

# THE STALLED REVOLUTION

Is equality for women an  
impossible dream?

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When Sheila Rowbotham first decided that there should be a women's liberation conference in 1970, her intention was 'to put women back into history'.

At this time of anniversaries, *The Stalled Revolution* is a tribute to the women who made Britain a better place. We record their struggles and we celebrate their victories.

In the course of writing our book, we interviewed many people and talked informally with several others. All were helpful, informative and encouraging. We are extremely grateful for their support.

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In the following pages we record many extraordinary women. We dedicate our book to them and to the thousands more whose names may be forgotten by history but whose achievements illuminate our lives.

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## The Two Great Anniversaries

In the spring of 2017, the government agreed to erect a statue of Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square.

The decision was well reported but many newspapers evidently did not expect their readers to know much about Millicent Fawcett. One newspaper ran the headline:

‘Who was Millicent Fawcett, the woman behind Parliament Square’s first female statue?’<sup>1</sup>

The statue has considerable symbolic significance. It marks the hundredth anniversary of one of the most important events of the twentieth century. On 6 February 1918, the Royal Assent was granted to the Act that allowed women to vote in parliamentary elections. Later in that year over 8 million women voted for the first time in a General Election.

Millicent Fawcett led the Votes for Women campaign for nearly 30 years. In 1918 she and her allies won a glorious victory and, at the time, she was one of the most famous women in Britain.

But her fame has not lasted.

Emmeline Pankhurst, the other great leader of the campaign to secure votes for women, is rather better known.<sup>2</sup> Most people

have heard of the suffragettes, whom she led, but they know very little about the nature of their struggle. When the film, *Suffragette*, was shown in 2015, the prejudice shown by the British establishment and the hardship suffered by the campaigners caused gasps in many cinemas.

This lack of knowledge is extraordinary. The campaign by women to secure the right to vote in parliamentary elections is one of the most momentous and inspiring stories of the last two hundred years. It changed the status of women in Britain and has a profound effect on the way we live today. Yet most people know less about the Votes for Women campaign than the marriages of Henry VIII.

## **The Second Anniversary**

The year 2018 should also be commemorated for a second anniversary. It marks fifty years since the beginning of the great upsurge of feminist feeling that came to be known as the Women's Liberation Movement.

The pioneers of the Women's Liberation Movement have no statues to record their achievements and, although many of these pioneering women are still alive, they are even less well known than Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst. This is partly the result of modesty. The Women's Liberation Movement was self-consciously egalitarian. It elected no leaders and rejected the cult of personality. But its achievements are all around us.

The Women's Liberation Movement inspired the two great Acts of Parliament that were passed in the 1970s: the Equal Pay Act and

the Sex Discrimination Act. Britain is far from being an equal society but many of the opportunities enjoyed by twenty-first century women can be traced back to the efforts of the Women's Liberation Movement.

The movement aimed to transform the way women were regarded and treated. Changes in popular culture illustrate the extent of the Movement's influence. Pictures of nude women were taken down from workplace walls, the so-called Beauty Contests lost their popularity and eventually even the Benny Hill Show, with its cohort of young women squealing as most of their clothes were 'accidentally' removed, eventually disappeared from our television screens.

Surprisingly, the work of the Women's Liberation Movement has fallen out of the popular consciousness. There appears to be an assumption that these changes in the role and status of women just arrived automatically as a matter of course. This is a dangerous piece of mythology. If we do not recognise the significance of the campaigns that won these important victories, we may delude ourselves into thinking that further improvements will come without effort.

There is also the need to establish a proper balance to the recollection of British history. It was said by a writer<sup>3</sup> in *The New Yorker*, and repeated many times since, that the women's movement was the most successful revolution of the twentieth century. Yet it is scarcely celebrated in this country. Indeed, unless they happen to sit on the throne, the achievements of women scarcely feature in popular accounts of our history. The coincidence of the two great anniversaries gives us an opportunity to restore these great victories, and the women who won them, to their proper place in the collective memory of Britain.

## Extraordinary Women

We were able to interview many of the most committed members of the Women's Liberation Movement. They all offered advice and encouragement to women campaigners.

Sheila Rowbotham told us that, 'it is no longer enough to point out what we don't like. We have to work out what sort of society we do want'.

Lynne Segal looked ahead: 'We do not simply want equality with men; we want to change the value system... We have visions of a better life'.

