeed some among them shared this feeling, and it was this that tipped the balance against an additional resolution demanding that food and financial aid be made available.⁸¹

Again, members from Hastings along with other League activists both in the

⁷⁹WFL, *Annual Report*, 1919-1922, pp. 6, 17.

⁸⁰Verbatim Minutes, 1922, pp. 27-29.

⁸¹Verbatim Minutes, 1922, pp. 30-32.

branches and at headquarters were united in demands for penal reform, and in this they worked closely with the Howard League for Penal Reform.⁸² In 1923, such sentiments culminated in the passage of a resolution urging that:

the entire penal system of this country should be reformed, and it urges the Government to bring in without delay a measure to make its purpose remedial rather than punitive...⁸³

Many branches, notably those in the south-east of England campaigned for the abolition of the death penalty. The Hastings branch went as far as setting up a branch of the Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment, and in 1925 they sent a letter to *The Vote* informing readers of the formation of a divisional council of the organisation in Hastings, for which they secured between sixty and seventy members - more than the Hastings branch of the League itself.⁸⁴

A more personal humanitarian choice for members was the interest in vegetarian lifestyles. Although this never took the form of resolutions to annual conferences, branches did invite speakers to their meetings. In Ashford in 1923 for example, Dr Josiah Oldfield of the Fruitarian Society spoke on the benefit of a diet consisting largely of fruit and vegetables. He was obviously encouraged by the response, as he commented that:

it always gave him great pleasure to speak for the WFL, as he felt that when women bravely discarded high corsets and long skirts, they were opening their minds to a freer life of health and educational interest.⁸⁵

⁸²NEC Minutes, October 8th 1927, p. 309, and October 5th 1929, p. 61.

⁸³Verbatim Minutes, 1923, pp. 68- 69. See also pp. 28, 71, for separate resolutions for the abolition of capital punishment and the provision of women wardens in women's prisons.

⁸⁴*The Vote*, May 22nd 1925, p. 166.

⁸⁵*The Vote*, April 13th 1923, p. 119.

This emphasis on the progress women had made, found expression in branches like Ashford, in a discussion on "The Modern Woman", and in Swansea, members answered in the affirmative to the question: "Should Women Continue To Work For Pay After Marriage?"⁸⁶ However, it was the question of animal cruelty which clearly demonstrated the extent to which League members were prepared to "open their minds."

Members in Portsmouth, Middlesbrough and Mid-London were vocally in favour of legislation which would end cruelty to animals, and succeeded in getting resolutions to this effect passed through the WFL annual conferences in 1921, 1922 and 1925, in particular with reference to the export of worn out horses.⁸⁷ While the majority in other branches were generally in favour of such measures, this did not extend to the contentious issue of vivisection and tests on animals. As a result, in 1923 when the Portsmouth delegate called on the conference to protest against the killing of animals by poison gas tests, there seemed to be a distinct nervousness among other delegates who voted to move the previous question. Such indecisiveness was grasped upon by the NEC who then moved an amendment to delete any references to opposition to vivisection from resolutions.⁸⁸ Thus while the interest in animal protection continued, the issue of vivisection was pushed to one side, and members, and indeed some entire branches, were left to pursue their own interest in this subject independently.

⁸⁶*The Vote*, November 25th 1927, p. 375, and October 20th 1922, p. 335. Others included: Princess Karadja on "Different Aspects of The Women's Movement", *The Vote*, June 20th 1924, p. 199, and Glasgow meeting addressed by Eunice Murray on the absurdity of the idea of "Votes for Flappers", *The Vote*, April 29th 1927, p. 135. There was a lot of anger about the use of the term "flapper", which many in the League thought derogatory.

⁸⁷WFL, *Annual Reports*: 1919-1922, pp. 3, 17, and 1924-1925, p. 5.

⁸⁸Verbatim Minutes, 1923, pp. 90, 91.

The pattern of pursuing particular interests independently was becoming more common in the early years of the 1920s. However not all were formally incorporated into the League official programme. Therefore when some "controversial" issues were raised at annual conferences, any delegate who disagreed with such proposals could, and did, challenge their validity. This occurred on questions of working for international peace and reconciliation in 1922 when the Edinburgh branch put forward a resolution outlining how this somewhat benign interest could be integrated into the League's programme.⁸⁹ The delegate from Portsmouth fell back on the argument that peace was not about equality and should therefore not be included in League policy. In the event a mid-way stance was taken whereby the decision to include conclusive peace objectives was overturned, yet members and branches were allowed to follow such lines if they so desired.⁹⁰

The mixture of opinion across League branches on the question of peace initiatives was clearly demonstrated in the League's involvement in the Peace Makers' Pilgrimage held in 1926 which saw a united front of women's organisation demonstrating in favour of disarmament and arbitration. League branches were given the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they would take part in the League contingent. In the event branches in Hampstead, Wallasey, and Hastings did participate, while the Portsmouth branch, after discussion, firmly decided they could not take part. Other branches' silence on the event indicates that they too declined any involvement.⁹¹

⁸⁹Verbatim Minutes, 1922, p. 92.

⁹⁰Verbatim Minutes, 1922, p. 93.

⁹¹See WFL, *Annual Report, 1926-1927*, pp. 19, 21, 22. NEC Minutes, June 26th 1926, pp. 201, and Verbatim Minutes, 1927, p. 62. See Jill Liddington, *The Long Road To Greenham*, pp. 144-147, for details of the pilgrimage, and *The Vote*, April 4th 1926,

The implications of such a wide range of personal positions on the subjects of animal cruelty, vivisection, and peace was that the WFL's political image was interpreted in a variety of ways, which often conflicted. In 1923, Dr Oldfield had associated the WFL with the abandonment of corsets and long skirts, whereas in July 1925 the NEC received a letter from member Mrs Juson Kerr, stating she had been unable to secure a speaker for a meeting in Deal as the planned speaker had been informed by a member of NUSEC that the WFL was a "bolshevik" organisation.⁹² Following an urgent request for clarification the NUSEC member, Miss Auld replied that she had simply said that the League had "bolshy ideas".⁹³

The fury in the NEC over such claims may have been linked to the panic reverberating around the country in the aftermath of the "Zinoviev Letter" incident. This scandal arose in 1924 after a letter of questionable authenticity was published which held details from the Communist International calling on British communists to start a revolution.⁹⁴ While on this occasion the furore died down, perceptions of the League as a communist organisation were not laid to rest. In 1928 the WFL branch in Dunoon threatened to disband, after hearing that the League was communist and its members "the most violent communists in the country"⁹⁵

p. 126, May 28th 1926, p. 167, June 4th 1926, p. 175, June 18th 1926, p. 18, and June 25th 1926, p. 198.

⁹²NEC Minutes, July 4th 1925, pp. 115. In January 1925 Miss Barrow resigned from the League because communist meetings had been said to have been held at 144 High Holborn. Secretary replied that meetings were not in League offices, and that they had not jurisdiction over the other rooms.

