

“Doing Something Silly”: The Uses of Humour by the Women’s Social and Political Union, 1903–1914*

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SUMMARY: Investigations into uses of humour associated with the militant suffrage campaign of the Women’s Social and Political Union have been largely concerned with the satirizing of suffragettes. The uses that suffragettes themselves made of humour as a considered political tactic have been less considered. This paper explores three ways in which suffragettes turned humour to their advantage during their campaign: by deliberately adopting “silly” behaviours as a counterpoint to over-formal and male dominated Edwardian politics; by quick-witted retorts to hecklers who sought to disrupt suffragette meetings and finally as a means of venting private political dissent and alleviating some of the stresses of hectic political campaigning. The exploration of humour within the WSPU’s work reveals some of the links between humour and social protest in the early twentieth century, and considers the extent to which its use in public political behaviour might be gendered.

In recent years, much has been made of the disjuncture between the flamboyant, militant campaign of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) and its more sedate, Victorian predecessors.¹ Whereas an earlier generation of suffragists had relied quiet methods to achieve their demands, the WSPU represented something quite different. Founded in 1903, it drew a line under Victorian tactics. Its roots lay in a number of new political and cultural currents which emerged in the twentieth century. Its founders had learned their politics in the Independent Labour Party in the 1890s, the decade when Britain witnessed a “flowering” of socialism, characterized by innumerable cultural phenomena.² A sense of possibility

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1. See for example Patricia Greenwood Harrison, *Connecting Links: The British and American Woman Suffrage Movements, 1900–1914* (Westport, CT, 2000); Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women’s Suffrage, 1866–1914* (Oxford, 2000); Sophia A. Van Wingerden, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866–1928* (Basingstoke, 1999).

2. Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland, 1850–1914* (Oxford, 1991), p. 261. See also Stephen Yeo, “The New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883–1896”, *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1977), pp. 5–56. For links between the WSPU and the ILP, see

pervaded all aspects of this work, moving politics beyond the domination of the Liberal and Conservative elites. Suddenly, individuals with no previous personal or familial connection to government found themselves speaking at public meetings, leading local branches, and even standing for election to various local authority boards. Women, who enjoyed full membership of the ILP and were eligible for election to many local government bodies, played a full part.

Socialist women carried this sense of possibility into the WSPU. As the Union expanded into a national organization its membership broadened and imported other new cultural trends. There was a strong cohort of artistic, bohemian women in its ranks. Many of these were self-confessed “new women”, those “smoking, cycling, defiant and desiring” embodiments of the “emerging form of emancipated womanhood [which] marked a new departure in femininity” at the end of the nineteenth century.³ The WSPU also attracted numbers of intelligent working-class girls who had taken advantage of the expansion of educational opportunities in the 1890s, often as pupil teachers then through University scholarships and extension schemes.⁴ The potent combination of such individuals in its ranks working amidst expanding definitions of femininity made the Union a unique presence in early twentieth-century politics in its aims, membership, organisation and particularly through its campaigning methods which challenged and expanded contemporary understandings of the political.

The WSPU’s leaders emphasized its newness and novelty. Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, the Union’s treasurer, explained some of the key differences which distinguished the WSPU from its contemporary political organizations. The strongest and most apparent difference was in its lack of men at any level. The Union was:

[...] run by women, and supported by women, for women and in the interests of women and not run by men, and exploited in the interests of men or of some men’s political party [...] this is an altogether new phenomenon of modern times and is inconceivable at first to the modern mind.⁵

Such arrangements in an age in which many political parties denied women formal membership were inconceivable to many Edwardian observers, and provoked bemused responses. The Union’s strangeness when compared

Krista Cowman, “‘Incipient Toryism’? The Women’s Social and Political Union and the Independent Labour Party, 1903–14”, *History Workshop Journal*, 53 (2002), pp. 128–148.

3. Angeliqwe Wilson, “Introduction”, in Angeliqwe Wilson (ed.), *Women Who Did: Stories by New Men and Women, 1890–1914* (London, 2002), p. xxxiii. For a much-cited pejorative view of such figures, see Eliza Lynn Linton, “The Girl of the Period”, *Saturday Review*, 14 March 1868.

4. For a discussion of scholarship opportunities open to women, see Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities, 1870–1939* (London, 1995), pp. 28–33.

5. *The Referee*, 28 March 1907, cutting in Arncliffe Sennett Collection, British Library.

with other political bodies and the numbers of somewhat bohemian young women who joined its ranks made it an easy target for humour, and it was not long before its unique manifestation of feminized politics became the butt of contemporary jokes amongst an uncomprehending public.

