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# The Women's Equality Party: "And Everything Old is New Again..."

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Véronique Molinari

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"Women can best serve the nation by keeping clear of men's party political machinery and traditions which, by universal consent, leave so much to be desired", *Women's Party*, 1917.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> In November 2015, a new player in British politics announced it would contest the following May elections to the devolved Scottish and Welsh Parliament as well as those to the London Assembly and London Mayor. After only a year of existence, the Women's Equality Party, co-founded in March 2015 by Catherine Mayer and Sandi Toksvig and led by journalist Sophie Walker, decided to put up candidates in an attempt to push "for equal representation in politics, business, industry and throughout working life," attracting in the process not only wide press coverage but a small –yet not insignificant– share of the votes as well.

The Women's Equality Party (WE) is not the only one of its kind in Europe as more than thirty women's parties have contested elections at national or European level in the past twenty years,<sup>2</sup> including, in the British Isles, the cross-party Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. Although no reference has ever been made to it by the media, it is not the first one of its kind in the UK either. Both its name and the fact that it is based on a 6 point-programme are direct reminders of Christabel Pankhurst's Women's Party and Margaret Haig's Six Point Group, both launched in the context of women's enfranchisement in 1918 together with other attempts at creating a women's party in Parliament and local government. That such a party should have come into existence in 2015 in the UK and bear such similarities with events that are now one hundred years old cannot fail to raise a number of questions, not only as to the reasons that account for its emergence (and

notably the progress that has been achieved in the fields targeted as key policy goals), but also as to what may still motivate women today to organize separately from mainstream political parties rather than contribute to changing things from the inside and the relevance of such a choice. That in the space of little more than one year, it should have managed to build a membership exceeding that of UKIP also makes it quite remarkable. By placing WE in a wider historical perspective, this article will not only try to determine to what extent the party can be considered as innovative rather than a close replica of past –and more or less successful– initiatives, it will also provide some special insight into the changes and continuities in the strategies, motivations and recruitment of women-only British campaigning groups. In this respect, the choice made by its members to claim the inheritance of the suffragette movement rather than that of other groups it bears more resemblance to will also need to be looked into.

## The Women's Equality Party: aims and strategies

- 2 The Women's Equality Party was born in the wake of the Women of the World Festival that was held in London in March 2015, following a suggestion by British author and journalist Catherine Mayer. After a first meeting with other political journalists, including Suzanne Moore, Sophie Walker and Hannah McGrath, held later in the month, Mayer was joined by comedian and political activist Sandi Toksvig. On 20 July 2015, Walker was announced as the party's leader and, two days later, the Women's Equality Party was registered with the Electoral Commission.
- 3 In its mission statement, WE presented itself as "*a new collaborative political force in British politics uniting people of all genders, diverse ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, beliefs and experiences in the shared determination to see women enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men so that all can flourish*".<sup>3</sup> Equality for women, its leaders insisted, was not a women's issue only. "*When women fulfil their potential*" one could read on the party's website, "*everyone benefits. Gender equality means better politics, a more vibrant economy, a workforce that draws on the talents of the whole population and a society at ease with itself. The Women's Equality Party is working towards such a society.*"<sup>4</sup>
- 4 The party's set of policies launched by Walker at Conway Hall on 20 October 2015 thus included six core objectives related to areas in which women were said to be lagging far behind men.<sup>5</sup> These were:
  - Equal representation in politics, business, industry and throughout working life;
  - Equal pay (including transparency on gender pay, zero tolerance against workplace discrimination, investing in childcare, boosting women's pensions);
  - Equal parenting and caregiving (including shared parental leave of six weeks at 90% for both partners, and free childcare from nine months, more flexibility in the work-place for both men and women and shared responsibilities at home);
  - Equality in education (including challenging gender stereotypes as well equal opportunities in teaching and school leadership);
  - Equal treatment of women by and in the media;
  - End to violence against women (including improving support for victims, prosecuting violence against women, and ending traffic and sexual exploitation).
- 5 Six months after its creation, the party could already boast 45,000 members and more than 65 local branches across England, Scotland and Wales, a success which its leaders attributed to a deep disillusion with mainstream politics, exasperation at not feeling represented and frustration with the lack of attention that was being paid to gender

equality –the very reasons which, Mayer and Toksvig say, had made them want to create the party in the first place. Because that situation was in their opinion partly to be explained by the under-representation of women in politics (only a quarter of the candidates who had contested the May 2015 general election and less than a third of the 650 MPs elected were female), WE advocated that women should make up at least 66% of the future candidates selected to replace retiring members of Parliament at the following elections and, to reach that target, recommended the use of all-women shortlists.

