

Women have always fought for a political voice, and many continue to do so today. But for those women living during the late 1880s their inability to be heard convinced one group of Liberal women that they should shout together – and loud. The Women’s Liberal Federation (WLF) was founded in 1886 by a group of women determined to campaign for and achieve ‘women’s emancipation’, university education for women, married women’s property rights and the protection of women and children.’¹ The women established a group within the Liberal Party to campaign for the rights of women and the acknowledgment of women’s growing desire to be more than ‘second-class citizens’.²

Hollie Voyce examines the history of the WLF and its modern counterpart, the WLD.

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WLF TO WLD GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNING

THE WLF were not intimidated by the opinions of male members and MPs and campaigned on issues which mattered to them as women, and to women across the United Kingdom. Records show that the organisation often disagreed with the Liberal Party³ as a whole, for example on the campaign against legalised prostitution.⁴ Despite friction between the Women's Liberal Federation and the party, however, it is clear that the WLF received a great deal of support from men,⁵ and it has remained true that the women's Liberal organisation has often found support with male members, regardless of how they are viewed by the party executive. In 1892 the Women's Liberal Federation adopted their most famous policy, 'Votes for Women', in opposition to the wishes of William Gladstone and the Liberal Party executive. It was felt that the importance of women's rights and the demand for the suffrage negated any opposition the women faced from inside the party.

The Women's Liberal Federation was the national campaign for Liberal women looking for empowerment and equal rights, and they used the power of local and community organisation to enthuse and maintain momentum, and to campaign actively

across the country. The Women's Liberal Associations were the real heroes – or heroines – of the grassroots Liberal women's campaign. For fifteen years, between 1894 and 1915, the Countess of Carlisle was president of the WLF, and succeeded in expanding the organisation enormously; she is described by David Morgan in his book *Suffragists and Liberals: the Politics of Woman Suffrage in Britain*, as being 'responsible for making the Women's Liberal Federation a power on Suffrage.'⁶ Despite the enthusiasm and drive of the Countess of Carlisle in trying to persuade the Liberal MPs of the need for suffrage, the parliamentary party remained split for many years; and when in 1910 the Liberal Government lost its overall majority it became clear that any campaign for suffrage would require cross-party support.⁷

Many of the women who were frustrated by the Liberal approach to suffrage and the opposition posed by Gladstone and other leaders eventually decided to join the Labour Party; the Pankhursts, for example, joined the Independent Labour Party during the 1890s, where they became central to the campaign for suffrage.⁸ Constance Rover notes in her book, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866–1914*, that across the country

Liberal groups put forward motions at their Annual Meetings in support of women's suffrage and that these remained subsequently ignored by Liberal leaders; such frustration also led to the establishment of the 'Liberal Men's National Association for Women's Suffrage (Northern Division)' by William Barton, MP for Oldham. His intention was to create a national network of these associations, much like the WLF, but the outbreak of war in 1914 hampered progress.⁹

By 1912, the WLF patience with the Liberal leadership had been exhausted, and on 4 June the Federation passed three resolutions. The first noted the Prime Minister's pledge that he would not propose any Reform Bill which could not be amended to allow women's suffrage; the second expressed gratitude to the Labour Party for its support of the campaign for women's suffrage; and the third threatened to end the relationship between the WLF and the Liberal Party if a Reform Bill passed without the inclusion of women's suffrage.¹⁰

Interestingly, the Social Democratic Federation at the time were not principally in favour of women's suffrage either; they believed that women should be dedicated to the principles of socialism and feared that by granting women the vote

Liberal election poster, 1929

FROM WLF TO WLD: LIBERAL WOMEN'S GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNING

they might use it unwisely. In 1905 Robert Blatchford wrote in the foreword to *Some Words to Socialist Women*:

Votes are only valuable in politics as guns are valuable in war. If women use their votes against Socialism they will be using their guns against their own emancipation; only through Socialism can woman win her place by men's side.¹¹

And so it seems that women from across the political spectrum found difficulty with their party's view of suffrage. Even the Labour Party had initial problems with male members 'hostile from the selfish dislike of sharing with women the privileges they had won themselves.'¹² For Liberal women the problem became increasingly difficult in the 1910s, yet membership of the Women's Liberal Federation grew steadily during the campaign for the suffrage.