⁹³NEC Minutes, October 10th 1925, p. 116.

⁹⁴Keith Laybourn, *The Rise of Labour, The British Labour Party, 1890 - 1979*, (Edward Arnold, London, 1988), p. 59.

⁹⁵NEC Minutes, September 29th 1928, p. 401.

Such controversy appears to have been largely the result of panic and a general unease in Britain about communism in the Soviet Union. There is certainly no substantial evidence that a large number of League members were associated with the Communist Party.⁹⁶ However, even such unproven claims served to exacerbate worried branch members who, like leading members Elizabeth Knight and Florence Underwood were concerned with the League's external image and internal unity. Even before 1928, this was one factor which cause an internal struggle between those who wanted to narrow down the varied programmes of League branches to ensure unity, and those who wanted its scope to remain flexible.

ii) "Controversy Lessens Our Power"

In 1927 the Glasgow delegate was instructed by her branch to attempt to draw League branches more firmly into line with the League's official equality programme. She demanded that "all women's organisations should work for complete equality between the sexes", arguing how they:

....should concentrate on the objects of the WFL... and not have our energies dissipated on any other matter...to bring in anything of a controversial character is to lessen our power...⁹⁷

Immediately, branch delegates from Deal and Walmer, Mid-London and Minerva Club stepped in and rejected any such move. The first stating that "if this were passed, my branch would cease to exist", and the other two agreeing that it would be a mistake to

⁹⁶A reference was made by Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in 1929 that Sylvia Pankhurst had agreed to join the WFL. See NEC Minutes, January 25th 1929, p. 436. However this was after the association of the League with communism. Furthermore it does not appear that Sylvia ever took an active role in the WFL.

⁹⁷Verbatim Minutes, Twentieth Annual Conference, April 30th 1927, p. 61. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1927).

tie themselves.⁹⁸ Alice Schofield Coates also argued against the suggestion, claiming that "it is not a terrible thing to have an opinion...it adds to our prestige..."⁹⁹

On a subsequent vote the resolution was soundly defeated, by fourteen votes to four. The branches had demonstrated they were not prepared to narrow down their activities. Yet this had been achieved through a rejection of resolutions, rather than any laid down policy acknowledging the diversity of interests in the League. As a result this unofficial policy would continue to be threatened by delegates attending annual conferences who favoured a narrowing of interests.

In 1927 a battle of wills commenced, which was finally resolved in 1929 through a contested NEC directive which advised that there should be less discussion on "non-controversial" subjects, which they defined as: equal opportunities, equal pay, an equal moral standard and the enforcement of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919.¹⁰⁰ In short they had devised a standard by which to measure whether an issue was controversial or not. On one level it was an attempt to identify some broad consensus throughout the League, yet on another, it ran dangerously close to authoritarianism, and marginalisation. At the forefront in this struggle were Elizabeth Knight and Florence Underwood who were both heavily involved in the clashes over the issue of divorce reform and birth control.

⁹⁸Verbatim Minutes, 1927, p. 62-65.

⁹⁹Verbatim Minutes, 1927, p. 63.

¹⁰⁰Verbatim Minutes, Annual Conference, April 13th 1929, pp. 72-75. (Hereafter referred to as Verbatim Minutes, 1929).

Birth control in particular had been a heavily contested and debated issue among women's societies since the early years of the century.¹⁰¹ However in the 1920s, NUSEC, Labour women and the Women's Liberal Federation all joined with the Women's Co-operative Guild in supporting birth control measures.¹⁰² Only the WFL officially remained silent, and the reason for this was Florence Underwood's steadfast refusal to respond to any suggestions that the League promote birth control. However, her actions certainly did not reflect the opinion of all League branches, where there were instances of both strong support and strong rejection among members. Edinburgh was one of those branches with a majority in favour of some form of birth control, and in 1927 their delegate proposed to the annual conference that the League support the provision of birth control advice to married women who desired it. On this occasion their motion failed to be seconded. The cautious approach of members again prevailed over a resolution sent in by Portsmouth members demanding the liberalisation of divorce laws.¹⁰³

In response to Portsmouth's resolution, attempts to move the previous question were unsuccessful, and delegates, ignoring arguments that since divorce laws were now equal it was no concern of the League, voted ten to two in favour of supporting a change in divorce law.¹⁰⁴ However, the subject was not closed, because Dr Knight

¹⁰¹See Chapter Three, footnote no. 102.

¹⁰²*The Woman's Leader & The Common Cause*, May 13th 1927, pp. 109, 110. *Time and Tide* frequently carried articles on birth control issues, and how they related to the women's movement. See Dale Spender, *Time and Tide Wait For No Man*, pp. 266-271. See also *The Liberal Women's News*, January 1927, p. 171 for an article on birth control information and the state, and July 1927, p. 108.

¹⁰³Verbatim Minutes, 1927, pp. 105, 106.

¹⁰⁴Verbatim Minutes, 1927, p. 106.

intervened and pleaded for a re-vote, or alternatively that the subject should not be discussed at all. She contended:

Some of our members who are keen church women and catholics and various other things will be leaving us if we are going to ask for increased facilities for divorce.¹⁰⁵

Her pleas met with resistance, not least from Alice Schofield Coates who could hardly hide her anger:

...it makes anything we do absolutely futile. We either must or must not express an opinion.....we will be a laughing stock.¹⁰⁶

Yet neither her words, nor the calls by other members for democratic practice to prevail, proved enough to counter the very real fear of losing members. Although no speakers came forward to substantiate Elizabeth Knight's claims of moral objections, the previous question was moved and carried, and the matter was dropped as Knight requested.¹⁰⁷

Because such moves marked a drastic retrenchment of the previous position taken by the League, some branches refused to abide by the ruling and continued to pursue an interest in "controversial" subjects in their branches. In short a sharp divergence between the interests and concerns of some branches and national policy was now so great, that it was inevitable that the League would either totally or partially lose members to other organisations and societies.

The implications of the success in narrowing down official guidelines on League concerns were to be felt later in the 1930s. There is evidence that a number of branches

¹⁰⁵Verbatim Minutes, 1927, pp. 106, 107.

¹⁰⁶Verbatim Minutes, 1927, p. 108.

¹⁰⁷Verbatim Minutes, 1927, p. 108. 8/6 votes in favour.

who had previously contributed so much to the League, stepped down their activities in the later years of 1920s. More and more a number of branches concentrated on organising social events, while others moved farther away from the national League body and became distinctly local organisations, rather than a branch of a national society.