- 6 Like the women's parties that have contested elections at national or European level, WE considers itself as a "*focused mainstream party*"<sup>6</sup> and refuses to take a party line on issues outside their remit. The fact that their aim should be not so much to gain access to power as to influence the policy commitments of the larger parties by pressuring them to take up their issues (and planning to disband once action has been taken)<sup>7</sup> would however tend to make them more of a hybrid between a party and a pressure group.

Just as the appearance of Green parties throughout Europe may have incited other parties to adopt green preoccupations or right-wing parties like UKIP in the UK or the Front National in France may have caused mainstream parties to veer to the right in recent elections, it was hoped that a women's party might exert pressure on the main parties and scare them into adopting its agenda for fear of losing votes to a competitor.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the rare successes experienced by other women's parties had occurred in electoral systems using some form of proportional representation while the UK's first-past-the-post implied very little chance of success in Westminster no doubt contributed to the WE's decision to run for elections in the devolved parliaments and assemblies, which all use electoral systems involving PR.

## The May 2016 elections

- 7 Four WE candidates were put forward for the National Assembly of Wales and two for the Scottish Parliament, all of them on regional lists (the only ones to use PR); eleven candidates were fielded for the London Assembly and the leader of the party, Walker, stood for mayoral elections. As a new player on the political scene, the party preferred not to ask for all of the electorate's votes, which might have left them with eventually getting none, but rather to go for only *one* out of the electorates' two possible votes. London voters were therefore told that they had four votes, two for London Mayor (first and second choice) and two for the London Assembly (one for their local area and one for a 'London wide' representative), and that by giving half of them to WE, they would contribute to advance the cause of equality. Similarly, Welsh and Scottish voters were encouraged to give one of their two votes (one constituency vote, one regional vote) to the party list. "*Women*", the argument ran, "*are half the population, it's only right to give half of your vote to helping them achieve equality*".<sup>9</sup> As far as the London campaign was concerned, WE explained that the four million women living in London were experiencing the UK's biggest pay gap, most expensive childcare, highest sexual violence rates and highest levels of child poverty. As regards sexual violence, billboard adverts were used to highlight the number of rapes taking place every day in the capital city ("*230 Rapes Every Day? Who Gives A Damn? We Do.*") and a campaign was launched on Twitter, encouraging victims of sexual assault to pinpoint where their attack had taken place so that a map of violence against women in the capital could be created –an echo of the "Reclaim the Night" campaign launched in the mid-seventies and revived in the early

2000s. The manifestos published for Scotland and Wales, on the other hand, offered no striking difference with the general UK platform, with the same six points being put forward as key objectives and no position being taken, in the case of Scotland, on the independence issue.

As a result of the campaign, WE took 1.2% of the vote in Scotland (3,877 in Lothian and 2,091 votes in Glasgow) and exactly the same percentage in the South Wales Central region (2,807 votes), with a particularly strong showing in Cardiff. In London, where it obtained 92,000 votes for the Assembly list (3.5%) and came ahead of UKIP in some boroughs, the party did not win any seat and Sophie Walker only secured 2% of the votes in the mayoral elections (53,055 votes).

- 8 Although no reference has ever been made to it in the course of the campaign, the idea of a women's party in Britain is nothing new. Following the 1918 Representation of the People Act and Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act, as the aim pursued by women's organizations had shifted from suffrage to social and political reforms, the question had rapidly been raised as to whether the best way to achieve these was through the existing political parties or a separate women's party. While, for some, maintaining separate women's organizations now that there was no impediment for them to join the mainstream political parties would only contribute to maintain a gendered division of roles,<sup>10</sup> for others, women's special contribution to politics would be more easily achieved without partisan ties. Given the difficulty for women to be heard within traditional parties, some leaders and members of the women's movement were naturally tempted by the creation of a separate women's party. Women then enjoyed a 40% share of the electorate and the organisations that had replaced pre-war suffragist groups (such as the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship) had well-defined programmes and members with a long experience of politics. That, it seemed, could well be turned into a new party. As it was, the widespread belief that war had rendered the old parties somewhat obsolete and discredited meant that the emergence of such party was expected by a good many politicians<sup>11</sup> and it was partly to fight its emergence that the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberals strove so hard to attract women to their own ranks through massive propaganda efforts and electoral promises.<sup>12</sup>

