

WOMAN SUFFRAGE:
ENGLAND'S INFLUENCE ON THE
AMERICAN MOVEMENT

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The American movement for women's suffrage had reached a standstill by the close of the nineteenth century. No progress was being made, and enthusiasm was at an all time low. In fact, the period from 1896-1910 became known among suffragists as the "doldrums." Yet by 1910, the need for women's suffrage was greater than ever. The movement needed new energy and ideas, and without them it would have remained paralyzed. However the help that was so badly needed was not found in the United States, but in England. Without England's influence, especially in the idea of focusing on a federal amendment rather than state referenda, the existing suffrage movement and its leaders could not have made the advancements which resulted in the eventual passing of the Nineteenth Amendment.

There were many problems plaguing the American suffrage movement by the late 1800s. The most important one was an apathetic attitude held by many, as it was probably the underlying

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cause of many other problems. As Olivia Coolidge, author of *Women's Rights*, wrote, "Nearly every well-meaning person seemed to believe in woman suffrage, and yet nobody cared much about the issue." People just seemed to feel that with all of the political corruption and other problems of the day, suffrage was simply not of paramount importance.¹ Even the suffragists themselves seemed to believe that equal suffrage would just come on its own, without any hard work or effort on their part.² It was just; therefore, it would come. Clearly, the movement lacked enthusiasm.

Another problem within the movement was in leadership and direction. The death of Susan B. Anthony in 1906 had left a void that would not easily be filled. Also, many of the older suffragists who had become leaders in the movement simply did not have the education or experience needed to run a national organization.³ The Reverend Doctor Anna Shaw, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Organization from 1904-1915, was one of the most eloquent speakers of her time but not a good organizer. Between annual conventions, the National Association rarely met, and communication of the leaders by mail was slow and inconsistent. Membership records were not kept, and there was no set procedure for fund-raising. When speeches were made, they were only in parlors or private lecture halls, and usually to people who already supported the cause. Also, working class women were unable to attend because they were held in the afternoons.

Obviously, the movement needed new direction and ideas, yet Dr. Shaw was easily annoyed and reacted to any attempts at new initiative as a potential threat to her leadership, which created an atmosphere not conducive to change.⁴

Another obstacle facing the women's suffrage movement was a very limited membership. Almost all the members were wealthy women without a lot of responsibilities, and as a result many did not view the movement as a movement of all women, but only a few. They felt that only one class of women wanted the vote and that the vast majority of women were content as they were. In fact, many immigrant women working for reform in labor did

indeed “[view] women’s suffrage irrelevant to basic social change, a mere plaything for the middle-classed, privileged woman.”⁵ They felt that it was not as important as other social, industrial, educational, and moral progress.⁶

From its start, the suffrage movement had been associated with temperance. Women were known supporters of prohibition, and many feared that if women gained the vote, prohibition would indeed be passed. The result was that liquor interests had long opposed woman suffrage. In fact, since the 1880s liquor sellers had used a tax to raise funds to fight both prohibition and women’s suffrage. Women’s suffrage was even a greater immediate threat to them, because if it were passed, they knew that it would be almost impossible to repeal, which was not true with prohibition.⁷

Liquor interests proved to be the greatest problem in state referenda, which for many years had been the only tools for advancement of suffrage. They had great influence in big business, organized crime, and the corruption in the political structure. Their power was immense, and they did not hesitate to use any means possible to prevent women’s suffrage. They bought immigrants’ votes, stuffed ballot boxes, used false counts, bribed, threatened voters, and voted illegally. They were even known to print up fraudulent ballots without the suffrage question or make individual suffrage ballots a different shape or color so that it would be easier to remove the yes votes from the ballot boxes so that they couldn’t be counted.

Unfortunately, many women suffragists did not realize that they needed to send delegates out as pollwatchers, a tactic that other reform groups had begun to use to ensure fair results. They were simply too idealistic about democracy to believe that illegal voting and unfair counts actually existed.⁸

Besides falsifying elections, liquor interests had even more ways of fighting against suffrage. The state legislatures themselves also voted on women’s suffrage to decide whether or not it even got on the ballot. At that time elected representatives were often corrupt, and even if they were not bribed with money, they were easily threatened by political pressure and special interest groups.⁹

When delegates from the National Association were sent to New England to question representatives on their views on suffrage, many openly responded that they were not at liberty to say without first consulting “the man who put [them] in.”¹⁰

Yet even with all of this corruption so widely practiced and known about the law could do nothing. At that time, in twenty-five states there was no law for a recount of votes if foul play was suspected. Laws pertaining to such misconduct in other states were vague and useless. Even if a person were convicted of election fraud, the election results would still stand. After the defeat of an Ohio suffrage bill, liquor interests openly and publicly took the credit for fixing the vote. With all of these obstacles, it is no wonder that suffragists were feeling very discouraged.