However, jokes at its expense were not the only manifestations of humour to be associated with the WSPU. In many aspects of their public campaigning, suffragettes could be seen actively deploying humour as a deliberate tactic; to diffuse hostility, to gain suffragettes a hearing, or to emphasize the ridiculous aspects of their more inflexible opponents. Humorous tactics by suffragettes were sometimes dismissed as women “doing something silly”, but served to win them attention in circumstances where female voices had traditionally been absent or silent.⁶ As the campaign increased in intensity humour also became a key means of alleviating stress, as shared jokes between WSPU members allowed them to give vent to critical feelings in a comparatively safe manner.

SATIRIZING THE SUFFRAGETTE

Satirical presentations of suffragettes crowded the popular Edwardian daily press. Katherine Kelly has noted how the suffrage movement and such papers, many of which began publication around the same time as the WSPU, combined to deliver “a new sense of urban life” to their readers.⁷ The prominent use that papers such as the *Daily Mirror* made of photography made the spectacle of the WSPU an irresistible topic for its front pages. The *Daily Mail* was equally fascinated and named the Union’s members “Suffragettes”, adding the diminutive feminized ending to the word in an attempt to inject some gentle humour into their coverage of the WSPU’s campaign during the general election of 1906.⁸ Its aim was to use light humour to detract from the political dimensions of the WSPU by making it appear over-feminine and consequently somewhat frivolous. Nevertheless, the WSPU’s leader Christabel Pankhurst recognized that the title differentiated her Union from other groups of suffragists and was quick to adopt it although her suggestion that it ought to be pronounced with a hard “g”, to underline that her members “were determined to get” to vote, was never followed.⁹

A level of gentle public lampooning attended the WSPU’s campaign for the next eight years. Initial press coverage reflected – and doubtlessly

6. Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, *Votes for Women*, 8 March 1908.

7. See Katherine E. Kelly, “Seeing Through Spectacles: The Woman Suffrage Movement and London Newspapers, 1906–13”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 11 (2004), pp. 327–353, 327.

8. Antonia Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes* (London, 1973), p. 11.

9. Christabel Pankhurst, *Unshackled: The Story of How We Won the Vote* (London, 1987), p. 63.

encouraged – the attitude of amused interest with which much of the public responded to the Union’s attempts to colonize Edwardian political life. “Indulgent smile[s]” and “curiosity” typified this response.¹⁰ Tolerant indulgence which perceived a comic dimension within suffrage demonstrations continued in press reports even after they became more violent. Coverage of the deputations to Parliament organized between February 1907 and January 1913 combined outrage and humour. The *Daily Express*, describing the arrests of over seventy women in March 1907, detailed “individual fights and scrambles for the most part it must be admitted conducted with the greatest good humour and pleasantness on both sides”. When faced with struggling suffragettes, the police “stood stock still and smiled”. Overall, the report concluded, “[t]he sight reminded one very much of the removal of naughty kittens from a room in which they had been disporting themselves freely”.¹¹ The same paper found equal humour in a demonstration in October 1908, when it compared the police cordon surrounding suffragettes in Parliament Square to “a game of kiss in the ring, the police forming the ring”, but admitted that “There was no kissing, however, when the lady was caught”.¹²

Some humour remained in press reports after the campaign embraced more violent forms of direct action such as arson. In February 1912 the *Daily Mirror* responded to the threat of augmented suffragette violence with a wry suggestion of how this might be used to improve the general landscape, presenting “advertisements that mar the countryside; the huge traction engines that are allowed to rumble through our streets; the drays that crawl along the middle of the road; our street bands”, at the top of a list of things that might usefully be blown up by suffragettes.¹³

The lampooning of suffragette activities permeated other aspects of popular culture. Music hall artistes found suffragettes an irresistible target and consistently ridiculed aspects of their perceived personal qualities, particularly their ability to terrify men, which underpinned one popular song:

Put me on an island where the girls are few
 Put me amongst the most ferocious lions in the zoo
 Put me on a treadmill, and I’ll never fret
 But for pity’s sake don’t put me with a suffragette.¹⁴

10. *The Times*, 22 June 1908. For discussion of this article, see Kelly, “Seeing Through Spectacle”, p. 339.

11. *Daily Express*, 21 March 1907.

12. *Ibid.*, 21 October 1908.

13. *Daily Mirror*, 25 February 1912, Maude Arncliffe Sennett Collection.

14. Written by Will Letters for the popular music hall performer Wilkie Bard. Similar songs include Louis Weslyn and Ernest R. Ball, “I Want A Man! (Suffragette Song)”, (London, 1910). For a description of the appropriation of “Put Me On An Island” by crowds at WSPU demonstrations see Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes*, p. 59.

