

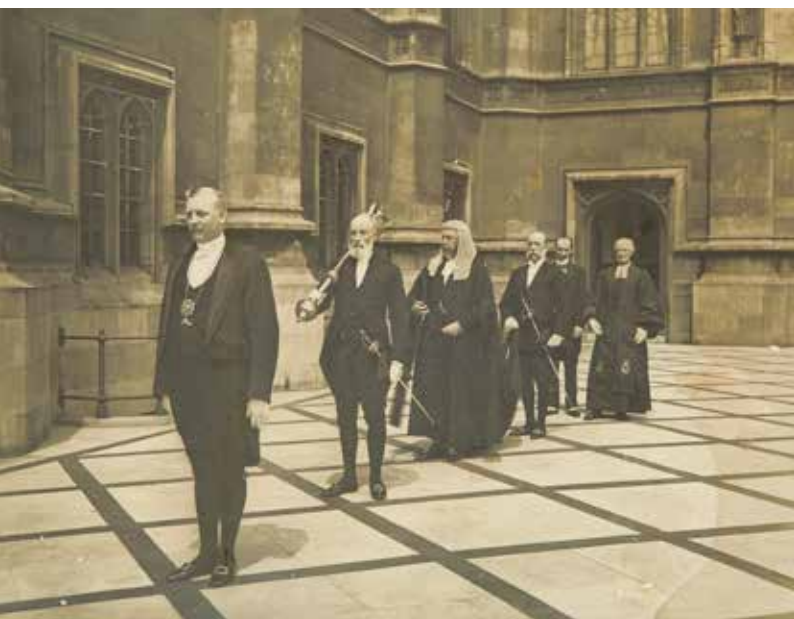


HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

# THE BURNING QUESTION:

Votes for Women and the Speaker's  
Conference on Electoral Reform,

## 1916-1917



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# JAMES W. LOWTHER

1st Viscount Ullswater, Speaker of the House of Commons 1905–1921

*'I endeavoured to push off the burning question of women's suffrage as long as I could.'*

*The Speaker, 'A Speaker's Commentaries'*

James William Lowther was first elected as an MP in 1883. He came from a political family, as did his wife, Mary Frances Beresford-Hope, who was niece of Prime Minister Salisbury.

Speaker Lowther was generally acknowledged to be a dignified and tactful presence in the Commons, who did a good job of reconciling factions during a difficult political period. He was universally praised for his fair handling of the Conference on Electoral Reform during 1916–17.

*'He told the Conference plainly that it was not a Parliamentary Debating Society... the government had asked us to find a way, and we had got to find a way.'*

*Alexander MacCallum Scott MP, January 1917*



## **SILVER WEDDING PRESENTATION TO THE SPEAKER AND MRS LOWTHER, 3 MAY 1911**

Photograph by Sir Benjamin Stone. Includes (left to right), A. J. Balfour, Sir Edward Grey, Speaker Lowther, Mrs Lowther, John Redmond, Ramsay MacDonald.

Parliamentary Archives, HC/LB/1/111/20/100

# THE SPEAKER AND THE SUFFRAGETTES

As Speaker, Lowther saw many militant women's suffrage activities take place in Parliament between 1906 and 1914. One of the most dramatic happened in October 1908 when Muriel Matters and Helen Fox from the Women's Freedom League chained themselves to the Ladies' Gallery grille, after which he ordered the public galleries to be closed. The galleries re-opened in 1909 under strict conditions.

Following incidents where Emily Wilding Davison hid in a ventilation shaft and broke a window in the Crown Office, the Speaker wrote to confirm her exclusion from the Palace of Westminster in 1910. However, this did not stop her hiding overnight in Parliament on census night the following year.

*'Her name had better go on the Index Expurgatorius.'*

*Speaker Lowther to the Serjeant at Arms,  
banning Emily Wilding Davison from the  
Palace of Westminster*



**MURIEL MATTERS CHAINED TO THE LADIES'  
GALLERY GRILLE, 1908**

House of Commons Library, *Illustrated London News*,  
7 November 1908

# ‘I CANNOT PRETEND THAT I LOOK FORWARD TO IT WITH ENTHUSIASM’:

## Setting up the Speaker’s Conference

Before 1914, approximately 40% of men were not entitled to vote. By 1916 it was clear that the next general election could not use the pre-war electoral register, as many men on military service would not have been entitled to vote. Conservative MPs argued for a ‘soldier’s vote’; Liberal and Labour politicians argued this had to be extended to other workers, and following pressure from women’s suffrage campaigners, it became necessary to consider women too.

Walter Long, President of the Local Government Board, suggested a cross-party conference to discuss and agree electoral reform. The Speaker, as Chairman, chose 32 MPs and Peers to be members. The Conference terms of reference were to examine, and if possible submit agreed resolutions, on franchise reform; redistribution of seats; electoral registration reform; and method and cost of elections.



