

# Holloway Prison and the Suffragettes

In the early 1900s, women who wanted equal rights with men began a high-profile campaign to demand 'suffrage': the right to vote.

Many of these Suffragettes were jailed in Holloway Prison for taking militant action in their fight for the vote and the prison became the scene of the first Suffragette hunger strikes.

This exhibition examines our local links to the campaign for votes for women.



Suffragettes released from Holloway Prison in August 1908 after serving six-week sentences for disturbing the peace. Hundreds of well-wishers greeted the women. Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library.

# The start of militant action

The Suffragettes were members of organisations such as the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and Women's Freedom League. The name 'Suffragettes' was coined by the *Daily Mail* but adopted by the women themselves.

The Suffragette campaigns began with public demonstrations but became increasingly militant. In particular, WSPU members, led by Emmeline Pankhurst, began new tactics such as breaking windows, damaging letter-boxes and confronting politicians.

Protesters across the country were imprisoned for breaking the law and over 1,000 were jailed in Holloway Prison alone.

## Anti-Suffragette reaction

The Suffragettes attracted great controversy, including opposition from 'anti-suffrage' groups. They were also criticised by other women's suffrage campaigners who preferred peaceful methods of protest.

However, the WSPU had a substantial number of members and support from some Members of Parliament.

**“We have touched the limit of public demonstration... Nothing but militant action is left to us now”**

**Emmeline Pethick Lawrence**



Anti-suffrage postcard, c1909. There is a striking contrast between the Suffragette portrayed here and in the *Votes for Women* advertisement.



Suffragette motor scarf in the WSPU colours of purple, green and white. The WSPU encouraged members to wear these colours at all times. Photo: Museum of London.



Suffragettes from north Islington in a procession towards 'Women's Sunday', a mass demonstration in Hyde Park in June 1908. Photo: Museum of London.



Advertisement for the WSPU newspaper *Votes for Women*, c1907.



Suffragette arrested while demanding to see the king at Buckingham Palace in 1914. Photo: The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University.

# Hunger strikes in Holloway

The campaign escalated further when Suffragettes in Holloway Prison began hunger strikes in July 1909.

The first woman to refuse food was Marion Wallace Dunlop, who was in prison for rubber-stamping a passage from the Bill of Rights onto a wall of the House of Commons. She demanded to be treated as a political prisoner rather than a criminal.

Other Suffragettes in Holloway began hunger strikes a few days later and most were released within days. In response to their complaints, MPs and the Home Secretary visited the prison in August and conditions were improved.

Suffragettes were still jailed as criminals, however, and more hunger strikes followed in Holloway and other prisons.

