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Between Class and Gender: Margaret Bondfield and the British Women's Suffrage Movement

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, the British women's suffrage movement moved increasingly to the centre of political life. Women's organisations, socialists and the labour movement nevertheless remained divided over the terms on which women should be enfranchised. Margaret Bondfield, whose political career was deeply rooted in trade unionism and labour politics, approached the suffrage question from a distinctly working-class perspective. She opposed proposals to enfranchise a limited number of women on the basis of existing property qualifications, arguing that, while such measures might remove the sex disqualification for some women, they would still leave the majority of working-class women outside the electorate. Before the First World War, she therefore advocated adult suffrage and engaged in sustained debate with other sections of the women's suffrage movement and with members of the Labour Party. Focusing on Bondfield's arguments for adult suffrage and her political activities, this article examines the formation of her position, the controversies surrounding it and its subsequent development. Her stance was shaped by her early occupational experience and trade union activism, while also reflecting wider debates within the British labour movement over the relationship between class interests and women's political rights. Adult suffrage faced considerable practical obstacles in the political circumstances of the time, but Bondfield's sustained attention to property qualifications and to the position of working-class women also reveals that the British women's suffrage movement was far from politically homogeneous. Examining the movement through Bondfield's experience offers a clearer understanding of the role of class in British suffrage politics and of the gradual evolution of the Labour Party's position on women's enfranchisement.

Keywords

Margaret Bondfield, women's suffrage, adult suffrage, working-class women, Labour Party

1. Introduction

By the early twentieth century, women's suffrage had become an unavoidable question in debates over political reform in Britain. For the newly formed Labour Party and the socialist and trade union organisations associated with it, the issue was not simply whether women should have the vote, but also how the franchise should be defined. The existing electoral system continued to impose property and residential qualifications. Some suffragists argued that the sex disqualification should first be removed so that women could be enfranchised on the same terms as men. Other socialists and labour activists feared that, so long as the existing qualifications remained intact, such a reform would benefit primarily women with property and a degree of

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social standing. They therefore called for the removal of both sex and property restrictions and for the extension of the franchise to all adult men and women. Before the First World War, the question of whether women's suffrage or adult suffrage should take priority remained a persistent source of division within the Labour Party and the wider British socialist movement [1].

In the pre-war debates examined here, 'adult suffrage' meant extending the parliamentary vote to all adult men and women without property qualifications, although certain registration requirements, such as residence, could remain. 'Limited women's suffrage' refers more broadly to reforms that would enfranchise only certain groups of women. In the pre-war proposals opposed by Bondfield, this generally meant allowing women to vote 'on the same terms as men' while retaining the existing male franchise qualifications. The settlement of 1918 was limited in a different way: it enfranchised women aged 30 and over who met specified qualifications, while most men could vote from the age of 21[2]. 'Equal suffrage' is used here to refer to the principle that women and men should qualify to vote on equal terms. The Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 gave this principle legislative effect by establishing equal parliamentary franchise qualifications for men and women from the age of 21[3]. It did not, however, remove all remaining electoral restrictions or abolish plural voting [4].

Margaret Bondfield stood at the centre of this dispute. She had long been active in the shop assistants' trade union movement and in labour organisations, and she supported women's participation in political life. Before the First World War, however, she rejected the demand advanced by some suffrage organisations that women should receive the vote "on the same terms as men". In 1905, in *The Women's Suffrage Controversy*, Bondfield explicitly opposed a limited women's franchise based on existing property qualifications, arguing that such a measure would fail to secure effective political rights for large numbers of working women, particularly working-class women [5]. In 1907, she debated Teresa Billington-Greig publicly under the title "Sex Equality versus Adult Suffrage". Their disagreement brought into sharp relief the different ways in which sections of the socialist and women's suffrage movements understood the relationship between class and sex [6]. Bondfield is therefore significant not only because she later became Britain's first woman Cabinet minister, but also because of the distinctive position she adopted during her earlier involvement in the suffrage movement. Why did a woman labour activist who had long campaigned for women's participation in public life oppose an influential form of limited women's suffrage and instead support adult suffrage, a demand that was politically more difficult to achieve at the time?

2. Literature Review

Research in China has also addressed the British women's suffrage movement. Pan Yinghua examined the development of women's political activity in the context of industrialisation and political democratisation in nineteenth-century Britain. Lu Weifang provided a systematic account of the movement's origins, organisations, campaigning methods and historical development. Their work has contributed to the study of British women's suffrage in China. More recent studies have paid greater attention to individual figures and political tendencies, including Millicent Garrett Fawcett and the ideas of moderate suffragists [7]. Bondfield, however, has received relatively little attention as a central figure in Chinese scholarship on women's suffrage. Her commitment to adult suffrage, particularly its relationship to the circumstances of working-class women, remains a subject for further investigation.

Scholarship outside China has examined the British women's suffrage movement more extensively. Sandra Stanley Holton situated the movement within the reform politics of the early twentieth century, exploring the complex relationships of cooperation and conflict among socialists, labour organisations and women's suffrage societies. Caroline Rowan examined women's organisation and political activity within the Labour Party between 1906 and 1920, while Brian Harrison explored the relationship between class and gender in modern British labour history [8]. June Hannam and Karen Hunt subsequently examined the political activities of socialist women from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, paying particular attention to divisions among socialist women over the question of suffrage [9]. Recent scholarship has continued to explore the relationship between the socialist and women's suffrage movements, including the divisions surrounding adult suffrage and women's suffrage [10].

Research on Bondfield herself has also developed. In her study of women Cabinet ministers in the twentieth-century British Labour Party, Paula Bartley devoted a chapter to Bondfield's early life, trade union

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work and political activities. In 2026, Nan Sloane published a new biography of Bondfield [11]. These studies have provided an important basis for understanding her political career. Existing scholarship, however, has generally examined her commitment to adult suffrage within broader accounts of British socialist women, the labour movement or her political career as a whole. A closer examination of *The Women's Suffrage Controversy* (1905), the public debate of 1907 and her trade union activities offers an opportunity to explore why she remained committed to adult suffrage and how this position related to the circumstances of the working women and women of the working class with whom she had long been involved.

Drawing primarily on Bondfield's political pamphlets, records of public debates, her autobiography and Labour Party conference reports, this article examines her position in the British women's suffrage controversy of the early twentieth century and its development over time. Rather than judging whether adult suffrage or limited women's suffrage represented the more progressive demand, it seeks to explain why Bondfield adopted her particular position. Her opposition to limited women's suffrage did not amount to a rejection of women's enfranchisement. She argued that removing the sex disqualification without changing existing property qualifications would still leave substantial numbers of working-class women outside the electorate. This view was closely connected to her early experience of paid employment and her subsequent trade union work. Securing the vote for all adult men and women through a single reform, however, faced considerable political obstacles in Britain at the time. By examining Bondfield's 1905 pamphlet, the public debate of 1907, her involvement in Labour politics between 1909 and 1912, and her responses to the reforms of 1918 and 1928 together, this article traces both the continuity of her commitment to adult suffrage and the adjustments she made in political practice. It shows how her criticism of property-based franchise qualifications was connected to the question of whether working-class women could express their own political interests, rather than relying upon women of other social classes to speak on their behalf. This close examination of Bondfield's arguments complements existing scholarship by connecting her experience of paid employment and trade unionism with her understanding of political equality, representation and the changing terms of franchise reform.

