

‘Fossilised prejudices’ and ‘strange revolution’

COMMEMORATING THE WOMEN’S PARLIAMENTARY RIGHTS ACT 1919



THIS YEAR MARKS the centenary of a key moment in the history of women’s status in New Zealand: the 29 October 1919 passing of the Women’s Parliamentary Rights Act. Women gained the right to stand for Parliament, a clear demonstration of their growing equality with men. They could henceforth try to step out of their ideological, and often actual, place in the ‘private sphere’ of the home, and attempt to gain election to the ‘public sphere’ seat of the nation’s power. Women, if elected, would be able to pursue the height of a public service career and have, as Barbara Brookes has noted, ‘a voice in Parliament to claim their rights’.¹

This important milestone is most often quietly commemorated as a long time coming after a series of near misses, and as an uncomfortable footnote to the lauded 1893 Electoral Act that made New Zealand the first country in the world to enfranchise women. While much is made of the 1893 achievement as an all-encompassing date of victory for women’s equality, there was a 26-year wait before the next logical step of allowing women to stand for Parliament, much longer than in Australia where this right was granted in 1902. As Sandra Coney argued in 1993, New Zealand feminists ‘found themselves engaged in a battle which would prove far more protracted than the battle for the vote’, and where ‘arguments were rehearsed again and again’.²

Here I consider how the history of women’s right to stand for Parliament has been written. I take up and extend Patricia Grimshaw’s 1972 observation about the importance of the imperial context. She suggests that during World War I in Britain ‘The opinion of the Press, of Parliament and of the general public underwent a strange revolution.’ In 1918 women over 30 years who were householders or married to householders were enfranchised, and simultaneously allowed to stand for Parliament in a ‘change of heart’ from the protracted opposition to women’s suffrage.³ Noting the importance of the relationship between Aotearoa New Zealand and Britain, in 1992 Margaret Wilson commented that the 1919 Act happened ‘only because New Zealand was in danger of falling behind other Commonwealth countries.’⁴

The first part of this article revisits the scholarship on the pre-war attempts to remove barriers to women standing for Parliament. The second part

examines the context of World War I, accounting for the ‘strange revolution’ in Aotearoa New Zealand that made the 1919 Act a foregone conclusion. I argue that the significant factors leading to change were the granting of rights to British women, and the valorization of women’s status in both the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres internationally, including Aotearoa New Zealand. These factors successfully combined with renewed feminist activism and male parliamentary support across the political parties.

There remained, however, as Kate Sheppard articulated in 1919, an undercurrent of ‘fossilised prejudices’ that stalled women’s entry to the Legislative Council, and continued to hold influence in the subsequent decades.⁵ In the case of the 1919 Women’s Parliamentary Rights Act, as I argue in the conclusion, World War I enabled the conditions for rapid improvement in women’s status in Aotearoa New Zealand, but the post-war climate witnessed a halt to this push for equality.

Part One

The legislative build-up to 1919 was long, complicated and frustratingly uneven. Women’s right to stand for Parliament was tied to the campaign for women’s suffrage.⁶ Sandra Wallace discussed in her 1992 PhD thesis and a following publication how several Bills that included women’s right to stand for Parliament were introduced into Parliament in the course of the women’s suffrage campaign.⁷ In her pioneering 1972 study of women’s suffrage in New Zealand, Patricia Grimshaw covered the first of these, the 1878 Electoral Bill. It was removed by a margin of 12.⁸ Nearly a decade later, in 1887, Julius Vogel’s Women’s Suffrage Bill included women’s right to stand. After encouraging initial support, Richard Seddon had an unexpected vote taken in the early morning that defeated the Bill.⁹ The 1891 Franchise Bill included women’s right to stand for Parliament, but after passing through the House of Representatives, it failed at the Legislative Council stage. Indicative of political shenanigans that plagued attempts at advancing women’s political equality, in the 1891 Electoral Bill Walter Carncross (Liberal, Taieri), known to be opposed to women’s rights, moved an amendment to the Bill to make women eligible to stand for the House of Representatives, hoping that it was a controversial sticking point that would defeat the Bill. The amendment was accepted 30 to 24, upon which the Legislative Council ‘quickly’ defeated the Bill. As Carncross had hoped, it was one matter to allow women the right to vote, but allowing them to enter the seat of politics was a step too far.¹⁰

Given the lead-up, it is unsurprising that in hope of winning the vote, women’s right to stand for Parliament was omitted from the 1893 Electoral Bill.¹¹ Megan Hutching points out that Kate Sheppard wrote in *The*

Prohibitionist about opposing the exclusion, but accepted it as a strategic move, and preferred not to 'quarrel over the matter'.¹² Carol Rankin's work concurs that in order to improve its chance of passing, the 1893 Electoral Bill 'expressly denied women the opportunity to enter parliament'.¹³ Looking back in 1919, Sheppard wrote that the 1893 omission seemed unimportant because it 'was so illogical and unfair that it appeared certain that in a short time it must be removed'. She reflected with disappointment that 'the years have passed' and the 'frequent efforts for justice that have been made by earnest women and chivalrous men have been met by indifference and scarcely-veiled hostility'.¹⁴ According to Monica Webb, pragmatic maternal suffragist Anna Stout considered that women in Aotearoa New Zealand 'gained the vote too early' and struggled afterwards to build upon the victory.¹⁵

After 1893 there was on-going feminist agitation and some male support for removing the disability barring women from standing for Parliament. Hutching points out that the matter remained a 'high priority' for some women and organizations; for example, Christina Henderson and the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).¹⁶ Sandra Wallace writes that *The White Ribbon* 'kept its readers informed of parliamentary moves regarding women's right to sit in Parliament. It frequently printed speeches by women advocating this extension to women's political rights and carried reports of overseas developments in the area'.¹⁷ James Keating highlights the importance of international feminist networks at the time.¹⁸ In 1895 Parliament received at least two petitions advocating the right to stand, including one from the Napier Branch of the WCTU.¹⁹ At its first conference in 1896 the National Council of Women (NCW) heard Liberal politician George Russell and prominent member and feminist leader Amey Daldy speak encouraging endorsement of a resolution to enable women to enter both houses of the legislature, and to be elected 'to any public office or position in the colony which men hold, and with regard to all powers, rights, duties and privileges of citizens, to declare absolute equality to be the law of the land for both men and women'.²⁰ The NCW then passed this resolution at all subsequent conferences until it went into recess in 1905. Resolutions were sent to political leaders, and there were letters, petitions and deputations on the matter. In addition, the Canterbury Women's Institute in 1896 suggested that women 'ask candidates whether they would vote for the removal of women's civil and political disabilities'.²¹