Several suffragette memoirs note the song's use by crowds bent on disrupting WSPU speakers.¹⁵ Theatre audiences were offered suffragette characters for comic effect. The trade-union organizer turned playwright, James Sexton, put a female character who “was disloyal, lied, had a past [...] made open love to her employer – and was a suffragette” into his play, *The Riot Act*.¹⁶ Cinema found comic potential in the WSPU's public profile. Elizabeth Crawford has identified around a dozen films with comic depictions of suffragettes, including Percy Stow's *Milling the Militants: A Comical Absurdity* (Clarendon Film Company, 1913) in which a man, left to cope whilst his wife attends a suffragette demonstration, dreams of draconian ways of suppressing the movement only to be rudely awakened by a bucket of water thrown by his returning wife.¹⁷

Literature devised satirical interpretations of the suffrage campaign such as in Nina Simmond's 1911 novella, *The House of the Suffragette*, which depicts the disorganized and neglected home of the suffragette Milly, from the perspective of her dog, Tricks. Whilst Milly attends meetings her children receive sleeping draughts from a lazy nursemaid and her cook steals from her. Indeed, Tricks informs the reader, “Nothing's been the same since my dear lady joined the Suffragettes”.¹⁸ The surprise visit of her cousin, Hepzibah, allows Milly to learn the error of her ways, and appreciate that she has, indeed, “let everything and everyone – husband, children, home – suffer for ‘the Cause’”.¹⁹

The picture postcard became most strongly identified with satirizing suffrage. The Edwardian period witnessed a dramatic rise in the use and popularity of picture postcards which were cheap, colourful and readily available due to new photographic and printing technology. They appealed to a rising consumer market as attractive postcards, presented as collectable as well as useful, and were released in series of related designs by shrewd publishers.²⁰ The suffrage movement itself made use of the fundraising opportunities presented by postcard collecting by issuing portraits of its more popular speakers in this format. Commercial publishers issued dozens of allegedly humorous cards featuring satirical interpretations of the campaign and its leaders, and such cards offer an accessible account of the ways in which humour was used against

15. See, for example, Grace Roe to David Mitchell, 22 September 1965, Mitchell Collection 73 83/52 Museum of London.

16. G. Wyndham Goldie, *The Liverpool Repertory Theatre, 1911–1934*, cited in Krista Cowman, “Mrs Brown is a Man and a Brother!” *Women in Merseyside's Political Organisations, 1890–1920* (Liverpool, 2004), p. 93.

17. Elizabeth Crawford, “Feature Films”, in Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866–1928* (London, 1999), pp. 220–221.

18. Nita Simmonds, *The House of the Suffragette* (London, 1911), p. 2.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 37

20. See I. McDonald, *Vindication! A Postcard History of the Women's Movement* (London, 1989), p. 9.

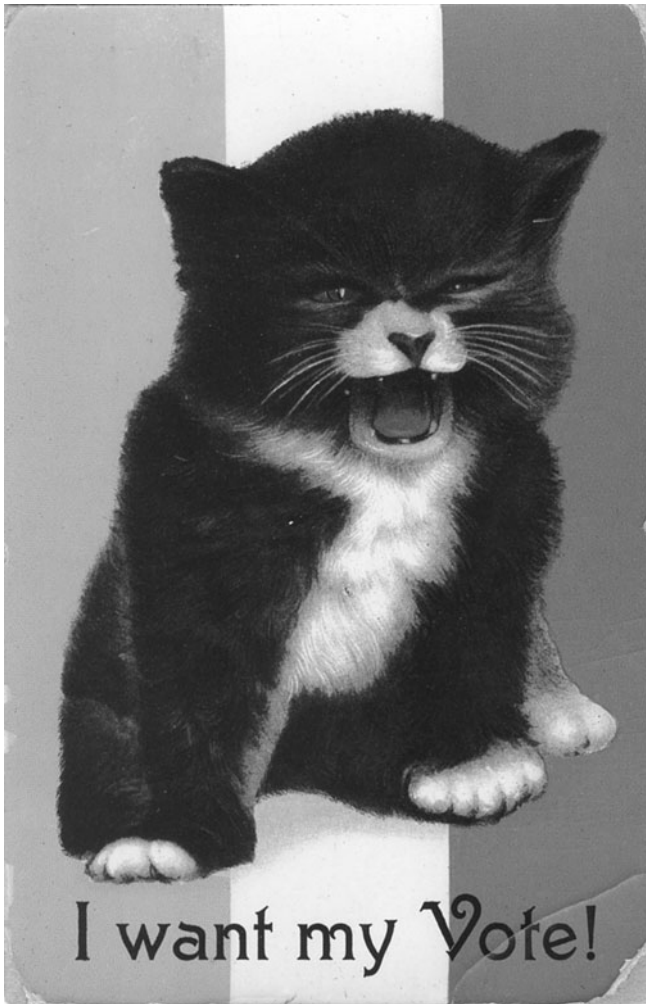


Figure 1. Commercial publishers issued dozens of allegedly humorous cards featuring satirical interpretations of the suffragette campaign and its leaders. Animals were popular, particularly cats.