By 1930, although seven new London branches had been formed, and four hundred new members reported, the long-established branches in Middlesbrough, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Swansea, failed to send in their usual levels of financial contributions. Furthermore the branches in Hastings, Ashford, Bradford and Darlington, sent in nothing at all. Such patterns were now firmly ingrained in the League, although it would be during the 1930s that the effect on membership levels and branches would be felt significantly.¹⁰⁸

CONCLUSION

The moves in the latter years of the 1920s toward narrowing down the League's wide campaigning base, presents another rather depressing image of the League. Equally the changes in local government also weakened the League's involvement in local affairs. Moreover, the absence of working-class representation appears to support the conclusion of those historians who perceive the 1920s as embodying the demise of the women's movement and feminism. However, in this chapter I have indicated the initiatives taken by local branches and members which were distinct from national policy trends. In these a forward thinking radical political consciousness was still evident by

¹⁰⁸Verbatim Minutes, Twenty-Third Annual Conference, May 24th 1930, p. 10.

the end of the decade, both merging with, and running alongside other political ideas and beliefs.

Individually League members developed political identities which were firmly integrated with their new citizenship and this was carried through into later decades and campaigns. Moreover the strong local networks developed since the early years of the century continued in the social and cultural lives of many League branches.

While the League nationally had failed to maintain a united identity, even after narrowing down its policy base, it still continued to demand tangible, albeit fewer, changes in the balance of equality between men and women. It was such campaigns for equal pay, for women in prison administration and for women in both Houses of Parliament which ensured their continued existence as a national organisation beyond the turbulent years of the 1920s.¹⁰⁹

Despite the difficulties the League members faced in the 1920s, this chapter has shown that the League's branches were indeed "live local organisations". Importantly, their activities and ideas belie any notion that the suffrage movement left no legacy for women in the years after 1918. There were women in the League who continue to abide by the League's founding motto, and who "dared to be free".

¹⁰⁹See Mrs Gerard, *Hats Off To The Past, Coats Off To The Future*, (WFL, London, [1932]), pp. 6-10.

CONCLUSION

WRITING THE HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN THE 1990s

I recently watched the repeat on BBC television of the women's suffrage drama "Shoulder To Shoulder", first shown in 1974. The drama-documentaries on Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and other famous suffragettes presented them as only interested in the suffrage, and isolated from other issues, campaigns and movements. Here were women going to the extremes of effort exclusively to get votes on equal terms with men. It made me reflect on how much analyses of the women's suffrage campaign had moved on since the mid-1970s.¹ The wider feminist ideas of suffrage advocates, the activities of suffrage societies beyond 1918, the crucial input of working-class women, as well as the class tensions embodied within the movement, and the factor of regional specificity, have all been subject to subsequent analysis. It is now rather a truism to say that the campaign involved women from all areas of the country, who had many different interests and concerns in addition to the vote, and who loosely formed coalitions around this one issue as a first step towards an equal and democratic society.

In this thesis I have extended such interpretations of the suffrage campaign. I explore the fundamental connections between WFL members' demand for the vote and their desire for the formation of democratic government, and for changes in the balance of power between men and women in social, economic and political spheres. I have demonstrated how WFL members demanded that women be incorporated into the public

¹The television series was accompanied by a book written by Midge Mackenzie, *Shoulder To Shoulder*, (Vintage Books, New York, 1988 [1975]).

sphere of citizenship and government, on the basis of the liberal principle of equality. League members campaigned not only for women's suffrage but for equal access to Parliament and public appointments, and for equal treatment at work and in the home. They believed their influence would bring an end to poverty and sexual violence. League members' commitment to absolute equality for men and women included recognition of sexual difference, which shifted depending on the specific issues addressed. While League members could demand equal access to Parliament and to the professions, they also demanded the provision of female doctors for women, who could sympathise more easily than male doctors with the needs of their female patients.

I have argued that League members' demands were a crucial factor in the gendered development of representative liberal democracy, and the changes in the relationship between the state and civil society which were formalised by the end of the 1920s. League members extended their understanding of social and political change to include issues of health, housing and education, not only because they deemed them just concerns of women, but because these issues were gradually included by a liberal and reforming politics within the widening provinces of the welfare state. League members did intervene with some success, especially after partial enfranchisement in 1918, in national and local politics. This movement of women into local government is not a new discovery. However I have shown that many of those League members who entered local government as councillors, Guardians and inspectors, were influenced by their commitment to feminist concepts of equality, which developed directly from their involvement in the suffrage campaign.

The membership of the WFL did contribute directly, as suffragists and feminists, to the emergence of liberal democracy in the 1920s. Even the abolition of Guardians in 1929 should not diminish the substantial achievements of those League members between 1907 and the late 1920s who entered local politics and who gained access to power.

My arguments on the gendered transformation of liberal democracy have been located in the way League members developed feminist concepts and began to use the term feminism to explain a wider movement for change in women's status. The WFL demonstrated all three elements of Nancy Cott's definition of modern feminism which were outlined at the beginning of this thesis. Firstly, I have demonstrated that members over the entire period between 1907 and 1930 consistently challenged male control over women, and secondly, that League members denied that women's subordination was natural and unchanging. On the contrary, League members perceived of the unequal power relationships between men and women as unnatural and damaging to society. They were at the forefront in the articulation of visions of a new, moral and more humanitarian society which would be achieved through equality between the sexes.

Nancy Cott's third criterion requiring women to recognise their common interests as a social group, also featured prominently in League members' ideas. I illustrated this through the discussions that were held on the future of the "great and wonderful feminist movement", before and after partial enfranchisement in 1918. I have traced the fundamental awareness of League members that simply to acquire the vote would not ensure the end to the entrenched philosophies and practices of the parliamentary political parties.

Not only did League members acknowledge sexual difference between men and women, but in their demands they displayed degrees of awareness of differences among women, especially those based on maternity, on paid and unpaid employment, and more problematically, on class. Before 1918, because of the influence and predominance of those members with socialist convictions, notably League president, Charlotte Despard, class differences were discussed, although often subjectively. With the polarisation of rich and poor, and increasing class hostility in the 1920s, many in the WFL studiously avoided questions of class difference. This marginalisation was also a product of attempts to maintain unity among the membership of the League after the temporary alliances between women broke down and differences of interest and direction were revealed. What resulted were attempts to maintain the unity in what had become a predominantly middle-class membership base in the League.

I have demonstrated that members had different degrees of access to, and influence over, League policy, and that ordinary branch members' views and experiences often differed from those of the League's leadership. Conflict was sparked by disagreement over the use and meaning of militancy and internal democracy before 1914, and over responses to the war, yet members were still able to unite on specific issues, and found a level of unity which gave them the ability to continue to organise after partial enfranchisement in 1918.

This pattern of distinct interests within the WFL continued in the 1920s. Official League policies which were increasingly dictated by the National Executive Committee in the 1920s, and endorsed at annual conferences, were not directly reproduced on the membership of the League branches. In some, members forwarded and followed up

their own programme of activity. I have shown how relations between national and local organisation grew increasingly confrontational towards the end of the decade, as the various political identities which had been developed in the League over the preceding years came to fruition.

