Britpolitics Fact Sheet – Emmeline Pankhurst

This fact sheet tells you about the life of famous suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst. You can find lots more about the history of elections and voting at [www.britpolitics.co.uk](http://www.britpolitics.co.uk)

# Early Life

Emmeline Goulden was born in Manchester in July 1858. Her parents were Sophia Jane Craine and Robert Goulden. Both were active campaigners against slavery (abolitionists) and helped to raise money for the newly freed slaves in the United States of America.

At the age of 14 Emmeline went with her mother to a suffrage meeting. There she heard Lydia Becker speak about the women’s suffrage movement. Lydia Becker was Secretary of the Manchester National Society for Women’s Suffrage. Lydia was also the editor of the Women's Suffrage Journal, of which Emmeline’s mother was a regular reader.

At age 15 Emmeline was sent to school in Paris where she made friends with Noemie Rochefort, daughter of the Republican journalist Henri Rochefort.

In 1879 Emmeline married the 45-year-old barrister Dr Richard Pankhurst. Richard had long been a supporter of women’s suffrage and worked with Lydia Becker and the Manchester National Society for Women’s Suffrage. He was also in favour of educational reform and advocated freedom of speech. They had five children: Christabel (1880), Estelle Sylvia (1882), Francis Henry (1884), Adela (1885) and Henry Francis (1889).

Soon after her marriage to Richard, Emmeline joined the committee of the Women’s Suffrage Society. Emmeline was also a member of the Married Women’s Property Committee. Richard helped to draft the Married Women’s Property Act, which was passed in 1882. With young children to care for, Emmeline was not the active campaigner that she was to later become.

In 1886 Emmeline and Richard moved with their children to London.

On 13 November 1887 Emmeline attended a free-speech meeting in Trafalgar Square. The Police Commissioner had banned public meetings. Mounted and foot police violently clashed with the assembled crowd. Two of the principal speakers John Burns and the Liberal MP Robert Cunninghame-Graham were arrested and imprisoned. The Trafalgar Square Riot is also known as ‘Bloody Sunday’.

In June 1888 an article, ‘White Slavery in London’ was published in the socialist newspaper The Link. Written by social reformer Annie Besant, the article exposed the low wages and shocking conditions suffered by the match girls at the Bryant and May factory in London.

When the match girls went on strike, Annie Besant launched a public campaign to help them. Emmeline worked with Annie and the match girls on this successful campaign. Annie helped them to set up a Matchmakers Union, which led to improved pay and working conditions at the factory.

In 1888, Emmeline and Richard’s four year-old son Francis Henry died of Diphtheria. This led to the family moving to a property in the more affluent Russell Square. Here the Pankhurst’s were hosts to many political and social reformers such as Annie Besant and William Morris. Emmeline and Richard were both members of the socialist Fabian Society. Ursula Mellor Bright later encouraged Emmeline to join the Women’s Liberal Federation.

# The Women’s Franchise League

In 1889 the Women’s Franchise League (WFL) was formed. Emmeline and Richard were both members. This was a newly created suffrage association and it campaigned for both unmarried and married women to be enfranchised. The WFL refused to support women’s suffrage bills that excluded married women from getting the vote. It also called for equality between men and women in divorce and inheritance. The WFL was a small organisation but many of its members were prominent figures in the women’s rights movement. Early members of the WFL included Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, Alice Cliff Scatcherd and Harriet McIlquham. The WFL was a radical suffrage movement. This radicalism caused discontent among its members and several left the organisation. Elizabeth Wolstenholme–Elmy resigned as Secretary and formed the Women’s Emancipation Union. The WFL was eventually disbanded in the mid 1890’s.

# Manchester

In 1893 Emmeline and her family returned to live in Manchester. Emmeline was friends with Keir Hardie and joined the newly formed Independent Labour Party (ILP) and left the Women’s Liberal Association. Richard also joined the ILP and stood for election as an ILP candidate in Gorton. Emmeline helped with his campaign, although he was unsuccessful.

In 1894, Emmeline was elected to the Chorlton Board of Poor Law Guardians. Appalled by the conditions she observed in the workhouse, Emmeline tried to improve the lives of the inmates. The welfare of the women and children concerned her the most. Emmeline was part of the committee that established a better school for the workhouse children. Emmeline believed that new laws were needed to reform the way women and children in poverty were cared for. However, she felt that these new laws would only come about if women had the vote.

In 1896 the Manchester City Corporation prohibited the ILP from holding open-air meetings at Boggart Hole Clough. ILP members, including Emmeline, continued to organise meetings at the Clough, in defiance of the order. Despite prosecutions and imprisonments, Emmeline herself was prosecuted, the meetings continued. ILP members insisted on the right to free speech. Eventually the Corporation was forced to change its policy. The prosecutions against Emmeline and the other ILP members were dropped.