## Feeding by force

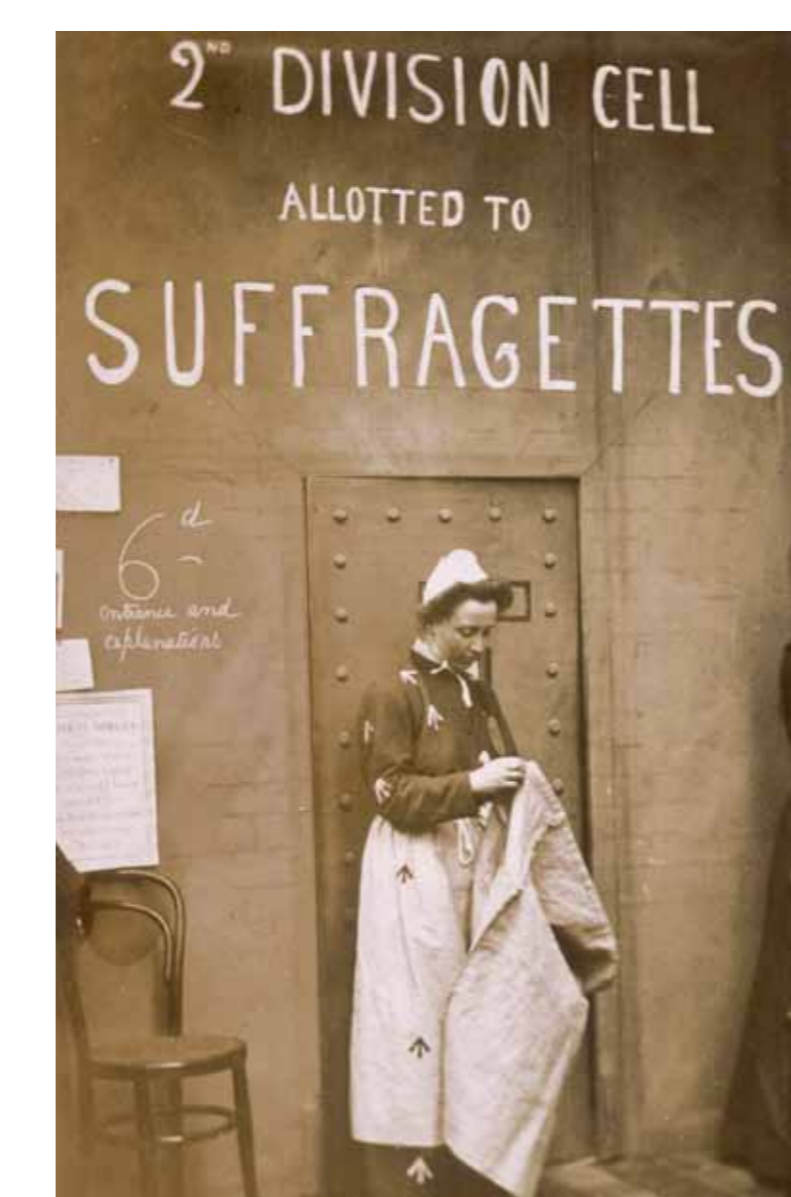
The government were unwilling to continue setting free Suffragettes who went on hunger strike.

In September, prison doctors began force-feeding women who refused to eat. This was a violent and painful procedure, using a tube fed through the nose or throat.

Many women were force-fed between 1909 and 1914. In 1912, during a mass hunger strike at Holloway, one Suffragette prisoner threw herself over a staircase to try to force the authorities to end the situation.

**“Holloway became a place of horror and torment... sickening scenes of violence took place almost every hour of the day as doctors went from cell to cell”**

**Emmeline Pankhurst**



Reconstruction of a Suffragettes' prison cell and uniform, staged for a WSPU exhibition in 1909. Photo: The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University.



Holloway Prison, c1906.



Senior members of the WPSU, c1910, all of whom went on hunger strike. From left: Lady Constance Lytton, Annie Kenney, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, Christabel Pankhurst and Sylvia Pankhurst. Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library.



Cover of the WSPU magazine, *The Suffragette*, 10 Jan 1913, depicting the brutal process of force-feeding.

**PUBLISHED 4th MARCH.**  
By Lady Constance Lytton and  
Jane Warton, Spinster

## **PRISONS & PRISONERS**

ALL WHO HAVE THE CAUSE at heart must read this splendid personal record of Lady Constance Lytton's imprisonments. Her whole-hearted sacrifices are well known, and this book is the outcome of her observation, reasoning, and dispassionate criticisms upon the prison system of England as applied to women. The acute sufferings that she endured are graphically described.

**A BOOK OF HEROISM**  
Bound in purple with W.S.P.U. badge.  
36 net.

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN.

Advertisement from *The Suffragette* for a book published in 1914 by Lady Constance Lytton. After receiving preferential treatment in Holloway, Lytton disguised herself as a working-class woman. Jailed in Liverpool for a public protest, 'Jane Warton' was force-fed but released when her true identity became known.

# National controversy

Force-feeding was widely reported and debated in national newspapers. Two well-known writers for the *Daily News* resigned when the newspaper supported the government policy.