Since 1910 the League had provided an environment where women had been able to develop their ideas and concerns through meetings and co-operation with other organisations and movement. Members of the League's leadership were responsible for a short entry in *The Vote* in 1927:

What is Feminism? *Equal Rights* the organ of the National Women's Party devotes a leader to the results of research on this word....the Collegiate dictionary defines feminism as "the theory, cult or practice of those who hold the present laws, connections and conditions of society should admit of and further the free and full development of women; also the propaganda for securing such changes as will effect this."

British feminists will find no quarrel with such an excellent, concise definition, and will share with *Equal Rights* pride in having occasioned a new word and determination to make the public generally aware of the full meaning and significance of "feminism".²

Whatever the pressure the leadership exerted, it was not able to control what the members themselves considered the most important "connections and conditions of society". This pattern of devolution and diversity was directly connected to the range of political identities among the members. In the 1920s some members continued to campaign for change solely under the auspices of the WFL, or at most the non-party women's movement, and prioritised the programme of direct equality with men. However, members also drew on a range of radical concepts which they believed would lead to a more humane society for both men and women in Britain, and across the world. Other League members located themselves within WFL politics and also in the

²*The Vote*, May 27th 1927, p. 166.

politics and ideologies of their chosen parliamentary political party. Thus while drawing on liberal or on socialist ideologies, members generated specifically woman-centred concepts and demands for change. They developed dual political identities which were grounded in a desire to end gender inequality and either a commitment to increasing the power of the working-classes, or to encouraging individual responsibility.

WFL member and one-time national President, Alice Schofield Coates is representative of this dual political identity which was such a crucial aspect of suffrage history and the history of the feminist movement. In an interview she gave to a local newspaper in her home in Middlesbrough in 1972, she recounted her work as a militant suffrage activist in the League, and later one of its most well known and influential members in the 1920s. She recalled her election to the Middlesbrough City Council where she was the first woman to take a seat, and her activities in her local Labour party which included a term as the chair of the Middlesbrough West division of the party. Yet, even in 1972 her comments reflected her commitment to the ideas she first voiced in the WFL. She stated "women should still be fighting for their rights.."³

In this thesis I have discussed how militancy was used by League members as a political strategy to assault the sites of male power. However, most members were not prepared to divorce their actions from their other beliefs. The attempts to resolve these difficulties produced a flexible definition of militancy by 1913, which emphasised resistance to Government, *and* maintained support from women through less violent actions, and through targeting a wider variety of sites of male power. Where the WSPU had split over issues of internal democracy in 1907, the WFL managed to

³*Middlesbrough Evening Gazette*, February 22nd 1972.

contain the contradictions of being a militant and democratic society by occasionally over-riding their concerns about democracy with the needs of the suffrage movement itself.

Future work could both extend my arguments about diverse political identities and the generation of a distinct woman-centred political culture. Studies could relate these distinct environments women created to wider cultural developments. Detailed local investigation could be undertaken on local members' routes into the WFL, and their relations as members of the WFL with other suffrage societies, and women's organisations, including the Women's Co-operative Guild, and the National Women Citizens' Associations. Studies of links with local party political organisations could explore further the extent to which League members drew their militant and democratic strategies from socialist and liberal cultures.

Much could also be uncovered in studying the WFL beyond 1930, by looking at their campaigning interests and their responses to the changes in women's status in the years running into the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s. A study of the WFL between 1930 and 1961 would locate the legacy of the League to future generations of women. It would also uncover more about the WFL's creation of its history, and why the WFL has been so marginalised from previous histories of the suffrage movement.

I have shown the diverse legacies of the suffrage movement to women active in the years after 1918. The suffrage campaign was not a movement which existed in isolation, but was connected to other changes in social, economic, political and sexual worlds. Differences in policy and also in cohesion in the League certainly increased in

the 1920s, yet the difference between these years and those before 1914 were not as marked as previous histories have suggested or implied. From the earliest years of the twentieth century, the women's movement was faced with the problems and contradictions of calling on all women to unite in order to overcome their oppression. Organisations constantly encountered the diverse interests of women of different classes, single and married women, and women in paid and unpaid work. It is also essential that further work explores differences in relation to race and sexuality.

The experiences of women in the suffrage movement have inspired later generations of women to challenge their oppression and lack of equality with men. It does not make their actions any less inspiring if we consider the differences and tensions in the ways women understood and worked for their emancipation, in addition to the points of unity and common purpose. By uncovering connections between League members' ideas, demands and actions; the development in liberal democracy and modern feminism; and the social, economic, cultural and political differences between women, suffrage is removed from its isolation. Then we can appreciate more clearly the challenges WFL women made to male government and power and their successes in creating a vibrant woman-centred political culture. We can also understand more fully the challenges feminists still face in achieving equality among women as well as with men, an equality that recognises difference and diversity.

APPENDIX ONE: TABLE OF WFL OFFICIALS & NEC MEMBERS 1907-1913

YEAR/OFFICIALS	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913
PRESIDENT			CHARLOTTE DESPARD	CHARLOTTE DESPARD	CHARLOTTE DESPARD	CHARLOTTE DESPARD	CHARLOTTE DESPARD
TREASURER	CHARLOTTE DESPARD	CHARLOTTE DESPARD	SARAH BENNETT	SARAH BENNETT (suspended)	SARAH BENNETT (r) CONSTANCE TITE	CONSTANCE TITE (r) ELIZABETH KNIGHT	ELIZABETH KNIGHT
HON. ORGANISING SECRETARY (later) HEAD OF POLITICAL AND MILITANT DEPT	TERESA BILLINGTON GREIG (TBG)	TBG	TBG	TBG (r)	EDITH HOW-MARTYN	EDITH HOW-MARTYN (r)	C. NINA BOYLE
HON. SECRETARY (became a paid post in 1911)	EDITH HOW-MARTYN	EDITH HOW-MARTYN	EDITH HOW-MARTYN	EDITH HOW-MARTYN	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD
COMMITTEE MEMBERS							
	CAROLYN HODGSON	CAROLYN HODGSON	CAROLYN HODGSON (r)	MISS WOODS	AGNES HUSBAND	AGNES HUSBAND (sh)	AGNES HUSBAND
	AMY SANDERSON	AMY SANDERSON	AMY SANDERSON	AMY SANDERSON (r)	ALEXIA JACK	ALEXIA JACK (sh)	MRS TANNER
	MARION HOLMES	MARION HOLMES	MARION HOLMES	MARION HOLMES (r)	MARGUERITE SIDLEY	MRS FISHER	MRS FISHER
	MISS FITZHERBERT	MISS FITZHERBERT	MISS FITZHERBERT (r)	EUNICE MURRAY	EUNICE MURRAY	EUNICE MURRAY (sh)	EUNICE MURRAY (r)
	BESSIE DRYSDALE	BESSIE DRYSDALE (r)				BESSIE DRYSDALE (r)	
	MISS MILLER	MISS MILLER	EMILY DUVAL	MARY MANNING	MARY MANNING (r)	C. NINA BOYLE	
	MISS MANSELL-MOLYN	MISS MANSELL-MOLYN	MISS MANSELL-MOLYN (r)	MARY McLEOD CLEEVEES	MARY McLEOD CLEEVEES (r)	MRS TIPPETT	MRS TIPPETT
	MRS BELL	MRS BELL	MRS BELL	KATHERINE VULLIAMY	KATHERINE VULLIAMY	KATHERINE VULLIAMY (r)	
	MARION COATES HANSEN	MARION COATES HANSEN		MURIEL MATTERS (r)		MARION COATES HANSEN (r)	
	ALICE ABADAM	MRS KENINGALE COOK	MAUD ARNCLIFFE SENNETT	MAUD ARNCLIFFE SENNETT (r)		MRS HUNTSMAN	MRS HUNTSMAN
	MRS WINTON EVANS	SARAH BENNETT	MRS SNOW	MRS SNOW	MRS SNOW	MRS SNOW	MRS SNOW (r)
	MRS DICE	EMMA SPROSON	EMMA SPROSON	EMMA SPROSON	EMMA SPROSON	EMMA SPROSON (r)	
		CICELY HAMILTON	MRS EARENGEY	ALICE SCHOFIELD COATES	ALICE SCHOFIELD COATES	ALICE SCHOFIELD COATES	ALICE SCHOFIELD COATES
		MRS CLAYTON (r)	SYME SERUYA (r)	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO
		EILEEN MITCHELL				EILEEN MITCHELL (r)	
			MARIE LAWSON	ALISON NEILANS	ALISON NEILANS	ALISON NEILANS (r)	
			COUNTESS RUSSELL	MRS BETTINA BORRMAN WELLS	CONSTANCE ANDREWS	CONSTANCE ANDREWS	CONSTANCE ANDREWS
			LILIAN HICKS	LILIAN HICKS (r)		ALIX CLARKE	ALIX CLARKE
				MRS FRANCIS	MRS FRANCIS	MISS MARY I. NEAL (sh)	MISS MARY I. NEAL
						JANET HAYES (sh)	
				MRS MANSON		MRS MUSTARD	MRS MUSTARD

