

# **A brief history of women and the vote in New Zealand**

## **New Zealand women get the vote**

'Womanhood Franchise granted!!!' With uncharacteristic excitement Catherine Fulton, the dignified matriarch of a landowning New Zealand family, recorded this in her diary on 19 September 1893. Her exclamation reflected the elation of women all over the country. When the news came through that the governor had signed the measure that enfranchised women there was spontaneous celebration. 'Splendid meeting', ran the telegraphed account of one gathering, 'City Hall crammed mostly women enthusiasm unbounded thousand handkerchiefs waving for victory.

Women were celebrating not only their enfranchisement - the right to vote in general elections - and a major advance towards equality in citizenship, but also the chance to influence society. For some, this was the most important part of winning the vote. New Zealand was the first country in the world to grant women the vote and congratulations poured in from suffragists elsewhere: the achievement of New Zealand women gave 'new hope and life to all women struggling for emancipation'. The campaign for the vote in remote New Zealand was part of the movement for women's rights in Europe, Britain and its colonies and the United States.

## **First-wave feminism**

Two main themes ran through the 'first-wave feminism' of the late nineteenth century: equal rights for women and moral reform of society. The equal rights movement had its origin in the eighteenth century. The philosophers of the Enlightenment envisaged individual political rights for men, but the arguments they employed could logically be extended to women. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft, inspired by the early French Revolution and especially the Declaration of the Rights of Man, produced the founding text of equal-rights feminism, *A vindication of the rights of woman*.

Movements for moral reform, and a significant role for women within them, may be traced to the evangelical revival of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and, beyond that, to a spiritual individualism which stressed the responsibility of all believers, women as well as men, for their own salvation. In both Britain and America, the evangelical revival generated movements and groups aiming at specific social reforms, in an effort to purify society of moral abuses. In these movements, and also in Protestant churches without a strict hierarchical structure, women had enhanced opportunities for participation and even for leadership. There was, too, in such circles, a view of women which stressed their moral character, conferring on them a special moral mission.

## **The British suffrage campaign**

By the 1860s middle-class women in Britain were organising to claim married women's property rights, expanded career opportunities and the vote. They found a powerful ally in one of the most distinguished men of the age, John Stuart Mill.

Recently elected to the British Parliament, Mill presented a women's petition for suffrage in 1866. He followed this up with a motion to enfranchise women, thereby initiating the first parliamentary debate on the topic. The British suffrage campaign was launched. When in 1869 Mill published *On the subjection of women*, arguing the feminist case in terms of liberal individualism, its impact was immediate and profound, not only in Britain but also in America, Australia and New Zealand.

### **Beginnings of the New Zealand debate**

In 1870 Mill wrote to Mary Müller in Nelson, sending her a copy of his book and congratulating her on the 'excellent beginning' New Zealand women had made in claiming their rights. Müller's writings as 'Femina' mark the beginning of the women's suffrage movement in New Zealand. The time was right. By the end of the 1860s colonial society had become more settled, prosperous and optimistic. People enjoyed a high standard of living, and a degree of social equality was evidenced — in the case of women — by the self-confident wage bargaining of domestic servants. This was the background to a lively debate in Auckland in 1871–72 when the activist Mary Colclough or 'Polly Plum' — converted to the cause of women's rights, she said, by reading Mill — took on all comers in the columns of the press and in public meetings.

### **Early attempts at legislation**

During the 1870s Mary Müller discreetly continued to promote women's suffrage among the many politicians of her acquaintance. It is probably she who persuaded two key political figures, William Fox and Alfred Saunders, to take it up. Robert Stout, one of the first prominent men to speak publicly on women's suffrage, claimed in 1871 to have been converted by reading Mill's work.