The campaign for women's rights, and most notably women's suffrage, attracted many Liberal women to the WLF. In 1887 the Women's Liberation Federation comprised fifteen individual branches, and nearly 6,000 members.¹³ Under the presidency of the Countess of Carlisle membership increased dramatically to more than 1,600 local groups – Women's Liberal Associations (WLAs) – and tens of thousands of individual members. The local organisations and communities formed by the WLA were arguably the most successful and active aspect of the campaign for women's rights within the Liberal Party, both in terms of their accessibility to women all over the country, but also in their contribution to the party and their attractiveness to women voters.

Women's Liberal Associations were the bedrock of the WLF and existed as grassroots factions for women's campaigning within a much larger organisation. WLAs were used by the

Women's Liberal Federation as a way in which to motivate and connect women from all over the country, using the local to form a national movement. According to a guide published by the WLF during the 1970s, each WLA paid the Federation an annual subscription in January each year of £2 minimum for affiliation of up to 50 members; for each member after this an additional 3d was paid.¹⁴ This subscription entitled the WLA to monthly literature from the WLF headquarters in London, advice and support from the WLF, representation by the WLF to the Council of the Liberal Party Organisation (upon which fifteen representatives of the WLF sat), representation to the Liberal Party Executive, and submission to the Liberal Parliamentary Party, when appropriate.¹⁵ The role of the WLA, as explained by the leaflet produced by the Women's Liberal Federation, was clear and fixed, with responsibilities divided between campaigning for women's rights and encouraging women's involvement in constituency activities. The WLF worked in much the same way as the National League of Young Liberals, each within a distinct hierarchy of power and regionalism.

The WLF was supported by the Women's Area Federations, which acted as regional headquarters for the more local WLAs (see Figure 1). Each Women's Area Federation acted as the 'middle link' between the local, constituency branch of the WLA and the national headquarters of the WLF. The Women's Liberal Federation specified the role of the Women's Area Federation as uniting local WLAs, arranging local conferences and helping to form new WLA branches.¹⁷ The strict hierarchical structure of the women's organisation meant that women throughout the party felt they were contributing in some way to the campaign

for women's rights. It also meant that the organisation did not become Westminster-centric or exclusive to those in a particular geographical area, something which became inevitable following the decline of membership and the disappearance of local and regional branches.

WLAs were initially set up as a more practical and convenient alternative to constituency involvement for women, as it was thought that local constituencies did not 'meet the political needs of all women', with 'constituency meetings usually held in the evenings' when many women, especially those with children, were unable to attend.¹⁸ This is still an issue for many women who wish to be involved politically today, especially for those in full-time employment and those with children.

Each WLA had specific responsibilities set by the WLF: to hold regular meetings – at least once a month – to organise discussions featuring outside speakers, with suggested topics such as 'opportunities in education, the National Health Service (in general), Hospitals – pre-natal and post-natal care, children in care, and women and the law'¹⁹ – all subjects which are still relevant today, and which the Women Liberal Democrats still discuss and raise within the Liberal Democrats. The Women's Liberal Associations sought to engage local women in politics and to invite them to learn about and debate political issues with confidence, with the WLA insisting that women with 'knowledge of local and national affairs should be encouraged to come forward as Liberal candidates'.²⁰ Again this is something which women within the Liberal Democrats are still seeking to do: the establishment of the Gender Balance Task Force – later the Campaign for Gender Balance (CGB) – in 2001 sought to support and mentor women keen