(r) Denotes resigned in this year.

(sh) Denotes the position was shared with others. This was only the case for members representing Scotland.

APPENDIX TWO: LIST OF WFL BRANCHES FORMED, 1908 - 1918¹

1907 & 1908

LONDON	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND	WALES	IRELAND
Chelsea. Clapham. Croydon. Finchley. Hackney. Hampstead. Herne Hill. Holloway. Lewisham. Peckham.	Birmingham. Chelmsford. Chester. Colchester. Eastbourne. Letchworth. Manchester. Marlow. Middlesbrough. Potteries. Sale. Sheffield. Sudbury. Tunbridge Wells. West Sussex. Woking. Wolverhampton. York.	Aberdeen. Dennistoun. Dundee. Dunfermline Dunoon Edinburgh. Glasgow. Partick. Perth. Pollockshields.	Caldicott. Cardiff.	Bangor.

1909

LONDON	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND	WALES	IRELAND
Battersea. Central London (Mid-London in 1911). Highbury.	Bromley. Burton on Trent. Cheltenham. Ipswich. Liverpool. Midhurst. Norwich. Sunderland. Swinton.	East Edinburgh. Glasgow. Govan. Kirkintilloch. Paisley. Springburn.	Aberystwyth. Carmarthen. South Glamorgan. Swansea.	

¹Italics denote when a branch has been reformed in the same town. These tables have been constructed around knowledge of branch activity in particular areas from information in branch notes of *The Vote*, attendance and comments made at Annual Conferences, and correspondence with the National Executive Committee of the League. It should therefore be noted that these tables do always correspond with the official lists in *The Vote*, nor to the claims made by League officials regarding the number of new branches formed.

1910

LONDON	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND	WALES	IRELAND
Acton. Brixton. Anerley & Crystal Palace. Dulwich. <i>Finchley.</i> Harrow. <i>Lewisham.</i> North Hackney. Northern Heights. (merged with Tottenham, 1910) <i>Peckham.</i> Southall. (Hayes & Southall, 1910) Stamford Hill. Tottenham. (see Northern Heights) West Hampstead. Willesden & Maida Vale.	Bournemouth. Brighton & Hove. Gravesend. Hadleigh. Lowestoft. Eccles. (previously Swinton branch) Urmston. Marlow. Portsmouth. (merged with Gosport, 1910) Gosport. (see above) South Shields. Stroud, Glocs. Waterloo. Wellingboro'. West Hartlepool.	Dunfermline. Glasgow. (all city branches merged) Kirkintilloch. Kilmarnock. Springburn.	Aberdare. Barry.	<i>Bangor.</i>

1911

LONDON	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND	WALES	IRELAND
Hampstead Garden Suburb. Kensington.	Stowmarket. Woolpit.	Scottish Scattered Members.	Montgomery Boroughs.	

1912

LONDON	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND	WALES	IRELAND
<i>Peckham.</i>	Aintree. Burnage. Walkden. <i>Woolpit.</i>	Rothsay.		

1913

LONDON	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND	WALES	IRELAND
Bowes Park. East London. Richmond. Streatham & Thornton Heath.	<i>Birmingham.</i> <i>Bromley.</i> <i>Gravesend.</i> Southampton. Winchester.	<i>Dunfermline.</i>		

1914 - 1918 (Dates of formation in brackets, where known)

LONDON	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND	WALES	IRELAND
Golders Green.	Bath. (1918) Nottingham. (1918) Anfield, (1915) Reading. <i>Sale.</i>			

