UNDERSTANDING 1917 AND BEYOND
THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

The women’s suffrage movement was a political and militant campaign to earn women the right to vote in political elections. At the beginning of the 19th century in the United Kingdom, some women were able to vote in parliamentary elections as a result of owning property, but in general women were expected to take care of matters at home, namely household chores and child-care, whilst it was expected that men would take responsibility for political matters. Throughout the 19th century, Acts were passed to extend the franchise (the right to vote) for men, and with the right not extended to women, it gave birth to the suffrage movement. During the 19th century, women from countries all over the world campaigned for universal suffrage, with many being granted the right to vote in the early 20th century.

THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN THE UK

Women’s suffrage had been called for since the early 19th century in the UK, but the campaign became more organised and driven in 1867, when proposals were made to make amendments to the Second Reform Act (1867) which would have given votes to women on the same terms as men. The amendment was defeated by 194 votes to 73.

Lydia Becker formed the National Society for Women’s Suffrage in November 1867 (an union of the Edinburgh, Manchester and London societies). This was one of many suffragist groups that existed across the country. Suffragists aimed to achieve the right to vote for women through peaceful, constitutional means. These groups held public meetings, wrote petitions and letters and sought to influence Members of Parliament to raise the subject of women’s suffrage in Parliament. In 1897, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was formed and brought together a number of smaller suffragist groups. Led by Millicent Fawcett, the NUWSS continued to pursue legal, constitutional means in the search for women’s suffrage.

Despite advances in education legislation for women, obtaining the right to vote on an equal basis to men still eluded the suffragist movement. As a result of growing frustration at the lack of progress, a new generation of women believed that different tactics should be employed to obtain the right to vote. The suffragist movement was seen as too middle class, with many believing it needed the support of working class women. Emmeline Pankhurst – a member of the suffragist movement – was one of those who had grown impatient with the respectable, constitutional tactics utilised by her fellow suffragists – in particular, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Pankhurst, along with her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, formed the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903, starting the suffragette movement. The suffragettes aimed to achieve the right to vote for women by more militant and forceful means. The word ‘suffragette’ first appeared in the Daily Mail in January 1906 and was intended as an insult. It was used to distinguish those women who used direct action from the peaceful ‘suffragists’ who used constitutional methods.
Under the motto of “Deeds, not words”, the WSPU and the suffragette movement utilised a number of tactics, some of which were militant and violent:

- mass meetings and marches
- heckling election meetings
- throwing stones through windows / breaking windows
- graffiti
- the destruction of letter boxes
- chaining themselves to railings
- disrupting public meetings
- damaging public property
- bomb attacks
- arson attacks
- hunger striking.

From 1909, hunger striking became a popular tactic amongst suffragette prisoners. In response, the prison authorities force-fed suffragette prisoners. Due to the increasing number of hunger striking prisoners and the outcry that force-feeding caused, the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act was introduced in 1913 to combat the tactic of hunger striking in British and Irish prisons. Referred to as the Cat and Mouse Act, prisoners on hunger strike would be released from prison on account of their failing health, on condition that they returned to prison at a later date.

THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN IRELAND

Like the mainland United Kingdom, Irish women had been campaigning for the same voting rights as men from the mid-19th century. Influenced and inspired by the suffrage movement in the UK, Irish suffragists adopted their tactics and suffrage societies began to be formed around the country. The campaign for suffrage in Ireland did not receive the same attention as it did in the UK due to the on-going Home Rule movement. Although many suffrage societies did not associate themselves with any political party, some did take a Pro and Anti-Home Rule stance.