## Christabel Pankhurst's Women's Party

- 9 The first attempt at forming a national women's party in the UK came from the leaders of the pre-war suffragette movement, the Pankhursts. Although this organisation was, politically speaking, very remote from the current, left-leaning, Women's Equality Party, it does allow interesting comparisons. In November 1917, as it was now certain that some measure of female suffrage would soon be granted, the Women's Social and Political Union wound up and was replaced by the Women's Party with Emmeline Pankhurst as its treasurer. The party presented itself as women's voice in politics and argued that women, thanks to their moral values, could purify the political sphere – a continuation of the ideas which had previously been defended by the WSPU to ask for the vote. If women wanted to contribute something new to politics, the party argued, they had to keep clear of men's traditional political organisations and not lose their identity inside worn-out male parties. In her inaugural address, Christabel Pankhurst thus explained:

We have formed the Women's Party because our opinion has been, and is, that it would not be a good thing for women, the new brooms in politics, to go into those

hopelessly dusty old places known as men's political parties. What would our fight for the vote, and our dreams of what it would enable us to do, be worth, if we were simply to go into the party political grooves which men have made and which now the best of them are so anxious to get out of?<sup>13</sup>

- 10 In a speech made at Queen's Hall (London) in the same month, she insisted again that, "by starting fair and square, the Women's Party [could] avoid many of the mistakes that men's parties have made in the past".<sup>14</sup> While assuring its electorate that the WP was in "no way based on sex-antagonism" (an accusation WE would also have to face one hundred years later), it was felt that women could best serve the nation by keeping "clear of men's party political machinery and traditions which, by universal consent, leave so much to be desired".<sup>15</sup>
- 11 The party received financial help from the British Commonwealth Union, favourable echoes in Northcliffe's press –the *Daily Mail* in particular– and the sympathy of the Coalition government. The reason behind such support, however, mostly had to do with the fact that the party was a nationalist as much as –and probably more than– a feminist one. As it was, proposals concerning women's rights and the improvement of women's condition were not given priority in the party's manifesto but came after a long list concerning the resolution of the conflict and how Britain should be ruled after the war (including upholding the authority of the national Parliament and not surrendering to the League of Nations, excluding from the British public service officials who were not of long British descent and wholly British connection or again maintaining the union between Ireland and Great Britain).<sup>16</sup> Although under the heading "Special Women's Question", the WP's manifesto then placed equal pay, equal marriage laws, equal parental rights, equal opportunities of employment, the raising of the age of consent and equality of rights and responsibilities in regard to the social and the political service of the nation, this feminist agenda was, to use Nicoletta Gullace's words, "grafted... onto the patriotic tree that had served the WSPU so well in their wartime quest for the vote,"<sup>17</sup> not the reverse.
- 12 Christabel Pankhurst stood for the first elections that followed the war, disputing the Smethwick constituency in December 1918 with Lloyd George's coupon and lost by only 775 votes. She then tried in 1919 to dispute a by-election (Westminster) but, lacking support and money, was heavily defeated. This, however, should not be taken as evidence that a women's party was doomed to fail. First of all, Gullace, in her study of the Smethwick election, argues that, had women been enfranchised on the same terms as men (that is to say at 21 rather than 30), it is highly likely that Christabel Pankhurst would have won the elections as she enjoyed widespread popularity "among a set of patriotic, independent munitions girls".<sup>18</sup> Besides, not only was Pankhurst the WP's only candidate but, more important, the party never had the support of the main women's organizations, which insisted that the name "women's party" was misleading and that no link whatsoever existed between the party and their movement.<sup>19</sup> As it was, this failed attempt was not regarded as significant and the creation of a separate women's party continued to be discussed by these same women's organisations in the following years. The question became all the more relevant as it soon became obvious that women were failing to make themselves heard within their respective parties and to be selected as parliamentary candidates (the percentage of women MPs only rose from 0.1 in 1918 to 2.3 in 1929 before falling to 1.5 in 1935). While the slow progress of legislation regarding divorce, the guardianship of infants or equal pay continued to fuel discussions about the desirability of a women's party, political allegiance, it seemed, was too great an obstacle to overcome.<sup>20</sup>

