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“Is it right that while the gambler, the drunkard, and even the wife-beater has a vote, earnest, educated, and refined women are denied it?”

Kate Sheppard was a founding member of the New Zealand WCTU. In 1887, she became the leader of its suffrage department. Sheppard believed in the prohibition of alcohol, but she also disliked the fact that women were so powerless. “We are tired of having a ‘sphere’ doled out to us,” she said, “and of being told that anything outside that sphere is ‘unwomanly’.”

Sheppard moved to New Zealand from England as a young woman. She married in 1871 but had only one child. Sheppard’s small family gave her time to work for the suffrage movement. She was well educated and had many skills, including the ability to influence both politicians and the public. After women got the vote, Sheppard continued to campaign for women’s rights. She became the first president of the National Council of Women, which set out to be a kind of women’s parliament.

The WCTU

In 1885, there was an important development for women’s suffrage in New Zealand: the visit of Mary Clement Leavitt from the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Leavitt had come from the United States to campaign against alcohol – the “natural enemy” of the home. Those who heard her speak tended to agree. At the time, drunken violence was a problem in New Zealand. So was men spending their wages on drink instead of food for their family. If women had the vote, Leavitt argued, they could choose politicians who would clean up society. By the following year, fifteen local branches of the WCTU had sprung up, and members began to campaign for temperance and suffrage.

The Fight Heats Up

By the early 1890s, women’s suffrage campaigners were active all over the country. Women from the WCTU and other organisations worked together to gain support for their cause. They wrote to newspapers and handed out leaflets. They bombarded politicians with letters and visits and organised public meetings and petitions. By far the largest petition was presented to parliament in July 1893. It was signed by almost 30,000 women – around a quarter of the adult female population at the time. Glued together, the petition was 270 metres long – and was presented to parliament in a wheelbarrow!

Men held a variety of opinions about women voting, but a growing number supported universal suffrage, including a few influential MPs. Over several years, they introduced bills to parliament, but these were always stopped by crafty opponents who made calculated changes so the bills would never become law. One of these changes proposed that women should also be allowed to become members of parliament, an idea that was certain to be hugely unpopular!
Men who made a living from selling alcohol were also loudly against women’s suffrage. They said that women voting wasn’t natural; it would endanger family life. What they really meant was that female voters would endanger their businesses. The Prime Minister, Richard Seddon, was sympathetic to this concern. He’d once sold alcohol in his store on the West Coast. But Seddon had a bigger worry. His party, the Liberals, stood for the rights of workers and the poor. He feared that if wealthy women could vote, their husbands would convince them to vote for the opposition. Seddon also feared that poorer women, more likely to vote for his party, wouldn’t bother. He could lose the next election. So Seddon worked to make sure that women would never get the vote. He assumed that other politicians would always back him.

Victory

Despite what Seddon wanted, after many months, an electoral bill finally got through. It was passed on 8 September 1893 by twenty votes to eighteen. Even then, opponents wouldn’t give up. They asked New Zealand’s governor, Lord Glasgow, to intervene. Anti-suffrage petitions were signed in pubs. But the fight was over. On 19 September, Glasgow signed the electoral bill, and it became law. The women had won.

Two months later, New Zealand had a national election. Over ninety thousand women voted for the first time – two out of every three adult women in the country. Around the world, the event was huge news, especially in Britain and the United States, where women had to wait almost three more decades before they won the same voting rights.

Women in Britain who wanted the vote were called suffragettes. To draw attention to their cause, they smashed windows, chained themselves to railings, and blew up the prime minister’s country house. One suffragette, Emily Davison, died when she ran in front of the king’s racehorse.

Suffragettes who broke the law were put in jail, where many went on hunger strike. Worried that these women would die and win sympathy for their cause, the government had them force-fed. In 1913, it passed what became known as the Cat and Mouse Act. Weak hunger strikers were released and put back in jail once they became stronger.

The First World War interrupted the British suffrage movement, but ultimately, the war helped the women’s cause. The huge role they played in the war effort – as coal miners and farm workers among other things – meant their demands could no longer be denied. In 1918, women over the age of thirty could vote if they met certain criteria, such as owning property. This was finally extended in 1928 to all women over the age of twenty-one – the same as men.
OTHER FEMALE FIRSTS

All women over the age of twenty-one, both Pākehā and Māori, gain the right to vote in New Zealand.

All white women in Australia gain the right to vote in federal elections.

Some British women over the age of thirty gain the right to vote and can stand for parliament.

Women in the United States gain the right to vote.

Iriaka Rātana becomes the first Māori woman to be elected to parliament.

Swiss women gain the right to vote and stand for parliament.

Helen Clark becomes New Zealand’s first female prime minister to win a general election.

1893 1894 1902 1906 1918 1919 1920

Women in South Australia gain the right to vote and stand for the South Australian parliament.

Women in Finland gain the right to vote. The following year, nineteen women MPs are elected in Finland.

New Zealand women gain the right to become MPs.

Elizabeth McCombs becomes the first female MP in New Zealand.

Aboriginal women in Australia gain the right to vote.

Jenny Shipley becomes New Zealand’s first female prime minister.

Dame Silvia Cartwright is New Zealand’s Governor-General.

Helen Clark is Prime Minister.

Sian Elias is Chief Justice.

Margaret Wilson is Attorney-General.
The Fight to Vote
by Susan Paris

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