In 1898 Richard Pankhurst died from a gastric ulcer.

Emmeline resigned from the Board of Poor Law Guardians and took up paid employment as a Registrar of Births and Deaths in Manchester.

In 1900 Emmeline was elected to the Manchester School Board. When the 1902 Education Act abolished school boards, Emmeline became a co-opted member of the LEA’s board of education and was appointed to the Committee on Technical Instruction.

# Women’s Social and Political Union

In October 1903 a group of women suffragists met at Emmeline’s home in Nelson Street and founded the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). The WSPU was not affiliated with any political party and it was only open to women members. Its aim was to gain the enfranchisement for women on the same terms as men. Its members included Emmeline’s three daughters, Christabel, Sylvia and Adela. The motto of the WSPU was to be ‘deeds not words’.

Emmeline spent the first years of the WSPU giving speeches and lectures, mostly in Lancashire. Annie Kenney joined the organisation after a WSPU meeting in Oldham.

The WSPU began a policy of heckling Liberal Cabinet Ministers at public meetings. Several women were arrested and imprisoned for this. These tactics made the enfranchisement of women and the WSPU a topic for the national press.

The WSPU wanted to gain publicity for their cause and to show the public how important the enfranchisement of women was. They believed that with enough favourable support the Government would have to listen and give women the vote. The WSPU also gave public speeches, held meetings and printed pamphlets and leaflets.

Annie Kenney was sent by the WSPU to help establish an office in London.

In May 1906 deputations from several Suffrage organisations and the Parliamentary Women’s Suffrage Committee met with the Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. Emmeline spoke at the meeting on behalf of the WSPU. They outlined the need for a Government measure supporting the enfranchisement of women. The Prime Minister told them to be patient that nothing could be done at that time, as several cabinet ministers were opposed to women having the vote.

The WSPU renewed its heckling campaign against Liberal Cabinet Ministers. They also began sending deputations to try and see the Ministers in person. The WSPU members wanted to discuss their point of view and get their case heard. Across the country, several women were arrested and imprisoned.

In October 1906, Emmeline was injured during a demonstration at the House of Commons. Eleven women were sentenced to imprisonment in Holloway Jail. Among them were Emmeline Pethick Lawrence (treasurer of the WSPU) and Annie Kenney.

The WSPU also established a ‘Keep the Liberals Out’ policy at by-elections. In 1907 Emmeline spent a lot of time travelling around the country campaigning against the Liberal candidate. At a by-election in Devon, Emmeline and Ellen (Nellie) Martel were set upon and physically assaulted by a group of angry men after the defeat of the Liberal candidate.

In 1907 several members, including Charlotte Despard and Teresa Billington Grieg, left to form their own militant society, the Women’s Freedom League. This was in response to the increasingly undemocratic way the WSPU was being run by Emmeline and Christabel. They also objected to some of the more violent tactics the WSPU used. At the same time the WSPU brought in a pledge, that all members had to sign, declaring that they endorsed the methods and objectives of the WSPU and would not support any candidate at Parliamentary elections until women had the vote.

In 1908 Emmeline was one of a small group of women arrested for trying to deliver a petition to the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, at the House of Commons. Emmeline chose to be imprisoned and was sentenced to six weeks in Holloway Jail. Shortly after Emmeline and the other women who had been released from Holloway, campaigned at a by-election in London dressed in prison clothes.

On 21 June 1908 a mass demonstration, which some estimates put at 500,000 people, was held in Hyde Park. Emmeline and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy led the first of seven processions.

On 30 June 1908 Emmeline was part of the deputation of thirteen women who tried, unsuccessfully, to see Herbert Asquith the Prime Minister. A demonstration was held in Parliament Square later that evening. Mary Leigh and Edith New were arrested and sentenced to two months in Holloway Jail for breaking windows. This was the first time that WSPU members had used this tactic. Although they’d acted independently, Emmeline thoroughly approved of their actions.

In October 1908 Emmeline, Christabel and Flora Drummond were sent to Holloway Jail. They were found guilty of attempting to incite a riot, as they had produced handbills encouraging people to ‘rush’ the House of Commons on the evening of 13 October. Christabel had conducted their defence and had called the Cabinet Ministers David Lloyd George and Herbert Gladstone as witnesses during the trial. Emmeline demanded they should be treated as political prisoners rather than as common criminals.

Emmeline was arrested again in June 1909 for trying to assert what she believed was her constitutional right to deliver a petition to the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith.

In October 1909 Emmeline went on her first speaking tour of North America.

In 1910 the WSPU declared a truce with the Government. They suspended their militant actions while awaiting the outcome of the Conciliation Bill. On the 18th November Emmeline tried to deliver a deputation to the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith to demand the Bill be passed. There were violent clashes between the police and the demonstrators ending in many arrests. This became known as Black Friday.