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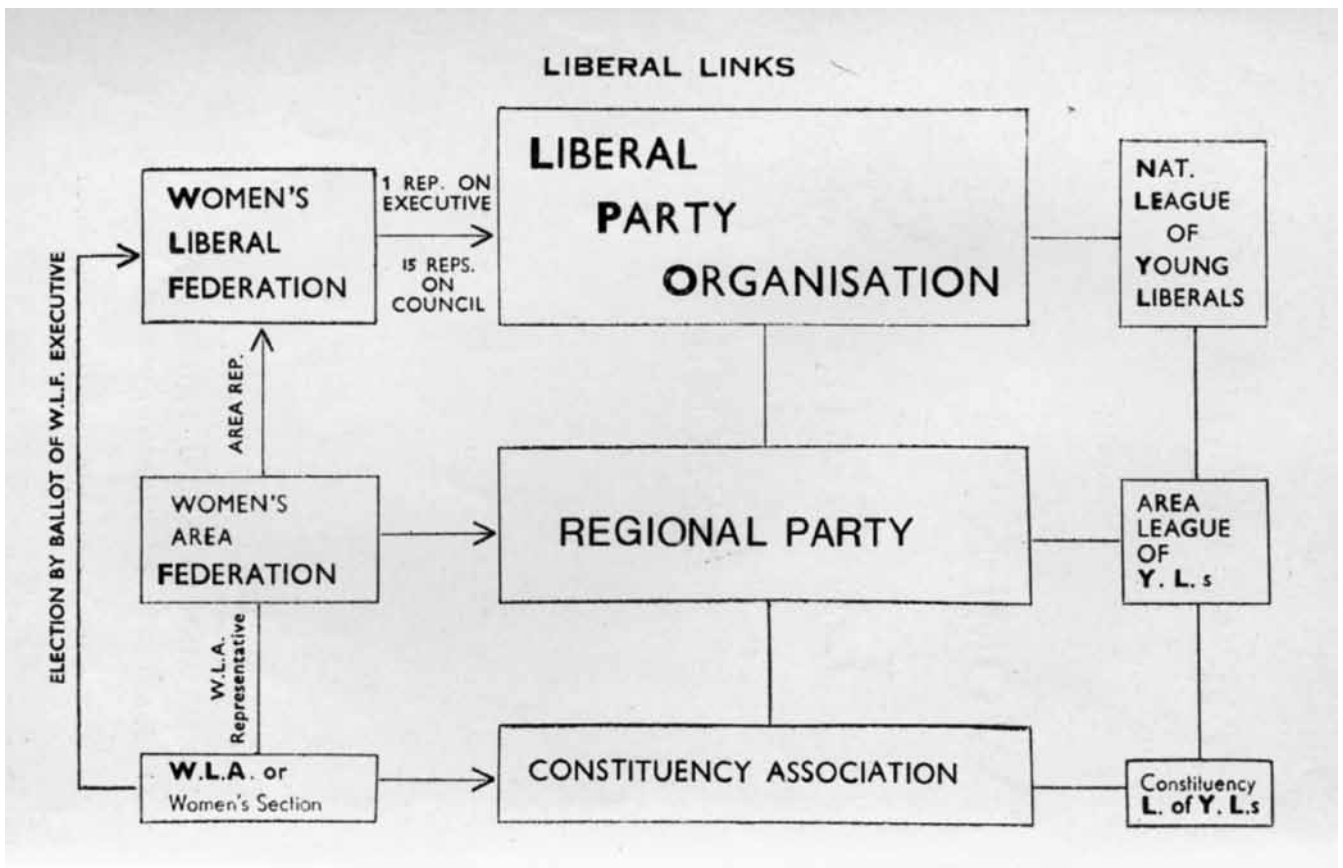


Figure 1: organisational chart from 'Organisation for Women's Liberal Associations' (undated, 1970s)

to stand as prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs) in opposition to all-women shortlists and other forms of positive discrimination.