In Parliament, the Home Secretary argued that force-feeding was neither dangerous nor seriously painful. In response, the WSPU collected statements from doctors to confirm that it was not a safe procedure.

The policy continued and the WSPU produced posters and leaflets to describe the horrors and dangers of being force-fed. They also held regular demonstrations in the streets outside Holloway Prison.

## No change in government policy

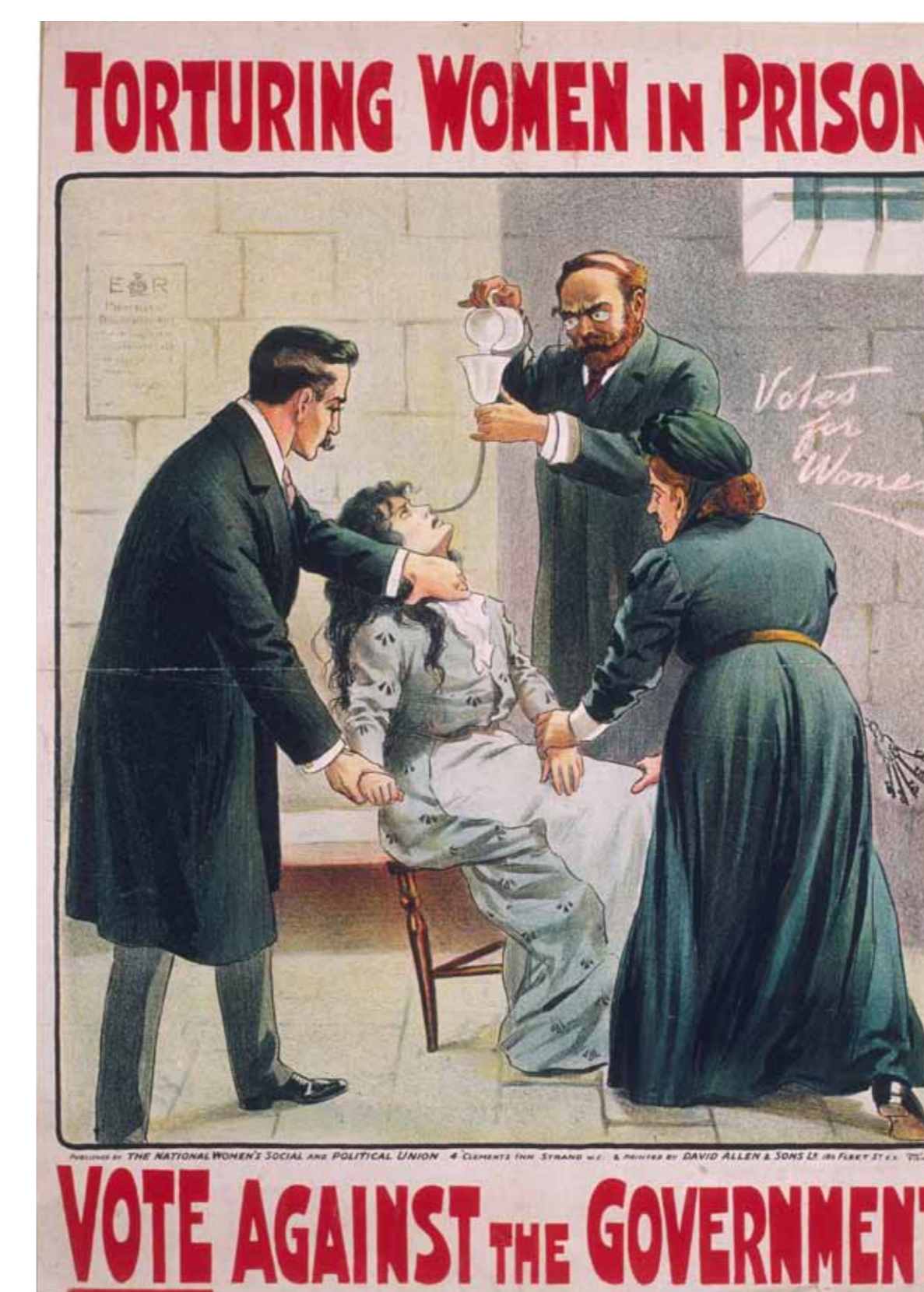
In the run-up to the 1910 general election, Suffragettes encouraged their supporters – and others appalled by the practice of force-feeding – to vote against the government.