- 13 Interestingly, among the reasons which Gullace identifies as having contributed to the electoral failure of the Pankhursts' Women's Party was the decision to give it such a gendered name, which she sees as both "*a bold and perhaps fatal one.*"<sup>21</sup> Voting for a party called the "Women's" Party would have been, she notes, as unlikely for a man as "*to wear a woman's hat to the polls, however pleasing the platform might have been.*"<sup>22</sup> In this respect, the WE's choice, one century later, to adopt an almost identical name may have had a similar impact, as has the decision to only put forward women candidates. This, together with the fact that its website and Facebook page have featured almost exclusively women, means that WE, although it welcomes both genders as members and insists that equality for women is not a women's issue only, may have given the feeling that it is solely aimed at women.

## The Six Point Group

- 14 Following the Pankhursts' initiative, the 1920s and 30s witnessed several other attempts at organising women voters, candidates and MPs, this time on a cross-party or non-partisan basis. Nancy Astor, for one, who was the first woman to have taken her seat in the House of Commons in 1919, attempted to organize a women's party among a small group of women MPs, including Margaret Wintringham (Lib.), Dorothy Jewson (Lab.) and Lady Terrington (Lib.). The failure of the last three members to get re-elected in 1924 however put an end to the prospect, the remaining MPs being too strongly attached to their party to consider a cross-party collaboration of this kind. In March 1921, Astor was also responsible for bringing together some forty organisations to form a Consultative Committee of Women's Organisations whose aim was to act as a link between MPs and women's organisations and organise voters in support of equality reforms.<sup>23</sup> The increase in the number of women elected to the House of Commons in 1929 (from 4 to 14) encouraged her to resume her attempts at forming a women's party within Parliament but, once again, party loyalty proved too strong. More than half the fourteen women MPs were Labour and felt they had been elected to deal with unemployment and standards of living, not specifically "women's issues", not to mention the fact that neither their party nor their voters would have liked to see them collaborate with Conservative MPs.
- 15 Local government in the interwar period also witnessed several initiatives aimed at securing the election of women to local bodies by finding suitable candidates, raising funds and supplying canvassers. That was the case of London's Women's Municipal Party, of Glasgow's Women's Local Representation Joint Committee, or again of Cambridge's Women's Citizens Association, within which Liberal candidates sought election as non-party women defending the reforms for which the NUSEC was fighting for. Even though women were elected on local councils in far greater proportion than in Parliament (in the 1930s, one in six councillors in the London Boroughs was a woman), it became increasingly difficult, at local level too, to contest elections on an independent platform.
- 16 The organisation which offers the most striking similarities with the current WE, however, both in terms of political platform and of strategy is undoubtedly the Six Point Group, which was founded in 1921 by Margaret Haig (Lady Rhondda), with former militant suffragists in its ranks such as Rebecca West, Dorothy E. Evans, Monica Whately or Helen Archdale, to coordinate the efforts of the various women's groups through a single body that would concentrate on a small number of realistic reforms. The organization took its name from the six areas of reform they wanted to achieve in

priority for women: 1) legislation on child assault; 2) legislation for the widowed mother; 3) legislation for the unmarried mother and her child; 4) equal rights of guardianship for married parents; 5) equal pay for teachers and 6) equal opportunities for men and women in the civil service. These later evolved into six general points of strict equality for women: political, occupational, moral, social, economic and legal. Point n°2, because the target was reached, and point n°4, because it was not expected to progress for a while, were replaced in 1926 by equal political rights and equal working rights. Where the Women's Party had blended feminism with a radical-right and imperialist ideology, the SPG, although it always emphasised its non-party stance, was far more left-leaning and staunchly anti-fascist.

- 17 In terms of strategy, the group aimed at mobilizing women voters, encouraging them to set aside party loyalty and vote for or against certain candidates according to their level of support for the reforms they were hoping to achieve. To do so, the group kept a careful record of the votes, speeches and actions of all MPs in regard to the six points and, on the occasion of three general elections (1922, 1923 and 1924), published Black lists and White Lists aimed at directing the female voters' votes.<sup>24</sup> While the MPs targeted on the Black List were reported to have been slightly penalised in the process, this was not enough however to affect the final results, except in some very rare cases where the contest had been a tight one, and the strategy was abandoned after 1924.

