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## Women and Politics in Smethwick, 1918-1929

Anna Muggeridge 

Department of History, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the experiences of two women who stood in general elections in Smethwick in the aftermath of women's enfranchisement. The first, and far better known, was Christabel Pankhurst, who stood as the Women's Party candidate there in 1918. A little over a decade later, in 1929, the relative unknown Maude Marshall stood as the Liberals' candidate. Both ran very different campaigns: Pankhurst as a celebrity candidate, who made overtly feminist appeals to voters, and Marshall as a candidate enmeshed within the party machine, but both were defeated. This article argues that their experiences as candidates, though distinct, were broadly indicative of wider contemporary trends in British politics. Furthermore, the article considers the role played by local women in both campaigns, examining the ways in which local women responded to, and were involved with, general elections in the years following enfranchisement.

### KEYWORDS

Smethwick; women's politics; women's suffrage; Christabel Pankhurst; Maude Marshall; general elections; labour party; conservative party; liberal party; women's party

## Introduction

In the eleven years between women's partial and full enfranchisement, the newly created parliamentary constituency of Smethwick saw two women stand as candidates in general elections: Christabel Pankhurst and Maude Marshall. Pankhurst had spent many years at the forefront of the fight for women's suffrage, having co-founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) with her mother, Emmeline.<sup>1</sup> In 1917, the two established the ultimately short-lived Women's Party as a political party, under whose auspices Christabel stood in 1918.<sup>2</sup> Although outside the mainstream party system, she had the backing of the coalition government and was expected to be successful, but was ultimately narrowly defeated by Labour's candidate, who took 52% of the vote.<sup>3</sup> Marshall, meanwhile, was a retired civil servant who had spent much of her life working in London, before moving to Cardiff where she became

**CONTACT** Anna Muggeridge  [anna.muggeridge@worc.ac.uk](mailto:anna.muggeridge@worc.ac.uk)  Department of History, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

<sup>1</sup>For overviews of the WSPU and the Pankhursts' role within it see: P. Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst* (London: Routledge, 2002) and K. Cowman, *Women of the Right Spirit: Paid Organisers of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1904–18* (Manchester: Manchester University Press (MUP), 2007). Smethwick was formerly in Staffordshire and is now part of the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell, one of the Black Country boroughs.

<sup>2</sup>N. Gullace, 'Christabel Pankhurst and the Smethwick Election: right-wing feminism, the Great War and the ideology of consumption,' *Women's History Review*, 23 (2014), 330–46; J. Purvis, 'The Women's Party of Great Britain (1917–1919): a forgotten episode in British women's political history,' *Women's History Review*, 25 (2016), 638–65.

<sup>3</sup>Smethwick,' *Birmingham Gazette* (BG), December 30, 1918.

involved in Liberal politics in the mid-1920s.<sup>4</sup> She was selected to stand in Smethwick in 1929 having never visited the area, and with no belief that she would succeed: her candidature appears to have been an exercise in ‘showing the flag’ for the Liberals in a constituency they had no chance of winning. She faced opposition from a Unionist candidate and the sitting Labour MP, Oswald Mosley, who comfortably secured re-election. Marshall finished third, achieving eleven percent of the vote.<sup>5</sup>

Both women had little in common beyond their shared gender at a time when women were but a tiny minority of candidates in parliamentary elections; that they stood in Smethwick, a constituency to which neither had any prior connection, and that they both stood in elections where there was particular interest in the new woman voter. In 1918, women over thirty who met certain property qualifications – around eight million women in total – were permitted to vote for the first time, while the 1929 contest was the first to be held following the passage of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act, which enfranchised around five million women aged below thirty, and around two million women over thirty who had not met earlier property qualifications.<sup>6</sup> By 1929, it had become clear that women would vote as men did – that is, for existing political parties – but in 1918 this was by no means assured and there was genuine concern in some quarters that women would not vote for candidates from existing political parties. Indeed, it was a belief that ‘women needed a party of their own’ which prompted the Pankhursts to establish the Women’s Party.<sup>7</sup>

In her 1918 campaign, Pankhurst, as might be expected, actively foregrounded feminist concerns, made direct appeals to women voters, and enjoyed great interest in her campaign which came by virtue of her being one of the best-known women in Britain at the time. By contrast, Marshall was fully enmeshed within the Liberal Party, and made no direct appeals to women voters, nor indeed any explicit references to her own relatively unique position as a woman candidate. She did not share Pankhurst’s fame and was unknown to voters in Smethwick prior to the election. Both women were defeated by Labour candidates: Pankhurst by John Davison, who held the constituency for the party until his ill-health necessitated a retirement in 1926, and Marshall by Mosley, who had won the resulting local by-election. Arguably, the experiences of both women in Smethwick are broadly indicative of wider national trends in British politics in the years following the First World War: most notably, the triumph of party politics and in particular the decline of the Liberal Party and emergence of Labour as the second party, and also the difficulties faced by women candidates in succeeding within this system.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*The London Gazette*, 4 November 1913, 7696; ‘The Campaign,’ *Smethwick Telephone (ST)*, March 16, 1929.