Advocacy from male members of Parliament established during the women's suffrage campaign continued as part of the pre-war work to remove women's disabilities. A Bill extending women's right to sit was presented in 1894 by Dr Alfred Newman (Opposition, Wellington Suburbs). It did not bode

well when that Parliamentary Disabilities of Women Abolition Bill only just passed thanks to the Speaker's casting vote, and it was eventually defeated.²² From 1894 to 1900 there were eight separate Bills on the right of women to enter Parliament. Wallace notes that 'none passed the committee stage and several failed to receive a second reading'.²³ The two key parliamentary advocates for women's political rights, Newman and Russell, both lost their seats in 1896 and as a consequence no Bills were introduced in 1897. Then in 1898 and 1899 Tommy Taylor (Independent, Christchurch) introduced a Removal of Women's Disabilities Bill, followed by a Bill introduced in June 1900 by George Russell after his return to Parliament. Russell's Bill was rejected at the committee stage. The new century was not looking promising.

The arguments made by those supporting the removal of disabilities were multiple. Indicative of the complex layers of support and ideology on the matter, the three politicians who introduced the Bills were of varying political persuasions: Alfred Newman (Opposition) George Russell (Liberal) and Tommy Taylor (Independent and later Social Democrat). Wallace captures how Liberal politicians justified women's place in Parliament through drawing upon 'natural sequence' arguments that extended democratic rights in support of equality of men and women, whereas conservative politicians were likely to emphasise women's political work through a justification that was grounded in their maternal difference from men and the unique womanly qualities that they would bring to the public sphere.²⁴

Māori standpoints were as complex and varied as those of Pākehā. In 1894 Hone Heke Ngapua (Liberal, Northern Maori) spoke in support of Māori women in Parliament during readings of the Parliamentary Disabilities of Women Abolition Bill. All four Māori seat MPs voted in favour of the Bill; Rapata Te Ao (Western Maori), Wi Pere (Eastern Maori), Tame Parata (Southern Maori) and Heke.²⁵ Heke considered that 'But, so far as the Maori women are concerned, I believe they have every right to have a seat in this House – that is, as far as rights are concerned – although, before going any further, I should like to see the measure put to the country.'²⁶ At the time of the Bill's eventual defeat he added that Māori women had equal rights with Māori men and that Māori women had proven themselves capable in conducting cases in the Native Land Court.²⁷

The year before, in 1893, Meri Mangakāhia of Te Rarawa had put a motion before Te Kotahitanga for women to gain the right to vote and to stand for the Māori Parliament. Success came in 1897.²⁸ In 1900 Tame Parata (Southern Maori) supported Russell's Bill to allow women to stand for Parliament, with the votes of the other three Māori seat MPs unlisted.²⁹

A number of people feared that New Zealand would lose its reputation for leading the world in social legislation if women did not secure the right to stand for Parliament. In 1894 Newman said on the matter 'that if we do not do this thing shortly other countries assuredly will'. And in 1896, aware of the emergence of a generation of 'new women', he did not see why women, entering local boards, should not proceed to the national level. Newman presciently pointed out that even if the bar to parliamentary participation was removed, it was likely that few women would stand for Parliament, and that even fewer would be elected.³⁰

Yet in the pre-war years support did not outweigh enduring prejudice against women's direct participation in politics. Raewyn Dalziel has persuasively argued that strongly held beliefs that the 'public' and 'private' spheres were inherently different, and the associated pervasive ideology that a women's place was in the home had an impact on lived realities.³¹ Parliament was the traditional seat of masculine power, and the enduring underlying ideology that women were weak, as Mary Beard highlights, meant that 'Women in power are seen as breaking down the barriers, or alternatively, as taking something to which they are not quite entitled'.³² Sandra Coney has argued that Parliament was considered 'no place for women', as they would witness male swearing and general bad behaviour, and would be judged as neglecting their home duties.³³

The idea of women in Parliament was treated as a subject for misogynistic humour. For example, in 1887 Wi Pere (Eastern Maori) in the debate on Vogel's Women's Suffrage Bill, joked that 'beautiful ladies' in Parliament would 'lead astray the tender hearts of some honourable gentlemen'. He argued that Vogel's Bill needed a clause for only 'plain women' to be allowed in the House and claimed that if attractive women entered the House his wife would not allow him there.³⁴ Grimshaw notes the presence of 'buffoonery' in discussions of women standing for Parliament, while Wallace reveals women were lampooned as potential 'men-women'. Both scholars note that politicians raised the argument that women would not vote for women.³⁵ The enduring ideology, Wallace argues, was that 'Parliament was not a proper place for women and that women could not make proper politicians'.³⁶

In the new century activist momentum for women in Parliament waned. At the time of Russell's unsuccessful parliamentary push in 1900 *The White Ribbon* published an open letter on the subject of women's disabilities. Written by Kate Sheppard, it listed six disabilities: women were unable to stand for the House or the Legislative Council; they were unable to be appointed as Justices of the Peace, act as jurors, or be guardians of children; they also took the blame for illegitimacy.³⁷ In another piece Sheppard wrote of trying to launch a petition to remove the disabilities. This was to counter

Seddon's belief that women themselves did not want disabilities removed and to shake women from apathy.³⁸ In 1901 efforts to remove all women's civic and political disabilities continued, with the WCTU forwarding a petition to this effect.³⁹ Significantly, in 1902, with a wealth of work and experience behind him, Russell decided that women's parliamentary rights were too far ahead of the times, and concluded that he would not introduce another Bill until public opinion had changed.⁴⁰ As Grimshaw has argued, it is important to acknowledge that at the time, the idea of women in Parliament and women's private issues mentioned in public was radical.⁴¹ This was also the case in Australia where, although most women had the right to vote and stand for Parliament from 1902, it took until 1943 for a woman to be elected. Advocates for change in New Zealand did not overly point to Australian women's rights. Perhaps they feared that opponents could use Australians' reluctance to accept political women, as evidenced by the Australian women who unsuccessfully stood for Parliament, against them.