The Liberals won the election but with a reduced majority. The practice of force-feeding continued, although the majority of MPs wanted it to end.

Many politicians and commentators opposed to the Suffragettes believed that women on hunger strike should be allowed to starve to death.

The government disagreed, still fearing that if Suffragettes died in prison, there would be overwhelming public support for votes for women.

**“What remains? Only imprisonment, with prison food and the natural consequence of not taking food in a natural way – that is death. This seems to me to be the plain truth, and the sooner we make up our minds to it the better”**  
**‘A Magistrate’, writing to *The Times***



WSPU poster campaigning against force-feeding and the Liberal government, 1914. Other, more violent illustrations were also produced, as already shown. Photo: The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University.



Illustration from *Punch* magazine, 5 Mar 1913, questioning the morality of the policy of force-feeding. *Punch* frequently published illustrations and humorous cartoons commenting on the Suffragette campaign.

Suffragettes treated their fight for votes as a military campaign and paid great tribute to women jailed for the cause. Medals were awarded to WSPU members who served prison sentences and 'Roll of Honour' tables such as this example, dated 11 Apr 1913, were printed regularly in *The Suffragette*. Medal photo: Museum of London.



THE ROLL OF HONOUR.			
Suffragists in Prison.	Date when sentenced.	Length of sentence.	Place of Imprisonment.
Miss Louisa Gay .. .. .	Jan. 9	8 months.	Holloway.
Mrs. Ethel Beckett .. .. .	Feb. 7	3 months.	Holloway.
Miss Mabel Mariel Scholfield .. .. .	Feb. 7	3 months.	Holloway.
Mrs. Mary Louisa Miles .. .. .	Feb. 7	3 months.	Holloway.
Mrs. Maud Brindley .. .. .	Feb. 7	5 months.	Holloway.
Miss Jane Short .. .. .	Feb. 21	6 months.	Holloway.
Miss Pleasance Pendered .. .. .	Feb. 21	4 months.	Holloway.
Miss Ella Stevenson .. .. .	Mar. 5	9 months.	Holloway.
Mr. Hugh Franklu .. .. .	Mar. 8	9 months.	Wormwood Scrubs.
Miss Marjory Masters .. .. .	Mar. 15	1 month.	Holloway.
Miss Margaret McFarlane .. .. .	Mar. 20	6 months.	Holloway.
Miss Lewhellyn .. .. .	Mar. 27	1 month.	Holloway.
Mrs. Pankhurst .. .. .	April 3	3 years' penal serv.	Holloway.
Miss Isabel Irving .. .. .	April 4	6 months' Hard Labour	Holloway.
Miss Olive Hockin .. .. .	April 4	4 months.	Holloway.
Miss Phyllis Brady .. .. .	April 4	Remanded without bail.	Holloway.
Miss Millicent Dean .. .. .	April 4	Remanded without bail.	Holloway.

# The Liberal Cat and Suffragette Mouse

In March 1913, as the controversy continued, the government introduced the *Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act*.

This law allowed prisons to release women weakened by hunger strikes and imprison them again when they recovered. It became known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act', after the way a cat teases a captured mouse.

Women released under the act were often very unwell. Many Suffragettes discharged from Holloway were taken to a house used by the WSPU in nearby Dalmeny Avenue.

According to *The Suffragette* newspaper, women were still frail when they returned to prison, where they frequently resumed their hunger strikes. Some avoided arrest and continued campaigning. Inside the prisons, despite the Act, some women were still being force-fed.