In 1910, President M. Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr, one of the first women’s colleges in the United States, stated that “the old fashioned arguments for women’s suffrage are being pushed into the background by the urgent practical need of the ballot felt by women today.”¹¹ The “old fashioned” arguments to which she was referring were probably the philosophical ones of equal rights for all people, and not just men, made by John Stuart Mill and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Yet as President Thomas noted, these had become one of the least important arguments of the day.

The first of the new arguments had emerged due to the rapid industrialization and urbanization of women, including many immigrants. Conditions for women laborers in factories, especially in the garment and textile industries, were deplorable. Women were overworked and underpaid, but simply could do nothing about it. Without the right to vote, they did not have the power to convince elected representatives to pass legislation protecting women in the workplace. The argument that a husband could protect his wife and represent her politically with his own vote was continually being disproven as more and more women entered the workplace.¹² Women laborers clearly needed greater means through which they could protect themselves against exploitation by big businesses.

Another new need for women's suffrage was the increasing number of women going on to higher education. The start of the twentieth century brought with it the founding of numerous new colleges and universities open to women. The result was a whole new, young generation of women ready and willing to fight for their rights to suffrage. New advances in medicine, psychology, and sociology were proving to these students that they were in no way inherently inferior to or less intelligent than men and that it was only social custom which made people believe so.¹³ In fact, the twentieth century marked the beginning of a whole generation of more educated and confident women, not content with asking for the right to vote, but demanding it.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the very same argument for women's suffrage had been emerging in England as well. Yet their movement had been in a "doldrums" of its own. The suffragettes, as they were called in England, had worked since 1860 and made little progress, mainly because their tactics were ineffective. Parlor meetings, sending petitions to Parliament, and politely questioning candidates about their opinions were simply not working. Finally, in 1903, British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst decided to form a new organization called the Women's Political and Social Union. She began introducing new methods never used before, such as outdoor meetings, interrupting government speakers at public gatherings and demanding their views, campaigning against anti-suffrage candidates, marching in parades, organizing and recording membership, and seeking the support and aid of working class women. Although many were already shocked by these bold new tactics, the most controversial ones were yet to come.

In 1905 Sir Edward Grey became the leader of England's new liberal government. One evening during a public speech, Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney, two young suffragists, demanded to know his views on votes for women. When he evaded their question, they persistently continued to question in an extremely accusatory manner until they were finally physically thrown out. The police treated them rather roughly, and threw them in jail. When the press learned of the incident, they turned

it into a huge story. It quickly became clear to the suffragettes that “a very small amount of disorderly conduct had done more for the suffrage cause than years of political protest.”¹⁵

Soon, the movement began to use more and more militant tactics; they threw stones, broke windows, poured acid into mailboxes, and attacked Parliament members with whips or bare hands. When arrested, their demand to be treated as political prisoners was denied. They then went on hunger strikes and were brutally force-fed through rubber tubing, which was run into their stomachs as they were held down.

They had showed many doubters that they were serious and would not be ignored, and the press had certainly stopped ignoring them. The constant coverage of the actions of the movement had made women’s suffrage one of the most widely discussed issues in England. In fact, the suffragette movement had even begun to be reported in American papers by 1910.¹⁶

In January, 1907, Harriot Stanton Blatch left England where she had been active in their suffrage movement to return to her home in America. The daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the original founders of the American suffrage movement, Mrs. Blatch saw what had happened to the movement which had meant so much to her mother and wanted to do something to revive it. She decided that it would be useless to try to work through existing suffrage groups, and she therefore founded the Women’s Political Union of New York. Mrs. Blatch had three main objectives for the Union, all of which she took from her experiences in England: to make propaganda more dramatic, to form ties between middle class and working women, and to make workers more politically minded. Within one month after its formation, the Women’s Political Union was already vigorously arguing the New York Women’s Suffrage Bill, which had been dead for years. They also began campaigning against anti-suffrage candidates and holding outdoor meetings. A huge suffrage parade was held, which would become an annual event in New York. Although at first parades were considered highly improper by established suffrage organizations, they quickly became a very common and

respectable form of protest.¹⁷

Another important leader who was influenced by England's methods was Carrie Chapman Catt. She had served as president of the National Association before Dr. Shaw, but had been forced to step down due to family illness. She later went abroad where she learned of the suffrage movements in other countries, especially in England. Although she did not approve of England's militant tactics, she did see how they got results and realized the need for new life in the American movement. She returned to New York in 1907, where she formed the Woman Suffrage Party, with direct political pressure on Albany as its main objective. Mrs. Catt is perhaps best known for her skills as an organizer, and organizing is exactly where she began. First, all members were catalogued by their political districts, which were individually led by trained workers. New leaders were chosen only by willingness to work. They immediately began making a list of sympathizers and opponents. Next, all anti-suffragists were actively campaigned against. To gain public attention, suffrage balls, bazaars, and art exhibits were held. Even buttons and calendars were sold.