Bea Campbell says we must persuade people to be open to change: They should "be prepared to be enlightened, enraged, amused and above all provoked".<sup>4</sup>

Miriam David insisted that, 'it is time for another women's movement.... It seems to me that feminism is everywhere and yet nowhere (is it) influential or powerful'.<sup>5</sup>

For the suffrage campaigns we have relied on the autobiographies of the two leaders and the writing of their many supporters. Millicent Fawcett was an elegant and intelligent member of the British political class, demure when she wanted to be but with a turn of phrase that could skin an opponent. She was generous and often funded parts of the campaign with her own money. Everyone speaks of her warmth and humanity which inspired wonderful admiration and loyalty in her supporters. On her death one supporter wrote,

'We were unspeakably proud of her.'<sup>6</sup>

Emmeline Pankhurst was a very different character, single-minded to an extraordinary degree, feared by the government and demanding unquestioning obedience from her followers. Slim and beautiful, Rebecca West called her, 'a reed of steel'.<sup>7</sup>

She was an extraordinary public speaker although Ethel Smyth, Emmeline's close friend, tells us that her other skills did not always match her soaring oratory. As part of the suffragettes' campaign of militancy Emmeline Pankhurst recommended smashing the windows of the powerful. Unfortunately, during an afternoon of hilarious practice in Ethel Smyth's garden, Emmeline Pankhurst failed to hit the target once. She had to leave the stone throwing to others.<sup>8</sup>

The achievements of the Votes for Women campaign and the Women's Liberation Movement were hard-won. Emmeline Pankhurst was repeatedly jailed and frequently on hunger strike. However, perhaps because of her celebrity, she was never forcibly fed. Other suffragettes fared worse. The process was so gruesome that, after being forcibly fed for a fortnight, most prisoners were in a state of collapse. There are terrible stories of hardship. Emmeline's daughter, Sylvia, was forcibly fed twice a day for five weeks. Constance Lytton had her health destroyed in prison and, like many others, she never fully recovered. Voting rights for women were earned by pain and suffering.

Members of the Women's Liberation Movement did not have to endure prison and few were arrested but they had to take more than their share of abuse. Most of the press made little attempt to understand the movement's motives. Instead of reporting the policies they preferred to libel the women. Supporters of the movement were portrayed as hairy, man-hating harridans with no sense of humour and no chance of attracting a man. It was a ridiculous, inaccurate and unworthy calumny but, in the way of such insults, it still hangs round the necks of female activists like a lead necklace.

## Completing the Revolution

The suffrage campaigners believed, and the Women's Liberation Movement hoped, that their victories would be followed

by further progress towards a world where the needs of women would be given the same importance as the needs of men. It did not happen. Success was followed by disappointment. In each case the revolution stalled; in the late 1920s as a result of the Great Depression; in the 1980s with rising unemployment following Margaret Thatcher's accession to power.

The work of the campaigners was never completed.

The question at the heart of this book is whether the time has come for a new liberation campaign and a third leap forward.

The need for improvement is very great. Violence against women is common in Britain. Each year, the number of rapes runs into scores of thousands and hundreds of thousands of women are assaulted in their own homes. Another terrible statistic: on average, two women are murdered each week by their partners. Too many women have to accept verbal and physical abuse as a normal part of their lives. Young women at many universities have had their student years ruined by the fast developing lad culture of disrespect for women.

Discrimination against women is much less obvious than the blatant injustice that was prevalent a generation ago, but women still face an accumulation of disadvantages. Perhaps they are not told of the best job opportunities, perhaps they get on the short list but never quite get the job and perhaps their best ideas are disregarded until a man says something similar, and takes the credit.

Women tend to occupy the worst paid jobs in our society and have little legal protection. Because most women are obliging, their compliance is taken for granted and their complaints are very often

ignored. Even women with great talent and ambition find it difficult to navigate their way through to the top in a world that has been very obviously fashioned by men for the convenience of men.

Women in the finance sector, whom we quote in Chapter 7, have been taught by experience exactly how twenty-first century discrimination operates – below the radar and usually denied.

‘They tell us this place is a meritocracy but men are taken more seriously and always seem to get the best opportunities and the best jobs.’<sup>9</sup>

And when women have children the discrimination gets noticeably worse.

Some of this unfairness can be put right by enforcing the rights that are already on the statute book – for equal pay and for protection against discrimination. Making sure that more women are in positions of power in our companies and important institutions would also help. So would ensuring that the House of Commons contains as many women MPs as men. But these reforms, while valuable, will not – on their own – produce the new and better world that most women want.

Equality with men was the cry of the Votes for Women campaigners and it found an echo in the demands of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Achieving equality is necessary but many female activists through the ages have realised that equality with men is not enough. Because of the social and political failures of our society, many men lead cramped and depressing lives. There is no advantage in joining them in their misery. A new liberation campaign should have a loftier purpose. Women should not limit their ambition to what men have: they should focus on what women need.

