



Right to vote badge bought in England.

# FIERCE FIGHT FOR RIGHT TO VOTE

Give women the vote? You must be joking. Heather Zubek dons the green, white and purple colours to explore how women fought for their right to take part in the way their country was run.

The Federal election is coming. It's time to think about political promises and those pesky television commercials. But when you're lined up with your parents at the polling booth, with a whiff of cooked sausage in the air, think of the time when women were not allowed to vote.

Your mum, grandma and aunty would not have been given a say in who ran the country. In fact, they could not take part in anything political at all.

Just over 100 years ago, the thought of any woman having a say in any political affair was just laughable.

Change only happened because women fought hard, some giving their lives, for something they believed in. It was during the late 1800s and early 1900s that many women in countries around the world began to campaign for their right to vote. They struggled against government opposition and even that of the general public. This movement became known as the *suffragist movement*, as the term *suffrage* means the right to vote in political elections.

## I AM WOMAN

Australian women had very few rights during the 1800s; even fewer when they married because all their property and any money they earned went straight to their husbands. They earned much less than a man doing the same job and were not allowed to file for divorce. The feeling among many politicians, all male, and the general public, was that women were not emotionally or intellectually capable of participating in politics. They also felt that giving this power to women would damage traditional family values.

So, women began to speak out for change. They wanted better education, more employment opportunities, the right to vote in elections and the right to be involved in running their country.



Illustration: Getty Images

### DID YOU KNOW?

The Monster Petition has been transcribed and developed into a database where anyone can search to see whether their female relatives were part of Australia's history. You can search the database on [parliament.vic.gov.au/about/the-history-of-parliament/womens-suffrage-petition/womens-petition](http://parliament.vic.gov.au/about/the-history-of-parliament/womens-suffrage-petition/womens-petition).

### THE MONSTER PETITION

In 1891, a handful of dedicated Victorian women collected signatures for a petition to present to the Victorian Parliament. This petition stated that "women should vote on equal terms with men". Today, petitions are signed with the click of a mouse and can be instantly sent to thousands of people through social media. These women spent six weeks walking door to door gathering more than 30,000 signatures in support of their campaign.

Looking like a rolled-up flattened fire hose, the Women's Suffrage Petition or the "Monster Petition", is housed in the Victorian archives. Made from paper pasted on to a cotton or linen fabric, the petition is rolled on to a cardboard spindle. It measures 20cm wide and 260m long. That's one and a half football fields. It would take three people three hours to transfer the petition from one spool to another. When it was presented to Parliament, it had to be carried by three men.

Unfortunately, all this hard work didn't immediately get women the vote but it did bring this right another step closer.

### THE WOMEN WHO ROARED: WHO'S WHO IN AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

#### Henrietta Dugdale

- Formed the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society in 1884.
- Fought against domestic violence.

#### Vida Goldstein

- Became a leader of the suffrage movement in Australia.
- One of the first women candidates to stand for the election in 1903.
- A popular public speaker who travelled around Australia, Europe and the United States speaking about women's rights.



Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst is arrested while trying to present a petition to King George V in May 1914. Picture: Wikipedia



Right: Oil painting of Australia's first female political candidate, Catherine Spence, by Maude Gordon. Picture: Wikipedia

#### Catherine Helen Spence

- Became Australia's first woman political candidate after standing in 1897 in Adelaide.
- Commemorated on the five dollar note.

#### Jessie Ackermann

- First president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).
- Inspired the founding of the WCTU of Western Australia.

#### Edith Cowan

- Born on a sheep station in Geraldton.
- First Australian woman to serve as a member of any Australian parliament.
- Commemorated on the fifty dollar note and in the naming of Edith Cowan University.



Edith Cowan, the first Australian woman to serve as a member of any Australian parliament.

Image from "Le Petit Journal", April 3, 1910, England, of English suffragettes dressed as firemen on a London street. Picture: Getty Images

### SUFFRAGE IN AUSTRALIA

In the early years of the 20th century, women around the world watched with envy as Australian women turned up at polling booths to vote and stood for elections. For more than a decade, Australia led the world in electoral gender equality.

It was a right earned by many years of hard work.

In 1884, the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society was the first women's suffrage organisation in Australia. Formed because of the work of Henrietta Dugdale and Annie Lowe, members organised debates, petitions, public meetings and lobbied members of Parliament to allow women to vote.

By the end of the 1880s similar suffrage groups had been established in other States. By 1894, 32 suffragist groups were united under one national group called the United Council for Women's Suffrage. This organisation taught its members how to speak at meetings so they could educate the public on women's rights.

### NEW ZEALAND BEATS AUSTRALIA

In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation in the world to allow women to vote in parliamentary elections but they still could not stand for election. This gave new hope to the suffrage movement in Australia. In South Australia, women began travelling across the State collecting signatures for their own petition.

This time the petition was successful.

In 1895 South Australia officially became the first Australian colony and the first electorate in the world to give equal political rights to both men and women meaning they could vote and stand for Parliament.

### WHAT ABOUT US?

Women in Western Australia were not about to be left behind. A year later in 1896, a group of women calling themselves the Women's Christian Temperance Union began campaigning for their right to vote.

They wrote to newspapers and held public meetings in Perth and in the bigger towns of the State's South West. When the group joined Australia's oldest women's club, the Karrakatta Club, they became known as the Women's Suffrage League, a powerful force for change.