3. The Formation of Bondfield's Commitment to Adult Suffrage: Working Life and Labour Politics

3.1 From Shop Assistant to Trade Union Activist: The Development of a Labour Perspective

During the nineteenth century, the parliamentary franchise in Britain underwent several reforms. The Reform Act of 1832 extended the franchise to certain property-owning men, while the reforms of 1867 and 1884 enfranchised more men in urban and rural areas respectively. Property and residential qualifications nevertheless continued to restrict the franchise, and women remained excluded from parliamentary elections [12]. Meanwhile, the women's suffrage movement developed from local associations into a national campaign. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), founded in 1897, became one of its leading organisations [13]. Support for women's enfranchisement, however, did not imply agreement over how the franchise should be extended. Whether the removal of the sex disqualification, without changes to existing electoral qualifications, would enable large numbers of wage-earning women to obtain the vote remained a matter of dispute. In 1905, Bondfield explicitly opposed such proposals for limited women's suffrage in *The Women's Suffrage Controversy*, arguing that many working women, particularly those from the working class, would still be excluded from the electorate [14]. The origins of this position lay in her early experience as a shop assistant and her subsequent involvement in trade unionism.

Margaret Bondfield was born in 1873 in Chard, Somerset. Her father, William Bondfield, was a lace worker with radical political views, while her mother, Ann Bondfield, came from a family of Congregationalist ministers [15]. Bondfield attended local schools in Chard and worked as a pupil-teacher for a year at the age of thirteen [16]. In 1887, aged fourteen, she left her hometown for Hove, near Brighton, where she became an apprentice in a draper's shop run by Mrs White [17]. She subsequently worked in other shops in Brighton, beginning what would become a long career as a shop assistant.

Bondfield's initial experience as an apprentice was relatively favourable. She later recalled in her autobiography that Mrs White ran a traditional shop where relations between the employer and employees were friendly, and young apprentices were treated much like members of the family [18]. Conditions became

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considerably harsher when she moved to other shops. The living-in system was widespread in British shops at the time, requiring shop assistants not only to work long hours but also to reside in accommodation provided by their employers. In his 1925 biography of Bondfield, Hamilton recorded her recollections of living-in arrangements. She had once been required to share a ground-floor room with an older female shop assistant. Its window opened directly onto the street, leaving them with little privacy [19].

The living-in system enabled employers to exercise control over shop assistants beyond their working hours. For young women on low wages, the dependence of their accommodation on their employment also made it difficult to escape unfavourable working conditions. On 14 February 1899, the House of Commons considered the question of shop assistants' working hours in London. During the debate, an MP pointed out that some drapers' shops required female assistants to work from 9 a.m. until 11 p.m. In his reply, the Home Secretary acknowledged that excessively long working hours were a problem in certain areas and noted that the Shop Hours Act 1892 principally restricted the working hours of employees under the age of eighteen [20]. The harsh conditions experienced by shop assistants at the time were therefore by no means confined to Bondfield's own experience.

Her years in Brighton also brought Bondfield into contact with Louisa Martindale, a local campaigner for women's rights. Martindale had long been concerned with women's education, employment and political rights, and frequently invited young female shop assistants to gatherings at her home. Her daughter, Hilda Martindale, later recalled her mother's association with Bondfield in her memoirs [21]. Through Martindale, Bondfield gained access to books and opportunities to discuss social questions. She gradually came to recognise that the difficulties women faced in their working and personal lives could not be explained solely by individual circumstances. Her subsequent concern with women's working conditions and political rights was closely connected to these early experiences and associations.

In 1894, Bondfield moved to London, where she continued working as a shop assistant and, through her elder brother Frank Bondfield, came into contact with local trade unionists and socialist activists [22]. Her employment in London deepened her awareness of the disadvantages faced by shop assistants in their relations with employers. As urban retailing expanded and shops extended their opening hours, assistants often worked late into the evening, while the living-in system left them subject to their employers' supervision outside working hours. For many young female shop assistants, both employment and accommodation depended on the same employer, leaving them with little security in their personal lives. Bondfield's later concern with shop hours, wages and the living-in system grew out of these experiences.

Rather than regarding the difficulties she encountered as merely personal misfortunes, Bondfield increasingly treated the improvement of shop assistants' working conditions as a matter of public concern. Around 1896, Clementina Black of the Women's Industrial Council invited her to take part in an investigation into the working conditions of shop employees. Bondfield visited a number of shops, recording the working and living conditions of their employees. Writing under the pseudonym 'Grace Dare', she also contributed articles to the trade union press exposing the poor conditions endured by shop assistants [23]. Her investigations subsequently provided important material for a series of articles on shop life published in the *Daily Chronicle* in 1898 [24]. In 1899, she published 'Conditions Under which Shop Assistants Work' in *The Economic Journal*, examining the working conditions of this occupational group [25].

This investigative work was particularly important to Bondfield's subsequent political activities. She began to connect her own experiences as a female shop assistant with those of other workers, using investigation, writing and public campaigning to draw attention to the conditions under which shop employees lived and worked. Although employed in retailing, shop assistants faced many of the same problems concerning wages, working hours and job security as workers in other occupations. Female employees were placed at a further disadvantage by their lower earnings and employer-controlled living arrangements. These experiences encouraged Bondfield to understand women's working conditions within the wider context of labour issues, rather than solely in terms of differences between men and women.

In 1898, Bondfield was appointed assistant secretary of the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks, marking the beginning of her full-time trade union career [26]. She took an active part in recruitment and organising work, placing particular emphasis on bringing female shop assistants into the union. In 1899, she attended the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Plymouth as its only female delegate [27]. Her transition from shop assistant to trade union official enabled her to represent the

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interests of her own occupational group while establishing a place for herself within the predominantly male British labour movement.

In her subsequent trade union work, Bondfield came into contact with workers from different parts of Britain and participated in discussions on working conditions and labour legislation. In 1906, she helped establish the Women's Labour League, an organisation dedicated to increasing women's participation in labour politics [28]. In 1908, she left the shop assistants' union, where she had worked for many years, to become organising secretary of the Women's Labour League [29]. Her activities had thus extended beyond the employment rights of shop assistants to questions of women's political representation. This did not mean that she had abandoned the labour perspective developed during her earlier career. She continued to recognise the differences in women's circumstances arising from their occupations, incomes and social positions.