As a result of the efforts of both Mrs. Blatch's and Mrs. Catt's organizations, a surge of new activity had begun using many tactics that had until now been unique to England. New recruits were encouraged, candidates were forced to take a stand on suffrage, and pollwatchers regulated local elections. For the first time in fifteen years, the New York Suffrage Bill was actually debated in both houses. And when women in other states learned of all the new activity and ideas in New York, they began revitalizing their own movements, not only using the new tactics from New York, but also trying out many of their own.¹⁸

The National Association itself slowly began to make reforms. In the winter of 1909-1910, Dr. Shaw spoke at one of the largest women laborers strikes in history. The garment makers of New York and Philadelphia had walked out on two of the largest companies of the time, demanding better working conditions, shorter hours, and a minimum wage. Dr. Shaw's speech represented a closing in the gap between wealthy and working class

American women, as had been occurring in England as well. They had begun to unite under a common cause. By 1910, the National Association had special meetings devoted entirely to women in industry. Although not all labor reformers were active in the suffrage movement, many had realized the importance of the vote as a weapon in securing protective legislation. And it was this growing unity among all classes of women that gained the movement much respect as a common cause.

The National Association had also begun to reform its organizational techniques. They kept membership lists, and began rethinking the way in which they chose leaders, emphasizing ability and time to devote to their work. Finally, in 1915, Dr. Shaw stepped down, realizing that her time had passed. She was replaced by Carrie Chapman Catt, who had previously held the position. Mrs. Catt accepted the office with great determination and enthusiasm to reorganize the Association, as was so badly needed, and to make women's suffrage a reality.

Unfortunately, for all of the new enthusiasm, the suffrage movement still had many problems. The corruption in state elections was as strong as ever. Many still had the attitude that suffrage should be won only through state referenda, and not by federal amendment. In a way, taking this position became a compromise between fully supporting, or fully opposing, suffrage. President Theodore Roosevelt became well known for telling suffragists to "go get another state" when questioned about a federal amendment. His attitude was one shared by many. For a long time, the federal amendment was simply a dead issue. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson also stated that he supported women's suffrage only by state referenda, showing that the attitude towards a federal amendment would be a long time in changing.

Yet the idea of having to win suffrage state by state was a very disheartening one. Even with all of the new effort by Mrs. Blatch and Mrs. Catt in New York, the suffrage bill still had not passed. More and more election results were reportedly fixed.

Winning over forty-eight states seemed to many like an endless task.

In England, the movement for women's suffrage was simpler in that it had only campaigned to convert the national parliament.¹⁹ Although it is true that this was their only option in working for suffrage, since they had no states, the idea of campaigning for women's suffrage only as a national issue was one that the American movement had been lacking for many years. The amendment itself had not even been debated in Congress since 1887. The credit for reviving suffrage as a national issue, one that could only be solved by a federal amendment, goes to one of the movement's youngest leaders, Alice Paul.²⁰

With a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, Alice Paul traveled to England to continue her graduate studies at the London School of Economics. She quickly became involved in one of the most militant wings of the suffragette movement. She met Lucy Burns, another recent American college graduate who would soon become one of her best friends. The two were soon arrested for their work in the movement. In prison, they went on hunger strikes and were forcibly fed. Although Miss Paul greatly supported England in its movement, she realized that she wanted to return to the United States to fight for suffrage at home.

Upon her return in 1913, Miss Paul decided that the quickest and most direct way to gain the vote would be by federal amendment.²¹ Along with Lucy Burns, she formed the Congressional Union in Washington, D.C. as a branch of the National Association. The Union's sole purpose was passing an amendment for women's suffrage, an issue that had been dead for twenty-five years.

The Congressional Union's methods were almost exactly like those being used in England. One tactic that Miss Paul had clearly learned in England was holding the party in power as solely responsible for the lack of voting rights for women. The objective of this argument was to put as much pressure as possible on whichever party was in power, as they were the ones with direct

ability to change the laws. Members of this party who did support suffrage, but had done little to further it, did not want to be associated with being anti-suffrage, and therefore felt the need to work harder for the cause. Even those who were not supporters of the movement would not want to be associated with the blame for all of the women suffragists' problems and struggles, especially the imprisonment.