In August 1903 Kate Sheppard led an impressive delegation — including Margaret Sievwright, Lily Atkinson (formerly Kirk), Jessie Williamson, Stella Allan (formerly Henderson) and Fanny Cole — to Premier Richard Seddon to urge the removal of women's disabilities. Tommy Taylor accompanied the delegation. Roberta Nicholls writes that 'Seddon, confident in knowledge that public opinion was now firmly set against the women, made little effort to take them seriously.'⁴² Seddon's biographer Tom Brooking argues that overall Seddon 'did not hold diehard chauvinistic and misogynistic views', but that he remained 'conservative in his refusal to allow women to stand for Parliament'.⁴³

The enduring importance of maternal ideology in colonial society was a double-edged sword for women's equality. Because suffrage had largely advanced on a platform of equality based upon women's difference and place in the home, it did not naturally follow that women would proceed into public life. This ideology hampered women standing for Parliament and opportunities for women to enter 'public life' more generally. Dalziel captured this sentiment in her work on the 'Colonial Helpmeet', and quoted suffragist Anna Stout's views that 'We seem able to get any measures we want through our vote', women were fully busy with 'domestic life', and could leave 'public duties' to elected men, and suffrage had enhanced women's femininity, 'women have developed a much higher standard of womanhood and the duties and obligations of motherhood.'⁴⁴ Monica Webb argues that Stout's words were for a particular British audience, and that while Stout 'believed firmly in the centrality of family and traditional womanly duties', she was supportive of women in non-traditional roles.⁴⁵ Furthermore she

argues of Stout that 'In her day and time ... she was widely viewed as a progressive and outspoken woman'.⁴⁶

It did not assist the endeavour for women's parliamentary rights that post-1893 the energy for the united front on suffrage had receded. Women had a diversity of causes to pursue, and an 1895 petition for parliamentary representation with 300 signatures, for example, paled in comparison to those presented for suffrage.⁴⁷ A generation of 'new women' were pursuing education and work opportunities in the public sphere.⁴⁸ These women, however, were well ahead of public opinion. The NCW 'faced increasing frustrations, opposition or apathy for its ideals and plans'. There was exhaustion and disillusionment, and by 1905 a decision was made to go into recess. According to insiders, 'It was to remain dormant for several years, until war-time conditions presented strong impetus for women to work together in council again'.⁴⁹ Amidst the difficult climate, there was some on-going agitation. For example, in 1906 Sarah Saunders Page sent a letter to new Premier Joseph Ward urging the removal of civil and political disabilities of women.⁵⁰

Part Two

On the eve of World War I, long-time supporter of women's rights Alfred Newman proposed that women's parliamentary rights be included in a Bill to make the Legislative Council elective. The House agreed, but the Legislative Council rejected the Bill.⁵¹ Importantly, male support in the House was still present. Yet it took until the end of World War I for two members to raise women's political rights. On 29 October 1918 Reform's Robert Wright 'gave notice of intention to ask Government if, in view of the splendid war work of the women of the Dominion, they will introduce legislation enabling women to become candidates for Parliament'.⁵² In an open letter to members of the New Zealand legislature, feminist and writer Jessie Mackay argued that rather than the removal of restrictions on women being a 'reward for war work', it was part of a bigger context that 'right is right' and that it was 'the hour' for Aotearoa New Zealand to join the post-war 'New Age'.⁵³ When the Legislative Council Amendment Bill came up on 5 December, James McCombs opportunistically moved an amendment to that Bill to remove the bar against women being nominated as parliamentary candidates, which was defeated by only two votes.⁵⁴ Apirana Ngata and Taurekareka Henare voted for McCombs's Amendment to the Legislature Act, while James Carroll, Maui Pomare and John Hopere Uru voted against it.⁵⁵

Christchurch's *Sun* reported that in Parliament Ward had suggested that McCombs was 'out to advertise himself', but that Prime Minister Massey had promised to introduce a government Bill at the next session.⁵⁶ James

McCombs, the Labour Party's first president, was tapped into women's networks, was anti-conscription, a prohibitionist, pro-proportional representation and for the abolition of the Legislative Council.⁵⁷ He wanted women justices of the peace and women sitting on juries.⁵⁸ He was also aware that support for women's representation went across parties. Indeed he said, 'I hope members of this House will consider this question altogether apart from party, and will consider it only from the point of view of doing justice to half the electors of New Zealand'.⁵⁹ Here he made a clear argument for women as equal citizens.

The wartime revival of women's organizations contributed to the push for women's rights. Shona Mann and Nancy Ridley consider that war 'brought women to realise that so many changes were taking place the world ahead must be different from the world they had known.'⁶⁰ In 1916 Christina Henderson, Jessie Mackay and Kate Sheppard set up a committee in Christchurch to revive the NCW. Sheppard became national president and Henderson the secretary. By September 1919 the first annual meeting was held in Wellington with Ellen Melville in the chair.⁶¹

The newly formed Labour Party assisted the push for women's equality. From July 1916 the Labour Party's constitution and platform included sex equality in public and industrial life, political equality and 'the removal of the political disabilities of women'.⁶² Upon her election to Parliament in 1933 Elizabeth McCombs expressed her opinion that 'I have shown that the Labour Party stands for justice for women, equality between the sexes, and most, if not all, of the humanitarian ideals of women.'⁶³ As Margaret Wilson has argued, the newly formed Labour Party became an option for radical women who were 'attracted by its socialist equalitarian vision and its concern for the individual who had not benefited under a capitalist economic system.'⁶⁴ Dorothy Page has noted that the newly formed NCW lacked 'the radical cutting edge of the first' as some women's organizations affiliated with the Labour Party.⁶⁵ There were plenty of politically conservative women, and men, however, supporting women's equal rights. As James McCombs, Kate Sheppard and Reform's Ellen Melville and others noted, the matter was not confined to political party divisions.