## WSPU protests and public reaction

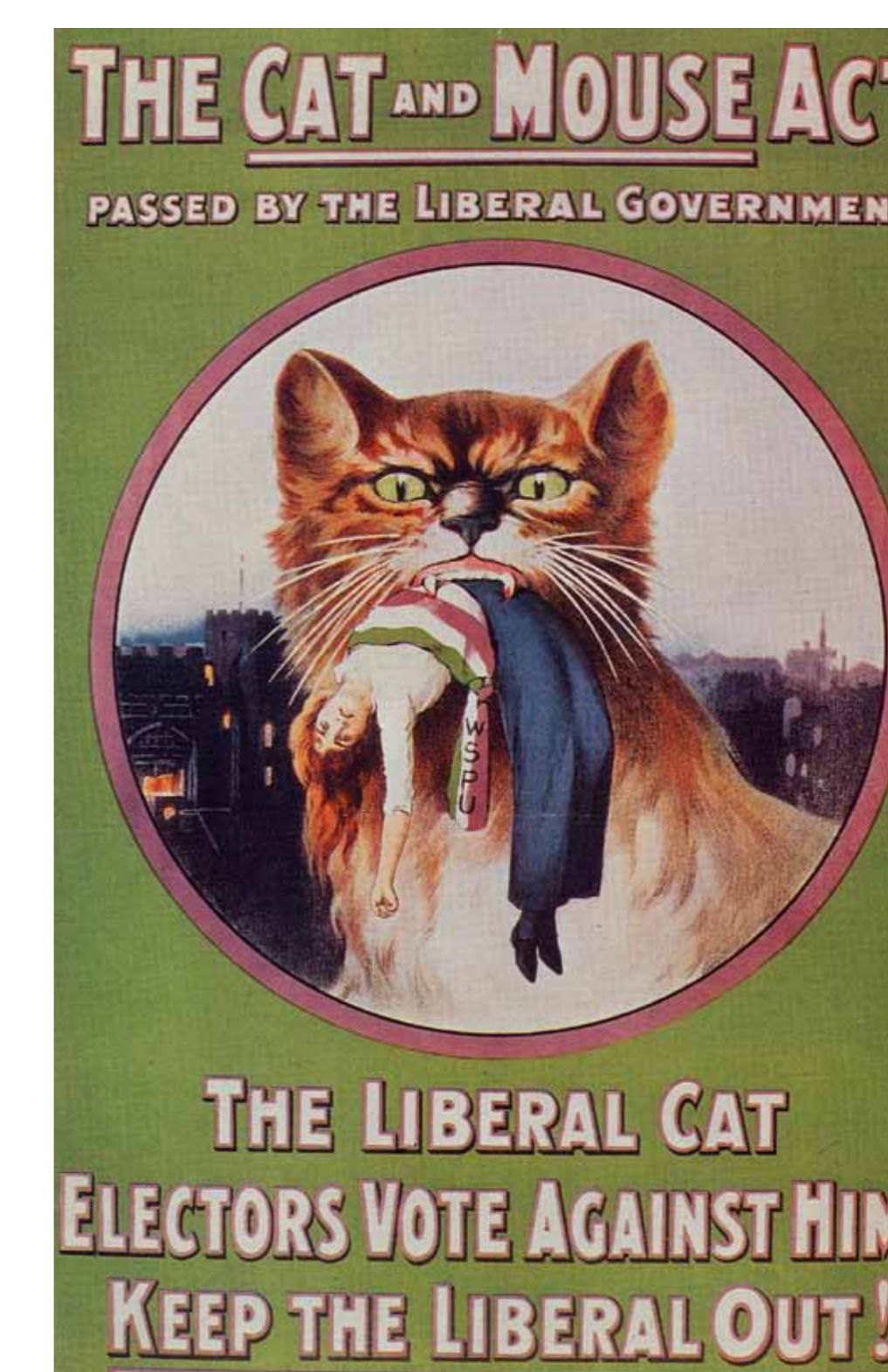
The WSPU campaigned vigorously against the Act, gathering support from influential people including doctors and clergymen.