Bondfield's early experiences help explain her commitment to adult suffrage. Having herself earned a living as a shop assistant, she was familiar with the restrictions women faced in their working and everyday lives. Her involvement in trade unionism also strengthened her conviction that improving workers' conditions required collective organisation and political participation. For Bondfield, women's political rights could not be considered separately from their economic circumstances. For large numbers of women who lacked property and depended on wages, there remained a considerable gap between formal electoral eligibility and the opportunity to participate in political life. This understanding formed an important basis for her subsequent opposition to limited women's suffrage and her commitment to adult suffrage.

3.2 From Limited Women's Suffrage to Adult Suffrage: The Formation of Bondfield's Political Position

Bondfield's years as a shop assistant and her subsequent trade union experience meant that she remained attentive to the circumstances of working women when discussing women's political rights. The British women's suffrage movement expanded rapidly in the early twentieth century, but political groups remained divided over how the franchise should be extended. Some suffragists argued that the sex disqualification should first be removed, allowing women to obtain the vote on the same terms as men. Supporters of adult suffrage, however, maintained that removing the sex disqualification alone would not enfranchise large numbers of working women while existing property and residential qualifications remained in place. In 1905, Bondfield set out her position in *The Women's Suffrage Controversy*, a pamphlet published by the Adult Suffrage Society [30]. Her objection was not to women's enfranchisement itself, but to a reform that would extend the vote initially to only some women on the basis of existing male franchise qualifications.

Bondfield's first concern was which women would actually be enfranchised by such a reform. Under the electoral arrangements of the time, men's eligibility to vote in parliamentary elections remained closely tied to property, the occupation of premises and residential qualifications. In *The Women's Suffrage Controversy*, she examined the categories of women who might qualify for the vote 'on the same terms as men'. These included property owners, householders, tenants of business premises meeting a specified rental threshold, qualifying lodgers, those occupying separate accommodation by virtue of their employment, and university graduates who satisfied the relevant requirements [31]. Although these provisions appeared to remove distinctions between men and women, they left existing property and residential qualifications intact. For Bondfield, this meant that women from different social classes would not have equal opportunities to obtain the vote.

She was particularly critical of the assumption that the lodger franchise would enable large numbers of working women to enter the electorate. Under the relevant qualifications, individuals occupying separate, unfurnished rooms with a weekly rental value of at least four shillings could qualify for the lodger franchise [32]. Drawing on the evidence she had collected, Bondfield pointed out that even unmarried women employed in the relatively prosperous Lancashire textile industry often shared accommodation with sisters or friends. Many women employed in the London civil service, telephone exchanges and clerical work lived with their parents or shared accommodation with others, making it equally difficult for them to meet the requirement of separate occupancy. Lower-paid factory workers, dressmakers, domestic servants and female shop assistants were even less likely to qualify [33]. Shop assistants employed under the living-in system faced particular difficulties, since their accommodation was tied to their employment and they frequently moved between jobs.

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Bondfield's assessment was closely connected to her own occupational experience. Having worked in shops for many years and investigated shop assistants' wages, working hours and living arrangements, she was concerned less with women's capacity to exercise the vote in the abstract than with whether existing reform proposals would actually enfranchise the working women whose circumstances she knew. She argued that removing the sex disqualification while retaining property qualifications might increase the number of women voters, but would still exclude substantial numbers of wage-earning women. For Bondfield, the question of women's suffrage was therefore also a question of labour politics.

Another of Bondfield's concerns was that limited women's suffrage might further entrench the property basis of the existing franchise. In her 1905 pamphlet, she criticised supporters of limited suffrage for presenting it as a first step towards wider political equality, arguing that such a reform might instead delay the introduction of adult suffrage. She noted that some suffragists were seeking the support of the labour movement for a limited franchise bill, and that it was precisely this attempt which had prompted her opposition 'as a woman trade unionist' [34]. Her assessment of electoral reform thus depended not simply on the number of women who would gain the vote, but also on whether the existing property qualifications would remain intact.

Her concerns had some basis in the political circumstances of the time. Lady Knightley (Louisa Mary Knightley), a Conservative suffragist, had publicly argued that extending the franchise to women who paid rates and taxes would reduce the need for universal suffrage, which she herself regarded as a danger [35]. Such statements reinforced Bondfield's doubts about whether women's enfranchisement under existing qualifications would necessarily serve as a step towards wider democratic reform. She feared that once some property-qualified women had gained the vote, the existing electoral system might acquire additional support, leaving working-class men and women who remained disenfranchised to wait for further reform.

Bondfield's advocacy of adult suffrage did not, therefore, mean that she regarded women's enfranchisement as a secondary concern. She sought to change the qualifications governing the franchise itself, removing restrictions based on sex and property and extending the vote to all adult men and women. Her position reflected the fact that large numbers of working-class men still lacked the vote, while women themselves differed considerably in their economic and social circumstances. Extending the existing male franchise to women might weaken the sex barrier without removing inequalities in political rights between social classes. As Sandra Stanley Holton has observed, the dispute between advocates of adult suffrage and women's suffrage was closely connected to the importance attached to class politics within the British socialist and labour movements [36].

Bondfield's commitment to adult suffrage before the First World War should not, therefore, be understood simply as a rejection of the women's suffrage movement. What she opposed was the assumption that enfranchising women 'on the same terms as men', while leaving existing property qualifications intact, would secure political rights for women as a whole. Her early experience as a shop assistant had made her particularly attentive to working women who lacked independent property or secure accommodation, while her trade union work encouraged her to connect their circumstances with the wider question of workers' political rights. Her position nevertheless raised a difficult question: if adult suffrage was unlikely to secure parliamentary support in the immediate future, might insisting on more comprehensive reform delay the removal of the sex disqualification? Disagreements over this question between Bondfield, other suffragists and members of the labour movement became increasingly public and remained central to the suffrage debates of the following years.

4. Adult Suffrage and Equal Suffrage for Women: The Debate, 1905–1912

4.1 Divisions within the Labour Party and Competing Approaches to Franchise Reform

By the early twentieth century, women's suffrage had become an issue in British party politics and the labour movement. For the emerging labour movement, the question was not simply whether women should have the vote, but how the franchise should be reformed and which groups should be enfranchised first. The parliamentary franchise was not yet universal even for men, and property and residential qualifications remained in place [37]. Against this background, the demands for women's enfranchisement 'on the same terms as men' and for the enfranchisement of all adult men and women, though both seeking to extend the vote to women, increasingly emerged as competing approaches to electoral reform [38].

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There was no consensus within the labour movement on women's enfranchisement. Some members were reluctant to make women's suffrage a major objective of labour politics, while other socialists explicitly called for the removal of restrictions on women's political rights based on sex. Following its establishment, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) showed considerable support for women's political rights, passing resolutions in favour of women's suffrage as early as the 1890s [39]. With the formation of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), the question of franchise reform also became closely connected to securing labour representation in Parliament. As the debate developed, another position emerged within the labour movement: rather than enfranchising a limited number of women under the existing qualifications, reform should remove both property and sex restrictions and extend the vote to all adult men and women [40].