The WLAs were the original GBTF; they encouraged women to become organised in political campaigning and helped them to gain skills and knowledge in public speaking and policy areas. The 1907 Qualification of Women Act gave women the right to be elected to local Borough and County Councils; many of the women who campaigned for women's rights were not only members of Liberal women's organisations but also of an umbrella organisation, the Women's Local Government Society, which had sought the formalisation of women's rights to be elected locally. According to the Society's website:

Although women had been able to be elected to various ad-hoc boards since the 1870s, and could be members on the new urban and rural district councils from 1894, 1907 gave them

the right to stand anywhere, and to become mayors.²¹

As well as encouraging women to stand for public positions, members of the WLA were also encouraged to become active within their WLA branch, whether as a representative on the executive, a volunteer organiser or a cake-baker for WLA garden parties. The guide to the organisation and functions of the WLA written by Joan De Robeck (circa 1950) states clearly that 'it should be made clear to members that they are expected to be active and jobs should be allocated'.²² This expectancy probably reflects the societal status of women at the time as much as the importance placed on women's campaigns. During the 1950s women's lives were certainly far different from those today; it was expected that most women would have time to be directly involved with their local branch, with twelve members being sought to create the organisation's executive committee. This convention

still exists today, with the WLD executive (of no more than twelve) being elected by the organisation's membership.

As Figure 1 shows, the executive of the Women's Liberal Federation was directly elected from the overall membership, but was usually made up of nominees from each Women's Area Federation.²³ The Women Liberal Democrats today do not benefit from the local and regional groups that the WLF relied upon and have far fewer members in comparison to the WLF's heyday in the early 1900s, yet the appeal of local connections and networks for women is still as strong as ever. In their 2008 funding bid to the party, WLD proposed to re-establish the local and regional networks of the WLAs, and now have regional contacts in thirteen areas across the United Kingdom.

As well as a focus on women's issues and political engagement in women's concerns, it was important to the WLF that a successful relationship between the WLA and the local

constituency was established. In the guide for WLAs written by Joan De Robeck, she notes that 'there should be close and complete cooperation with the Liberal Association ... it is both foolish and wasteful to carry on a vendetta',²⁴ which suggests that tension between the WLAs and local parties had been a problem in some areas. A good relationship between the WLA and the local party meant that women were more likely to be encouraged to put themselves forward as potential candidates, with the full knowledge that they had local support, and a good knowledge of the local area.

After achieving women's suffrage, the political representation of women became important to the Women's Liberal Federation. Today this is still proving to be a major concern for both WLD and the CGB, as women remain hugely under-represented, both as MPs and as PPCs selected for winnable seats. Before the creation of the CGB, WLD provided a vital support for women hoping to be elected to Westminster. A leaflet produced by the Women Liberal Democrats entitled 'Focus on Women' in 1991 aimed to help female PPCs understand more about Liberal Democrat policies, and reinforced the view that framing the political debate around 'women's issues' did not offer a solution to the inequality that women experience in society. The leaflet's foreword was written by Ray Michie, the MP for Argyll & Bute at the time; in it she argued that 'the tendency to confuse women's politics with women in politics'²⁵ only hampered the debate on equality and women's rights, and that the only way to achieve parity was to look for equality of opportunity in all policies. Ultimately however, she argued that electoral reform was the key to greater representation of women in politics; again, an issue upon which the Liberal Democrats

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still campaign and an argument which has been proved to work in other elections, such as those for the Welsh Assembly and European Parliament.

One activity in which the Liberal women's organisation has always been involved is attracting female voters; during elections WLF and WLD published manifestos for women, detailing those party policies which were most appealing and which had the greatest benefit to women. During the 2001 election, WLD produced mini-manifestos which each candidate could hand out to women, often outside the school gate or at the supermarket – sadly, places where women are still mostly likely to be found.