Keeping up with overseas, especially Britain, was an important argument in James McCombs's December move in Parliament. Referring to progress in Australia, Canada, the United States, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Holland and Britain, he said, 'I hope the House will recognise the fairness of the proposal which I am submitting, and that it will not be behind other enlightened democracies in the world'.⁶⁶ There was high awareness that in Britain in 1918 some women over the age of 30 got the vote, and that year the passing

of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act allowed women to stand as candidates and be elected as MPs. In Australia at the federal level, with the exception of Aboriginal women in some states, women could vote and stand for election from 1902.⁶⁷ Dismay at falling behind Britain was expressed in the Legislative Council by Sir W. Hall-Jones, one of three supporters of McCombs's amendment, who mentioned that 'Home' had already allowed women to stand for Parliament and that women in Aotearoa New Zealand were 'good Imperialists', by which he meant fellow British subjects.⁶⁸

In the context of working as part of the imperial war effort, there was an especially close colonial relationship between Aotearoa New Zealand and 'Home'.⁶⁹ Indicative of that relationship, newspapers carried comprehensive coverage of Britain, interspersing global and local news. This included much coverage of the international advance of women's rights following the war. In December 1918 the *Nelson Evening Mail* carried a story from the London *Times* that discussed advances in women's parliamentary rights internationally. As James McCombs had mentioned Alberta in the House, the article included the election to the Alberta Provincial Legislature of Miss Adams, a sister in the Canadian Military Hospital, and commented that it was 'of the new spirit to which the war has so largely contributed'.⁷⁰ In an impassioned letter to the editor of the *Lyttelton Times*, Jessie Mackay pointed out women's service during the war and the influenza epidemic, and considered the rejection of McCombs's amendment a 'criminal blunder'. 'What, we wonder, will our leaders reply if Britain has to ask why the wives and mothers of the Anzacs are not deemed fit to be honoured with their sisters in the Homeland, in Canada, in Australia and in America?''⁷¹

Grimshaw writes of the British experience that 'It was the First World War, with its consequent shattering of established society and its values' that led to women's suffrage. She asserts that 'as women took up occupations that were traditionally male monopolies, long cherished beliefs in women's physical frailty and incompetence went by the board.' Change in Aotearoa New Zealand occurred as a part of the British context, where imperial attitudes were picked up and fused with local intentions. Grimshaw's 'strange revolution', involving an advance in women's status through their wartime work and general good conduct, happened in the two nations. Importantly, in both places, 'the opinion of the Press, of Parliament, and of the general public' changed, enabling legislative advance of women's rights.⁷² Newman summed up the sentiment in Parliament in 1918: 'After the way the women have worked, after the hardships they have undergone during the war, and the noble way they have behaved, the House must do justice to them by carrying the amendment'.⁷³ The *Press* reported Russell saying that when it came time

to write the history of the war, 'the work of the women of the Dominion will be worthy to rank with the most glorious deeds of heroism of the soldiers in the trenches'.⁷⁴ Imperial wartime rhetoric united 'British' women, blurring local differences, and forming new public opinion.

The November 1918 influenza epidemic provided the immediate backdrop for McCombs's amendment and added further lustre to the already impressive demonstration of women's war work. In the Legislative Council, William Hall-Jones drew attention to the Prime Minister's wife 'who risked her life during the epidemic to help'.⁷⁵ Reporting on the health crisis, the *Otago Witness* considered that 'too much credit cannot be given to the women and men who assisted' with the epidemic.⁷⁶ The *Manawatu Times* considered women's work in the epidemic as confirming their right to stand for Parliament. It reported that in contrast to Parliament adding 'insult to injury' by refusing equal rights to women, 'the Auckland City Council had paid a well-deserved tribute' by electing a woman. With two vacancies arising from bereavement, the council appointed Mr G.W. Murray, the highest polling unsuccessful candidate at the last municipal election, and then 'in recognition of the heroic and self-sacrificing work of the women of Auckland in the recent epidemic', Mrs Maguire, wife of the superintendent of Auckland Hospital, was appointed to the other vacancy.⁷⁷

Historians have argued that during the war 'women's paid work changed only in minor ways', and rather it was in the volunteer sector that New Zealand women's contribution was widespread and essential.⁷⁸ Kate Hunter argues that there was not 'wholesale change' or dramatic change noticed in the census. She does, however, signal regional difference, and focuses on rural women's increased workloads.⁷⁹ Erik Olssen has argued that war happened amidst a longer range of changing occupational patterns for women, involving greater participation in paid employment and growing diversity in occupations, with the decline of domestic and industrial work in favour of new commercial and professional opportunities.⁸⁰

Where women's status was concerned, the war led to change in perceptions of work opportunities for women, rather than actual widespread change in occupations. In public opinion, Parliament and the press, women were cast as vital to the war effort in roles as nurses, factory workers and women in public. And as Jane Tolerton has revealed, some women did play an active role in the war effort overseas, contributing to women's growing status.⁸¹ Ellen Melville argued women had 'proved their capacity to fill very position' and should also have the right to enter Parliament. Melville was an example of a new generation of feminists entering the paid public service. She became an Auckland city councillor in 1913.⁸² In 1917 local body elections Ada Wells became the first woman to sit on the Christchurch City Council.⁸³

Largely due to the war, public opinion had caught up with the idea of women's equality being expressed in the public domain. Sarah Luxford notes women's increasing entrance into the professional and clerical sectors during the war.⁸⁴ Newspapers contained stories about the presence of women in paid public work. For example, the *Waihi Daily Telegraph* reported that 'There are 4153 women in the Public Service in a temporary or permanent capacity, compared with 1826 before the war. The Commissioner speaks highly of their work'.⁸⁵ Much of the information in the public domain was positive and valorising of women as equals. Editorializing on McCombs's amendment, the *Southland Times* wrote that 'after the experience of the war no one can refuse to acknowledge the right', and concluded that:

Women will take a more prominent part in public affairs after this and the state will benefit by their activity. The legislature will be improved by having women in both Chambers, and the Parliament of New Zealand ought not to be behind those of older and, as we have thought, less progressive countries in opening its doors to the sex that, except in the actual fighting, has borne the labour and suffering of the war equally with men. It may be taken for granted, we think, that women will be eligible for Parliament before the next general election is held in this country.⁸⁶