Postcard, no publisher, posted in November 1908. Author's Collection.

suffragettes. Some were quite light. Animals were popular, particularly cats.²¹ The postcard shown in Figure 1 is quite typical of this genre. Here the kitten, backed by the WSPU colours of purple, white and green, does not present an overtly hostile interpretation of the suffragette campaign although it could be read as an attempt at infantilization. Such images

21. For cats, see Crawford, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, p. 564.



Figure 2. A postcard depicting the domestic chaos which derived from the disjuncture between women's perceived sphere and the public work of the suffragette. The scene underlines the message that suffragette activism puts domestic life in turmoil.

Postcard, published by C.W. Faulkner & Co, London, posted in February 1908. Author's Collection.

would appeal to those who found the suffrage campaign amusing and to its more passive supporters as it is not an overtly anti-suffragette image.

Another common trope depicted the domestic chaos which derived from the disjuncture between women's perceived sphere and the public work of the suffragette. Typical of this type of illustration is Figure 2, where the hapless, emasculated husband tries to feed his children,

succeeding only in scalding the family cat. The caption, “The Suffragette *not* at home” refers to the title “At Home”, which the WSPU used for their regular branch meetings throughout the country, whilst a note on the floor informs the husband that his wife is attending an “important committee meeting”.²² A list of meetings affixed to the wall underlines the message that suffragette activism puts domestic life in turmoil. Many felt these cards replicated their own views, and the sender of this particular example has appended his hope that its recipient is not similarly “left to do so” by his “good wife”. Although this is gentle, some images were extraordinarily vicious and indicate the hostility felt towards the suffragette movement. Suffragettes were “harridans with big feet, buck teeth, long noses”, wearing mannish clothing suggestive of a lesbian identity.²³ Such images were not restricted to the postcard market. Newspapers traded similar depictions of “the suffragette face” with line drawings suggesting that arrested women derived enjoyment from police “embraces”.²⁴

TURNING THE TABLES: RETALIATORY SUFFRAGETTE HUMOUR

The use of humour by observers of the militant suffrage campaign, to depict and interpret and to exploit and undermine its aims and protagonists has not gone unnoticed by suffrage historians.²⁵ However, one aspect of the role of humour within this campaign that has been largely overlooked is the extent to which the suffragettes themselves invoked comic approaches which they exploited to their own advantage. In an age when women were considered inferior to men, an inferiority underlined by their subordinate legal position, many suffragettes found that provoking laughter at the expense of their opponents created a powerful and subversive weapon which they put to good use in their campaigns.

Suffragettes most obviously used humour reactively to diffuse threatening situations. It was not unusual for them to meet with hostility from crowds during their propagandizing. Open-air meetings were a ubiquitous feature of early twentieth-century urban life, utilized by all political

22. Mary Gawthorpe’s description of the Manchester WSPU’s “At Home”, *VFW*, 24 September 1908 explains the social dimension of such meetings.

23. Crawford, *Women’s Suffrage Movement*, p. 564. For a discussion of how certain forms of clothing were perceived as marking lesbian identity by early twentieth-century sexologists see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870–1936”, in Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jnr (eds), *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (London [etc.], 1991), pp. 264–280, 270.

24. “The Suffragette Face: New Type Evolved by Militancy”, *Daily Mirror*, 25 May 1915; *Daily Graphic*, 15 February 1907, caption: The Gaoler removes a prisoner. The Lady: “Oh this is lovely!”

25. See, for example, Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women* (London, 1987), p. 163.

groups to “reach people who could never be got inside a building to listen to political speeches”.²⁶ The WSPU also recognized such meetings could save funds which would otherwise have been spent on hiring halls.²⁷ Yet there were other attendant costs. In an advice manual to potential electoral candidates J. Seymour Lloyd warned that “speakers require to be most carefully chosen for open-air work, as criticism is remarkably rough and ready on such occasions”.²⁸ This advice was aimed at party-political candidates who could expect hostility from opposing parties, whereas suffragettes faced persistent criticism from across the political spectrum, and the open-air venues rendered them especially vulnerable.