Setting this higher and perhaps even utopian purpose means that it is not just the symptoms of inequality and discrimination that must be dealt with. As Veronica Jarvis Tichenor writes,

‘To strike at the heart of the gender structure, we must... aggressively disrupt and reconstruct assumptions that lie at the very core of who we think we are’.<sup>10</sup>

These assumptions about gender roles are often unhelpful but they buttress our sense of identity and are difficult to eliminate. Men are leaders and women are followers; men are self-confident and women are diffident; men are rational and women are emotional; women are good with babies and men are good with cars; women do the cooking and men go off to do something more important. Both sexes are trapped in stereotypes that limit our aspirations and make us fearful of change.

## **Doubts and Reluctance**

According to the famous story in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, King Alfred fell asleep when he was left in charge of baking the cakes and let them burn. Although Alfred was no misogynist, there remains a small suspicion that he neglected his duty because he felt that baking was not a man’s responsibility.

Most men nowadays would probably attend to the cakes, or at least set a timer to prevent them burning. Indeed most men now profess a commitment to equality between the sexes but the number who give genuine support, let alone help to instigate the steps leading to change, remains depressingly small. And to be fair, in this book we stress the fact that, although help and support from men is welcome and much needed, women have to take charge of the campaign for their own liberation.

It is therefore somewhat dispiriting to find that there still appears to be a residual resistance in women themselves to challenge inequality. It is never easy to summon the energy to fight against such heavy odds. The pioneers who led or were involved in the two great women's campaigns of the past century found the strength and inner resources to persevere against taunts, insults, physical abuse and innumerable inexcusable setbacks. However the truth is that the jibes did not only emanate from those in power, but were thrown at them by the general public, by other women and even by their own families. Have we women in the twenty-first century lost some of that resilience or is something else holding us back?

There is a great deal of current publicity surrounding sexual and gender identity and this is a complicating factor, but the reluctance to engage with the struggle for equality is also connected with who women think they are in a broader social arena. Having been told from an early age that the main battles are over and that if they try hard enough they can rule the world, young women are under enormous pressure not to fail and even when they succeed what they find is often not to their liking.

So the temptation for some women may be to take over from Alfred and follow Nigella Lawson back into the kitchen.

## **Feminism**

What inspired the Votes for Women campaigners and the supporters of the Women's Liberation Movement was that deep belief in the rights and entitlement of women, which we call feminism.

Jude Kelly, Artistic Director of London's South Bank Centre says,

'I'm convinced that feminism needs to be a big, bold, baggy overcoat that can accommodate each fully rounded female.'<sup>11</sup>

It is hard to disagree with such an inclusive statement but many women still find the coat to be uncomfortably restrictive. The concept of feminism as a liberating force is still misunderstood and mistrusted. Attitudes vary from acceptance of the word as a beacon signalling an empowering sense of freedom from past shackles to doubts and fears about humourless harridans challenging the very notion of womanhood.

Throughout this book we endeavour to rehabilitate and reclaim feminism.

The feminism we espouse is straightforward and should be uncontroversial. Brenda Hale, who is now president of the Supreme Court, put it this way when we met her:

‘A feminist is someone who believes women are equal to men in terms of potential and entitlement.’<sup>12</sup>

It is a wise and simple description requiring no further explanation. The problem arises when we try to make this belief a reality. Equality and improvement do not come about just because we state their inherent fairness. Being a feminist may imply the need for action. Not everyone is eager to campaign but supporting those who are prepared to fight on our behalf is a necessary contribution that every woman can make.

In *I Call Myself a Feminist: A View from 25 Women under Thirty* published by Virago in 2015 Martha Mosse says,

‘Feminism is fairness.’<sup>13</sup>

Kate Nash writes:

“I personally think our generation has sat back a bit, because we could... I feel like it’s our responsibility together to start

making a noise, taking action. We need to have a more ‘fight it’ attitude, get angry, make some waves, be loud.”<sup>14</sup>

Sustained equality between the sexes is long overdue. We owe it to Millicent Fawcett, Emmeline Pankhurst, Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, Harriet Harman and many more to fulfil their feminist aspirations.

A campaign to rehabilitate feminism, overturn the cultural norms that sustain male supremacy and create a society that gives as much weight to the needs of women as to the needs of men, cannot reasonably be described as a process of reform. It amounts to a revolution.

In later chapters we speculate on what that revolution might involve. It must have a strong political element but it would be very optimistic to imagine that such a revolution might be driven by politicians. During the last twenty years most politicians appear to have lost confidence in their ability to make fundamental changes in our society. They will have to be pressed hard by women campaigners, who in turn will need the help and support of other enlightened and progressive forces in our society.