The first suffrage society to be formed in Ireland was formed by Isabella Tod. The North of Ireland Women’s Suffrage Society was established in Belfast in 1872 after Tod embarked on a suffrage tour of Ulster that was well supported. Tod made links with suffragists in Ireland and England and her work inspired women in Ulster to support the campaign for suffrage. Before her death in 1896, Tod worked closely with Anna Haslem. Haslem and her husband Thomas Haslem, were women’s rights campaigners who formed the Dublin Suffrage Association (DWSA) in 1876. Ireland continued on a similar pattern to the UK, when in the early 20th century, a new generation of suffrage campaigners were frustrated at the lack of progress in winning the right to vote on the same level as men. In 1909 the North of Ireland Women’s Suffrage Society changed its name to the Irish Women’s Suffrage Society (IWSS) and in 1912 carried out Ireland’s first recorded suffrage militant act by smashing the windows of the General Post Office in Donegall Square, Belfast. Suffragettes based in Belfast continued their militant campaign, mimicking some of the tactics of their English counterparts (mostly damaging public property).
In 1908 Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and Margaret Cousins established the Irish Women’s Franchise League (IWFL) in Dublin. Influenced by the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in England, the IWFL were more aggressive and militant than previous suffrage groups that had been established before and its aim was to achieve suffrage within the context of the Home Rule movement. In June 1912, after the IWFL campaigned to have the right to vote included in the Third Home Rule Bill, the Irish Parliamentary Party refused. In response, several activists – including Hanna Sheehy Skeffington – chained themselves to railings and threw stones through the windows of the General Post Office, Custom’s House and Dublin Castle. The women were arrested and received sentences of between one and six months in prison. In Mountjoy Jail in Dublin, the women enjoyed ‘political prisoner’ status (this was a result of the hunger strike campaign by suffragettes in England) so decided not to hunger strike. This changed in July as two English WSPU members were arrested in Dublin for throwing an axe at the visiting Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. After being imprisoned, the women went on hunger strike. Sheehy-Skeffington and three other women joined the WSPU prisoners on hunger strike. After gaining little public support, the IWFL prisoners were released early – partly due to the Irish authorities wishing to avoid any negative publicity. The two WSPU prisoners were force-fed and later released on medical grounds.

The Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) established Belfast and Dublin branches in 1913 and along with the Irish Women’s Suffrage Society (IWSS) stepped up the militant campaign in Ireland, mirroring the more extreme tactics being employed in England such as arson, bombing and destruction of public property. The actions of the WSPU were not well received in Ireland. Non-militant suffrage groups (and even militant groups such as the IWFL) distanced themselves from the WSPU’s actions. The WSPU’s violent campaign was mostly focussed on Ulster where they were determined to put pressure on Edward Carson, leader of the Ulster Unionists, to support suffrage. When arrested, all prisoners followed the example set by suffragette prisoners in England and went on hunger strike.

THE END OF PROTESTS AND WINNING THE VOTE

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, suffragettes in England (and those loyal to the UK in Ireland) ceased their campaigning and protests in favour of helping with the war effort (the suffragist NUWSS still had a substantial membership and continued to campaign constitutionally and lawfully). The suffrage movement in Ireland had largely been dying down since 1913 when it became more engaged with the labour movement and the plight of women workers. There were some who supported and helped with the war effort, but there were also those who followed a more republican route. By late 1914, Cumann na mBan (The Women’s Council), the female equivalent of the Irish Volunteers, was the largest female organisation in the country. Their aim was to “advance the cause of Irish liberty and to organize Irishwomen in the furtherance of this object” by assisting the newly established Irish Volunteers. Whilst Ireland was still under British rule, some nationalist women did not recognise the parliament in Westminster as their parliament, so they did not believe that the suffrage movement would provide them with a legitimate voice for change.
After the outbreak of war, men from different walks of life signed up to fight. Later in the war, with enlistment numbers decreasing, conscription was introduced. With men leaving to fight in the war, women replaced men in the workplace to keep the country going. Emmeline Pankhurst, having suspended suffrage activities by the WSPU, helped the government recruit women to work during the war. The work of women during the war helped to change the perception of a woman’s role in society. Between 1914 and 1918 more than one million women replaced men in employment in Britain. Employment opportunities for women opened up in industries such as the civil service, transport and weapons manufacturing. Realising that current voting law would prohibit men who were fighting on the front line from voting in a general election (only men who were in the country 12 months prior to an election could vote), the government revised the franchise. Due to campaigning by Millicent Fawcett and the NUWSS and the work that women undertook during the war, further revisions were added which granted limited franchise to women. The Representation of the People Act 1918 granted the vote to women over the age of 30 who were also householders or wives of householders, owners of property over £5 or university graduates. All men over the age of 21 were granted the right to vote. Further to this, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 was passed which allowed women over the age of 21 to stand as Members of Parliament in elections. Women were finally granted the vote in 1928 with the passing of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act. The Act gave all women over the age of 21 the right to vote, regardless of property ownership. By the time the act was passed, many of the well-known suffragist and suffragette campaigner were dead. Millicent Fawcett, who had continued campaigning for equal suffrage into her elderly years, was invited to Parliament to see the Bill voted through. She died the following year.