As well as advancing women's work in non-traditional areas, wartime saw the state's reliance upon women's unpaid work in the home and volunteer sector come to the fore. Kate Sheppard's 1919 presidential address to the annual conference of the NCW included a staunch call for the removal of 'women's disabilities'. She perceptively wrote that in Britain, 'Then came the tremendous upheaval of the war, and fossilised prejudices crashed in all directions'. Sheppard provided examples of how the war had helped with women's liberation internationally. In her focus on equal citizenship, she argued that 'It must not be forgotten that the Home and State are one'.⁸⁷ Maternal feminist arguments continued to play an important part in lobbying. As Wallace has argued, women would enter Parliament to play a gendered part on social welfare issues and purify the house.⁸⁸ Women's maternal platform was further strengthened during wartime when morals came under question through the disruptions to social order, including from drinking and sexual licence. Articulating women's right to equality through their difference, Independent Grey Lynn MP John Payne said in Parliament as part of the December 1918 debate:

I cannot for the life of me see why we should allow women to remain under this disability, especially in view of the fact that in their hands is really the training of the young citizens of the community. A woman is more nearly in touch with a good many of our moral and social problems than is a man; and, in my opinion, woman ought to be on the floor of this House in order that she may take a share in the councils of the nation, and lend her aid in remedying the social and moral conditions in the manner in which they ought to be remedied and remodelled.⁸⁹

Immediately after McCombs's unsuccessful attempt in 1918, women's groups embarked on a campaign of letters and telegrams to the press, Parliament and the Premier. Optimistically, they also prepared candidates for the next general election.⁹⁰ In Auckland, the NCW sent telegrams to all Legislative Council members asking them for support.⁹¹ A deputation of Nellie Coad, Edith Howes and Marjory Nicholls to Francis Bell captured the key arguments. They told Bell that women's services were as essential to the country as men's and that the country would benefit if men and women could cooperate in Parliament. They argued that women were especially valuable in the housing and child welfare areas, that women had shown they possessed brains, ideals and organizing abilities, and that they had a moral right to sit in Parliament. Forestalling detractors, they added that if being an MP was not for all women, it was not for all men, either. Signalling a forgone conclusion, Bell said it was the manner in which McCombs had introduced the matter that was the reason why it had not happened at that time.⁹²

Women were said to have proved themselves fit for public office on account of their unpaid work across a wide range of women's organizations and patriotic groups. Commenting on the visit to Francis Bell, an editorial in the *Dominion* argued that 'During the war the women of the British Empire have responded heroically to every call made upon them. Without their help victory could not have been won. They have shown themselves capable of doing almost everything that men can do. They have not been called upon to fight, but the soldiers could not have been adequately fed, clothed, equipped, and supplied with ammunition.' The article continued that 'The experiences of the war have greatly changed our opinions regarding woman's sphere. For the sake of the nation our womenfolk broke through traditional restrictions and created a new world for themselves. Bonds have been burst, and women have discovered a wider field for their activities. It is generally recognised that if they now demand more scope for their energies in politics as well as in industry their claim cannot be logically or successfully resisted'.⁹³

Overall, war effected a broad shift in women's status. In the case of women's parliamentary disabilities, pre-war obstacles were overcome. Articulating the change, the *Southland Times* editorialized on McCombs's 'little episode of interest' by saying that: 'We do not know why any exception should have been taken to it. After our experience in this war no one can say there is any position in public life for which women are unfitted, and why New Zealand, the first country to extend the political franchise to women, should refuse to open the door of the Legislature to them, we do not know'.⁹⁴ In December 1918 a column in Otago's *Otautau Standard and Wallace County Chronicle* supported the idea that because of women's war

efforts it was illogical not to extend them parliamentary equality. It quipped that while some people professed to fear the 'shrieking sisterhood' that 'most hysterical and fanatical women could not be much worse than some men we have at Wellington'.⁹⁵

On 26 September 1919 the Women's Parliamentary Rights Extension Bill had its second reading in the House of Representatives. Introducing the Bill, Massey said that it was 'probably one of the shortest but not the least important that has been submitted to the Legislature of this country'.⁹⁶ Responding to a question from McCombs on the order of business, Massey said that 'he had not the slightest doubt it would pass the House without any serious difficulty'.⁹⁷ Massey situated the Bill as 'really the outcome of granting the parliamentary franchise to the women of this country'. He noted the importance of keeping up with Britain, arguing that there was 'a certain demand that women in New Zealand should be placed in the same position as the women of England so far as parliamentary rights were concerned'.⁹⁸ Leader of the Opposition, Sir Joseph Ward, summed up that 'The war has altered the whole aspect of the question of what is due to the women of the world'. He noted that public opinion had changed and considered women's parliamentary rights 'the right thing to do'.⁹⁹ Leader of the Labour Party Harry Holland argued that women deserved parliamentary rights not because of war work, 'but because they are citizens, and because laws express the collective morality of the nation, or, on the other hand, the lack of morality'. He advanced twentieth-century maternal citizenship arguments that emphasized the 'elevating influence' of the mother.¹⁰⁰ Labour MP Robert Semple envisioned women in the house being able to eliminate the misery and squalor in cities. He added to Holland's sentiments that 'war will become a thing of the past' with women 'in the councils of the world'.¹⁰¹ McCombs reiterated the need to catch up with international advances in women's rights, and lamented that the 'Old Country' had acted before Aotearoa New Zealand.¹⁰²