## **Role of the Arts**

Music, words – on the page or in the theatre – paintings, sculpture and dance help us to express emotions vital to our intellectual and emotional growth and wellbeing. Through the arts we can challenge stereotyping and disrupt the notion of a static, unchanging world.

The arts can help us to query long-held and often unquestioned assumptions about the way we conduct our lives. Separate from

the political establishment itself, they can prompt us to think about the effect of politics in our daily existence. They have the power to encourage us to dismantle cultural norms.

During the 1970s, for example, at the height of the Apartheid era in South Africa, the Royal Court Theatre in London staged plays like 'The Island' and 'Siswe Banzi is Dead' by the South African playwright, Athol Fugard, criticising that heinous regime. The principal actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona were black. Many of us already had strong feelings about apartheid but Fugard's plays provoked a personally felt visceral shock in the audience. What we were reading and hearing about in the media was brought to life through drama.

The arts have the potential to open the minds of the people of Britain to the possibility of creating a society where the needs of women are just as important as the needs of men.

Being consumers rather than practitioners of the arts ourselves, we interviewed several people whose intimate connection with the arts gives them the right to speak with some authority.

As professional singer Elizabeth Roberts told us that

'The arts reflect back to us what is and also what could be.'<sup>15</sup>

In a society where the entitlement to equal rights and opportunities is taken seriously, we need to invest in and promote the arts. They help us to imagine a better future.

## Lessons of History

We expected our study on the Votes for Women campaign and the Women's Liberation Movement to lift our spirits and so it did. The

suffragists and the Women's Liberation Movement showed us how to confront injustice and how to be victorious.

We were surprised at the number of practical lessons provided by those past campaigns. There is a famous picture of suffragettes chaining themselves to railings but that was only one of a stream of publicity ideas that kept their cause constantly in the news and their opponents forever on the defensive. On a summer afternoon they hired a balloon and dropped several thousand leaflets from the sky over London. On another afternoon a suffragette sidled into Lambeth Palace to lobby the Archbishop of Canterbury. Somewhat nonplussed, he offered her tea.

The Women's Liberation Movement had wide ambitions. The movement certainly wanted the government to introduce reforms but they saw their main purpose as creating a grass roots community of women, with scores of support groups in towns and cities across Britain. The movement was also an important self-help organisation. As we recount in Chapter 4, members of the movement opened over sixty women's centres: protected spaces where women could find refuge, support and stimulation.

Of course, Britain of the twenty-first century is notably different from the Britain that existed before the First World War or in the 1970s but the qualities needed to challenge injustice and to win are the same as they were in the past. A modern campaign will need the resilience of Millicent Fawcett's suffrage societies, the eye-catching excitement of Emmeline Pankhurst's Suffragettes and the revolutionary vision that inspired the Women's Liberation Movement.

In the last chapter of this book we suggest how a new liberation campaign might be developed. The lessons from our history provide bedrock principles. Appeal to all women; be democratic and

inclusive; be relentless in achieving success; always remember that while reforms are useful, what women really need is a fundamental change in the way society is organised.

Most important of all, a new liberation campaign must be an organisation of women, led by women, with its policy and priorities determined by women. Men should be encouraged to support but, as campaigners from Millicent Fawcett to Harriet Harman have insisted, only women can know what women need and it is only women who will find the stamina to carry their cause through to success.

There is no advantage in trying to start afresh; we should build on what we have. Many women are already members of campaigning organisations. Our concern is that, while these groups do good work, they have not yet found a way to mobilise their collective strength in a way that puts maximum pressure on government and on the other power centres in our society.

But the biggest lesson of all is that a new liberation campaign must have an appetite for success. It must convince its members that victory is not only possible but, with enthusiasm and relentless campaigning, victory will be assured. G. D. Anderson stresses the strength of womanhood:

‘Women are already strong. It’s about changing the way the world perceives their strength.’<sup>16</sup>

## **Moments of Joy**

It is tempting to describe such a stupendous endeavour only in terms of selfless dedication and unflinching determination. No doubt a lot of hard work will be necessary but the Votes for

Women campaign and the Women's Liberation Movement taught another lesson that Lynne Segal repeated to us:

‘There is great collective joy in working with other like-minded women.’

During both of the earlier campaigns, the women pioneers found a sisterhood that lifted the spirits and was valued almost as highly as the great victories themselves. In our next chapter, we describe two days of hope, of shared happiness and of collective joy. A new liberation campaign will have moments just like these.