Two years from the centenary of the Representation of the People Act, when looking at the points that formed the basis of the SPG in the 1920s (whether in their initial or in their revised form), and comparing them to the six points put forward by WE, one cannot fail to be struck again by the similarity between the two as regards political, economic and social rights. The fact that, one century later, the same objectives should be defended obviously raises the question of whether so little progress has really been achieved in these areas. In terms of political representation, the percentage of women in the House of Commons rose from 1.5% in 1935 to 18% in 1997 and currently stands at 32% (following the 2017 general elections) while that for peeresses increased from 0.4% in 1959 to 7% in 1997 and currently stands at 25%; this is not to mention the fact that women represent 35% of the members of the Scottish Parliament and that the leaders of the three main parties in Scotland are female while Wales was the first legislature in the world to achieve gender equality in 2003 and could boast more than 40% AMs at the time of the election. This is not equal representation but represents significant progress. Similarly, as far as equal pay is concerned, while on average women in the mid-1930s earned less than half men's wages for four hours less work a week,<sup>25</sup> the gender pay gap for median hourly earnings of full-time employees today is 9.4 per cent (November 2015), the lowest figure since the survey began in 1997.<sup>26</sup> The cost of childcare, the lack of value given to unpaid caring work or the low rates of women's pensions on the other hand are issues which have been raised by feminist organisations throughout the past century without much progress being achieved. Though not as audible in WE's discourse before the May 2016 elections (or not as clearly relayed in the press) as those raised above, these contribute to maintain many women in poverty or financial dependency by preventing their full participation in the economy.

## Non-partisanship then and now

18 Like WE today, the interwar parties and organisations mentioned above were resolutely non-partisan<sup>27</sup>. From the beginning of the fight for women's suffrage, it had been expected that women voters would bring a special contribution to politics and help improve society; political parties, because they had been established by men and were male-dominated, could not be the means through which such transformations could be achieved. For most of the women involved in parliamentary parties at the time, especially Labour members, such a strategy however was ill-thought out: if separate women's organisations might be useful for the promotion of special aims such as equal political rights or temperance, adherence to a mainstream party, they believed, was necessary for general political work and for a greater efficiency in the promotion of these aims.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Minnie Pallister, from the ILP, while recognizing that it was "*necessary at the present to concentrate upon the woman's question*" which had been injured by "*many years of Capitalism and traditions*", insisted on the fact that feminism should only be a staging post towards a socialist system in which total equality between men and women would forbid any distinction between "*women's*" and "*men's questions*"<sup>29</sup>. Similarly, Helen Fraser, a NUSEC member and a Liberal candidate to the 1923 elections, while acknowledging the necessity for women to work through non-party or "*all party*" organisations of their own, stressed that it was not possible to govern a country with MPs elected on individual programmes.

30

The choice between putting pressure on political parties and politicians *from without* or exploiting the position of women *within* political parties to obtain support for egalitarian reforms was regularly debated by feminists in the years that followed both their access to their electorate and to Parliament. In fact, the two strategies coexisted for some years. Putting pressure on political parties and politicians by threatening them with a mobilization of the women's vote also worked to some extent in the ten years or so that followed the Representation of the People Act insofar as the "female vote" remained for a while a largely unknown element (the first opinion polls only appeared after 1937 in Britain) and some feared women might vote as a bloc. After a while, however, as the women's vote became less threatening and the trend evolved towards a growth in the female membership of political parties and a decline in the membership of women's associations, these methods lost in efficiency and slowly disappeared, together with the idea of a women's party.

The decision, in 2015, to renew such a strategy through the creation of WE and the adoption of a strictly non-partisan stance raises more questions. Distrust for political parties (to be understood as *male-dominated* political parties) never truly disappeared from the feminist discourse. Radical feminists in the 1970s argued that sexuality and violence –which they identified as the keys to women's oppression– could only be fought outside mixed-sex groups (which implied a rejection of double affiliations with either trade unions or the Labour Party) and that if, to take up Kate Millet's words, the campaign for women's rights was "*more about changing the recipe of the cake than getting an equal slice*"<sup>31</sup>, then it had to be fought outside the party system. In this respect, however, the discourse adopted by the leaders of WE bears more similarity with that of interwar organisations as their aim has not so much been to keep clear of political parties as to threaten them into action. Thus, for Mayer, joining the mainstream parties and