Finally, in 1899 women over the age of 21 in WA were given the right to vote but it wasn't until 1920 that they were allowed to stand for election.

### BUT IT'S NOT FAIR!

When Australia federated in 1901, our constitution stated that only women who were allowed to vote at State elections could vote at Federal elections. At this time women in South Australia and Western Australia were the only ones with this right.

After much work by suffragists and some politicians, the Commonwealth Franchise Act was enacted in 1902. This meant all women in Australia over 21, except indigenous Australians and those of Asian, African and Pacific Islander descent, could now vote in Federal elections and stand as a member of Parliament.

Unfortunately, at this time most of Australia's women were still not allowed the same right in their own State. The last State to grant women the right to vote was Victoria in 1908.

While women ran in elections from 1903, it wasn't until many years later that the first women won seats in the Australian Parliament. One of them was Dame Dorothy Tangney, a school teacher from Perth.

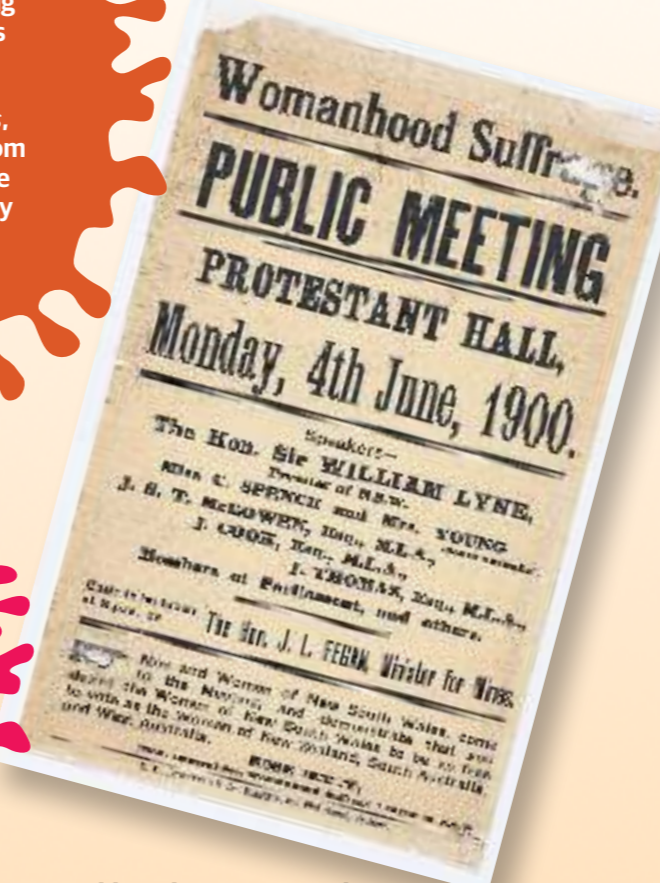
### SUFFRAGIST VS SUFFRAGETTES

In Britain, the *suffragists* used peaceful means for their campaigns. They organised petitions, posters, leaflets and public meetings. By the early 1900s some suffragists believed they were not getting through to the British government or its people and believed a more militant approach was needed. These new campaigners were known as *suffragettes*, their motto being "Deeds not Words". From 1905, the suffragette movement became more violent. To get people to listen they broke shop windows, planted bombs, burned down buildings and went on hunger strikes.

### WHEN WOMEN WON THE RIGHT TO VOTE:

- United States in 1920
- United Kingdom in 1928
- United Arab Emirates in 2006
- Saudi Arabia in 2015

In Pakistan, women were given the vote in 1956 but today many community and religious leaders still prevent them from voting. In Kenya, many women are prevented from participating in elections due to the increasing violence towards them during polling time.



Pamphlet relating to Australian women's suffrage, 1900. Picture: Courtesy of State Library of NSW

### THE SUFFRAGETTE MOVEMENT IN BRITAIN

Are you enjoying reading about Rose in ED!'s serial story *In the Lamplight* by Dianne Wolfer?

If you read pages 6 and 7, you'll find that Rose's sister Edna belongs to the suffragette movement in Britain. Rose writes about how these women are fighting for their right to vote. Would you damage works of art like Edna's friends did, in order to get your message across?

In 1897 a woman called Millicent Fawcett founded the National Union of Women's Suffrage in Britain. Millicent believed in making change through peaceful means. She wrote letters to newspapers and talked with politicians, trying to convince them that all women have the right to vote.

Progress was very slow and this frustrated many women, so, in 1903, the Women's Social and Political Union was founded by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia. These women, and the others who joined them, were prepared to use violence to get what they wanted. They became known as the *Suffragettes*.

One of the Suffragettes in Britain introduced the movement's official colours: white for purity, green for hope and purple for loyalty and dignity. Members wore these colours in sashes when they marched in parades or at public meetings. Some women even had their underwear made in the three colours.

Many Suffragettes disrupted public meetings and were often thrown in jail where they would start hunger strikes in protest. Other members burned down churches, broke shop windows in central London and chained themselves to the gates of Buckingham Palace. Politicians were often attacked by Suffragettes and their homes bombed.

One woman, Emily Davison, threw herself under the King's horse as it was racing. She sadly died and became the first martyr for the Suffragette cause.