Keir Hardie was among the most prominent advocates of equal suffrage for women within the labour movement. In his pamphlet The Citizenship of Women: A Plea for Women's Suffrage, first published in 1905, Hardie presented women's enfranchisement as a political question that could be addressed directly through legislation [41]. In November 1906, Hardie introduced a Bill in the House of Commons seeking to remove the 'sex disqualification' that prevented women from registering as parliamentary electors and voting in elections [42]. He did not reject the democratic aims of adult suffrage, but favoured removing the sex barrier as the first step in electoral reform. For Hardie and those who shared his position, the exclusion of women as a group from parliamentary elections constituted one of the most immediate inequalities in the existing franchise. Enfranchising women who met the existing qualifications would establish their electoral rights on the same basis as men and achieve a defined reform within the prevailing system [43].

Advocates of adult suffrage, by contrast, were primarily concerned with the existing franchise qualifications themselves. At the Labour Party conferences of 1906 and 1907, supporters of adult suffrage opposed proposals to extend the vote to women on the basis of existing property qualifications, arguing that such measures might strengthen the electoral influence of the propertied classes [44]. Their objection was not to women becoming voters, but to the continued exclusion of many working-class men and women if the franchise remained subject to existing property requirements.

Bondfield supported adult suffrage. As her 1905 pamphlet *The Women's Suffrage Controversy* made clear, she did not question women's right to vote. Her concern was which women would qualify for the franchise 'on the same terms as men'. Female shop assistants, domestic servants, factory workers and many other working women who lived with their families or shared accommodation found it difficult to meet the existing property and residential qualifications [45]. For Bondfield, extending the existing male franchise to women could not be equated with securing political rights for women as a whole. If reform went no further than removing the sex disqualification, its immediate beneficiaries would be women who already satisfied the property qualifications but were excluded solely on account of their sex. Adult suffrage, by contrast, required changes to the qualifications determining who could vote.

The disagreement was therefore not simply between supporters and opponents of women's suffrage. Advocates of equal suffrage for women regarded the removal of the sex disqualification as the immediate priority. Hardie believed that an attempt to secure universal adult suffrage in a single reform would encounter strong opposition from the major political parties. He therefore supported enfranchising women on the same terms as men as an initial step [46]. From this perspective, limited women's suffrage was not the final objective of reform, but a means of ending women's complete exclusion from parliamentary elections.

Bondfield feared a different political outcome. In her 1905 pamphlet, she criticised advocates of limited women's suffrage for presenting their proposals as a step towards full political equality, arguing that such a reform might instead strengthen the political influence of the propertied classes [47]. Once women who met the existing property qualifications had been enfranchised, she feared that the pressure for the wider franchise reform demanded by supporters of adult suffrage might diminish.

The debate within the labour movement also reflected another concern. In principle, 'adult suffrage' meant extending the vote to all adults regardless of sex, but suffragists were not convinced that everyone who invoked the term intended to include women. Within the British socialist movement, the distinctions between 'adult suffrage', 'universal suffrage' and 'manhood suffrage' were not always clearly drawn. Some women activists feared that, once the franchise had been extended to working-class men, the labour movement might lose its incentive to campaign for women's enfranchisement [48]. Advocates of adult suffrage warned that limited women's suffrage might reinforce class privilege, while supporters of women's suffrage feared that the priority

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given to class politics would once again leave women waiting for political rights. The two approaches thus came into direct conflict.

Between 1905 and 1908, adult suffrage commanded considerable support within the Labour Party. Caroline Rowan's study of women's activities in the party during this period shows that resolutions supporting limited women's suffrage repeatedly encountered opposition from advocates of adult suffrage at party meetings. The position represented by Hardie was therefore far from the only one within the party [49]. Bondfield's arguments developed within this political context. Her disagreement with Hardie was not fundamentally about whether women should have the vote. Rather, it concerned which restriction should be removed first when both sex and property qualifications excluded people from the electorate, and how an initial reform might alter the subsequent balance of political power.

The divisions over the franchise within the early Labour Party thus concerned the order and terms of reform. Hardie and his supporters favoured removing the sex disqualification first, allowing women to obtain the vote on the same terms as men. Bondfield and other advocates of adult suffrage sought to remove both sex and property restrictions. The two groups differed in their understanding of political equality. One regarded equal franchise qualifications for men and women as the immediate priority; the other maintained that equality could not extend to working-class women unless the qualifications themselves were changed. These differences formed the background to the public debate between Bondfield and Teresa Billington-Greig in 1907, entitled 'Sex Equality versus Adult Suffrage'.

4.2 The Public Debate on 'Sex Equality versus Adult Suffrage', 1907

The divisions outlined above came into sharp focus during a public debate held on 3 December 1907. The Women's Freedom League (WFL) and the Adult Suffrage Society (ASS) organised a debate entitled 'Sex Equality versus Adult Suffrage', with Teresa Billington-Greig representing the Women's Freedom League and Bondfield speaking on behalf of the Adult Suffrage Society. Isabella Ford chaired the meeting [50]. A verbatim report of the debate was published by the Women's Freedom League the following year [51]. Both speakers agreed that women should have the vote. Their disagreement concerned how political equality should be achieved: whether the sex disqualification should be removed first, or whether both sex and property restrictions should be abolished together.

Billington-Greig regarded the exclusion of women on grounds of sex as an obstacle that British democracy needed to address first. The resolution she supported argued that enfranchising women under the same qualifications as men would provide a practical means of advancing democratic reform [52]. In her view, the exclusion of women as a group from parliamentary elections was the principal obstacle to genuine democracy and national self-government. The sex disqualification should therefore be removed as a priority [53]. Even if the existing male franchise continued to impose property and residential qualifications, enfranchising women who met those requirements would end their exclusion from parliamentary elections solely on grounds of sex.

Billington-Greig's argument also rested on a clear sequence of political reform. Without the vote, women lacked the direct political means to change the existing franchise. Enfranchising those who met the prevailing qualifications would enable women to become political participants capable of pressing for further reform, rather than remaining excluded from the electoral process. She went so far as to argue that even if only a small number of women initially gained the vote, their limited numbers would not diminish the political rights they had acquired [54]. For Billington-Greig, limited women's suffrage was not the final objective of democratic reform, but the first step towards ending the exclusion of women on grounds of sex.

Bondfield also explicitly acknowledged that women should obtain the vote 'at the earliest opportunity' [55]. What she opposed was extending the existing male franchise to women and presenting such a reform as the achievement of equality between the sexes. Under the prevailing qualifications based on property, residence and marital status, many working-class women, particularly married women, would still remain outside the electorate. Bondfield therefore argued that enfranchising some women under the existing property qualifications would produce only nominal equality, leaving intact the inequalities in political rights arising from differences in women's economic circumstances [56].