In April 1911, Emmeline and members of the WSPU organised a resistance against the Census. They refused to fill in their census forms or stayed away from home on census night. They wanted the Government to give the new Conciliation Bill a fair chance. The Bill passed its second reading in May 1911. The WSPU called a truce with the Government.

Emmeline was on another speaking tour of North America when she heard that the Conciliation Bill had failed. The truce came to an end and window breaking resumed on a grand scale.

Emmeline returned to England in early 1912. At a WSPU meeting Emmeline advocated the destruction of property to try and force the Government to enfranchise women. Emmeline was arrested and sent to prison for breaking windows in Downing Street.

The police raided the London office of the WSPU. Christabel fled to France and continued running the organisation from there. Emmeline Pankhurst, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence and Frederick Pethick Lawrence were put on trial at the Old Bailey. They were found guilty of conspiracy to commit property damage and sentenced to nine months in prison. Emmeline went on hunger strike, avoided being force-fed and was subsequently released early on medical grounds.

Emmeline and the WSPU called for an increase in militant action. This led to wide spread acts of property destruction, including window breaking and arson. Several members were unhappy with this decision and left the organisation. Emmeline Pethick Lawrence and her husband Frederick were forced to leave the WSPU for criticising this tactic.

Adela Pankhurst and Sylvia Pankhurst also left the WSPU over disagreements in policy. This created a family rift with Emmeline. Adela later moved to Australia.

In 1913 Emmeline was arrested and stood trial at the Old Bailey for having "counselled and procured" persons unknown to bomb an empty property belonging to David Lloyd-George. Emmeline was sentenced to three years in Holloway Jail. Emmeline went on hunger strike and then thirst strike as well.

In 1913 the Government had brought in The Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act, known as the "Cat and Mouse Act". This was an attempt to defeat the suffragette’s tactic of securing an early release by going on hunger strike. Once a prisoner’s health had deteriorated to a critical level they would be released to recover. They could then be re-arrested at any time and re-imprisoned to serve the remainder of their sentence.

Emmeline was released and re-imprisoned several times under the Cat and Mouse Act in 1913 and 1914.

During this period she continued to keep up her work for the WSPU, giving speeches and attending meetings. She also travelled to America and went to see Christabel in Paris.

# The First World War Starts

When war was declared in August 1914 the WSPU suspended its militant activities in return for the government releasing all suffragette prisoners. The WSPU supported the war effort, encouraging men to fight and women to take up employment in factories. The government enlisted the help of Emmeline and the WSPU, providing the funding for a patriotic rally in London. 30,000 people attended. Emmeline called on the trade unions to allow women to take over men’s jobs. One of the rally’s slogans was ‘men must fight and women must work’.

Emmeline herself was very patriotic and was determined to help the country win the war. As well as lecturing and holding rallies around the country, Emmeline also travelled to America to encourage them to support Britain in the war with Germany. In 1917 Emmeline travelled with Jessie Kenney to Russia. Here Emmeline met with the Russian Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky and other high-ranking officials, to try and keep Russia in the war.

Emmeline was also concerned with the plight of illegitimate young children ‘war babies’, whose fathers were absent. Although in her late fifties, Emmeline adopted four children.

The pro-war stance Emmeline and Christabel imposed on the WSPU and the suspension of the suffrage campaign caused disagreements amongst its members.

The WSPU was eventually disbanded in 1917.

# The Women’s Party

In 1917 Emmeline and Christabel formed The Women’s Party. The Party still advocated equality for women. It called for the defeat of Germany and measures that would help Britain to achieve this, such as the closing down of non-essential industries and the introduction of food kitchens. It also called for the abolition of trade unions.

Christabel stood, unsuccessfully, in the General Election of 1918 as a Women’s Party candidate.

The Women’s Party disbanded in June 1919.

# Later Life

In 1922 Emmeline moved to Canada with her four adopted children returning to England in 1925.

In 1926 Emmeline joined the Conservative Party and stood, unsuccessfully as an electoral candidate.

Emmeline Pankhurst died on 14 June 1928, age 69. On the 2 July 1928 The Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act became law. This Act gave women equal voting rights with men.

Emmeline was buried in Brompton Cemetery, London on 18 June 1928.

# Legacy

Emmeline Pankhurst raised public awareness of the women’s suffrage movement but it is still disputed whether the militancy and violence used by the WSPU hindered or helped the cause.

In 1930 the former Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin unveiled a statue of Emmeline Pankhurst. It stands in the Victoria Tower Gardens, London. The inscription reads, “This statue of Emmeline Pankhurst was erected as a tribute to her courageous leadership of the movement for the enfranchisement of women.”

Emmeline Pankhurst’s house at 62 Nelson Street, Manchester is now the Pankhurst Centre. It contains a women’s centre and a small museum dedicated to the Pankhurst family and their role in the campaign for women’s suffrage.