Yet many felt that this argument, one of the strongest in England, was simply not applicable to America. In England, the party in power had complete power over all national affairs, and this was far from true in America. But the Democrats, then in power in the United States, were just as uncomfortable with being accused as solely responsible, as it proved to be a great hindrance in elections. Still, many suffragists did not agree with this tactic as they would be forced to disassociate themselves with many representatives who had been great allies in the past. In fact, the "party in power" issue became so important that it was a major influence in the upcoming split in the suffrage movement.

Another new tactic which Alice Paul brought back with her from England was the use of picketing and militancy. By March 1913, the Congressional Union had organized a parade of eight to ten thousand women. Although the police were supposed to provide adequate protection for the parade, they did not. The women were spat at, slapped, tripped, sworn at, knocked down, and kicked, yet the police did not do much about it. The crowds were getting so violent that a riot would have started had the troops from Ft. Meyer not been called in.

Many more conservative suffragists did not like the growing violence in Washington. The Congressional Union's tactics were simply getting too radical and militant for them. By the spring, the Congressional Union was forced to make a direct split with the National Association, changing their name to the National Woman's Party. The National Association set up their own new branch to work for a federal amendment, but their focus was still on state referenda.

Meanwhile, the Woman's Party was mobilizing. They began picketing the White House almost constantly and publicly attacked President Wilson. They even burned his speeches on the sidewalk in front of the White House. These actions greatly angered many people, because as the threat of world war approached, they felt that Americans should show a united front and patriotism. They felt that the suffragists' picketing was treasonous and an embarrassment to the country.

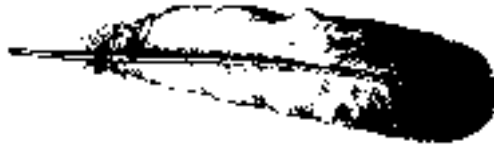
Police began arresting the picketers for "obstructing traffic." Yet as soon as they were released, they went right back to picketing. When they refused to stop, or pay the fines, they were imprisoned. After having been denied the right to be treated as political prisoners, they went on hunger strikes and were forcibly fed.

The tactics used by the Woman's Party were very controversial at the time, as they still are today. It was constantly disputed as to whether they were more of a help or a hindrance to the movement in general. The Woman's Party claimed that they had caused President Wilson to eventually support a federal amendment, while the National Association claimed that he had changed his mind in spite of, and not because of, Alice Paul and her associates.²² Yet even Carrie Chapman Catt, then still President of the National Association, had to admit that "spectacular events carried suffrage messages to the masses of the people as suffrage appeals to reason never could."²³

The Woman's Party has gone down in history as the militant wing of the suffrage movement. Although this is true, it unfortunately causes many to overlook their full contribution to women's suffrage. Besides picketing, they organized parades, lobbied Congress, interviewed candidates, and worked tirelessly for three years on a dead issue that no one else seemed to be willing to fight for, all before the militancy that did not start until 1917. In fact, by the end of 1914, the National Association had gone bankrupt and couldn't even afford state referenda while the Woman's Party was sending delegates out to all suffrage states to

campaign against the Democrats. By 1915 they were organized in all forty-eight states. They had finally made the federal amendment a major issue in the suffrage movement and were gaining new supporters rapidly.

The movement seemed to have found the “new life” that it had so badly needed. Leaders who had returned home from England to revitalize their own suffrage movement had not only given American suffragists many new tactics to use, but also the enthusiasm and spirit to create new methods of their own and to work hard to make equal suffrage for women a reality. This goal was finally achieved in 1920 with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, declaring that the right “to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”



¹ Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1923) p. 169

² Olivia Coolidge, Women's Rights: The Suffrage Movement in America, 1848-1920 (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1966) p. 96

³ *Ibid.*, p. 95

⁴ Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States (New York: Atheneum, 1970) p. 249

⁵ Maxine Schwartz Seller, ed., Immigrant Women (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981) p. 269

⁶ Lois Bannister Merk, Massachusetts and the Women's Suffrage Movement (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961) p. 330

⁷ Coolidge, p. 109

⁸ Catt and Shuler, p. 170

⁹ Coolidge, p. 109

¹⁰ Catt and Shuler, pp. 167-168

¹¹ Flexner, pp. 231-232

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 230-231

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 232

¹⁴ Sandra L. Myers, Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982) p. 231

¹⁵ Coolidge, pp. 98-99

¹⁶ Catt and Shuler, p. 240

¹⁷ Flexner, p. 253

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259

¹⁹ Coolidge, p. 97

²⁰ Flexner, p. 263

²¹ Coolidge, pp. 110-111

²² Catt and Shuler, pp. 259-269

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 241

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