Women ratepayers' voting rights in municipal elections, already recognised in Nelson and Otago, were extended to all the provinces in 1875. It suggests growing support for women's rights as citizens in the wider community during the 1870s: the end of the decade saw the first determined efforts to introduce legislation for the parliamentary franchise. In 1878 and 1879 the temper of the country's lower and upper houses of Parliament — the House of Representatives and the Legislative Council — was notably liberal. In the 1878 session members welcomed an Electoral Bill introduced by Robert Stout, which included a clause to enfranchise women ratepayers. It opened up debate on the whole question. That the bill failed to become law was for reasons quite unconnected with the issue of women's suffrage.

After this encouraging beginning expectations among suffragists were high in 1879: the government was headed by John Hall, a steady friend of women's suffrage, and many members of the previous House had been returned. The Qualification of Electors Bill, which proposed giving women property owners the vote, was introduced. It soon became clear that granting the vote to women ratepayers was no longer acceptable. In 1880 and 1881 further efforts by James Wallis to bring in women's suffrage also failed. The right of married women to their own property was guaranteed in 1884. But the question of the parliamentary vote was set aside until the end of the decade.

### **Developments in the United States**

By the time it was taken up again the situation had changed. Closer links with the United States (symbolised as well as facilitated by the opening of a steamship mail link between Auckland and San Francisco in 1871) were bringing New Zealand into touch with a society in many ways akin to its own, shaped by immigration rather than emigration: a country where women were still outnumbered by men in the more remote areas; a new world crackling with energy.

Many of the concerns of American women coincided with those of women in New Zealand, notably the widespread abuse of alcohol. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) spread rapidly in America after its foundation in 1874, developing a broad programme of social reform. Its president from 1879, Frances Willard, persuaded members that women should protect their homes and families from liquor by claiming, through the vote, their rightful voice in public affairs. Missionaries of the union were sent abroad in 1885 with this message. Mary Leavitt, who reached Auckland in February, found a receptive audience. Travelling the length of the country, with the assistance of Anne Ward she set up branches of the first national women's organisation in New Zealand, the New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Union. After eight years it would lead the movement for the enfranchisement of women to a successful conclusion.

### **The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in New Zealand**

Women of New Zealand sprang into action in the suffrage cause. New Zealand was becoming a mature society in terms of gender balance, urbanisation and industrialisation, but in the 1880s the country entered a period of economic recession which would last to the mid 1890s. In the principal towns problems associated with the Old World — poverty, sexual licence and disorder — were being reproduced. Many New Zealand women blamed alcohol for the disorder of society and welcomed a women's organisation that sought to ban it.

As in the United States, the WCTU in New Zealand was divided into departments. Most were devoted to charitable activities, such as running soup kitchens, visiting prisons and hospitals, and youth work. The franchise and legislation department headed the suffrage campaign, and in Kate Sheppard, from 1887, it found an ideal leader: a woman without sectarian narrowness, characterised by judgement, tolerance and charm. Her means of action — pamphlets, letters to the press, talks, personal contact with politicians, petitions — were those of overseas suffrage groups, with whom she maintained regular contact.

The organisation was always limited by lack of funds, but not the least of Kate Sheppard's talents was making a little money go a long way. Writing in the *Prohibitionist*, she kept women up to date not only on the New Zealand suffrage movement but also those in other countries. The campaign was in no way a one-woman operation, but the personal contribution of Kate Sheppard cannot be too heavily stressed.

### **Further legislative attempts**

Women suffragists in the WCTU sought ties with members of Parliament favourable to their cause. Kate Sheppard found an invaluable ally in the courteous and

punctilious John Hall, who led the pro-suffrage group in Parliament and supported the women suffragists outside. Prospects for the cause looked good under the Stout–Vogel ministry (1884–87), in office when the campaign began. Although the liquor lobby opposed women's suffrage, which it viewed as a temperance plot, both government leaders were favourable to it, as was John Ballance, another key member of the ministry. In 1887 Julius Vogel introduced a Women's Suffrage Bill which included the right to sit in Parliament. Despite the customary jokes and innuendoes about the problems of dealing with ladies in the House, it passed its second-reading vote, only to be defeated at the committee stage by the machinations of its opponents.