The Women's Liberal Federation produced leaflets for WLAs to distribute amongst women, and to help attract female voters to the Liberal constituency candidate. *The Challenge of Citizenship: The choice of the woman voter* gave brief summaries of the Liberal policies that were most relevant to the female electorate of the time. The leaflet sought to reconcile the role that women played within the home with that which they could play within the political world, encouraging them 'to bring to the service of the community the qualities which they bring to the service of the family'.²⁶ Even then the WLF were campaigning against government waste, and the unfair distribution of food subsidies and housing benefit to the rich and poor alike. The WLF sought to persuade women, both within the Liberal Party and outside, that their role was vital to the success of society and their skills, no matter how domestic, were necessary and beneficial to achieving a meaningful understanding of citizenship. Sub-headings such as 'Women as producers', 'Women in Marriage' and 'Women in the National Economy' detailed the need for a women's touch in areas of national policy; for

example the WLF called for a removal of purchase tax on quality goods as it was felt that the tax system at the time encouraged the consumer to buy 'shoddy goods'.²⁷

A 1949 WLF Committee Report, *The Great Partnership*, saw the organisation examine in greater detail the conflict between the roles of women as individuals and as obedient wives. The report aimed to understand the role that women played in the community and to what extent this could be expanded to achieve greater parity between the sexes. Again, it is clear that the WLF looked beyond the needs of women within the Liberal Party to what Liberal women could do to benefit the whole community. The report's introduction referred to the achievements of individual women despite the societal climate, and drew attention to the work of the independent Member of Parliament, Eleanor Rathbone, who 'justified the enfranchisement of women by her interest in social problems and effective influence in their solutions'.²⁸ The overall aim of the report was to draw attention to the social disadvantages that women faced at the time, but also to act as reference guide for women to campaign for improvements to their situations. The report was subdivided into six sections: 'Women in the home'; 'Women and education'; 'Women and the Health Services'; 'Women at work outside the home'; 'Women and the National Insurance Act of 1946'; and 'The legal position of women'.²⁹

A similar document entitled *Freedom and Choice for Women* was later produced by the SDP–Liberal Alliance in 1986. Both pamphlets examined women's positions in society and the inequalities which existed and proposed policies to improve women's situations. By 1986, the subject of women within marriage, and relief for

the housewife was not featured, instead being replaced by an examination of women's status in the workplace³⁰ – an obvious reference to the changing nature of women's employment rights and the increasing number of women choosing not to stay at home.

Interestingly, however, the majority of the themes and findings from each publication are the same. For example, WLF's report considers the supply of teachers to schools and the need to encourage a greater number of women to return to teaching. It finds 'that women teachers have fewer opportunities of promotion to the highest grades of the profession', and that for those who do manage to advance their careers, 'they are paid only 80 per cent of men's rates'.³¹ Almost forty years later the Alliance policy paper noted that 'there are still too few women as models of success for girl pupils. While women make up 77 per cent of teachers ... only 43.4 per cent of head teachers ... are women'³², also noting that 'women's average weekly earnings are less than 70 per cent of men's'.³³ This single example shows the real lack of progress in pay equality and equality of opportunity for women – both issues which the Women Liberal Democrats continue to campaign on to this day. A comparison between *The Great Partnership* and *Freedom and Choice for Women* highlights many more areas in which insufficient progress has been made since the establishment of the WLF: maternity services, child-care provision, and women's pensions, to name but a few. One hundred and twenty years later, these are still issues which affect women and for which real solutions are still being sought.

The Women Liberal Democrats (WLD) was formed following the merger of the SDP and Liberal Party in 1988, aiming to build upon the work of the women's organisations in both predecessor parties; the

existence of a women's organisation was written in to the Liberal Democrat constitution. WLD acts both as a support network for women and as a campaigning organisation, with a strong identity in attempting to influence party policy and opinion. Over recent years WLD has used its position as an specified associated organisation of the party to submit a number of policy motions to the Liberal Democrat conference, on subjects such as women in prison, sexual health and rape convictions. Much in the same way that WLF often fought against the party executive – and won, in the case of women's suffrage – WLD is not afraid to argue for better conditions for women, both inside and outside the party, despite any opposition.