lobbying for women's equality from within would have been far less effective than campaigning from without: "*the one way you can very quickly change the minds of mainstream parties is threatening them at the ballot box,*" she declared on the launch of the party's manifesto. Walker confirmed: "*When there's a political risk for mainstream parties, they begin to listen and change policies.*"<sup>32</sup> Is the situation today such as to justify the adoption of methods which proved inefficient one century ago, at a time when the context looked rather favourable? Some elements would tend to indicate that it might be: since the 1980s, women have not only represented a majority of the electorate, they have represented a majority of British voters too.<sup>33</sup> This, together with the reappearance of a small gender gap at the beginning of the 2000s<sup>34</sup> (the female vote is now being globally more favourable to Labour),<sup>35</sup> means that political parties have recently proved eager to win women's votes, as illustrated by initiatives such as Labour's controversial pink bus in the May 2015 elections. The fact that women voters may be considered by some, both politicians and feminists, as a "*decisive bloc*"<sup>36</sup> has also recently led groups such as the Fawcett Society or the YWCA to encourage them to make use of their vote and to use the threat of a "*female vote*" to put pressure on political candidates.<sup>37</sup> As far as WE is concerned, Walker considered that, despite their failure in the May 2016 elections to secure more than 2% of the votes in the London mayoral race and to have any candidate elected, their strategy had paid off: her party's campaign was, in her opinion, what had led Labour candidate Sadiq Khan to declare, in March, that he would be a "*proud feminist*" in City Hall, pledging to close the gender pay gap and increase police presence on public transport at key times to lower the number of sexual assaults. Similarly, Zac Goldsmith's promise to tackle violence against women was put down to their being "*in the race.*"<sup>38</sup>

- 19 Yet, the fact that WE not only sought to put pressure on parties but also tried to get candidates elected raised another issue, that of a possibly counterproductive effect. In that respect, the criticisms the party had to face are very similar to those levelled at the interwar attempts at organizing women separately. Some Labour supporters thus argued that the party, rather than advance the cause of women's equality, risked weakening it by further fracturing voters, particularly on the left. For *Guardian* columnist Gaby Hinsliff, women seeking change should use the platform of existing parties to "*shake things up*" from within rather than contribute to split the progressive feminist vote any more than it already is and take away votes from Labour and the Liberal Democrats (which would ultimately benefit the Conservatives)<sup>39</sup> while in Scotland, Emma Ritch, the executive director of Engender, questioned the strategic benefits for a relatively timid UK policy platform to stand against candidates from parties "*whose gender equality commitments may be bolder.*"<sup>40</sup> As it turned out, the Labour Party was reportedly deeply annoyed with WE following the May elections as the latter was believed to have dented their share of the vote in the capital –an accusation based on the premises that the votes given to WE would have gone to Labour had their women candidates not contested the election.<sup>41</sup> Just as, back in the 1920s, the link between their members and women's non-party organisations had been a source of debate and tension (in 1925 a Labour party conference only narrowly rejected a resolution aiming at forbidding its women members to belong to a feminist organisation),<sup>42</sup> reports of would-be supporters being shut out of Labour for having supported WE (or -allegedly- merely "liked" their Facebook page) began to circulate in late 2016, one journalist and political activist even explaining how she was expelled from the Labour Party for being an affiliate WE member.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, the party has been criticised for being essentially a white, London-based middle-class experiment, fighting to obtain equality within the existing system rather than challenging this system, and providing yet another example of liberal feminism. WE has thus been accused of focusing on issues that are not generally controversial, such as employment and politics, while failing to address the issue of how gender discrimination could be linked with race, disability and class-based oppression. The fact that WE refused to take a line on Sharia law in Britain –despite the latter's implications for Muslim women– also affected the credibility of the party. On the eve of the election, Walker felt it necessary to answer some of these attacks by pointing out that their London candidates were “30% BAME and 30% LGBT” and, on the occasion of her leadership speech made at the inaugural party conference the following year lamented the fact that the party was still attracting few women from ethnic minorities and other frequently under-represented groups, admitting that many had not joined the party “because they feel it is not for them”. WE, she now wanted to make clear, would fight to help the poorest households as well as promote the rights of non-white women, disabled women and the LGBT.<sup>44</sup> While WE's discourse, as it was relayed in the press and on their social networks before the May 2016 elections, could be criticized by some as disregarding inequalities and oppressions at the intersection between gender and other types of inequality, it has now become much more explicit, notably in its denunciation of connections between gender and socioeconomic inequality, calling among other things for a reform of the tax system that would reduce inequality, value unpaid work and provide “universal, affordable childcare” and denouncing the impact cuts to social care funding have had on disabled children, adults, family carers, and the care sector, from a gender perspective.<sup>45</sup>