It was August 1890 before the matter was raised again. Hall put an unexpected motion in favour of the women's franchise which initiated a full-scale debate, culminating in a division with a majority in favour. But later in the month, both his Women's Franchise Bill and his amendment to the Electoral Bill failed. The Women's Franchise Bill was introduced late in the session and did not receive sufficient support from ministers to make it viable; the amendment to the Electoral Bill was defeated at a vote taken at 2 a.m. when some supporters were absent and others changed sides. Clearly, more pressure on politicians was needed if women's suffrage was to be secured.

### **Early suffrage petitions**

Between 1890 and 1893 the women's suffrage campaign all over New Zealand gained momentum. WCTU women broadened the base of their movement by drawing in non-temperance women, working-class women, the educated élite, and women in more isolated areas. They supported Women's Franchise Leagues, which had no temperance connection, and organised massive petitions, open for signature by all adult women. The debate on women's suffrage was particularly intense in Dunedin where the movement had energetic leaders and organisers in Harriet Morison, Marion Hatton and Helen Nicol. Dunedin canvassers for the suffrage petitions consistently — and by a wide margin — collected more signatures than workers in other centres. Suffragists there were fortunate in having an ideal opponent, a man they could love to hate, in Henry Smith Fish, representative of the liquor trade in Dunedin city and in Parliament — the very stereotype of simplistic anti-suffragism and boorishness.

### **Women's Franchise Leagues**

In April 1892 Nicol, Morison and Hatton organised the first Women's Franchise League, with Anna Stout as nominal president and Hatton as executive president. Morison urged women to support the suffrage campaign because they 'had to obey the same laws as men, had to pay the same taxes as men, and had a right to the same representation.' She travelled to Auckland, helping set up a league there, to which Amey Daldy was elected president. Smaller centres — Gore, Ashburton, Waimate, Feilding, Marton — quickly followed suit. In centres where the WCTU was not actively involved in the suffrage campaign, the franchise leagues were especially important; in Wanganui the league was led by Margaret Bullock and Jessie Williamson. In Christchurch, where there was a substantial group of suffragists of both sexes clustered round the university, the Canterbury Women's Institute, established in September 1892, numbered among its many members Kate Sheppard, Ada Wells, Edith Grossmann and Maud Pember Reeves; unlike the leagues, it accepted men as full members.

## **The anti-suffrage stance**

The success of the suffrage petitions spread panic in the ranks of the liquor lobby, which responded by promoting anti-suffrage petitions in public houses in 1892. In Dunedin, where Henry Fish paid his anti-suffrage canvassers according to the number of signatures obtained, 5000 names were said to have been collected. Fish's credibility suffered when some were found to be fraudulent, and others those of women who had been misled into believing they were supporting women's suffrage.

In Parliament, neither the Liberal nor the opposition leaders would admit to being hostile to women's suffrage, but members held widely differing views about the roles women should play in society. Would the home-loving New Zealand wife be 'unsexed' by participation in politics, her grace and softness lost? Would her husband be less than a man to allow her to participate? Would the reform lead to unthinkable role reversals where wives made the speeches and husbands fried the chops? There were also calculations of political advantage. Some believed women were a radical force; others that they were conservative upholders of traditional values. While their adherence to the temperance cause was applauded in some quarters, it was feared in others. The suffrage issue cut across conventional lines of political allegiance.

## **Political manoeuvres**

There was steady support for the women's cause among Liberal backbenchers, but the attitude of ministers was less than straightforward. Ostensibly in favour of women's suffrage, some ministers quietly joined its opponents on two occasions in 1891. First, John Ballance introduced an Electoral Bill without provision for women's suffrage. When Hall's amendment incorporating it was obstructed by the liquor lobby, three ministers joined the obstruction. Then, after Hall's own Female Suffrage Bill passed its second reading with a majority, the entire cabinet tried to delay its implementation until after the next election. Failing in this, they supported an amendment to allow women to sit in Parliament, in the confident expectation that this would be too much for the Legislative Council. In late September the bill was narrowly defeated there, 17 to 15.