Their platform “lorries” were targeted. Nellie Crocker recalled hers being pulled across a market square, then tipped over, by a less than friendly crowd in Retford.²⁹ In Huddersfield, Annie Kenney and a younger, inexperienced speaker had their lorry seized by the crowd and pulled through the town to be deposited outside the lunatic asylum.³⁰ Other crowds were more menacing. At by-elections, feelings could run high. In January 1908, the Liberal Party lost the seat at Newton Abbot which it had held since 1885. Emmeline Pankhurst and Nellie Martel, who had been overseeing the WSPU’s campaign, bore the brunt of Liberal disquiet. They were badly beaten by “young men and boys” wearing Liberal rosettes and Emmeline was knocked unconscious.³¹ Physical attacks on suffragettes were not restricted to elections. Ada Flatman was almost thrown off a pier during a holiday campaign in the Isle of Man in 1909 whilst in Uppingham, Mary Gawthorpe was rendered senseless when a well-aimed missile hit her on the head.³²

Less threatening but equally disrupting were the orchestrated attempts to drown out the WSPU’s speakers altogether. At worst this involved groups with whistles, bells, and saucepans which were banged continually. Individual hecklers were just as disruptive, questioning suffragettes’ femininity or household management. “These women”, one man sneered at Minnie Baldock as she handed out WSPU leaflets at Kings Cross Station to crowds of men heading off to the FA cup final in 1908; “It is a pity they cannot look after their homes. I wonder what their places are like?”³³ In Ashton, Hannah Mitchell faced a market trader whose “good strong market-trained voice” consistently rose above hers with shouts of “Can

26. J. Seymour Lloyd, *Elections and How to Fight Them* (London 1909), p. 33.

27. See Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant* (London, 1924), p. 83.

28. Seymour Lloyd, *Elections*, p. 35.

29. Nellie Crocker mss autobiography, Girton College Cambridge.

30. Kenney, *Memories*, p. 106.

31. Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London, 1914), pp. 91–93.

32. *Liverpool Courier*, 20 August 1909; Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes*, p. 37.

33. *VFW*, 30 April 1908.

any on ye bake a batch o'bread? Han yer mended the stockin's? Go whoam an mind yer babbies".³⁴

Younger suffragettes might not be expected to carry such heavy domestic responsibilities, but were reminded to "Gerr off home and 'elp tha mother to look after t'kids".³⁵ "Does your mother know you're out?", Grace Roe was frequently asked when she began outdoor speaking in her early twenties.³⁶ Older single women did not escape criticism either, but often found crowds eager to tell them it was "no wonder [they were not] married".³⁷ The prevalence of domestically-oriented jibes was so great that Hannah Mitchell exasperatedly remarked to a meeting in West Yorkshire in May 1907, "the way such questions as 'can you darn a stocking' [...] were so often asked at [our] meetings by men, it seemed that the ability to do such things was regarded as a sufficient qualification for the franchise!"³⁸

Suffragettes found humour offered a retaliatory tool in attempts to combat gendered prejudices. A speaker with a quick and ready wit could turn a hostile audience into a sympathetic one. Annie Kenney was acutely aware of this. She recalled how suffragettes:

[...] were taught never to lose our tempers; always to get the best of a joke, and to join in the laughter with the audience even if the joke was against us. This training made most of the Suffragettes quick witted, good at repartee, and the speakers that an audience took a delight in listening to, even though they did not agree with them, were those able to make them laugh.³⁹

Suffragettes became skilled at dealing with interruptions. Responses born of frustration demonstrate speakers' abilities to think on their feet and turn insults to their advantage, mirroring Freud's observations regarding the ability of jokes to transform hearers into co-haters.⁴⁰ In Somerset Annie Kenney found "an elderly man kept repeating the same statement ever few minutes 'if you were my wife I'd give you poison'". Eventually, the speaker, "tired of his repeated interruption, replied 'yes, and if I were your wife I'd take it'".⁴¹

Other ripostes reveal the quick-wittedness of some of the suffrage movement's best speakers. Mary Gawthorpe had a seemingly endless store

34. Hannah Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel* (London, 1968), p. 155.

35. Molly Murphy, typescript autobiography, People's History Museum, Manchester, p. 10.

36. Grace Roe, "A Suffragette's Story", Suffragette Fellowship pamphlet, n.d. (c.1960).

37. S.J. Stephenson, typescript autobiography, Suffragette Fellowship Collection, Museum of London, pp. 83–84.

38. *The Worker*, 4 May 1907.

39. Kenney, *Memories*, p. 104.

40. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, cited in Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, p. 163.