News reports of women released and re-arrested under the Act increased national concern about Suffragette prisoners.

However, there was also increasing public hostility and alarm as the Suffragettes' campaign became much more violent. They resorted to frequent attacks on property, including burning down empty buildings and attacking works of art. In December 1913, they also attempted to blow up a wall at Holloway Prison.

**“Methods of repression and expedients like the Cat-And-Mouse Act would deserve ridicule, were it not for the sufferings they involve.”**

**Bishop of London, writing to *The Times***



WSPU poster campaigning against the Cat & Mouse Act and the Liberal government, 1913.

**CAT AND MOUSE TORTURE,**  
Miss ANNIE KENNEY, Miss RACHEL BARRETT, Miss LAKE,  
and Miss LENNOX  
**RE - ARRESTED.**

**MISS KENNEY'S HEALTH.**

**RELEASED SUFFRAGIST AT A MEETING.**

Miss Annie Kenney, who was released from Holloway on October 13, after a hunger strike of eight days, was yesterday carried to the weekly meeting of the Women's Social and Political Union, held at Knightsbridge Hall, W. Mrs. Dacre Fox, who presided, said Miss Kenney was in a very weak state, and her desire was that there should be no cheering.

News articles reporting that Suffragettes including Annie Kenney had been returned to prison (*The Suffragette*, 4 Jul 1913) and that Kenney had again been released in poor health (*The Times*, 20 Oct 1913).

**The Holloway Prison Explosion.**

Two thunderous explosions outside Holloway Gaol on Thursday night gave rise to the rumour that some misguided women had attempted to blow up the prison which has become a lodging-house for the London militants. As a matter of fact, gunpowder or some other explosive had been used to blow two small cavities in the outer wall of the gaol which borders the rear of Dalmeny avenue. Fuses had been laid, but no one was hurt except, perhaps, the perpetrator, who in her hurry to escape left a tress of auburn hair entangled in the wire on the top of the garden wall.

Report from the *Islington Gazette*, 22 Dec 1913, of an explosion at Holloway Prison.



News stand poster, c1913. Although the Suffragettes were careful not to endanger human life, their heightened campaign created an atmosphere of fear and anxiety. Photo: The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University

# Outbreak of war

The Suffragettes continued their campaign in the build-up to the First World War, which they criticised as a 'man-made' conflict.

Once war was declared, however, the WSPU campaign was suspended and its members pledged support for the war effort. The government agreed to release all Suffragettes from prison.

As men went away to fight, women made an important contribution to the war effort by filling the jobs left vacant by soldiers.

WSPU members set up new campaigns to support women war workers and to propose compulsory war service for men and women.

## Votes for women granted

Women were finally granted the vote as the war was drawing to a close, with the *Representation of the People Act 1918*. This legislation allowed all women over the age of 30 the right to vote.

Women were finally granted the vote on the same terms as men in 1928.

## Lasting legacy

The violent campaign of the WPSU has been the subject of much historical debate.

However, one century on from the hunger strikes in Holloway, the Suffragettes remain the most enduring symbol of the fight for votes for women.

**“In times of war the rules of peace must be set aside and we must put ourselves without delay upon a war basis, let women stand shoulder to shoulder with the men to win the common victory which we all desire”**

**Emmeline Pankhurst**



Headline from *The Suffragette*, 16 April 1915, highlighting the recruitment efforts and war work of WSPU members.