Newspaper coverage was overwhelmingly supportive. The *Wanganui Chronicle* noted that Ward had 'said that the war had altered the whole aspect of the position so far as women were concerned throughout the world and, more particularly in the Old Country' and Holland's words that 'The women who contributed social service to the country were doing their duty with man, and was equally entitled to a voice in the Government and in the making of wars'.¹⁰³ The *Auckland Star* headlined the passing of the Bill 'The Superior Sex'. It reported Ward as saying that 'the war had completely changed the position of women; It was recognised that but for their co-operation and the work they did, which liberated many thousands of men for fighting, the war could not have been won'. Ward believed that 'Numbers of New Zealand

women were extremely well able to take a share in the government of the country' and added that 'the fact that women polled so well in the elections showed their interest in politics'.¹⁰⁴ An editorial in the left-leaning *Grey River Argus* considered the passing of the Bill 'complete recognition of the right only partially admitted' through women's suffrage. It did, however, foreshadow that moving beyond 'theory' to seeing women in Parliament would take time.¹⁰⁵ Two days later, the paper's summary of the speeches emphasized that it was four of five Labour MPs who had spoken to the Bill. The summary included Semple's words on women's ability to stop wars. He was quoted as saying that 'The women of the world were above the ethics of the jungle and would tackle the world's problems from a humane point of view'. Women were carers of children, 'custodians of the cupboard' and responsible for the 'laborious domestic work, and the toil of the nation, and who often gave up their lives to bring life into this world', and were nurses in the battlefield and 'the mothers of the nation', and he concluded that because of this they had equal rights.¹⁰⁶

In the immediate post-war context, overt opposition was limited to minor lampooning of how to treat ladies in the House. John Vigor Brown (Independent Reform, Napier) thought that 'not many will avail themselves of the opportunity' and mentioned that it would be very difficult for a woman with a family to cope with the parliamentary schedule, with all night sittings, as 'She would have to go away and look after her family.'¹⁰⁷

Once again, the Legislative Council put a spanner in the works and defeated the Bill 18 to 8. On procedural grounds, it considered that the House could not include women being appointed to the Legislative Council in its Bill.¹⁰⁸ Conservatism was not confined to Pākehā members. Te Heuheu Tukino chief of Ngāti Tuwharetoa asserted in the Legislative Council in 1919 that if the Bill allowing women to stand passed it would lead to trouble in the home. He believed that the representation by a woman was 'against the customs of the Maori people'.¹⁰⁹ He asserted that in Māori culture 'The male has always been the master mind', and asked that if the Bill passed 'that the women of the Native race should be excluded from its provisions'.¹¹⁰ Also present in the Legislative Council was John Topi Patuki from Ruapuke Island in the Foveaux Straight who initially voted in favour of the Bill, but later changed his mind.¹¹¹

Even after a conference between the two houses on the matter an impasse remained, and Massey announced that the Legislative Council would have to follow suit in the future. On 29 October the Women's Parliamentary Act passed, including married women as eligible for election to the House of Representatives.¹¹²

Conclusion

The victory of 1919 was bitter-sweet, as it took until 1941 for women to be granted the right to be appointed to the Legislative Council, and until 1946 for Mary Anderson and Mary Dreaver to be admitted.¹¹³ Meanwhile, a difficult long-term pattern set in for women being elected to the House of Representatives. Margaret Wilson notes that 'Although women won the right to be elected in 1919, the prejudice remained strong against women standing for Parliament. It was only by the determined efforts of women like Ellen Melville and Elizabeth McCombs that the breakthrough was made in 1933'.¹¹⁴ Janet McCallum pointed out 'It took 14 attempts in as many years before Elizabeth McCombs took her seat in 1933'.¹¹⁵ After Elizabeth McCombs, only 14 women were elected to Parliament between 1935 and 1975, eight from the Labour Party and six from the National Party. Three of these women served as Cabinet ministers and two held Māori seats.¹¹⁶ In comparison 298 men were elected during this time.

The number of women MPs increased during a late-twentieth-century second wave of feminism, supporting Dalziel's argument that until that wave, the majority of women 'clung to the functions associated with the hearth and home'.¹¹⁷ James McCombs had prophetically suggested that proportional representation, introduced in 1996, would be needed to boost the number of women in Parliament by the end of the twentieth century.¹¹⁸ Writing in 1993, Elizabeth McLeay concluded that 'the women who have represented their electorates have gained their positions despite rather than because of the political structure in which they participate,' and there is a large literature on enduring prejudices faced by women MPs.¹¹⁹

The pattern of slow and difficult change, both before and after World War I, adds weight to the argument that it was the wartime context that enabled the rapid improvement in women's status. Once the wartime climate ended, change slowed down. And if public opinion witnessed Grimshaw's 'strange revolution', once the need for wartime work and the perception of women in non-traditional occupations ended, there was a reversion to favouring women's maternal identity, and their primary place in the home. Melanie Nolan writes that the effects of women's war work were 'only potentially and partially liberating,' and suggests that a period of regression followed.¹²⁰ Erik Olssen and Jan McLeod note that after the war, women gave up their clerical positions in the civil service to returning servicemen.¹²¹

Women's rights in Aotearoa New Zealand advanced in a context mindful of the international, and in particular the British, situation. Most prejudices were themselves imported as part of the baggage of colonial history. In addition, colonial pride, and not falling behind Britain, or other countries,

was an important factor in the legislative change. Once Britain had given some women the vote and the right to stand for its Parliament, Aotearoa New Zealand was hurried along. In short, women's wartime work, involving their contribution to both the public and private spheres, combined with renewed feminist activism and male parliamentary support to make the 1919 Act a foregone conclusion. The newspaper evidence suggests it was women's value during wartime that charged and changed public opinion towards what was previously an issue only of concern to a minority.

Because it detracts from the national pride of the women's suffrage world first of 1893, and because it took until 1933 for a woman to be elected, 1919 has remained a quiet part of the history of women's status in Aotearoa New Zealand. It was, however, a pivotal and essential moment that deserves to be commemorated. The passing of the 1919 Act cuts to the heart of women's place in society, and highlights the ongoing tensions and contradictions concerning equality and difference in society.