APPENDIX THREE: TABLE OF WFL OFFICIALS & NEC MEMBERS: 1920 - 1930

YEAR/OFFICIALS	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930
PRESIDENT	lap-6	lap-6	lap-6	lap-6	lap-6	lap-6	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ANNA MUNRO	MRS BOWELNE PETHICK-LAWRENCE	BOWELNE PETHICK-LAWRENCE	BOWELNE PETHICK-LAWRENCE	BOWELNE PETHICK-LAWRENCE	BOWELNE PETHICK-LAWRENCE
TREASURER	DR ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT	ELIZABETH ENRIGHT
SECRETARY	MISS FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD	FLORENCE UNDERWOOD
HON ORGANISING SECRETARY	MISS ANNA MUNRO	MRS ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	lap-6	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	lap-6	MRS SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON
COMMITTEE MEMBERS													
	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO		ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO	MRS BARDQ	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO	ANNA MUNRO
	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES (BIDDLESBROUGH)	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES	ALICE SCHORFELD-COATES
	MISS ALIX M. CLARE (MONTGOMERY BOROUCHE)	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	ALEX M. CLARE	
	MISS MARY I. NEAL (MANCHESTER)	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL	MARY I. NEAL
	SARAH WHETTON (PORTSMOUTH)	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON	SARAH WHETTON				
	MRS MUSTARD	MRS MUSTARD	MRS MUSTARD	MRS MUSTARD	MRS MUSTARD	MRS DEXTER	MRS DEXTER	MRS DEXTER	MRS DEXTER	MRS DEXTER	MRS DEXTER	MRS DEXTER	MRS DEXTER
	MISS DOROTHY E. AINS	DOROTHY E. AINS	DR THY E. AINS	MISS BALLAR DAWSON (sh) (1920)	MISS BALLAR DAWSON	MISS BILLES VAN PAAS	DR OCTAVIA LEWIS	OCTAVIA LEWIS	MRS FLETCHER	MISS MARIAN REEVE'S (BIRMINGHAM CLAN)	MARIAN REEVE'S	MARIAN REEVE'S	MARIAN REEVE'S
	CHARLOTTE DESPARD	MRS FIBOTTI (MANCHESTER)	MRS FIBOTTI	MRS FIBOTTI	MRS FIBOTTI	MRS FIBOTTI			MRS FIBOTTI	MRS FIBOTTI	MRS FIBOTTI	MISS MARY NEW	MARY NEW
	MISS WOODS	MISS WOODS	MISS CLARE NEAL (BIRMINGHAM)	CLARE NEAL	CLARE NEAL	LARE NEAL	CLARE NEAL	CLARE NEAL	CLARE NEAL	CLARE NEAL	CLARE NEAL	CLARE NEAL	CLARE NEAL
	MISS JANET GIBSON	JANET GIBSON	JANET GIBSON		MISS ELISE MORTON		MRS STICKLAND	MRS STICKLAND	MRS BRADDO (PORTSMOUTH)	MRS BRADDO	MRS BRADDO	MISS BRADDO	MRS BRADDO
	MRS EMMA PROSON	MISS NORMANTON	MISS NORMANTON	MISS NORMANTON (S)	MRS HOLMES	MRS HOLMES	MISS BA... (sh) (1920)	MISS MARTIN	MISS HAVESON	MRS S... (sh) (1920)	MISS ATTON (BIRMINGHAM)	DR MARIAN MACCENZIE (LONDON)	MARIAN MACCENZIE
	MRS M. TOGGS	MRS METON	MRS EBOVAL RECEPTOR			MRS BOOB		MISS PORTER				MRS LBOOB	MRS LBOOB
			SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVES (sh) ADMIRAL O. BBS M. TS (BIRMINGHAM) MISS MARY STEWART	SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVES (sh) MISS SPENCER, MISS STEWART			SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVES (sh) MISS SPENCER, MISS STEWART	SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVES (sh) MISS SPENCER, MISS STEWART	SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVES (sh) MISS SPENCER, MISS STEWART	SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVES (sh) MISS SPENCER, MISS STEWART	SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVES (sh) MISS SPENCER, MISS STEWART	SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVES (sh) MISS SPENCER, MISS STEWART	SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVES (sh) MISS SPENCER, MISS STEWART
			MISS EMMA STEVENSON (S) (1925)	MISS EMMA STEVENSON	MISS S. STEVENSON	MISS S. STEVENSON	MRS FURCH EBB	MRS FURCH EBB	MRS FURCH EBB	MRS FURCH EBB	MRS FURCH EBB	MRS FURCH EBB	ALDERMAN KATHLEEN CHAMBERS

(r): resigned. (sh): shared post. (branch location)

LONDON

BRANCH/YEAR	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930
CAMBERWELL										NEW BRANCH	
CHISWICK											NEW BRANCH
CLAPHAM(*)	REORGANISED DISBANDED										
CROYDON(*)	REORGANISED DISBANDED										
FINCHLEY									NEW BRANCH		
GOLDERS(*) GREEN			NEW BRANCH					REORGANISED	DISBANDED/ REORGANISED		DISBANDED
HACKNEY(*)		DISBANDED								NEW BRANCH	DISBANDED (?)
HAMPSTEAD (*)		REORGANISED									
HIGHBURY										NEW BRANCH	
HIGHGATE											NEW BRANCH
KENSINGTON(*)			DISBANDED							N. KENSINGTON NEW BRANCH	
KEW & DISTRICT										NEW BRANCH	
MID LONDON(*)											
MINERVA CLUB					NEW BRANCH					REORGANISED	
NINE ELMS							NEW BRANCH				
RAYNES PARK											NEW BRANCH
WIMBLEDON										NEW BRANCH	

(*) DENOTES ACTIVE PRIOR TO 1918

SOUTH EAST ENGLAND

BRANCH/YEAR	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930
ASHFORD		DISBANDED & REFORMED									
BEXHILL	REORGANISED										
BRIGHTON (*)				REFORMED				DISBANDED	DISBANDED		
DEAL & WALMER						NEW BRANCH			DISBANDED		
HASTINGS	REORGANISED					REORGANISED					
PORTSMOUTH (*)											
RYE			DISBANDED					NEW BRANCH			
SOUTHEND ON SEA		NEW BRANCH		DISBANDED(?)							
WESTCLIFFE ON SEA			DISBANDED								

SOUTH ENGLAND

BRANCH/YEAR	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930
LETCHWORTH (*)				DISBANDED	REORGANISED	DISBANDED					
NEWBURY & THATCHAM								NEW BRANCH		REORGANISED	
THAMES VALLEY					NEW BRANCH		DISBANDED (?)			NEW BRANCH	
UXBRIDGE						NEW BRANCH/ DISBANDED					

(*) DENOTES ACTIVE PRIOR TO 1918

NORTH EAST, NORTH, NORTH WEST

BRANCH/YEAR	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980
HULL	NEW BRANCH	REORGANISED				DISBANDED(?)					
MIDDLESBORO' (*)							REORGANISED				
DARLINGTON								NEW BRANCH		NEW BRANCH	
GATESHEAD											
BRADFORD								NEW BRANCH			
LEEDS											
NOTTINGHAM											
SHEFFIELD		DISBANDED								NEW BRANCH	
LIVERPOOL (*) & CROSBY WALLASEY			LIVERPOOL & CROSBY DISBANDED	NEW BRANCH AT WALLASEY					WALLASEY BRANCH DISBANDED		
MANCHESTER (*)	AMALGAMATED WITH MANCHESTER SUFFRAGE SOCIETY										

(*) DENOTES ACTIVE PRIOR TO 1918

APPENDIX FIVE: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES²

Bennett, Sarah. (Miss)
Central London branch

Sarah Bennett spent her early life living with her family in a village in the New Forest. She was one of the earliest members of the WFL. In an article in *The Vote* in 1910 she stated that she had believed very strongly in co-operation and trade unionism, but had partially rejected the latter because they "in many ways held narrow and conservative views and were not real social reformers."

Bennett was appointed as the WFL national treasurer in 1909, but resigned in June 1910. She was reprimanded by the League's NEC for her activity in WSPU militant action in late 1910, and left the League in early 1911. Later Bennett joined the WSPU, and was imprisoned twice in Holloway where she went on hunger strike. Bennett also resisted paying her taxes.