<sup>5</sup>General Election,’ *ST*, June 1, 1929.

<sup>6</sup>M. Takayanagi, ‘Women and the Vote: The Parliamentary Path to Equal Franchise, 1918–28,’ *Parliamentary History*, 37 (2018), 168–85.

<sup>7</sup>Purvis, ‘The Women’s Party,’ p. 640.

<sup>8</sup>For discussion of the decline of the Liberal Party and the rise of Labour, see for example: K. Morgan, *The Age of Lloyd George: The Liberal Party and British Politics, 1890–1929* (London: Routledge, 1971); P. Adelman, *The Decline Of The Liberal Party 1910–1931* (London: Routledge, 1995); D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–18* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (CUP), 1990); D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo, eds., *Labour’s First Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000); D. Howell, *MacDonald’s Party: Labour Identities and Crisis, 1922–1931* (Oxford: Oxford University Press (OUP), 2002); R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914–1951* (Oxford: OUP, 2010). For the challenges faced by early women MPs, see E. Vallance, *Women in the House: A Study of Women MPs* (London: Continuum, 1979); B. Harrison, ‘Women in a Men’s House: the Women MPs, 1919–1945,’ *Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), 623–54; K. Cowman, *Women in British Politics, 1689–1979* (London: Palgrave, 2010); J. Gottlieb and R. Toye, eds., *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918–1945* (London: Palgrave, 2013).

Yet, as this article will argue, their lack of success is not indicative of a failure of women to engage in and with politics in Smethwick. Analysis of each campaign contributes to a broadening of our understanding of the relationship between women parliamentary candidates and local voters, especially women; and how these newly enfranchised women began to engage with the political process in the aftermath of suffrage. Furthermore, although both Pankhurst and Marshall were defeated, an analysis of both campaigns is still significant. As Lisa Berry-Waite has argued, exploring the experiences of 'both successful and unsuccessful women candidates is crucial in providing a comprehensive understanding of women's candidatures', and so considering the experiences of both candidates in Smethwick adds to the wider literature on women's role in parliamentary politics at this time.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, while initial assessments of the post-enfranchisement women's movement in Britain suggested that this was a time in which the movement went into retreat, more recently the strength and diversity of women's activism in the interwar period has been recognized.<sup>10</sup> While few women became MPs, many women were active in a plurality of women's organizations, including party-political, single issue, occupational, faith-based and housewives' associations.<sup>11</sup>

However, despite the growing understanding of the multiplicity of ways by which women might become politically active in this period, there has been relatively little attention paid to how ordinary women engaged in politics in their constituency during an election campaign.<sup>12</sup> Much work to date has tended to focus either on women MPs; women as party organizers; or appeals to women in party literature.<sup>13</sup> There has been relatively limited research which explores the ways in which women voters responded to and engaged with election campaigns 'on the ground', and still less on how they responded to campaigns waged by women candidates. Thus, this article seeks to add to the growing literature on the impact of enfranchisement, broadening our understanding of women's engagement with parliamentary politics in the 1920s, emphasising, in so doing, the importance of the local case study.

Regrettably, a comprehensive understanding of women's roles in politics in Smethwick is limited by an absence of local party association records, and by a lack of accounts from the two candidates themselves. Nonetheless, reporting in local newspapers allows for an examination of the two campaigns as witnessed by reporters working in the area. This article draws chiefly on the town's weekly paper, the *Smethwick Telephone* and three local papers based in nearby Birmingham – the

<sup>9</sup>L. Berry-Waite, 'The "Woman's Point of View": Women Parliamentary Candidates, 1918–1919,' in *Electoral Pledges in Britain Since 1918*, ed. by D. Thackeray and R. Toye (London: Palgrave, 2020), p. 49.

<sup>10</sup>For the 'decline' see for example: M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–59* (London: Palgrave, 1992); for 'diversity' see for example: P. Thane, 'What difference did the vote make? Women in public and private life in Britain since 1918,' *Historical Research*, 76 (2003), 268–85.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 271–2. For housewives' organisations: M. Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997) and C. Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928–64* (Manchester: MUP, 2013).

<sup>12</sup>See M. Hilson, 'Women voters and the rhetoric of patriotism in the British general election of 1918,' *Women's History Review*, 10 (2001), 325–47 for a relative exception.

<sup>13</sup>See for example: Vallance, *Women in the House*; J. Hannam, 'Women as Paid Organizers and Propagandists for the British Labour Party Between the Wars,' *International Labour and Working-Class History*, Vol. 77 (2010), 69–88; D. Thackeray, 'From Prudent Housewife to Empire Shopper: Party Appeals to the Female Voter, 1918–1928,' in *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918–1945*, ed. by J. V. Gottlieb and R. Toye (London: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 37–53.