It is almost exactly 61 years ago since I heard John Stuart Mill introduce his suffrage amendment to the Reform Bill on 20 May 1867. So I have had extraordinary good luck in having seen the struggle from the beginning.

Millicent Fawcett, leader of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, writing in her diary about the passing of the Representation of the People Act 1928, 2 July 1928.
In one of the more infamous incidents of the suffragette movement, **Emily Wilding Davison** was killed when she ran out in front of the King’s horse Anmer, at the Epsom Derby, 4th June 1913. After the event, it was believed that she threw herself in front of the horse to draw attention to the suffrage movement, but it is instead believed that she was possibly trying to attach a WSPU banner to the horse and accidently got ran over.

**Millicent Fawcett** dedicated her life to women’s suffrage. At the age of 19, she became involved in the suffrage movement and was an active campaigner for most of her life. In 1890, she became President of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Fawcett believed in non-violent and lawful protesting. It is widely believed that Fawcett’s campaigning was instrumental in securing the first votes for women in 1918.

**Emmeline Pankhurst** became involved in the suffrage movement towards the end of the 19th century. After the death of her husband in 1898, Pankhurst fully dedicated herself to the suffrage movement. She formed the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903, using more extreme, militant tactics than previous suffrage campaigns. With the outbreak of war in 1914, the WSPU ceased their actions and supported the war effort.

**Anna Haslam** was a suffrage campaigner from the mid 19th century. Along with her husband Thomas, she formed the Dublin Women’s Suffrage Association (DWSA) in 1876 and was the first major suffrage group in Ireland. They campaigned peacefully, through constitutional methods and reached out to women all over Ireland. Despite the rise of the suffragette movement, Anna continued to campaign peacefully.

**Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington** met her future husband Francis whilst attending university in Dublin. Together they campaigned for women’s suffrage across the UK and in 1908 formed the Irish Women’s Franchise League (the Irish equivalent of the militant WSPU). They also helped establish The Irish Citizen newspaper in 1912 “to further the cause of Women Suffrage and Feminism in Ireland”.

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QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between the suffragist movement and the suffragette movement.

2. Create a spider diagram representing the tactics used by the suffragette movement and explain why you think such extreme tactics were utilised.

3. Explain the impact that the Representation of the People Act 1918 and the Representation of the People Act 1928 had on the electorate.

In pairs, analyse the suffrage propaganda poster on page 8. Make notes around the poster regarding the imagery, colour, slogans, and metaphors. Explain what you think the poster is trying to communicate.

ICT TASK

In pairs, research, design and create a comic which profiles some of the key personalities from the suffrage movement in Britain and Ireland.

- Identify and profile four personalities from the suffrage movement.
- Who were they and what did they contribute? Research and save relevant images and information in order to complete the task. Save your comic and share it with your class.

Why not turn your report into a front page story for Votes For Women or The Irish Citizen using Desktop Publishing software?

RESEARCH TASK

In pairs, perform an image search for the suffrage newspapers "Votes for Women" and "The Irish Citizen" (search for "Votes For Women newspaper / The Irish Citizen newspaper + suffrage" for the best results). Research the event "Black Friday" and write an article for Votes For Women / The Irish Citizen reporting on the incident. Think of the type of language you will use and who the intended target audience is for the report.
### FURTHER READING

For a timeline on the suffragette movement, search online for "Suffragette timeline: the long march to votes for women" from the Telegraph.co.uk.

For further information on the suffragettes and the winning of the vote, search online for "Did the suffragettes win women the vote?" from BBC iWonder.

For further information on the tactics used by the suffragettes, search online for "What did the Suffragettes Do?" from johndclare.net.

For further information on the suffrage movement in Ireland, search online for "Women, suffrage and class" from the Independent.ie.

For further information on the suffrage movement, search online for "The Suffrage Movement" from Century Ireland.