

Speech: PM words at unveiling of Millicent Fawcett statue: 24 April 2018

Behind me, outside the Supreme Court, stands a statue of the Great Emancipator.

To my right, we see the man who did more than any other to gain independence for India.

Opposite Parliament, the man who saved Europe from the grip of fascism.

They are all great men, important men, men who deserve their places in history and in this square.

But I would not be standing here today as Prime Minister...

No female MPs would have taken their seats in Parliament...

None of us would have the rights we now enjoy, were it not for one truly great woman: Dame Millicent Garret Fawcett.

The struggle to achieve votes for women was long and arduous. Dame Millicent was there from the beginning, and devoted her life to the cause.

As a teenager, she collected names for the first pro-Suffrage petition even though she was too young to sign it herself.

As a young woman she overcame a dislike of public speaking and took to the platform at the first women's suffrage meeting to be held in London.

For decade after decade, in the face of often fierce opposition, she travelled the country and the world, campaigning not just for the vote but on a whole range of issues.

She was a tireless advocate for equal access to education, pressuring universities to admit women on equal terms and establishing her own Cambridge college.

She fought for the rights of sex workers, convincing politicians to overturn the discriminatory Contagious Diseases Acts.

She campaigned to protect children from exploitation and abuse, reported on the treatment of civilians in the Boer War...

She was even responsible for Blake's And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time being set to music by Sir Hubert Parry.

History has many authors. In our own small way we each help to shape the

world in which we live.

But few of us can claim to have made an impact as significant and lasting as Dame Millicent, and it is right and proper that, today, she takes her place at the heart of our democracy.

On behalf of the whole country, I would like to thank all those who have made this possible.

Caroline, of course, who spearheaded the calls for a lasting memorial to Dame Millicent.

Sculptor Gillian Wearing, who has created a beautiful and fitting tribute.

Communities Secretary Sajid Javid, who has steered the project on behalf of the government from conception to completion.

And everyone who supported the campaign for this statue over the past two years: from Lord Finkelstein, a vocal advocate from the beginning, to the tens of thousands of individuals who signed petitions, wrote letters and lent their backing in so many ways. And around this square, the Mayor and others who had their role in this statue. This statue is your statue.

After Fawcett's death in 1929, a tribute in one newspaper read that, "Whenever a new victory has been gained by women or some individual woman has found her way in at a new door, the minds of many have turned at once to Dame Millicent."

Almost 90 years later, it is all too easy to forget those who forged a path for generations of women to follow.

To take for granted the progress that they achieved through years – decades – of bitter struggle.

We do so at our peril.

Because the fight for equality is far from won.

And as long as that is the case, we will need brave women and men to stand up and speak out in the face of injustice and discrimination.

Doing so will not always be easy.

But courage calls to courage everywhere.

And, for generations to come, this statue will serve not just as a reminder of Dame Millicent's extraordinary life and legacy, but as inspiration to all of us who wish to follow in her footsteps.