**WALTER H. LONG MP**

Parliamentary Archives, PHO/11/2/36/3

A Question of Justice:

**WILLOUGHBY**

**DICKINSON, MP**

and Women's Suffrage Supporter

Willoughby Hyett Dickinson MP (1859-1943) was one of the most dedicated campaigners for women's suffrage in the House of Commons. He was elected as a Liberal MP in 1906 and became Baron Dickinson in 1930. Unlike most MPs, Dickinson did not criticise suffragettes for militancy. Of all the members of the Conference, he was the only one with a perfect record of both attending and voting in favour of every women's suffrage bill between 1906 and 1914. This included his own private members' bill in 1907.

Dickinson and his wife Minnie had two daughters. Desirée had a long career in public service. Joan married Conservative politician John Davidson in 1919, and when he became a peer in 1937, she successfully stood in his place to become MP for Hemel Hempstead. She held the seat until 1959, and in 1963 became a life peer as Baroness Northchurch.

*'I am very glad to have a daughter in the House of Commons after all I did to get women entitled to be there.'*

*Willoughby Dickinson, 1937*



**WILLOUGHBY DICKINSON**

House of Commons Library, *Illustrated London News*,  
17 February 1906

# WHO'S WHO AT THE SPEAKER'S CONFERENCE

Speaker James W. Lowther,  
Chair of the Conference  
W. T. Jerred, Local Government Board,  
Secretary to the Conference

## **LIBERALS**

Sir Ryland Adkins MP  
Sir John Bethell MP  
Richard Causton, 1st Baron Southwark  
(appointed after 13 Dec)  
Ellis Davies MP  
Willoughby Dickinson MP  
Herbert Gladstone, 1st Viscount Gladstone  
Albert Grey, 4th Earl Grey  
George Lambert MP  
Alexander MacCallum Scott MP  
W. M. R. Pringle MP  
Sir John Simon MP  
Aneurin Williams MP

## **CONSERVATIVES AND UNIONISTS**

Edward Archdale MP  
Sir Frederick Banbury MP  
(resigned 13 Dec)  
Sir William Bull MP  
Colonel James Craig MP  
(resigned 13 Dec)  
Sir Robert Finlay MP  
James Gascoyne-Cecil, 4th Marquess of Salisbury  
(resigned 13 Dec)  
Sir Joseph Larmor MP  
Harry Levy-Lawson, MP and later  
1st Viscount Burnham  
Donald Macmaster MP  
Col Henry Page-Croft MP  
Basil Peto MP  
Sir Harry Samuel MP  
Charles Stuart-Wortley, 1st Baron  
Stuart of Wortley  
George Touche MP  
Edmund R. Turton MP  
Sir Robert Williams MP  
(appointed after 13 Dec)

## **IRISH NATIONALISTS**

Patrick Joseph Brady MP  
(appointed after 13 Dec)  
Maurice Healy MP  
T. P. O'Connor MP  
Thomas Scanlan MP

## **LABOUR**

Frank Goldstone MP  
Stephen Walsh MP  
George J. Wardle MP

*Viscount Bryce, Laurence Hardy MP  
and John Mooney MP were also appointed,  
but withdrew before the Conference began.*

*All photographs from Parliamentary Archives, PHO collection*



Speaker James W. Lowther



George Lambert MP



Richard Causton



Sir Frederick Banbury MP



Harry Levy-Lawson, MP



Sir Harry Samuel MP



Charles Stuart-Wortley



Sir Robert Williams MP



Maurice Healy MP

# VOTES FOR WOMEN

## at the Speaker's Conference

The Speaker deliberately left discussion of women's suffrage as long as possible, to obtain agreement on other issues first. On the departure of three anti-suffragist members in December 1916, he replaced them with pro-suffragists. Votes for women was finally discussed on 10 and 11 January 1917. The Conference agreed there should be some measure of women's suffrage, but not on the same terms as men. Various age limits were considered, but the number of women enfranchised seemed either too high or too low for consensus. Then:

*'I made my proposition that vote should go to occupiers or wives of occupiers, and this carried 9 to 8. Thus by a majority of one, the suffrage clause went forward!'*

*Willoughby Dickinson*

The Conference therefore recommended that the vote be given to woman who were on the local government register, or whose husbands were, provided they had reached a specified age 'of which 30 and 35 received most favour'.

### VIII.—*Woman Suffrage.*

The Conference decided by a majority that some measure of vote should be conferred. A majority of the Conference was also of opinion should decide to accept the principle, the most practical form would be to give the vote in the terms of the following resolution :—

33. Any woman on the Local Government Register who has reached the specified age, and the wife of any man who is on that Register if she has reached the specified age shall be entitled to be registered and to vote as a parliamentary elector.