Coates Hansen, Marion. (Mrs)
Middlesbrough branch

Marion Coates Hansen developed her political interests in the Women's Liberal Association. By 1906 she was the well established, and businesslike Honorary Organising Secretary of the ILP branch in Middlesbrough. She was a founder member of the WSPU branch in the town, and joined the WFL during the split in November 1907. She was a member of the NEC in 1907 and 1908, and returned to the committee in 1912 only to resign after the special conference in April 1912. She maintained her links the WFL after this date through her sister-in-law Alice Schofield Coates.

Marion Coates Hansen stood as the first woman candidate for Middlesbrough's council elections in 1910, but was not elected. She was appointed as a Poor Law Guardian. She continued to work primarily in the ILP and the Labour party after April 1912. In 1918 she was elected as the second woman councillor in Middlesbrough in 1919. She served on the council until 1935.

²The subjects of this appendix are a selection of League members who have not been the subject of biographical studies. For information on Charlotte Despard, see; Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life*, and Margaret Mulvihill, *Charlotte Despard. A Biography*. For Teresa Billington Greig, see: Carol McPhee and Ann Fitzgerald, eds., *The Non-Violent Militant*. Hilary Francis who is based at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York, is currently writing a D.Phil thesis on the lives and work of sexual reformers, including Edith How-Martyn, Alison Neilans, and C. Nina Boyle.

Dilks, Alice. (Mrs)

Eastbourne branch

In 1909 Alice Dilks resigned from her post as the Honorary Secretary of Eastbourne's Women's Liberal Association until such time as the government agreed to pledge itself to women's suffrage. In 1910 she referred to herself as a "life long Liberal" who deplored the advance of militant methods. This appears the reason she joined the WFL, and became the branch secretary of the Eastbourne branch in 1909. Dilks served as the WFL Honorary District Organiser for the region until she moved to London in March 1911. Subsequently her school master husband took a post in America and Dilks moved there with her family.

In 1926 she appears to have reaffirmed her loyalties to the Liberal party, and even though by this time resident in France, she wrote to the *Liberal Women's News*. She must have kept up some informal links with the WFL since her departure in 1911, because there was an obituary for her in *The Vote* after her death in March 1927.

Hicks, Lilian Martha. (Mrs)

Hampstead branch

Lilian Hicks lived for twenty years in East Anglia until the early 1900s. Following her husband's death she moved to Hampstead and joined the WFL, along with her daughter Amy. Previously she had undertaken much work for the Charity Organisation Society, but resigned when the committee refused to grant equal pay for its male and female employees. Lilian Hicks was elected to the WFL's NEC in 1909 and 1910, but resigned probably because she wanted the WFL to extend its militant policy along the lines favoured by the WSPU. She was arrested for militant protests while a member of the WFL and later undertook more extreme actions in the WSPU.

Hicks, Amy Maud.

Hampstead branch

When Amy Hicks was arrested following a militant protest in London in 1909 she described herself as an "educational worker". Hicks was very active in WFL militant demonstrations during 1909 and was arrested and imprisoned. She was appointed as the first Head of the WFL literature department but resigned in 1910. She joined the WSPU in order to pursue their militant policies and was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. Hicks was also an active member of the Women's Tax Resistance League.

In 1927 her marriage to John Major Bull was noted in *The Vote* which suggests she maintained some links with the WFL, although there is no evidence of any activity in women's organisations in the 1920s.

Holmes, Marion. (Mrs)

Croydon branch

Marion Holmes was brought up in a northern mining village. By 1910 she was married with a six year old daughter and living in London. She was present at the first public meeting held by the WFL in November 1907 and subsequently became a member. She served as joint editor of *The Vote* during its first months, and although she claimed to prefer writing to speaking, Marion Holmes did both for the WFL. Holmes was noted for the number of pamphlets she produced for the WFL which included cameo sketches of famous women including Florence Nightingale and Josephine Butler. From 1907 to 1910 Holmes was a member of the NEC and once acted as temporary national secretary in place of Edith How-Martyn.

Before joining the WFL she had worked for the Liberal Federation, but in 1910 declared she was "on strike" from the Liberals. She had also been a member of the Fabians but gave up all other parties when she joined the WFL. In 1910 she suffered a breakdown and resigned her position on the NEC. When she recovered she returned to work for her local League branch in Croydon. In the early 1920s she continued to attend League annual conferences, and served on the NEC in 1922 and 1923. After this year there are no records of any further active work.

Knight, Elizabeth. (Dr)

Ipswich, Hampstead and Kensington branches

Elizabeth Knight was a member of the wealthy "Knights Castille" family, who were well known for their luxury soaps. She was one of the first women to attend Newnham College, Cambridge. Later she entered the London School of Medicine and trained as a doctor alongside Louisa Garrett Anderson. Knight joined the League sometime during 1907 and was imprisoned for two weeks in Holloway in 1908 for her part in a League protest in Downing Street. Knight used her wealth to bolster League funds in the various branches. She became a major share holder in the Minerva Publishing Company which produced *The Vote*. Knight secured advertising for Knights Castille products in *The Vote*. She became the national League treasurer after the special conference in April 1912 and was for a time the treasurer of the Hampstead League branch.

Elizabeth Knight remained as national treasurer until her untimely death in a road accident in October 1933. In the period between 1914 and 1933 she became a highly influential figure on the League's NEC. She was a close friend of Florence Underwood. After her death the abrupt end to her generous contributions to *The Vote* resulted in the paper's closure.

Munro, Anna Gillies Macdonald. (Miss). Also known as Mrs Anna Munro-Ashman.
Dunfermline and Reading branches

Before 1906 Anna Munro spent three years working in the east end of London and later in Scotland. She joined the WSPU in October 1906 and was a member of the Dunfermline branch. She took the entire branch into the WFL after the split in

November 1907. Munro was a very popular League figure in Scotland, first as an organiser, and from 1910 as a Scottish representative on the NEC. She was arrested and spent six weeks in prison in 1908.

Anna Munro moved to England sometime in 1912, and in 1913 married company director Sidney Ashman. She took the name Anna Munro-Ashman but exclusively used her unmarried name in League business. She lived for the remainder of her life in Reading and was elected as the president of the WFL branch in the town in 1915. She remained a highly active member of the WFL in the 1920s and served as national president for one year in 1925. Munro was made a Justice of the Peace.

Until the early 1960s Anna Munro remained an active member of the League, and its national treasurer. She travelled to Dublin to attend the Internal Alliance of Women conference and while there visited Charlotte Despard's grave with other members of the League to lay a wreath. She witnessed the disbanding of the WFL in 1961 and died shortly after in 1962. Munro was a member of the Suffragette Fellowship.

Murray, Eunice Guthrie. (Miss)

Glasgow and Scottish Scattered Members branches

Eunice Murray was the daughter of a Glasgow lawyer. She joined the League in its early years and regularly contributed article to *The Vote* and published a number of pamphlets for the WFL. By 1912 Murray was serving as the president of the Glasgow branch, and later organised the Scottish Scattered members branch. She represented the League at meetings across Britain and on one occasion travelled to Ireland to address a suffrage meeting.