41. Kenney, *Memories*, p. 103.

of witty replies, which diffused hostility by making hecklers appear ridiculous. “Sweets to the sweet”, she quoted when a group of men attempted to stop her meeting by pelting her with peppermint “bulls’-eyes”.⁴² When one man flung a cabbage at her, Mary laughingly remarked that she had been afraid that the gentleman would lose his head at some point.⁴³ As an ex-pupil teacher with university qualifications, Mary Gawthorpe could draw on a variety of resources to defeat public opposition and bring an audience on to her side. Other suffragettes used less academic knowledge to the same effect.

One favourite technique was to subvert male observers’ tendency to criticize suffragettes’ lack of domesticity by making reference to the normal weekly pattern of work in most households, a pattern of which many male hecklers appeared ignorant. Gladice Keevil silenced the man who shouted out during a Thursday meeting that she ought to be doing her washing by reminding him that in her home, as in all respectable households, the washing was done and put away at the start of the week.⁴⁴ The irony of such responses, which emphasized men’s lack of engagement with the regular rhythms of housework, struck a chord with female listeners as well as with more sympathetic men, and was usually sufficient to silence interruptions.

HUMOUR AS A FORM OF MILITANCY

Whilst humour was useful in diffusing threatening situations, it also played a more pro-active part in suffrage campaigning. Its deployment underpins some of the activities which the WSPU defined as “militant”. Historians have presented suffragette militancy as indivisible from violent forms of direct action against property which lent a “terrorist touch [...] [to] the WSPU’s private war”.⁴⁵ This interpretation focuses mainly on activities between 1912 and 1914.⁴⁶

Suffragettes themselves took a longer and more eclectic view of the composition of militancy. They saw it as actions which involved a knowing subversion of accepted gendered behaviour as women appropriated areas of public life under their own auspices. Suffragettes borrowed

42. Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes*, p. 37.

43. Versions of the cabbage story appear, for example, in Kenney, *Memories*, p. 103; interview with Dr Letitia Fairfield, 21 December 1976, Harrison Tapes, Women’s Library, London; Nellie Crocker Mss.

44. Kenney, *Memories*, p. 104; E.M. Jackson, Harrison Tapes, The Women’s Library, London.

45. David Mitchell, *Queen Christabel: A Biography of Christabel Pankhurst* (London, 1977), p. 321. See also Brian Harrison, “The Act of Militancy: Violence and the Suffragette, 1904–14”, in *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 26–81.

46. See C.J. Bearman, “An Examination of Suffragette Violence”, *English Historical Review*, 120 (2005), pp. 365–397.

and imported tactics from other political organizations, most notably radical and socialist groups, and defended them on the grounds that they were only replicating “the methods which men had used to get the vote”.⁴⁷ Some of the larger suffragette demonstrations explicitly imitated those held by Chartists, supporting Christabel Pankhurst’s declaration that “the suffragettes [were] the Chartists of the twentieth century”.⁴⁸

There were also innovative techniques. As Wendy Parkins has observed, suffragettes excelled at grasping “tactical opportunities for political protest from the everyday practices of modern life with which they were familiar”.⁴⁹ This stretched ideas of what might encompass political protest. In January 1908, suffragettes attempted to lobby the cabinet council at 10 Downing Street. When the police attempted to prevent a demonstration they discovered that Edith New and Olivia Smith had “steel chains [...] wound round their waists, and [that] the ends of the chains being passed round the railings were secured by means of padlocks”.⁵⁰ They carried on speaking for some time before the police were able to detach the chains, and, in the ensuing confusion, another suffragette managed to get inside the prime minister’s residence.

Sylvia Pankhurst discerned two reasons behind this action, claiming the women had acted “both symbolically to express the political bondage of womanhood, and for the very practical reason that this device would [inhibit their removal]”.⁵¹ In court Olivia Smith emphasized the WSPU’s commitment to non-violence, telling the magistrate: “I did not hurt the fence. I did not hurt anybody”. Writing in their defence in the WSPU’s official paper *Votes for Women*, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, the WSPU’s treasurer, iterated Smith’s emphasis and identified the deliberate selection and deployment of ridiculous behaviour as a considered political tactic. She drew parallels with earlier, male-dominated revolutionary movements, repeating the comment of a police officer that “If this had been a man’s movement [...] there would have been a murder by now”. Suffragette humour had a political purpose. When observers remarked on “how silly” it was “of the women to chain themselves to railings”, they were missing the key point. “Doing something silly”, Pethick Lawrence explained, “is the woman’s alternative for doing something cruel. The effect is the same. We use no violence because we can win freedom for women without it; because we have discovered an alternative [...] woman’s wit”.⁵²

47. Mrs Swales of Leeds WSPU, quoted in the *Worker*, 8 August 1908.

48. *Liverpool Daily Post*, 1 September 1906. See also various press reports of the WSPU demonstration on Hunslett Moor, February 1908.