The two speakers thus differed in their understanding of 'sex equality'. Billington-Greig emphasised that, although some men were disenfranchised, men were not excluded from the parliamentary franchise solely on

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grounds of sex. Women, by contrast, faced a legal disqualification that applied to them as a group. Bondfield maintained that if sex equality meant merely allowing women to vote under the same property qualifications as men, working-class women would gain formally equal conditions rather than equal opportunities for political participation. She advocated adult suffrage, which she regarded as 'the quickest way to establish real sex-equality' [57]. The equality she sought required not simply the admission of women into the existing electoral system, but changes to the qualifications determining who could become an elector.

Who could speak for working-class women was another important issue in the debate. Billington-Greig argued that the failure of a limited suffrage bill to enfranchise all women immediately should not prevent those who met the existing qualifications from obtaining the vote. Bondfield did not dispute these women's right to campaign for their own enfranchisement, but rejected the claim that a limited franchise measure represented the interests of all women, particularly those of the working class. She made it clear that women who supported a bill granting the vote 'on the same terms as men' were entitled to pursue their objective, but should not claim that such a measure served the interests of working-class women [58]. The exchange reflected a principle central to Bondfield's political position: working-class women should be able to speak for themselves rather than have their interests represented solely by women of other social classes. Her years as a shop assistant and trade unionist had made her particularly attentive to the ways in which wages, employment, housing and household finances shaped working women's lives. As Nan Sloane has pointed out, Bondfield did not oppose cooperation with middle-class women. She insisted, however, on the right of working-class women to express their own interests, rather than assuming that middle- and upper-class women who gained political rights could determine their political demands on their behalf [59]. For Bondfield, limited women's suffrage was therefore not simply a question of how many women would gain the vote, but also of whether those who became electors could claim to represent working women who remained disenfranchised.

Billington-Greig, however, rejected the reduction of women's suffrage to a middle-class political demand. In its published account of the debate, the Women's Freedom League criticised Bondfield for placing excessive emphasis on class oppression while failing to give equal weight to oppression based on sex. The organisation described her arguments as 'masculine arguments' and characterised her as 'only man's echo' [60]. These polemical remarks nevertheless reflected a central objection among suffragists: if socialists recognised the political domination of the working class by the propertied classes as an injustice, why should they not also recognise the exclusion of women by men as a distinct form of political inequality?

The disagreement between the two women cannot therefore be reduced to a choice between class and sex. For Billington-Greig, sex constituted a political barrier that could not be subsumed under other social divisions. Women should first enter the electorate as citizens and then seek further changes to property qualifications. Bondfield maintained that political equality founded on an unchanged property-based franchise would perpetuate exclusion among women themselves. Billington-Greig emphasised that obtaining political rights would create opportunities for further reform, while Bondfield argued that the initial reform would itself determine which social groups acquired new political influence.

The two approaches also differed in their assessment of gradual reform. For advocates of women's suffrage, enfranchising some women would establish women's status as parliamentary electors and create opportunities for further extensions of the franchise. Bondfield feared that the enfranchisement of propertied women might instead strengthen political support for retaining property qualifications. In *The Women's Suffrage Controversy* (1905), she had already challenged the view that a limited suffrage bill would necessarily constitute a step towards full political equality. The public debate of 1907 brought this concern into direct confrontation with the political strategy adopted by other suffragists [61]. The disagreement was not over whether democracy should ultimately be extended, but whether an initial reform would facilitate further change or alter the balance of political power in ways that might obstruct it.

At the end of the debate, the resolution supported by Billington-Greig was carried by 171 votes to 139 [62]. The result indicated that a majority of those present favoured removing the sex disqualification first, although the adult suffrage position also attracted considerable support. The debate did not resolve the divisions between the two sides, but brought into focus questions that had previously been raised in party conferences, political pamphlets and suffrage organisations. Should the exclusion of women on grounds of sex take precedence over the reform of property qualifications? Could the enfranchisement of some women be regarded as an advance in women's political status more generally? Who should speak for the interests of working-class women?

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Would gradual reform open the way towards universal suffrage, or reshape the political forces that stood in its way?

Bondfield's arguments in 1907 also clarified her commitment to adult suffrage. She did not seek to replace the question of women's suffrage with that of class, but rejected the assumption that admitting some women to the existing electorate would resolve the problem of women's political equality. Billington-Greig, by contrast, insisted that the legal exclusion of women as a group constituted a distinct political inequality that had to be addressed in its own right. Their differing understandings of equality extended the controversy beyond the scope of the franchise to questions of the sequence of reform, political representation and the means of achieving democracy. These divisions continued to shape the Labour Party's position on women's suffrage in the years that followed.

4.3 The Continuing Debate and the Labour Party's Changing Position, 1909–1912

The public debate of 1907 did not resolve the divisions between advocates of adult suffrage and those favouring equal suffrage for women. As these disagreements entered the practical politics of the Labour Party and the Women's Labour League (WLL), they increasingly centred on a more immediate question: should the Labour Party oppose a franchise reform bill in its entirety if it extended the vote to more men without also enfranchising women? The dispute over this issue brought the earlier disagreement about whether sex equality or adult suffrage should take priority directly into the Labour Party's parliamentary strategy.

The Labour Party conference of 1909 exposed these tensions. The resolution under discussion called for 'the enfranchisement of all adults, male and female', while an amendment submitted by the Women's Labour League proposed that any attempt to exclude women should meet with 'uncompromising opposition' from organised labour to the Bill as a whole [63]. Bondfield, attending the conference as a WLL delegate, removed the wording requiring opposition to the entire Bill before formally moving the amendment [64]. She later explained in her autobiography that Arthur Henderson, the Labour Party's General Secretary, had drawn her attention to the practical difficulties involved in such a requirement [65].

Bondfield's decision illustrated a further difficulty faced by advocates of adult suffrage when their demands entered party politics. She continued to support the enfranchisement of all adult men and women, but stopped short of making their simultaneous enfranchisement an absolute condition of Labour MPs' support for franchise reform. Many members of the WLL disagreed with her decision. Its Executive subsequently discussed her unilateral alteration of the amendment and eventually endorsed her action, although the incident exposed differences over political tactics within the organization [66].

Women active in labour politics were concerned not only with whether the ultimate objective of reform included women, but also with the political means by which their inclusion could be secured. The dispute showed that even among Labour women, adult suffrage and women's suffrage could no longer be treated as entirely separate political objectives. Bondfield continued to emphasise the need to reform the qualifications governing the franchise as a whole. A growing number of WLL members, however, insisted that the Labour Party should ensure that women were included in any future extension of the vote. Bondfield's primary concern was which social classes would benefit from reform, while other WLL members were particularly anxious that women might once again be excluded as the male franchise expanded. As parliamentary reform became a more immediate political prospect, the relationship between these two demands became increasingly close.