One of the greatest problems which women's organisations have faced throughout history, and despite their political or social functions, has been the lack of awareness about how policies affect each gender differently. The publications of the WLF, SDP–Liberal Alliance and WLD during the 1940s, 1980s and 2000s respectively, all show that political effect in terms of gender is always an afterthought. The existence of so many different policy papers detailing the position of women in the community and the need for greater action to achieve equality only seeks to underline the necessity for women still to discuss gender inequality and what more needs to be done. Despite the creation of the Gender Balance Task Force in 2001, the majority of the functions carried out by WLD remain vital to the Liberal Democrats. During election times WLD helps to encourage women candidates; for example, extra fundraising in 2001 helped to provide office supplies to female PPCs who desperately needed fax machines for their campaigns. The 2008 business plan for WLD shows its intention to create women's

manifestos for the next general election, as well as reviving their 'Women in Target Seats' campaign, which encourages WLD members actively to support female candidates in some way.³⁴

Today the role of the Women Liberal Democrats as a campaigning organisation for women's rights works in tandem with its involvement in party campaigning during election times. Looking again at the foundations upon which the WLF was established, four key changes were sought: women's emancipation, university education for women, married women's property rights and the protection of women and children.³⁵ One hundred and twenty years later it is possible to consider just how much the grassroots campaigning of Liberal women has achieved. Considering women's emancipation, it is fair to say that women are now free to make choices based on their own convictions; women are accepted in society as fundamentally equal to men, able to live, work and be independent. Secondly, university education for women: women are now free to attend university, to study as and when they choose and in most subjects are now achieving results above the levels of their male counterparts. Women, too, have the same property rights as men and the same rights to their children and to divorce as men. And finally, the protection of women and children: it is this subject which highlights so emphatically the importance of context. Women have greater rights in today's society and are undoubtedly protected by law far more than in 1887, yet domestic violence is still a dangerous reality for hundreds of thousands of women in the United Kingdom. It is estimated that today one in four women experience some form of domestic violence. This, together with low rape conviction rates and honour killings,

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all draw attention to the fact that women and children are still second-class citizens today, only in a different context.

The campaign for equality today obviously focuses on different aspects of the disparity between the sexes, and to some extent the battles that WLF fought are no longer relevant, but it is equally important to remember that the debate has not disappeared, it has just moved on. Women are still under-represented politically, both in terms of their presence in political institutions such as Parliament, but perhaps more importantly in the fact that the effect that policies and decisions have on women is absent from the discussions. It may well be that these changes are both the cause and effect, but without organisations such as the Women Liberal Democrats, and the Women's Liberal Federation in its day, women's voices will not be heard, and politics will only ever be half as pertinent as it could be.

Hollie Voyce previously worked for the Women Liberal Democrats as their Head of Office, and before that was a Women and Equalities intern for Lorely Burt MP. Hollie has had a long-held interest in women and politics and studied how the European Union affected women's citizenship in Britain while at university.

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- 4 David Morgan, *Suffragists and Liberals: the Politics of Woman Suffrage in Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), p. 14.
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REVIEWS

Women and Lloyd George

Ffion Hague, *The Pain and the Privilege: the Women in Lloyd George's Life* (Harper Press, 2008)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

THIS IS a positively brilliant book: the ultimate definitive study of Lloyd George's relationships with the various women in his life. Originally a simple biography of Dame Margaret Lloyd George, it soon developed into a full analysis of her husband's relationship with many other women. The book is a highly compelling read from cover to

cover, certain to keep the reader enthralled throughout. It reads like a historical novel and yet (as is apparent from the bibliography and the endnote references) is firmly grounded in a rich array of both primary source materials and extremely wide secondary reading. Mrs Hague always writes in a lively, personal style certain to captivate the reader.