The next year, when another Electoral Bill was introduced, allowing women the right to vote but not to sit in Parliament, it passed smoothly through the lower house. The Legislative Council, however, added an unexpected amendment. Women should enjoy 'electoral rights', that is, the right to a postal vote. The move reflected the opposition's attempt to appeal to country women, who were presumed to be a conservative force. It was too much, an advocate explained, to expect these women to travel several miles in order to vote, if the weather were inclement. On the flimsy grounds that the secrecy of the ballot might be put at risk, the bill was defeated. It is evident, not only that the government negotiator, the shrewd and determined Richard Seddon, was glad of the opportunity to defeat the bill, but also that the government managed to force its backbenchers into line on the vote.

## **The 1893 suffrage petitions and the Electoral Bill**

In 1893 both sides swung into action. Yet another petition, signed this time by nearly 32,000 women — between a fifth and a quarter of the adult female population —

urged the adoption of measures to enable women to vote at the next general election, pointing out the 'grievous wrong' of denying women what had already been admitted by Parliament to be a just right. The timing of any change was perceived as crucial by the government. Even Ballance, a friend of suffrage, feared for his party if women were to vote at the coming election. When in April Ballance's death brought Seddon to the premiership suffragists prepared for the worst. However, the government was publicly committed to women's suffrage. After Hall had introduced a further Women's Suffrage Bill, and in the course of its second reading rolled out the 300-yard long compilation of women's petitions, only three members voted against its introduction.

When the government's own Electoral Bill, with a clause on women's suffrage, passed through the lower house an important question was raised. Were Maori women included? Maori women are not recorded as having played a major role in the activities of the WCTU or the franchise leagues, and the issue of their enfranchisement had not been pressed by Maori members. But in 1892–93, at the same time the European women's suffrage movement was reaching a climax, large sections of the Maori community had established their own parliament. In May 1893 Meri Te Tai Mangakahia presented it with a motion to enable women to vote for and sit in it. She based her claim, which was well received, on the experience of Maori women in owning and managing their own land. When it was asked in the House of Representatives whether voting rights should be extended to Maori women, there was a roar of unanimous approval.

### **The final struggle**

Seddon's opposition to the Electoral Bill was concentrated in the upper house, where 12 new councillors, appointed to facilitate government business, played a key role. Although the bill was an important government measure, it was not an issue of confidence and they had not been asked to support it. While the Legislative Council deliberated, therefore, both sides attempted to sway them. Enthusiastic suffrage meetings were held up and down the country. Wavering councillors received encouraging telegrams from the Auckland Franchise League and known supporters were given white camellias for their buttonholes. As the debates moved into the committee stage at the end of August 1893 there was unparalleled interest and excitement throughout the country.

The vote on the third reading was marked by complex manoeuvres on the part of the ministry. It was evident that Council members were almost evenly divided. Seddon realised he needed one more vote to defeat the bill so he telegraphed one of the new councillors to change his vote. The ploy backfired. Angered by Seddon's action, two opposition councillors, who had favoured women's suffrage but only with the safeguard of electoral rights, changed sides and voted in favour. On 8 September the bill was passed 20 to 18. As the *New Zealand Herald* commented, 'it is hardly too much to say that the enfranchisement of the woman has been accomplished by her enemies'. On 11 September Seddon announced to a crowded House and gallery that the government would accept the bill.

Even at this stage the measure was not safe. Eighteen legislative councillors petitioned the new governor, Lord Glasgow, to withhold his consent. Suffragists responded by showering him with telegrams and requests to receive deputations. In Wellington the

newly formed Anti-Women's Franchise League sent anti-suffrage members of Parliament red camellias, to contrast with the white ones worn by supporters. Anti-suffrage petitions were again opened for signature in public houses, often in return for free drinks, but once more many of the several thousand names collected were found to be bogus. On 19 September 1893, finally, it was over. Seddon telegraphed Kate Sheppard to tell her the governor had signed the bill that gave New Zealand women the vote.

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