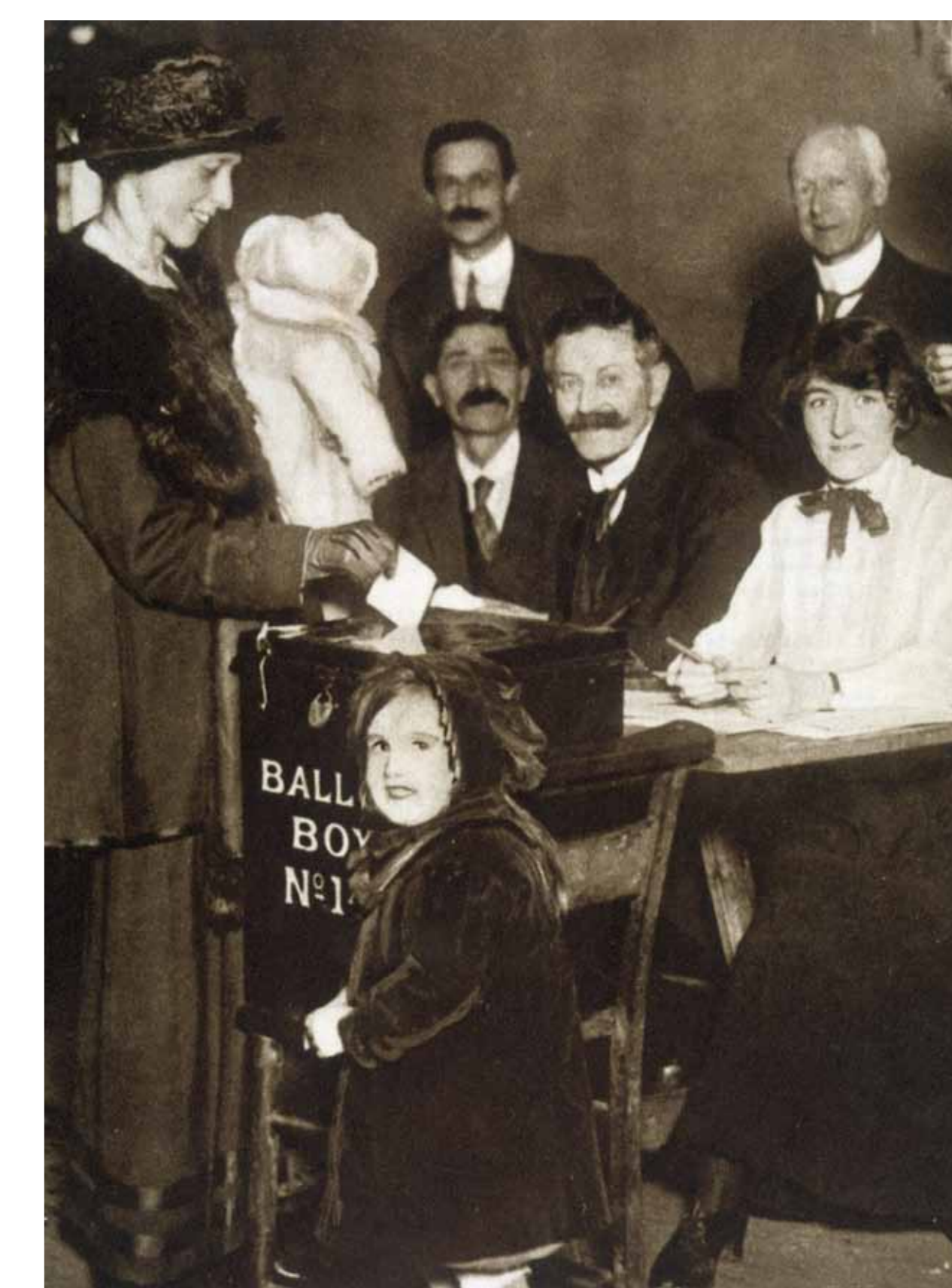


Members of the WSPU introduce Prime Minister David Lloyd George to female munitions workers in September 1918. Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library.

## Acknowledgements

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Exhibition researched by Allie Dillon.



A woman voting in a parliamentary election for the first time, 1918. Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library.