Various ages were discussed, of which 30 and 35 received most favour.

The Conference further resolved that if Parliament decides to give the vote to a woman of the specified age, who is a graduate of any University her name shall be entitled to vote as a University Elector.

## THE RECOMMENDATION ON WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN THE SPEAKER'S CONFERENCE REPORT



# WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGNERS:

Millicent Fawcett

At the outbreak of war in 1914, militant suffragette activity was suspended by the Women's Social and Political Union. However suffrage campaigning did not stop, but took different forms. The leader of the militant Women's Freedom League, Charlotte Despard, was a socialist pacifist. The constitutional National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was split, with some of its leaders opposing the war and others, including its president Millicent Fawcett, supporting it.

Throughout the Speaker's Conference, women's suffrage campaigners lobbied politicians extensively. Foremost among these was Millicent Fawcett. Following the report of the Conference, she presided over a deputation of women war workers to Prime Minister Lloyd George in March 1917. Fawcett declared that all campaigners were resolved to support the Conference, as:

*'We would greatly prefer an imperfect scheme that can pass to the most perfect scheme in the world that could not pass.'*

*Millicent Fawcett, 29 March 1917*



## MILLICENT GARRETT FAWCETT

Studio photograph by W. & D. Downey c. 1880.

WOA Reference Collection

# WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGNERS:

Emmeline Pankhurst

Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928) was brought up in a politically active family. She became involved in women's suffrage in 1880 and formed the Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU) in 1903. She believed winning the vote would never be achieved by constitutional means. She was imprisoned on a number of occasions for militant action, and went on hunger strike protests.

During the First World War, Emmeline and her daughter Christabel worked to mobilise women for the war effort, believing this was the best way for women to prove they deserved the vote. In contrast, her daughter Sylvia opposed the war and worked to relieve suffering of working women in the East End. After the report of the Speaker's Conference, Emmeline attended a deputation of women war workers to the Prime Minister in March 1917, where she said in war time she wanted to see the vote given '*with as little disputes and as little difference as possible.*'



## EMMELINE PANKHURST

By John H. F. Bacon. Chalk on paper, c.1908.

Parliamentary Art Collection, WOA 5438

# ‘ALMOST A MIRACLE’

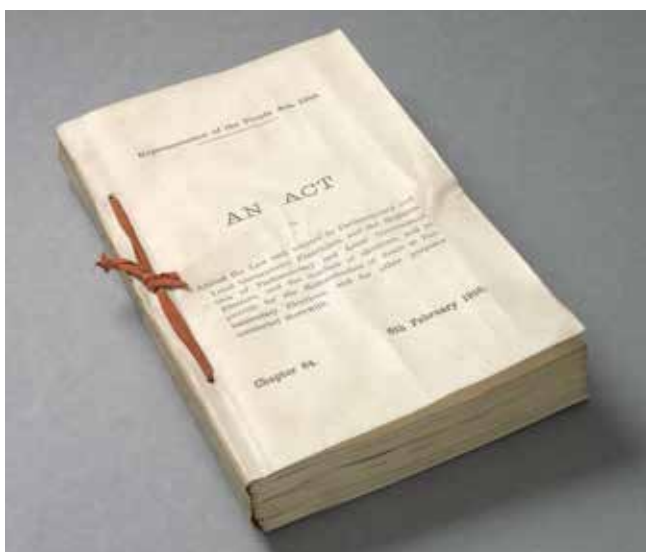
## The Representation of the People Act 1918

The Representation of the People Bill introduced in May 1917 embodied the Conference’s resolutions. The Act gave the vote to all men aged 21 years or older and to men on military or naval service from the age of 19. Women aged 30 or older who qualified for the local government franchise, or whose husbands did, were given the vote – approximately 8.4 million women.

*‘It was thought desirable that women and men should be somewhere about on a parity and we took the age of thirty which was the nearest we could get to make the number of women voters equal to the number of men.’*

*The Speaker, House of Commons Debates, 4 April 1919*

There was still significant opposition to votes for women, including from Conference members Sir Frederick Banbury and Lord Finlay. However many former opponents, including Asquith and Walter Long, announced their support. The Act received Royal Assent on 6 February 1918.



### REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACT 1918

Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1918/7&8G5c64

# VOTE100



The Speaker's Art Fund

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[www.parliament.uk/1917speakersconference](http://www.parliament.uk/1917speakersconference)

**Display and publication supported by:**

The Speaker's Advisory Committee  
on Works of Art

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington  
Parliamentary Archives

**Display Curator:** Dr Mari Takayanagi,  
Vote 100 Exhibition Project

**Designer:** Mark Fisher,  
House of Commons Design Team

Vote 100 is Parliament's project to celebrate the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave all men and some women the vote for the first time, in 2018.