KATIE PICKLES

University of Canterbury

NOTES

- 1 Barbara Brookes, *A History of New Zealand Women*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2016, p.210.
- 2 Sandra Coney, ed., *Standing in the Sunshine: A History of New Zealand Women Since They Won the Vote*, 1993, Viking Penguin Books, Auckland, p.38.
- 3 Patricia Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand*, Auckland University Press and National Council of Women, Auckland, 1972, 1987, pp.xvii, xx.
- 4 Margaret Wilson, 'Women and the Labour Party', in Margaret Clark, ed., *The Labour Party after 75 Years*, Occasional Publication No. 4, Department of Politics, Victoria University of Wellington, 1992, pp.35–49, 40.
- 5 Kate Sheppard, 'President's Address', in Margaret Lovell-Smith, ed., *The Woman Question: Writings by the Women who Won the Vote*, New Women's Press, Auckland, 1992, pp.235–44, 236.
- 6 See Neill Atkinson, *Adventures in Democracy: A History of the Vote in New Zealand*, Otago University Press in association with the Electoral Committee, Dunedin, 2003, pp.85–88.
- 7 Sandra Wallace, 'Powder-Power Politicians: New Zealand Women Parliamentary Candidates', PhD thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, 1992, p.24.
- 8 Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand*, p.17.
- 9 *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (NZPD), 1887, 57, p.372.
- 10 Wallace, 'Powder-Power Politicians', p.26.
- 11 Coney, *Standing in the Sunshine*, p.38.
- 12 Megan Hutching, *Leading the Way: How New Zealand Women Won the Vote*, HarperCollins, Auckland, 2010, p.49.
- 13 Carol Rankin, *Women and Parliament 1893–1993: 100 years of institutional change*, Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Wellington, 1993, p.3.
- 14 Kate Sheppard, 'President's Address', p.237.
- 15 Monica Webb, 'Anna Paterson Stout: Portrait of a New Zealand Lady 1858–1951', MA thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, 2015, p.86.
- 16 Hutching, *Leading the Way*, p.33.
- 17 Wallace, *Out of the Home and Into the House: New Zealand Women's Fight to Enter Parliament*, Department of Justice, Wellington, 1993, pp.3–4.
- 18 See James Keating, 'Piecing together suffrage internationalism: Place, space, and connected histories of Australasian women's activism', *History Compass*, 16, 8, 2018, pp.1–15 and James Keating, 'The Defection of Women': The New Zealand Contagious Diseases Act repeal campaign and transnational feminist dialogue in the late nineteenth century', *Women's History Review*, 25, 2, 2016, pp.187–206.
- 19 Wallace, 'Powder-Power Politicians', p.29.
- 20 Dorothy Page, *The National Council of Women: A Centennial History*, Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books, and NCW, Auckland, 1996, p.26.
- 21 Wallace, *Out of the Home*, pp.3–4.
- 22 NZPD, 1894, 83, pp.404–12, 567–71.
- 23 Wallace, *Out of the Home*, p.7.
- 24 Wallace, *Out of the Home*, p.7.
- 25 NZPD, 1894, 83, p.412.
- 26 NZPD, 1894, 83, p.407.
- 27 NZPD, 1894, 83, p.570.
- 28 Tania Rei, *Maori Women and the Vote*, Huia Publishers, Wellington, 1993, pp.17–21.
- 29 Coney, *Standing in the Sunshine*, p.39; NZPD, 1900, 111, pp.274, 684.
- 30 Wallace, *Out of the Home*, pp.8–9.

- 31 Raewyn Dalziel, 'The Colonial Helpmeet: Women's Role and the Vote in Nineteenth Century New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 11, 2 (October 1977), pp.112–23.
- 32 Mary Beard, *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, Profile Books and London Review of Books, London, 2017, pp.56, 57.
- 33 Coney, *Standing in the Sunshine*, p.38.
- 34 NZPD, 1887, 57, pp.240–1.
- 35 Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand*, p.17; Wallace, 'Powder-Power Politicians', pp.42, 46.
- 36 Wallace, 'Powder-Power Politicians', p.61.
- 37 Sheppard, 'An Open Letter', in Lovell-Smith, *The Woman Question*, pp.197–200.
- 38 Sheppard, 'That Petition', in Lovell-Smith, *The Woman Question*, pp.196–7.
- 39 Wallace, 'Powder-Power Politicians', p.31.
- 40 Wallace, 'Powder-Power Politicians', p.46.
- 41 Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand*, p.126.
- 42 Roberta Nicholls, *The Women's Parliament: The National Council of the Women of New Zealand 1896–1920*, GP Print, Wellington, 1996, p.64.
- 43 Tom Brooking, *Richard Seddon: King of God's Own: The Life and Times of New Zealand's Longest-serving Prime Minister*, Penguin, Auckland, 2014, p.128.
- 44 Dalziel, 'The Colonial Helpmeet', p.123.
- 45 Webb, 'Anna Paterson Stout', p.36.
- 46 Webb, 'Anna Paterson Stout', p.66.
- 47 Wallace, 'Powder-Power Politicians', p.6.
- 48 Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand*, pp.2, 126.
- 49 Shona Mann and Nancy Ridley, *A Vision and a Dream: An Informal History of the Christchurch Branch of the National Council of Women N.Z. Inc.*, Christchurch Branch of the National Council of Women, 1993, p.8.
- 50 Nicholls, *The Women's Parliament*, p.68.
- 51 Hutching, *Leading the Way*, p.119.
- 52 *Northern Advocate*, 30 October 1918, p.3.
- 53 *Evening Star*, 3 December 1918, p.2.
- 54 Wallace, 'Powder-Power Politicians', p.49.
- 55 NZPD, 1918, 183, p.847.
- 56 *Sun*, 9 December 1918, p.3.
- 57 Peter Franks and Jim McAloon, *The New Zealand Labour Party 1916–2016*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2016, p.71.
- 58 David Gee, *My Dear Girl*, Treehouse, Christchurch, 1993, pp.74, 84.
- 59 NZPD, 1918, 183, p.844.
- 60 Mann and Ridley, *A Vision and a Dream*, p.9.
- 61 Hutching, *Leading the Way*, p.153.
- 62 Pers com Jim McAloon 6/8/18. 1918 Conferences United Federation of Labor, NZ Trade Unions and New Zealand Labor Party, The Maoriland Worker Printery, Wellington 1918, pp.30, 33.
- 63 Elizabeth McCombs, 'Women and the Labour Movement', in Charlotte Macdonald, ed., *The Vote, The Pill and the Demon Drink: A History of Feminist Writing in New Zealand 1869–1993*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 1993, pp.98–101.
- 64 Wilson, 'Women and the Labour Party', p.38.
- 65 Page, *The National Council of Women*, p.53.
- 66 NZPD, 1918, 183, p.844.
- 67 In Britain, the first woman MP to be elected to the Commons was Constance Markievicz in the 1918 general election. She was a member of Sinn Fein and did not take her seat. The first