In 1917 her novel, *The Hidden Tragedy*, was published and contained what were probably autobiographical sketches of her activities in the WFL. Murray resigned from the League in 1918 disappointed with the failure to categorically support the war. Murray stood unsuccessfully as a candidate in the Bridgton constituency in Glasgow in the December 1918 general election. Later in the 1920s she rejoined the WFL and served for periods as a Scottish representative on the NEC.

Neal, Clare. (Miss)

Swansea branch

Clare Neal trained as a school teacher and spent her entire working life teaching in schools in Swansea. She was one of the founding members of the WFL branch in Swansea in 1909. By 1912 she had become the branch president. She undertook many League campaigns in the town but there is no evidence that she was ever arrested or imprisoned. Clare Neal joined her sister Mary Neal on the NEC in 1920 and continued to serve throughout the 1920s. She was an active member of the National Union of Women Teachers and served a term as its president in the 1920s.

Strong networks existed in the Swansea branch which continued into the 1920s. In 1925 a meeting was held by the branch to honour one of its members, Emily Phipps. Clare Neal in her address to this meeting noted that of the twelve women who had formed the branch back in 1909, four of them were present.

Clare Neal retired in 1930 and moved to live with two close women friends in London. She died in 1938.³

Schofield Coates, Alice. (Mrs)
Middlesbrough branch

Alice Schofield was born in 1882. She trained as a teacher before becoming a paid organiser for the WFL in 1909. She was arrested and served a month in prison. During a organising trip to Middlesbrough she met local coal merchant George Coates. They married in 1910 and Alice settled in Middlesbrough. Shortly after she revived the Middlesbrough League branch and served as its secretary and then president. The efforts of Alice and her fellow members made the branch into one of the most active in the League before 1918. Especially notable was Alice Schofield Coates's part in the formation of the Middlesbrough and District Women's Council which during the war opened five child welfare clinics and a communal kitchen.

Alice had gone with the local ILP branch into the new Labour party in 1918 and she was the first woman to be elected to the Middlesbrough Council in 1919. She served until she lost her seat in 1926. In 1921 Alice was appointed as a Justice of the Peace, and her standing in the WFL earned her election as the WFL national president for one year in 1924. She also served on other local committees in the 1920s and on the committee of the National Council of Women. Alice continued to be an active member of her local Labour party. Over the years she gave a number of interviews to her local press about her political activities. She died in 1972.

Sproson, Emma. (Mrs)
Wolverhampton branch

Emma Sproson was born in 1867 in West Bromwich and from nine years of age worked as a half timer in a local factory. In 1896 she married postman "and artist", Frank Sproson, and they had two sons and one daughter. Originally a member of the NUWSS, Sproson joined the WSPU and later the WFL. Sproson was the leading light of the Wolverhampton branch and had the support of her husband who occasionally spoke at League meetings. Between 1908 and 1912 she served on the NEC but *resigned after* the special conference in 1912. Sproson continued to remain a member of the WFL and was one of the few working-class women to become prominent in the organisation. This was not unnoticed by other members of the League. Her entry in the 1913 *Suffrage Annual* referred to her as a "child from the lower depths", and she spent her time between 1908 and 1913 speaking at meetings across Britain on the needs of

³For more details see Hilda Keen, *Deeds Not Words*, pp. 116-117.

working-class women. In 1911 Emma Sproson resisted paying her dog licence and was imprisoned in the third division for five weeks.

Emma Sproson resigned from the League in anger during the League's 1919 annual conference following a disagreement on her suggestions for changes in *The Vote*.

Thompson-Price, Louisa. (Mrs)

Louisa Thompson-Price came from a strictly Tory family, but claimed that through education she became a "secularist" and a "radical". She was an admirer of Charles Bradlaugh, one of the earliest birth control advocates. She served as secretary of the North Hackney Women's Liberal and Radical Association and was a member of the NUWSS. She resigned from both when militancy began, and was one of the earliest members of the WFL. Later she took part in the WFL's picket of the House of Commons in 1909 and shortly after became a director of the Minerva Publishing Company. Louisa Thompson-Price gained a brief notoriety following her article in *The Vote* in 1911 calling for men to be admitted to the WFL.

There are no records of any subsequent involvement, but Louisa seems to have maintained links with the WFL, as after her death in 1926 she left it a legacy of £250/- in her will.

Underwood, Florence. (Miss)

Clapham branch

Florence Underwood first came to prominence in the WFL through her appointment as national propaganda secretary, and then as the paid national general secretary in 1911. Prior to this, Florence Underwood had been the secretary of the Clapham League branch. From 1911 she devoted all of her energies solely to the WFL and became an extremely powerful figure during the first world war and in the 1920s, not least through her editorial control of *The Vote*.

Nothing is known of her personal life, except that she was a close and lasting friend of Elizabeth Knight. She continued to serve as national League secretary until her death during the second world war.

Whetton, Sarah. (Mrs)

Sheffield and Portsmouth branches

Sarah Whetton was the president of the Sheffield branch of the WFL, until she moved with her husband and family to Portsmouth in 1909. Shortly after she jointly founded a WFL branch in Portsmouth and was soon serving as its president. She later became the Honorary Organising Secretary for the region. Sarah Whetton and her fellow branch members were highly active in the town and were rewarded in 1914 when the branch was declared the strongest in the south-east of England.

Sarah Whetton served on the NEC from 1915, and in 1925 became the national organising secretary of the League. The branch in Portsmouth continued to campaign during the 1920s, and developed a strong independent identity within the League. Whetton served as vice-president of the Portsmouth Women's Citizens Association in the 1920s and continued to work on both this committee and the WFL well into the 1930s.

Wynne Nevinson, Margaret. (Mrs)
Hampstead branch

Margaret Wynne Nevinson was born in Leicester and later trained and worked as a teacher. She married the journalist Henry Wynne Nevinson and had a son and a daughter. Margaret travelled to Germany before settling in Hampstead where she began working in London's East End, before being appointed as a Poor Law guardian. She joined the WSPU and after the split in 1907, joined the WFL. In 1909 her husband resigned from his position at the *Daily News* in protest against the paper's support of the force feeding of suffrage prisoners. Margaret was a regular contributor to *The Vote* and also the author of a number of League sponsored booklets and pamphlets. These included: *Five Years Struggle For Freedom*; *The Legal Wrongs of Married Women*; and *Ancient Suffragettes*.

Margaret Wynne Nevinson was a member of the Women Writers Suffrage League and of the Church League for Women's Suffrage. In the 1920s she kept up her connections with the WFL and toured branches giving speeches, most notably on her experiences as one of the first women Justices of the Peace. She wrote an autobiography, *Life's Fitful Fever*, which was published in 1926. In it she claimed that while she could never be an enthusiastic party politician, "in spite of Mr. Asquith" she inclined "to Liberalism."

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