49. Wendy Parkins, “Fashion and the Suffragette Movement”, in *idem* (ed.), *Fashioning the Body Politic: Gender, Dress, Citizenship* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 97–123, 99.

50. *The Times*, 18 January 1908.

51. E.S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette* (London, 1911), p. 191. See also Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes*, pp. 47–48.

52. *VFW*, March 1908.

Similarly “silly” behaviour characterized much of the WSPU’s public campaigning. Its reception demonstrates how Emmeline Pethick Lawrence’s hopes that the tactics would “arrest [...] attention” were not unfounded.⁵³ The chaining episode was rarely repeated, yet the image of women in chains has proved one of the most enduring of the WSPU’s campaign.⁵⁴ Following the railings episode at Downing Street, described above, which involved neither real nor threatened violence against government, the Prime Minister and his cabinet secured large police escorts to and from meetings there to protect them from further interruption by women. Individual ministers followed similar lines elsewhere, which won little public sympathy. When the Prime Minister spoke in Sheffield in May 1909, the local newspaper condemned the precautions and police presence as “highly successful but not particularly English [...]. Mr Asquith was smuggled to a hotel as if he were a bale of contraband goods [...]. It was surely a little undignified”.⁵⁵ After suffragettes chained themselves to the grille in the House of Commons, the Government attempted to introduce a “Brawling Bill” which promised draconian punishments for anyone found guilty of disorderly conduct in Parliament.⁵⁶ Although the Bill never passed into law, its debate showed the government determining on a disproportionate response to women’s militancy.

Whilst a demonstration in Parliament may arguably have threatened the state, other protests utilized innocent tactics that turned ridicule away from the perpetrators to their targets who could not contrive a response which appeared anything other than pompous or disproportionate. Government officials were perplexed when Jessie Kenney discovered a “new Post Office regulation, which provide[d] for the posting and delivering of human letters”. She duly “posted” Elspeth McClelland and Daisy Solomon to the Prime Minister at a cost of threepence. A messenger boy walked the two ladies to Downing Street where the Prime Minister’s butler was at a loss as to how to respond, finally declaring in exasperation “You must be returned, you are dead letters”.⁵⁷

When Cabinet Ministers attempted to escape public encounters with suffragettes by refusing to address public meetings with women in the audience, WSPU members responded by sneaking into halls sometimes days in advance. A favourite tactic, employed by Mary Phillips at St

53. *Ibid.*

54. Claire Eustance, “Protests From Behind the Grille: Gender and the Transformation of Parliament, 1867–1918”, *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997), pp. 107–126.

55. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 22 May 1909.

56. E.S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette*, p. 370. For more details of the protest at the grille, which involved members of the Women’s Freedom League, see Eustance, “Protests from Behind the Grille”.

57. *Votes for Women*, 26 February 1909; Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes*, pp. 88–89.

George's Hall, Liverpool, and Vera Holme and Elsie Howey in Colston Hall Bristol, was to hide underneath the organ. This provided a safe spot where they could rest undetected and a superb microphone as their voices echoed through the organ pipes. As stewards hopelessly searched for the source of the disembodied voices, the women, and the audience, saw the joke. "The audience made such fun!", Vera Holme noted in her parodist poem "An Organ Recital", published shortly after the event.⁵⁸ Ministers found no humour in such situations, and responded with confusion, lacklustre speeches, and mounting frustration, again belittling their sense of self-importance in the face of suffragette irreverence.

Once militancy included attacks on property, the Government's response became more severe. It became more difficult for suffragettes to use light-hearted protests to critique perceived over-reaction on the part of the authorities, but they still found occasion to mock weaknesses in official responses to their protests. In June 1914 a bomb, assumed to be the work of suffragettes, exploded in Westminster Abbey. Scotland Yard issued a description of a woman "wearing a black and white checked dress and carrying a black handbag". Anyone seeing her "should report it to the police at once". Gertrude Harding, a London suffragette, recalled the WSPU's response: "The following day a long poster parade set forth from Lincoln's Inn House [the WSPU headquarters]. By an odd coincidence each woman was wearing a black and white checked dress and carried a black handbag!"⁵⁹ This satirized what the suffragettes claimed was a key problem with the government's attitude towards their demands – its failure to recognize women as individuals, or to consider any individual merit in their demands. As the government determined to view all women as a threat, the suffragette response demonstrated how difficult bringing individuals to account for their actions might be.