## “Modern suffragettes?”<sup>46</sup>

- 20 Although it is with interwar feminism and, as we have shown, more particularly with some non-partisan attempts to organise the newly enfranchised women as an electoral bloc, that WE offers the most striking similarities, it is not this movement (nor more recent ones such as the Women's Liberation Movement and the six demands it adopted between 1971 and 1975<sup>47</sup>) whose inheritance WE has chosen to claim. Since its creation, great efforts have been made to link the party to the pre-war militant suffrage movement: using a black and white picture of suffragists on their Facebook page for the launch of the party in March 2015,<sup>48</sup> adopting green and purple –the colours of the WSPU– as the colours of their logo or again organizing a special screening of *Suffragette*,<sup>49</sup> which had just been released in the UK, to formally launch the group's policy platform of gender equality in Edinburgh in October 2015. Similar references multiplied in the following weeks, with a workshop organised by Brighton's WE team being entitled “*Deeds, not words*”, the motto of the WSPU, and a variant, “*Action, not words*” being used for their call to close the gender gap. One year later, the decision to hold their first party conference in Manchester, birthplace of Emmeline Pankhurst and of the WSPU, provided WE with new opportunities to draw parallels between the two movements, including non-partisanship (“*They understood that the movement to achieve equality was bigger than left or right,*” Walker underlined in her inaugural speech), and to refer to the continuity between “*their struggle*” and “*our struggle*”.<sup>50</sup>
- 21 Claiming the inheritance of the suffragettes (a women-only, militant movement) rather than that of the constitutional and more moderate wider suffrage movement or the

looser and more varied Liberation Movement of the seventies certainly has to do with the fact that their name, spectacular actions and period of time, make them more colourful and more distinctive than others. This is not to mention the fact that the WSPU has long proved more popular among feminist scholars, both in Britain and in the United States, a trend that Mayhall attributes to the work of the Suffragette Fellowship and their creation of a "master narrative" of the movement that "*privileged the sequence of events leading from action on the part of women, to their arrest and incarceration*" to the exclusion of other forms of militancy.<sup>51</sup> The release of a movie of the same name, by contributing to make them better known to the wider public, no doubt provided additional encouragement to multiply references in the weeks that followed.

- 22 More than (possibly) good marketing strategy, however, the links with the suffragette movement may also be a means for the party to remind voters of how it has been necessary, in the past, for women to agitate for their rights in order to make things move forward. In that respect, using past battles or strategies to legitimize present ones is not rare and, as illustrated by Cowman and Mayhall, both first- and second-wave feminists before WE "*interrogated aspects of women's earlier opposition to patriarchy to shape and enhance contemporary organizational practices.*"<sup>52</sup> Just like the radical feminists of the 1960s and 1970s before them,<sup>53</sup> equating their actions, through the use of regular references, with those of the militant suffragettes can thus be for WE a way to assert a continuity between their two movements.

## Conclusion

- 23 The creation of yet another women-only campaigning group, one hundred years after the campaigns for equality that followed women's enfranchisement and half a century after the Women's Liberation Movement, is evidence that organizing separately from male-dominated parties still appears to some British feminists as the best strategy to make themselves heard. That the agenda they are pressing for should not itself look much different from what it used to be at the time gives us additional insight as to the progress that remains to be achieved.
- 24 There is not much innovation in either the name, the strategy, or the programme of WE and a large part of the press coverage the party managed to enjoy in the early months of its existence is no doubt to be accounted for by the links that exist between its founders and the media. Still, one cannot ignore that in the space of little more than one year the party has managed to build a membership of 65,000 (far exceeding that of UKIP, which in July stood at 39,000, and superior to that of the Green Party, which amounted to no more than 55,500) and to attract more than a quarter million votes.
- 25 Disillusionment with the major political parties certainly provides part of the explanation for that success. Despite some slight fluctuations, the share of the votes for Labour and the Conservatives has regularly declined since 1992 and the prime beneficiaries of this trend have been the so-called third parties, some of whom might also be characterised as anti-system or populist parties –UKIP being the most obvious example. In the comments to be found on WE's websites, many supporters thus mention the feeling of not being adequately represented by the major parties, not having their interests or their concerns taken into account. A majority however express dissatisfaction with the pace of reform concerning equality between men and women, which no doubt represents the main impulse behind the support for the party. In this respect, whatever the reservations one