The first Conciliation Bill of 1910 brought these questions into sharper focus. The Bill proposed to enfranchise approximately one million women who met the relevant household qualifications, most of whom were unmarried. It passed its first and second readings, but Prime Minister H. H. Asquith subsequently refused to allocate further parliamentary time, preventing it from proceeding to the final stages of legislation [67]. For supporters of women's suffrage, the episode again demonstrated the difficulties of relying on the Liberal government to advance reform. For the Labour Party, women's suffrage was becoming increasingly difficult to treat as an issue that could be indefinitely postponed. Relations between the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Liberal Party were also changing. Millicent Garrett Fawcett gradually lost confidence in the Liberal government's willingness to introduce women's suffrage legislation, and the NUWSS began to turn its attention increasingly towards Labour [68]. Labour women continued to press for women's enfranchisement, while suffrage organisations reconsidered the prospects for cooperation with the

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labour movement. This growing convergence altered the political circumstances in which advocates of adult suffrage had exercised considerable influence within the Labour Party between 1905 and 1908.

The Labour Party returned to the franchise question at its annual conference in January 1912. The conference adopted a resolution declaring that any franchise reform which excluded women would be unacceptable to the labour and socialist movement [69]. Its wording closely resembled the amendment proposed by the WLL in 1909, particularly in restoring the central demand that Bondfield had removed: the Labour Party should not accept a reform measure that excluded women [70]. A demand that had failed to secure sufficient support within the party three years earlier had thus become a formally adopted conference policy. This did not mean, however, that all sections of the party had reached agreement. Delegates from the miners' unions continued to oppose making women's enfranchisement a condition of support for an entire franchise reform bill [71]. The significance of the 1912 decision lay not in the Labour Party abandoning adult suffrage in favour of a particular form of property-qualified women's suffrage, but in establishing a new principle: future extensions of the parliamentary franchise should no longer enfranchise men while excluding women.

The changes between 1909 and 1912 cannot be attributed to any single political figure. Labour women had long campaigned for women's suffrage within the party and played an important part in reshaping its political agenda. The Liberal government's continued failure to introduce women's suffrage reform prompted the NUWSS to reconsider its party-political strategy, while the Labour Party itself needed to broaden its organisational base and strengthen its capacity for electoral mobilization [72]. In 1912, the Labour Party and the NUWSS began cooperating through the Election Fighting Fund (EFF), which provided financial assistance and experienced campaign organisers to Labour candidates who supported women's suffrage [73]. Commenting on this cooperation, *Common Cause* emphasised that while Labour possessed political enthusiasm, effective political mobilisation also required a well-developed organisational machinery [74].

This cooperation brought women's suffrage more directly into the Labour Party's electoral activities. Previously, adult suffrage and women's suffrage had largely competed through conference resolutions, pamphlets and public debates. From 1912 onwards, the inclusion of women in franchise reform became increasingly connected with support for parliamentary candidates, the organisation of by-election campaigns and cooperation between political organisations. The Labour Party's position on women's suffrage was therefore no longer expressed primarily through statements of principle, but began to form part of its electoral strategy and parliamentary activity.

Bondfield's position during these developments must be understood in the context of the earlier disputes. She had consistently advocated adult suffrage, seeking the removal of both property and sex restrictions. Her handling of the WLL amendment in 1909 also showed that she did not favour pursuing a separate programme of women's enfranchisement at the expense of working-class men. The Labour Party resolution of 1912, meanwhile, established another principle within party policy: whatever form an extension of the franchise might take, women should not once again be excluded. These two demands did not displace one another, but gradually came together within Labour Party policy.

The controversy of 1907–1912 therefore ended in neither a complete victory for advocates of adult suffrage nor one for supporters of women's suffrage. The Labour Party retained its commitment to a wider extension of the franchise while affirming that any new reform must include women. The problem of class exclusion raised by advocates of adult suffrage remained unresolved, but the exclusion of women on grounds of sex could no longer be indefinitely postponed. By 1912, two previously competing demands had begun to converge within Labour Party policy: extending the electorate and ensuring that women were included in that extension had both become essential elements of franchise reform. The franchise settlement of 1918 would give this convergence of principles a more concrete, though still limited, legislative form.

5. From Limited to Equal Suffrage: Reform and Responses, 1918–1928

5.1 Limited Women's Suffrage in 1918: Political Breakthrough and Unequal Qualifications

After 1912, women could no longer be readily excluded from debates over parliamentary franchise reform in Britain. The First World War also undermined the practical foundations of the existing system of electoral

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registration. With large numbers of men serving in the armed forces for extended periods, the pre-war franchise, which depended heavily on residential qualifications, became increasingly difficult to maintain. In October 1916, the Speaker's Conference began considering reforms to the electoral system, and in January 1917 it proposed extending the male franchise and enfranchising some women [75]. Women's admission to the parliamentary electorate was thus no longer merely a matter of dispute between suffrage organisations and the labour movement, but had become an issue that needed to be addressed in the reconstruction of British politics.

The *Representation of the People Act 1918* substantially extended the male franchise and granted women the parliamentary vote for the first time. Under Section 4 of the Act, women had to be at least 30 years old and either possess the relevant local government electoral qualification or be married to a man who held the requisite qualification in order to be registered as parliamentary electors [76]. Approximately 8.4 million women were thereby enfranchised [77]. For the first time, British women gained the parliamentary vote on a large scale, but the qualifications for men and women remained unequal. Men generally became eligible to vote at the age of 21, whereas women faced an age threshold nine years higher and had to satisfy the additional qualifications prescribed by the Act.

The age threshold of 30 did not arise from a judgement that younger women lacked the capacity to exercise the vote. In November 1918, Lord Islington, explaining the earlier franchise arrangements in the House of Lords, made clear that the decision to set the voting age for women at 30 was not based on any assumption that women between 21 and 30 were incapable of voting. Rather, enfranchising women in that age group would have resulted in female electors potentially outnumbering male electors, a change considered too far-reaching at the time [78]. The age distinction was therefore part of the political compromise embodied in the 1918 settlement. Parliament recognised women's right to participate in national elections while using age and other qualifications to restrict the size of the newly enfranchised female electorate.

The *Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918*, passed in November of the same year, further removed the sex barrier to women's membership of the House of Commons. The Act provided that a woman could not be disqualified by sex or marriage from being elected to, sitting in or voting as a member of the House of Commons [79]. Under the parliamentary eligibility rules then in force, women aged 21 and over could stand for election to the Commons. This created a discrepancy between the qualifications for voting and those for parliamentary membership: women aged between 21 and 29 could stand as parliamentary candidates but could not vote in parliamentary elections themselves.

Bondfield responded directly to the franchise settlement of 1918. She later recalled that she and other advocates of adult suffrage, including Mary Macarthur, regarded the legislation as 'a mean and inadequate little Bill', since it extended the franchise while introducing further inequalities in electoral qualifications that would have to be removed [80]. Her objection was not to women entering the electorate, but to the continued absence of equal franchise qualifications for adult men and women.

Viewed in the light of Bondfield's earlier arguments, the settlement of 1918 brought into focus the questions she had repeatedly raised since 1905. She had opposed equating women's enfranchisement 'on the same terms as men' with the achievement of political equality for women as a whole. Any reform based on existing qualifications, she argued, still raised the question of which women would actually be entitled to vote. After 1918, the divisions within the female electorate did not simply reproduce those envisaged by pre-war proposals for limited women's suffrage. Nevertheless, age, property and local government electoral qualifications continued to determine which women could participate in parliamentary elections.