PRIVATE JOKES: HUMOUR BETWEEN SUFFRAGETTES

Such uses of humour turned much of the scorn directed at suffragettes against their detractors, making male politicians appear remote, undermined and out of control, unable to cope with the suffragettes' ability to subvert every-day situations or transform them into sites of political protest. Yet within the WSPU itself, humour also played a vital but less self-conscious role in uniting women together through difficult circumstances. All political organizations attract their share of intrigue and personality clashes and the WSPU was no exception. Its activists spent prolonged periods of time away from home engaged in itinerant

⁵⁸ Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes*, p. 98.

⁵⁹ Gretchen Wilson, *With All Her Might: The Life of Gertrude Harding, Militant Suffragette* (New York, 1998), pp. 159–160.

campaigning or the subterfuge of militant actions, known as being “on active service”.⁶⁰ There was no glamour in this work which was tiring, thankless and sometimes dangerous.

A rather sardonic, self-deprecating line in humour thus developed which strengthened the bonds between individual WSPU members, thus upholding the organization. The close friendships which developed between many suffragettes facilitated this. Gretchen Wilson drew on Caroline Heilbrun’s observations regarding the way in which a successful women’s movement built a “sense of identification with women [...] not as fellow sufferers but as fellow achievers and fighters in the public domain”, to develop an analysis of the experience of suffragettes as analogous to that of soldiers. The movement, she explained, promoted deep bonds between members which were “intensified [...] [by] the shared sense of drama”, and thus “provided circumstances for friendship that men have often experienced, but women rarely”.⁶¹ Sharing experiences such as public vilification, or imprisonment cemented immediate and lasting friendships sharpened through shared humour.

There was certainly an element of “trench humour” within the joking suffragettes shared privately. Those who made most use of this were often amongst the most successful of the WSPU’s workers, suggesting that humour formed an effective coping mechanism. Dora Marsden, who spent some time as a paid organizer for the Union, recalled a “tiny group” of suffragettes in the Manchester branch who cheerily referred to themselves as “SOS”, standing for “sick of suffrage”.⁶² Dora, who had left the Union when she made this observation, took the label seriously at face value, proclaiming them “sick of the unending donkey work of the gutter and the pavement”, yet other more resilient workers were clearly using such descriptions with intended irony to carry them through adversity.⁶³

Mary Gawthorpe displayed the same humour in private that made her such a popular figure on the public platform. In *The Women’s Annual and Suffrage Who’s Who*, she described her recreations as “sleeping” and “not talking”.⁶⁴ Shared jokes featured heavily in suffragettes’ later memories of their work, emphasizing their importance. Jessie Kenny remembered the atmosphere in the general office at the WSPU’s London Headquarters where “a lot of fun” went on.⁶⁵ “It was great fun to us young folk”, Esther

60. Kitty Marion typescript autobiography, Suffragette Fellowship Collection, Museum of London.

61. Wilson, *The Life of Gertrude Harding*, p. 160; Caroline Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York, 1988), p. 72.

62. *The Egoist*, 15 June 1914.

63. *Ibid.*

64. A.J.R. (ed.), *The Suffrage Annual and Women’s Who’s Who* (London, 1913).

65. Jessie Kenney, “The Flame and the Flood”, unpublished autobiography, Kenney Papers, University of East Anglia, ch. 3

Knowles similarly wrote of her time at Headquarters.⁶⁶ Aeta Lamb, a shy young woman who worked behind the scenes at the WSPU's offices, found some solace on her deathbed by talking with fellow suffragette Elsa Gye of "the jolly days we all had together".⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

Although historical engagement with the role of humour in the militant suffrage campaign has considered its operation against the WSPU, this was not its only role. Humour was also deployed by suffragettes as a considered political tactic. Initially it offered an opportunity to diffuse hostility and silence male hecklers who threatened to disrupt their propagandizing. As the campaign progressed, suffragettes used humour to devise new forms of protest which, whilst appearing flippant or amusing, added a unique dimension to their public work.

"Doing something silly" in a self-conscious way helped suffragettes to extend their campaign beyond the boundaries which traditionally delineated political activity. In this way they devised new strategies which were not hampered by women's lack of access to the formalized political processes of Edwardian Britain, but rather exploited women's status as outsiders. As well as being a deliberate campaigning tactic, humour between suffragettes was also vital in keeping women engaged and motivated through the more tiring or dangerous aspects of their work. "We would be *hilarious*", Grace Roe remembered when describing her work as chief organizer during the WSPU's most hectic period of quasi-underground militancy.⁶⁸ For many women it was clear that the ability to laugh during – and about – their suffrage activities deepened the bonds of friendship they felt with their co-workers and carried them through more difficult times.

66. Esther Knowles, "Born Under a Lucky Star", *Calling All Women*, 1971.

67. Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway* (Penobscot, ME, 1962), p. 239.

68. Harrison, "The Act of Militancy", p. 46.