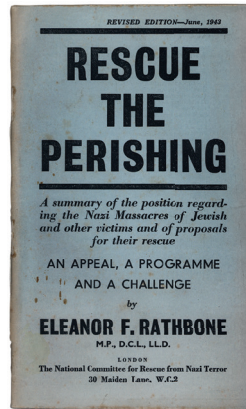




Becoming an MP

Rathbone was elected to Parliament in the 1929 'Flapper' election, as an Independent MP. One of only fourteen women in the House of Commons, she used her new platform to extend her campaigning away from home to feminist colonial issues, challenging child marriage and women's franchise inequalities in India and Palestine (then ruled under a British Mandate), and female circumcision (FGM) in Kenya.

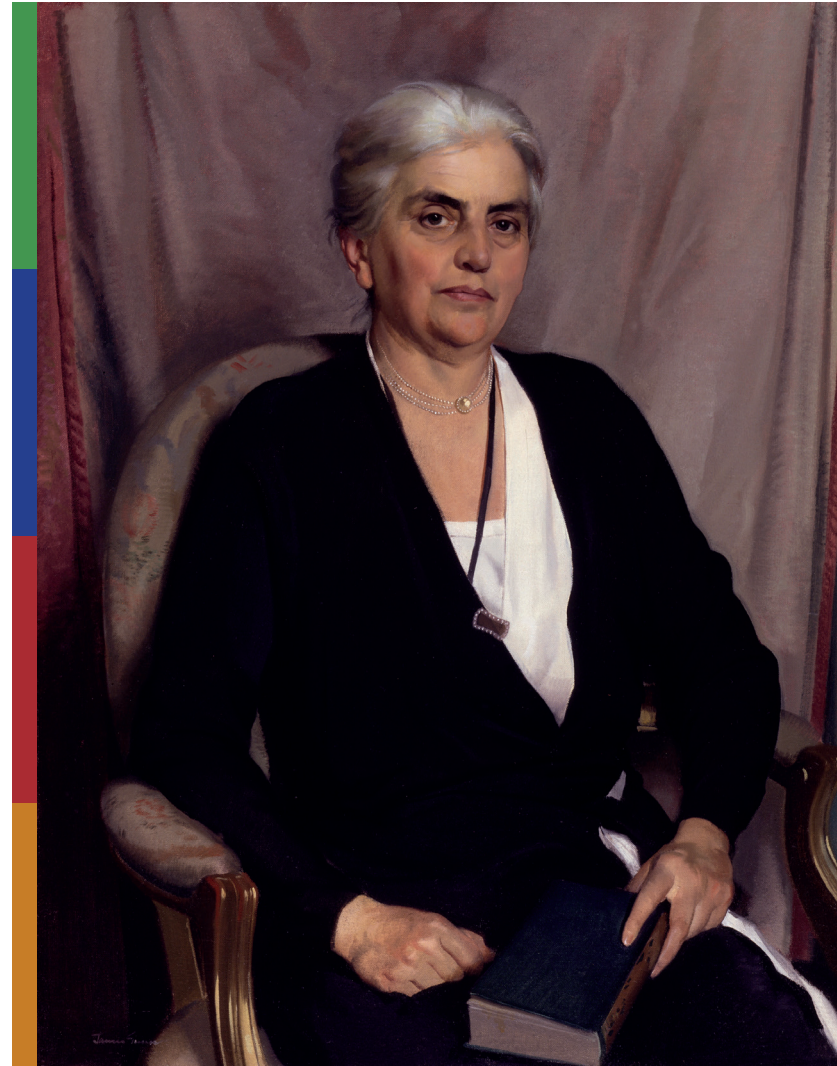
In 1933 she presciently warned of the danger posed by Hitler's regime, and henceforth foreign affairs became a priority. She was a member of the League of Nations Union, which involved her in investigative trips with other women MPs to eastern Europe and Spain, and in the rescue of child refugees from the Basque country. A staunch anti-appeaser, she felt a personal responsibility for the Czech refugee crisis, caused by the Munich settlement, and in November launched a campaign to rescue as many as possible.



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MP for refugees

Rathbone established the Parliamentary Committee on Refugees in 1938 as a vehicle for her campaigns and her efforts to rescue endangered Jews. She challenged ministers and officials and led deputations. She put down more than eighty Parliamentary Questions on internment alone, fighting for improved conditions and challenging the tribunal system. She visited internment camps boosting the morale of the internees. News of the Nazi plans for the mass murder of Europe's Jews precipitated the establishment of the National Committee for Rescue from Nazi Terror in 1942, aimed at raising awareness at home. At the time of her death in January 1946 she was actively involved in the Save Europe Now campaign, challenging the repatriation of Jewish refugees and campaigning for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.