may have about their strategies and motivations, and even though electoral success seems out of reach, it cannot be denied that WE, thanks to media coverage, have managed to bring publicity to some issues more successfully than long-standing groups such as the Fawcett Society, whose campaign was totally overshadowed in the context of the last elections. In so doing, they have probably contributed to pressure some politicians into positioning themselves on some of the points on their programme, such as sexual assault and domestic violence or equal pay (David Cameron announced in July 2015 measures to fight against the phenomenon),<sup>54</sup> and thus partially reached their aim.

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## NOTES

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## ABSTRACTS

The May 2016 elections to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and London mayor and assembly members saw the appearance of a newcomer on the British political scene. The Women's Equality Party, co-founded the year before by Catherine Mayer and Sandi Toksvig to push "*for equal representation in politics, business, industry and throughout working life,*" is not the only one of its kind in Europe. More interesting, it is not the first one of its kind in the UK either. Both its name and the fact that it presents itself as based on a six point-programme are direct reminders of Christabel Pankhurst's Women's Party and Margaret Haig's Six Point Group, both launched in the context of women's enfranchisement in 1918 together with other attempts at creating a women's party in Parliament and local government. Such similarities with events that are now one hundred years old cannot fail to raise a number of questions, not only as to the reasons that account for its emergence, but also as to what may still motivate women today to organize separately from mainstream political parties rather than contribute to change things from the inside – a question that was central to the interwar women's movement. By placing WE in a wider historical perspective, this article will not only try to determine to what extent the party can be considered as innovative rather than a close replica of past initiatives, it will also provide some special insight into the changes and continuities in the strategies, motivations and recruitment of women-only British political associations or parties. In this respect, the choice made by its members to claim the inheritance of the suffragette movement rather than that of other groups it bears more resemblance to will also be looked into.

Les élections législatives de mai 2016 en Ecosse et au pays de Galles, ainsi que celles pour le maire et l'assemblée de Londres qui se sont tenues en même temps, ont vu l'émergence d'un nouveau parti sur la scène politique britannique. Fondé un peu plus d'un an auparavant par Catherine Mayer et Sandi Toksvig, le *Women's Equality Party*, est entrée dans la course afin, selon les propos de ses dirigeantes, de promouvoir « *une représentation égalitaire en politique, dans les affaires, dans l'industrie, et dans toute la vie active* ». Le parti, qui a su à cette occasion s'attirer une importante couverture médiatique, n'est cependant pas le premier du genre en Europe ni-même au Royaume Uni. Son nom, ainsi que son programme, basé sur six points, évoquent très clairement le *Women's Party* de Christabel Pankhurst et le *Six Point Group* de Margaret Haig, tous deux fondés au moment de l'obtention du droit de vote par les femmes en 1918 et accompagnés d'autres tentatives, tant au niveau parlementaire que local, de fonder un parti féminin. De telles similitudes avec des événements qui ont maintenant près d'un siècle ne peuvent manquer de susciter un certain nombre d'interrogations, non seulement quant aux raisons qui expliquent son émergence mais

également quant à la pertinence pour les femmes aujourd'hui de continuer à s'organiser distinctement des principaux partis politiques plutôt qu'essayer de faire changer les choses « de l'intérieur » –une question centrale au mouvement féministe de l'entre-deux-guerres. En replaçant le *Women's Equality Party* dans une perspective historique plus large, cet article ne tentera pas uniquement de déterminer dans quelle mesure celui-ci peut être considéré comme novateur, il s'attachera également à souligner les changements et continuités observables dans les stratégies, motivations et recrutement des associations politiques exclusivement féminines en Grande-Bretagne. Le choix fait par les membres du *WEP* de se présenter comme les héritières du mouvement des suffragettes plutôt que d'autres mouvements dont elles seraient plus proches sera à cet égard également discuté.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Women's Equality Party, parti féminin, élections, féminisme

**Keywords:** Women's Equality Party, women's party, elections, feminism

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