woman to take her seat was Nancy Astor, after a by-election in December 1919. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/elections/voting/women/vote/overview/womenincommons/> accessed 29 September 2018. Women were allowed to stand for Parliament in South Australia from 1894, then all women at a federal level from 1901. In 1903 there were four women candidates. It took until 1943 for Enid Lyons (United Australia Party) and Dorothy Tangney (Australian Labor Party) to be elected to the House of Representatives. At the state level, Edith Cowan became the first woman in Parliament in 1921. There were four women in state parliaments before 1943. https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/Australian_Electoral_History/milestone.htm accessed 29 August 2018. Nineteen women MPs were elected in the first Finnish Parliament in 1907. <http://www.helsinki.fi/sukupuolentutkimus/aaniokuus/en/articles/first.htm#inland> accessed 29 September 2018. In 1918 the Federal Canadian government gave women over 30 years who were British subjects and with a husband or son in the services the right to vote and to stand for Parliament. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/rights-women.html> accessed 29 September 2018.

68 NZPD, 1918, 183, p.850.

69 On ‘Home’ see Felicity Barnes, *New Zealand’s London: A Colony and its Metropolis*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2012.

70 *Nelson Evening Mail*, 31 December 1918, p.1. See NZPD, 1918, 183, p.844.

71 *Lyttelton Times*, 10 December 1918, p.6.

72 Grimshaw, *Women’s Suffrage in New Zealand*, p.xvii.

73 NZPD, 1918, 183, p.845.

74 *Press*, 23 December 1918, p.6.

75 NZPD, 1918, 183, p.850.

76 *Otago Witness*, 11 December 1918, p.13.

77 *Manawatu Times*, 17 December 1918, p.4.

78 Kate Hunter, ‘Women’s Mobilization for War (New Zealand)’, in Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer and Bill Nasson, eds, *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10768.

79 Kate Hunter, ‘New Zealand’, in Ute Daniel et al, eds, *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10638.

80 Erik Olssen, ‘Women, Work and Family: 1880–1926’, in P. Bunkle and B. Hughes, *Women in New Zealand Society*, Allen and Unwin, Auckland, 1980, pp.25, 159–83.

81 Jane Tolerton, *Make Her Praises Heard Afar: New Zealand Women Overseas in World War One*, Booklovers Books, Wellington, 2017.

82 Coney, *Standing in the Sunshine*, pp.39–40.

83 Wallace, ‘Powder-Power Politicians’, p.49.

84 Sarah Luxford, ‘Passengers for the War? The involvement of New Zealand women in employment during the Great War 1914–1918’, MA thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, 2005, p.7.

85 *Daily Telegraph* (Waihi), 3 December 1918, p.2.

86 *Southland Times*, 9 December 1918, p.4.

87 Sheppard, ‘President’s Address’, pp.235, 236.

88 Wallace, *Out of the Home*, pp.14–15.

89 NZPD, 1918, 183, p.846.

90 Nicholls, *The Women’s Parliament*, pp.112–3.

91 Wallace, *Out of the Home*, p.12.

92 *Dominion*, 9 December 1918, p.6.

93 *Dominion*, 9 December 1918, p.4.

94 *Southland Times*, 7 December 1918, p.4.

- 95 *Otautau Standard and Wallace Country Chronicle*, 17 December 1918, p.3.
- 96 NZPD, 1919, 184, p.963.
- 97 NZPD, 1919, 184, p.699.
- 98 NZPD, 1919, 184, p.964.
- 99 NZPD, 1919, 184, pp.964–5.
- 100 NZPD, 1919, 184, pp.966, 967.
- 101 NZPD, 1919, 184, p.978.
- 102 NZPD, 1919, 184, pp.968–9.
- 103 *Wanganui Chronicle*, 27 September 1919, p.5.
- 104 *Auckland Star*, 27 September 1919, p.12.
- 105 *Grey River Argus*, 2 October 1919, p.2.
- 106 *Grey River Argus*, 4 October 1919, p.3.
- 107 NZPD, 1919, 184, pp.977–8.
- 108 NZPD, 1919, 185, p.756.
- 109 Rankin, *Women and Parliament*, p.16, Brookes, *A History of New Zealand Women*, p.210.
- 110 NZPD, 1919, 185, pp.6–7.
- 111 NZPD, 1919, 185, pp.9, 767.
- 112 Wallace, *Out of the Home*, p.16.
- 113 Wallace, ‘Powder-Power Politicians’, p.61.
- 114 Wilson, ‘Women and the Labour Party’, p.40.
- 115 Janet McCallum, *Women in the House: Members of Parliament in New Zealand*, Cape Catley, New Zealand, 1993, p.vii.
- 116 Elizabeth McLeay, ‘Women and the Problem of Parliamentary Representation: A Comparative Perspective’, in Helena Catt and Elizabeth McLeay, eds, *Women and Politics in New Zealand, Political Science* in collaboration with Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1993, pp.40–62, 42. Mabel Howard, Hilda Ross and Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan were the Cabinet ministers. Sullivan and Iriaka Rātana were the Māori women MPs.
- 117 Dalziel, ‘The Colonial Helpmeet’, p.123.
- 118 Wallace, ‘Powder-Power Politicians’, p.122.
- 119 McLeay, ‘Women and the Problem of Parliamentary Representation’, p.62. On difficulties see, for example, Janet McCallum, Marilyn Waring, *Three Masquerades: Essays on Equality, Work and Hu(man) Rights*, Auckland University Press with Bridget Williams Books, Auckland, 1997; Holly Walker, *The Whole Intimate Mess: Motherhood, Politics and Women’s Writing*, BWB Texts, Wellington, 2017; Arthur Baysting, Dyan Campbell and Margaret Dagg, *Making Policy Not Tea: Women in Parliament*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1994.
- 120 Melanie Nolan, *Breadwinning: New Zealand Women and the State*, Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2000, p.16.
- 121 Olssen, ‘Women, Work and Family’, p.180, Jan C. McLeod, ‘Activities of New Zealand Women During World War I’, BA Hons thesis, University of Otago, 1978.