Working-class women therefore remained central to Bondfield's assessment of the reform. Women under 30 were ineligible to vote in parliamentary elections, regardless of whether they were independently employed, while those aged 30 and over still had to satisfy the relevant registration requirements. The 1918 settlement thus left many younger working women who had been employed in industrial production and other forms of work during the war outside the parliamentary electorate [81]. Before the war, Bondfield had emphasised not simply women's shared position as a sex, but the ways in which employment, income, residence and marital status together shaped their opportunities for political participation. The franchise qualifications established in 1918 brought these questions back into practical politics.

At the same time, the reform of 1918 also reflected the alternative approach advocated by supporters of equal suffrage for women before the war. Billington-Greig and others had maintained that enfranchising some

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women first would break down the legal barrier that excluded women as a group from parliamentary elections on grounds of sex. The 1918 Act achieved this breakthrough through gradual reform. Women became parliamentary electors for the first time, and the political debate increasingly shifted from whether women should have the vote to why men and women should remain subject to different franchise qualifications.

The franchise reform of 1918 therefore did not fully realise the proposals advanced by either side before the war. The barrier to women's parliamentary enfranchisement, which advocates of equal suffrage for women had sought to remove, had been breached, but the equal franchise qualifications for adult men and women demanded by Bondfield had not been established. The pre-war controversy over whether to remove the sex disqualification first or reform property qualifications at the same time thus entered a new phase. Once women had become parliamentary electors, the question was whether inequalities in voting qualifications based on age, property and personal status should continue to exist. The campaign for equal suffrage over the following decade developed within this new legislative framework.

5.2 From Unequal Qualifications to Equal Franchise: The Reform of 1928

After 1918, the political debate over women's suffrage in Britain changed in character. Women had entered the parliamentary electorate, and the central question was no longer whether they should have the vote, but whether men and women should qualify for it on the same terms. The minimum voting age of 30 for women established by the 1918 Act, together with registration requirements linked to local government electoral qualifications, continued to exclude substantial numbers of adult women from parliamentary elections. Removing the differences between male and female franchise qualifications therefore became the principal objective of the subsequent campaign for equal suffrage [82].

For Bondfield, this demand was directly connected to her pre-war commitment to adult suffrage. Her dissatisfaction with the 1918 settlement did not mean that she rejected the political gains women had achieved. Rather, she regarded the different age thresholds and other qualifications imposed on adult men and women as creating new divisions within the parliamentary franchise. By the years leading up to 1928, the question that concerned her had become increasingly clear: if women were now recognised as members of the national political community, what justification remained for determining their eligibility to vote according to qualifications different from those applied to men?

In 1928, the Conservative government introduced the *Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Bill*. Its central purpose was not simply to enfranchise another category of women, but to establish the same legal qualifications for the parliamentary franchise for men and women. The resulting *Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928* repealed the provisions of the 1918 Act that prescribed separate franchise qualifications for men and women. It established that parliamentary electors who had reached the statutory voting age, were not subject to any legal incapacity and met the relevant residence or business premises qualifications would no longer be subject to different electoral requirements on grounds of sex [83]. Women were consequently entitled to register as parliamentary electors from the age of 21 on the same terms as men.

The reform had an immediate effect on the size of the female electorate. During the House of Lords debate on the Bill, the government estimated that the new provisions would add approximately 5.25 million women to the electoral register. Of these, around 1.7 million were married women aged between 21 and 30, while nearly 1.2 million were women in the same age group who earned their own living [84]. For Bondfield, who had long been concerned with the position of young working women, the latter group was particularly significant. The 1918 Act had excluded them from parliamentary elections on grounds of age. After 1928, they would no longer be subject to different electoral qualifications from male workers because of the combined effects of age and sex.

On 29 March 1928, Bondfield explicitly supported the Equal Franchise Bill during its second reading in the House of Commons. She began by reflecting on her earlier attitude towards franchise reform, explaining that she had previously found it difficult to share the enthusiasm surrounding such measures because voting rights had depended more upon the possession of property than upon an individual's status as a human being [85]. Her concerns had not fundamentally changed since her earlier criticisms of limited women's suffrage. She continued to judge franchise reform by the grounds upon which voting qualifications were established, rather than simply by the number of women admitted to the electorate.

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Bondfield went on to describe the reform of 1928 as placing men and women on an equal political footing for the first time. She argued that the right to vote should not depend upon whether an individual was a man or a woman. Men and women deserved equal political standing 'because we are human beings and part of society as a whole' [86]. For Bondfield, equal suffrage removed more than a difference in the statutory voting age. It challenged the principle that the law should impose different political qualifications upon adult citizens according to their sex. She therefore regarded the Bill as a 'tremendous social advance' [87].

Her understanding of equal suffrage also extended to the wider significance of political participation. Bondfield believed that removing unequal qualifications would eliminate the 'artificial barrier' preventing women from acquiring political education and taking a full part in public life. She regarded the vote less as a privilege to be enjoyed than as an opportunity to participate in collective political life and contribute to the common good, an opportunity that also carried public responsibilities [88]. From her examination in 1905 of which working women could satisfy property and residential qualifications to her insistence in 1928 that adult women should be able to enter political life without artificial restrictions, her concern remained firmly rooted in the practical conditions of political participation.

Her discussion of working-class women's political capacities offered a particularly clear expression of this longstanding position. During the debate, another Member of Parliament raised the question of voters' education. Bondfield challenged a narrow understanding of what it meant to be educated. Referring to the wives and daughters of working men, she argued that although such women might not have attended university, they had been educated in the 'university of experience'. Their encounters with poverty, hardship and the difficulties of everyday life had given them forms of social knowledge that deserved a place in the political life of the nation [89].

This argument closely echoed Bondfield's earlier efforts to secure a political voice for shop assistants and working women. She did not seek to justify their enfranchisement by demonstrating that they possessed the same educational backgrounds as those who had attended university. Instead, she maintained that work and lived experience could themselves provide knowledge of political value. The political community needed to draw not only upon the experience of those possessing property, formal education and social standing, but also upon that of ordinary women who confronted questions of wages, housing, family life and social hardship in their daily lives. What Bondfield sought in 1928 was therefore not merely the establishment of equal franchise qualifications for men and women, but the inclusion in national political life of working women who had previously faced some of the greatest obstacles to participation, bringing their own experiences to bear upon public affairs.

The changes to the parliamentary franchise between 1918 and 1928 also altered the relationship between the two approaches that had competed before the war: adult suffrage and equal suffrage for women. The reform of 1918 first broke down the legal barrier that had excluded women as a group from parliamentary elections, while the legislation of 1928 removed the differences between male and female franchise qualifications. Britain did not adopt the immediate introduction of adult suffrage that Bondfield had advocated in the early twentieth century. Instead, equal franchise qualifications were achieved through two successive reforms. The significance of 1928 lay in the convergence, within the law, of two demands that had previously been in conflict: the inclusion of women in the parliamentary electorate and the establishment of equal voting qualifications for adult men and women.