Liverpool Record Office

Reception for Miss Eleanor Rathbone to celebrate her election as an MP, 6 June 1929

For Further Information

www.parliament.uk/vote100

<https://rememberingeleanorrathbone.wordpress.com/>

VOTE100

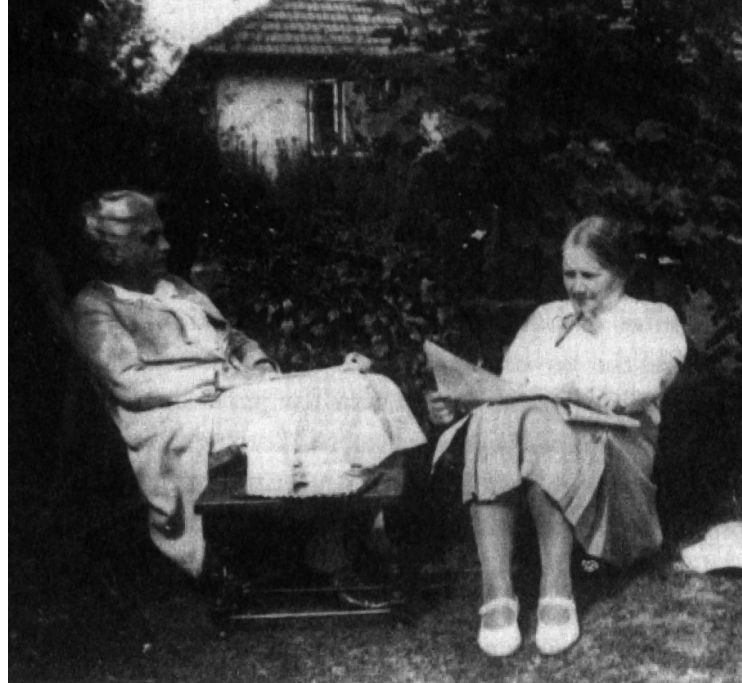
A most independent
Member: **Eleanor
Rathbone MP**

‘Whatever ought to be done, can be done’

Rathbone Family Motto

Eleanor Rathbone (1872-1946) was born in London to Elsie (Emily Acheson Lyle 1832–1918) the second wife of Rathbone’s father the highly-respected Liverpool philanthropist, social reformer and Liberal MP William Rathbone VI (1819-1902). Her parents valued education and impressed the importance of responsible citizenship upon all their children, an ideal informed by the Quaker family heritage. These ideals were reinforced at Somerville College, Oxford, where she became a pioneering female student in 1893. She studied the Idealist school of philosophy which promoted practical social reform, and was noted for her ‘considerable powers of independent thought’. She made many lasting friendships, embraced the feminist and suffragist movements, and co-founded the ‘Associated Prigs’, a discussion society often debating moral issues of the day. Back in Liverpool, she concluded she could not ‘revel in thought for thought’s sake’ with so much misery in the world and so many people needing help. Instead, with her father’s support and help, she launched a career as a social investigator.

Cover image:
Eleanor Rathbone by Sir (Herbert) James Gunn, oil on canvas, 1933.
© National Portrait Gallery, London



Eleanor Rathbone and Elizabeth Macadam in 1937, Liverpool University Special Collections and Archives RP.XIV.3.95 (detail)

Unsuspected Obligations

Rathbone never had a plan of action but responded to the needs of the day. She surveyed and reported upon a raft of social, welfare and political inequalities, from the casual dock labour system, family poverty, poor housing, labour, wage and widows pensions to education and welfare inequalities for women. Pioneering achievements included the establishment of a Council for Voluntary Aid (later the Personal Services Society), a national scheme to pay wartime separation allowances and the first professional training course for social workers in 1905, a joint venture between Rathbone and Elizabeth Macadam (1871–1948), who became her lifelong friend and companion.

Local Politics

Politics became an integral part of Rathbone’s life in 1897 when she was appointed parliamentary secretary of the Liverpool Women’s Suffrage Society. Then in 1909 she was, due to legislative change, the first woman to be elected to Liverpool City Council, as Independent member for Granby Ward. She became the most prominent woman in Liverpool public life, fighting to abolish slums, improve education, wages and working hours. She was elected president of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship in 1919 (formerly the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies), and became a Justice of the Peace in 1920. Her concern about family poverty and women’s economic dependence upon men informed the launch, in 1918, of her twenty-five year campaign for a family allowance to be paid to mothers.



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