

Speech: PM's Vote 100 speech: 6

February 2018

The 6th of February 1918 may not be as well-known or instantly recognisable as the dates of the wars, battles and coronations that have shaped our nation's history.

But there is no doubt it was a day that forever changed our nation's future. A day when, for the first time, we went from being a country where most people could not vote to one where most people could.

It was another decade before equal suffrage was achieved.

But on that February day – seven centuries after Magna Carta, almost 90 years after the Great Reform Act – the Mother of Parliaments finally earned the right to call itself a true democracy.

A 1909 postcard published by the Women Writers Suffrage League shows a woman being dragged from the feet of Justice by the masked thug of Prejudice. And so it was in real life.

Because the right to vote was not handed over willingly. Rather it had to be forced, over many years of struggle, from the hands of those who held it for themselves. All around us here today are reminders of what that struggle looked like.

Through that small door away to my right is the cupboard where Emily Wilding Davison hid on census night. Up the stairs is St Stephen's Hall, where the statue of Viscount Falkland still bears the mark of Margery Humes, who chained herself to its spur.

Outside, beyond the grand arched window, lie New Palace Yard and Parliament Square, scene of such brutality when suffragettes clashed with police on Black Friday. Now these stories now dwell in the history books, dusted off to share with visiting constituents and schoolchildren. Yet in this hall tonight we see the living legacy of the suffrage campaigners. Hundreds of female Parliamentarians, past and present.

Women who serve or have served as ministers and shadow ministers. A female former Speaker of the House of Commons. A female Prime Minister.

A century after women won the right to send MPs to Westminster, nearly all the parties represented here have a female leader or deputy leader.

The women in this hall come from every corner of the country, indeed from right across the world.

We represent many parties and almost every point on the political spectrum.

None of us are exactly alike, none of our stories are the same.

Yet every one of us is here today because of the heroic, tireless struggle of those who came before us.

Women who led a campaign not just for themselves or their families, but for generations as yet unborn.

Of course, women were not the only people brought into public life by the 1918 act.

It also enfranchised, for the first time, more than five million working class men. Men who – for four, bloody years – had been expected to fight and die for their country, yet had not been trusted with the right to choose who governed it.

So the granting of Royal Assent was a truly momentous moment in our history. Yet when it came, the celebrations were muted.

In 1918, Europe was still at war. In the words of Emmeline Pankhurst – the founder of the Women's Social and Political Union, who I'm proud to say was later adopted as a candidate for the Conservative Party – "the sorrows of the world conflict precluded jubilations". A century on, we're putting that right.

And not just this evening. As we've heard, the celebrations and commemorations will run all year long, both in here in Parliament and across the country.

In an age where millions around the world are denied the right to vote and millions here at home are apathetic about exercising it, it's only right that we all learn more about those who fought so hard to extend the franchise.

We don't hear enough about these Edwardian radicals.

In fact I think for many people, the first time many of us encounter the suffragettes is when we see Mrs Banks in Mary Poppins. It's certainly an entertaining introduction to the "soldiers in petticoats". But in terms of detail I think it leaves a little bit to be desired.

We owe such a debt to the suffrage campaigners that they deserve greater recognition. And that's why, later this year, a statue of Millicent Fawcett will be unveiled in Parliament Square, It's why the government is also helping to fund a statue of Emmeline Pankhurst in her home town of Manchester.

And it's why the Government has put £5 million towards events marking this year's centenary. Events that will recognise and celebrate not just the Pankhursts and the Fawcetts, significant though they were. But also the many other women whose roles are often overlooked. Marion Wallace Dunlop, the illustrator of children's books who staged the first suffragette hunger strike. Sophia Duleep Singh, the Maharaja's daughter who faced both sexual and racial prejudice as she played a leading role in the Women's Tax Resistance League.

Helen Ogston, the “woman with the whip”, who in 1908 was driven from the stage by an angry mob during a suffrage rally in Maidenhead – a town that, many years later, I have the privilege of representing in Parliament. And, of course, the thousands – tens of thousands – of ordinary women and men whose names are lost to history. Some risked arrest and imprisonment. Others were forced out of their jobs. All faced being shunned by family, friends and society.

Yet each played their part in securing a right we should never take for granted – and a right that is still not secure today. Because a century after women were first enfranchised, some are still prevented from taking their place on the electoral roll. Many survivors of domestic abuse are unable to register for fear of revealing their address to an ex-partner. That effectively means the threat of violence is removing women’s right to vote, something that is simply unacceptable. That’s why just before Christmas, the Government laid a series of statutory instruments that will make it easier for those who are at risk of abuse to register and vote anonymously.

Those changes will be debated in the House of Commons tomorrow. I’m sure that, in the week of this significant anniversary for women voters, MPs of all parties will set aside their differences to support this important change.

The need to expand anonymous registration is a reminder that the Act we’re commemorating tonight was only one step on a long journey.

I’m the 54th person to be Prime Minister of this country, but only the second to be a woman. Women make up half the population of this country, yet only a third of its MPs. I’ve long campaigned to get more women into public life at all levels. It’s not about appearances, or even just about giving women an equal chance to get on. I want to see more women in politics and government because greater female representation makes a real difference to everyone’s lives.

The same is true of the many other groups who do not see themselves properly reflected in public life.

People from minority ethnic groups, members of the LGBT community, people with disabilities, or those from less privileged backgrounds. At last year’s election, the proportion of MPs who were educated at comprehensive schools reached a record high – but it’s still just 51 per cent.

So let us celebrate this centenary, and give thanks to those who gave their all so that we might be here today.

But let us also commit ourselves to continuing their work.

To carrying forward the torch they passed to us.

To securing the rights they fought for and ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, is able to play a full and active role in our democracy.

The brave women and men who came before us left us the most precious

inheritance.

Now let us all, through words and deeds, be their fitting heirs.