For Bondfield, the reform of 1928 also brought a definite political outcome to the questions she had raised about electoral qualifications for more than two decades. In her earlier campaigns, she had asked which women could qualify for the vote under restrictions based on property, residence and marital status. After 1918, the question was why women, having gained the parliamentary franchise, should still be subject to different age thresholds and other qualifications. By 1928, the legal distinctions between men and women in parliamentary voting qualifications had been removed. The wives and daughters of working men, together with wage-earning women whose participation in political life Bondfield had long sought to secure, could now enter the parliamentary electorate on the same terms as adult men.

5.3 Working-Class Women and Bondfield's Place in the History of Women's Suffrage

From the publication of *The Women's Suffrage Controversy* in 1905 to the passage of the Equal Franchise Act in 1928, Bondfield's position on the franchise remained largely consistent. What she opposed was not

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women's participation in politics, but the extension of the existing property-based franchise to only those women who qualified to vote on the same terms as men. Looking back on her earlier position, she continued to emphasise that she had opposed limited women's suffrage because such a reform might further strengthen the political influence of the propertied classes. Her aim had been to secure full voting rights for all women [90]. To classify her simply as either a supporter or an opponent of women's suffrage would therefore obscure the political substance of her commitment to adult suffrage.

Bondfield's concerns arose primarily from her understanding of working women's living conditions. For women who possessed independent property, a permanent residence or other legally recognised qualifications, removing the sex disqualification could transform their political position. Female shop assistants, domestic servants, factory workers and many other wage-earning women, however, faced obstacles extending beyond their sex. In 1905, Bondfield examined the extent to which different groups of women could qualify for the vote under the existing male franchise. Her purpose was to demonstrate how differences in property ownership, housing and employment created substantial inequalities among women in their opportunities to acquire political rights [91]. She thus moved the discussion beyond whether women should have the vote to the question of which women could actually become electors.

Bondfield's emphasis on working-class women's ability to express their own political interests was another important feature of her position. Some middle- and upper-class suffragists believed that, once enfranchised, they could represent the interests of working-class women in political life. Bondfield consistently rejected the assumption that working women should depend upon women of other social classes to speak on their behalf [92]. She had herself worked alongside middle-class women in campaigns for social reform over many years, and her position did not involve a rejection of cooperation across class boundaries. What she insisted upon was the right of working-class women to articulate political demands arising from their own experiences of work and everyday life, and to participate in public affairs in their own right.

The differences between Bondfield and the mainstream women's suffrage movement must therefore be understood in relation to their respective political circumstances. Bondfield had long been active in trade unions, labour organisations and socialist politics, where she worked among both male and female workers. Women such as Bondfield and Mary Macarthur, whose political activities were centred primarily on labour organisations, approached the franchise question from a different perspective from suffragists who were politically active mainly through independent women's organisations [93]. The former were particularly attentive to inequalities arising from wages, employment and property qualifications, while the latter confronted the exclusion of women as a group from parliamentary politics on grounds of sex. These different experiences gave rise to competing views about the order in which franchise reform should proceed and formed an important part of the British suffrage debates of the early twentieth century.

The reforms of 1918 and 1928 brought these two demands into the British electoral system in successive stages. The reform of 1918 ended the complete exclusion of women as a group from parliamentary elections on grounds of sex, but differences in age and other qualifications remained. In 1928, parliamentary franchise qualifications were equalised for adult men and women. Britain did not introduce adult suffrage in a single reform, as Bondfield had advocated in her earlier campaigns. Instead, over the course of a decade, two successive reforms brought about the transition from the partial enfranchisement of women to equal franchise qualifications for men and women. This historical process also demonstrated that the concerns emphasised by the two sides before the war were not mutually exclusive. The barrier excluding women on grounds of sex had to be removed, but the inequalities in electoral qualifications that remained after this initial reform also required attention.

Bondfield's speech in the House of Commons debate of 1928 gave clear political expression to her longstanding concerns. She did not seek to establish women's eligibility for the vote by appealing to their educational attainment or social standing. Instead, she drew particular attention to the knowledge acquired by the wives and daughters of working men through poverty, work and family life, describing their education in the 'university of experience'. She argued that such experiences deserved a place in the political life of the nation [94]. Her understanding of the parliamentary franchise thus remained closely connected to a particular social group: working women who lacked property, formal education and public recognition, but who experienced the consequences of social and economic problems directly.

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It is in this respect that Bondfield occupies a distinctive place in the history of the British women's suffrage movement. She was not a direct driving force behind the legislation of 1918 or 1928, nor was the adult suffrage movement the dominant organisational force within the pre-war campaign for women's suffrage. Her contribution was to bring a persistent question into the debate: when political equality was demanded in the name of 'women', should the different economic and social circumstances of women themselves also be taken into account? By connecting the everyday experiences of female shop assistants, factory workers, domestic servants and working men's wives with the question of citizenship, she demonstrated that women's suffrage concerned not only the removal of legal exclusion on grounds of sex, but also who could actually enter the political community.

In this sense, 'giving voice to those rendered invisible' was more than a rhetorical description of Bondfield's political activity. The working women whose interests concerned her had long been part of Britain's social and economic life, yet they found it difficult to enter an electorate defined by property qualifications. Nor were they necessarily able to express their interests through their own experiences within the mainstream women's suffrage movement. Drawing upon her own working life, Bondfield brought these women into debates over franchise qualifications, political representation and citizenship. The central question raised by her contribution was not whether women should have the vote, but which women were actually included when political rights were extended in the name of 'women'.

6. Conclusion

Margaret Bondfield's significance in the debates over women's suffrage lay not in the eventual adoption of the particular course of reform she advocated. In the early twentieth century, her experiences as a shop assistant and trade unionist brought her into contact with many women who depended upon wages for their livelihood. These experiences led her to recognise that extending the existing male franchise to women would not enable all women to enter political life. Her commitment to adult suffrage and her disagreements with advocates of equal suffrage for women consistently centred on one question: which women would actually become electors when political rights were extended to women? The reform of 1918 first broke down the legal barrier that had excluded women as a group from parliamentary elections on grounds of sex, but differences in age and other franchise qualifications remained. The Equal Franchise Act of 1928 finally established the same parliamentary voting qualifications for adult men and women. Britain therefore did not follow the path of immediate adult suffrage that Bondfield had envisaged in her earlier campaigns. Nevertheless, her concerns about class inequalities within proposals for limited women's suffrage remained relevant throughout the reform process. Bondfield's distinctive contribution to the British women's suffrage debate was to draw attention to the circumstances of female shop assistants, factory workers, domestic servants and working men's wives, whose experiences had long received little attention in political discussions. What she sought was not merely the extension of political rights in the name of 'women', but the opportunity for working women to participate in political life in their own right, drawing upon their own experiences and speaking for themselves.

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