*Birmingham Post*, the *Birmingham Mail* and the *Birmingham Gazette*. In this period, both the *Post* and the *Mail* were fervent Unionist papers, while the *Gazette* was more moderate, supporting Liberal and later Labour candidates.<sup>14</sup> The politics of the *Smethwick Telephone* are somewhat harder to trace. Established in 1884 by a group of local residents, the *Telephone* was bought by its only reporter, James Billingsley, in 1888. Billingsley remained owner and editor until his death in 1943, when the paper passed to his daughter Kathleen, an ‘outspoken member of the Conservative Party’, which may give some clue to her father’s politics.<sup>15</sup> Unsurprisingly, most of these newspapers appear to have favoured the chances of Pankhurst over her Labour opponent in 1918. In 1929, however, it was generally acknowledged by all that Labour’s candidate, Oswald Mosley, would be victorious over his opponents. This article will briefly discuss the political culture of pre-war Smethwick before using these newspapers firstly to examine the contrasting candidatures of Pankhurst and Marshall, then to explore the extent to which local women were active participants in both election campaigns.

### Pre-war Politics in Smethwick

In the years leading up to the First World War, the Labour Party had begun to establish a growing presence in Smethwick. A Labour Representation Committee was established in 1909, and the party had significant success in municipal elections: in 1913, almost half of municipal seats in Smethwick were won by Labour representatives.<sup>16</sup> Trade unionism also grew rapidly in the area in the lead up to war as a result of the 1913 Black Country strikes in the metalwork industries.<sup>17</sup> John Ward argues that ‘the support given to the strikers by the Labour Party helped to cement ties’ between local trades unions and the growing Labour movement in the area, attributing Labour’s success in municipal elections in 1913 to this.<sup>18</sup> Union membership grew further throughout the First World War, during which time the Midlands, and particularly industrial areas like Smethwick, made a ‘major contribution [...] manufacturing industry’, although there is, as yet, little scholarship on gender dynamics within local trade union branches and it is unclear how many women in the constituency were unionized.<sup>19</sup>

Both municipal and parliamentary elections were suspended during the conflict, a period which also saw significant changes to constituency boundaries, which appear to have further benefited Smethwick’s Labour Party. Prior to the war, the town of Smethwick had been part of the constituency of Birmingham Handsworth. This was one of the largest electoral divisions in the country, which had returned Liberal Unionist MPs since 1886, including in both 1910 elections. However, the growth of

<sup>14</sup>J. Brennan and I. Cawood, ‘We Must Get in Front of These Blighters: Political Press Culture in the West Midlands, 1918–1925,’ in *Print, Politics and the Provincial Press in Modern Britain*, ed. by I. Cawood and L. Peters (Oxford: OUP, 2019), pp. 119–55.

<sup>15</sup>A. Baggs *et al.*, ‘Smethwick: Social life,’ in: M Greenslade, *A History of the County of Stafford: Volume 17* (London: OUP for the University of London Institute of Historical Research, 1976), pp. 134–6; R. Yemm, ‘Immigration, Race and Local Media: Smethwick and the 1964 General Election,’ *Contemporary British History*, 33 (2019), 98–122, 100.

<sup>16</sup>‘The Formation of a Labour Representation Council,’ *ST*, October 9, 1909; ‘The Elections,’ *ST*, November 8, 1913.

<sup>17</sup>C. L. Staples and W. Staples, ‘“A Strike of Girls”’: Gender and Class in the British Metal Trades, 1913,’ *Historical Sociology*, 12 (1999), 158–80.

<sup>18</sup>J. Ward, ‘The Development of the Labour Party in the Black Country’ (PhD thesis, University of Wolverhampton, 2004), p. 51; J. Benson, ‘Black Country History and Labour History,’ *Midland History*, 15 (1990), 100–110.

<sup>19</sup>J. Bourne, ‘Introduction: The Midlands and the Great War,’ *Midland History*, 39 (2014), 157–62.

Labour influences in Smethwick had made Birmingham Handsworth the least safe of all the Birmingham divisions in the years prior to war, with the Liberal Unionists securing progressively narrower victories thanks to growing Labour strength.<sup>20</sup> As part of wider electoral reforms, which culminated in the passage of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, a nationwide redistribution of seats created a number of new constituencies, including Smethwick.<sup>21</sup> As such, by 1918, Smethwick (the constituency) was now firmly within the Black Country and no longer part of Birmingham. This was significant: although the West Midlands generally remained controlled by the Conservative and Unionist Party and the Chamberlains' political influence throughout the interwar years, the Black Country was a 'crucial exception' to this dominance, with Labour making significant inroads into the region, especially in Smethwick.<sup>22</sup> This was much more apparent when Maude Marshall stood there in 1929, by which time Labour had won four general elections and a by-election. However, even by 1918, Labour's increased power in the constituency was recognized, and Christabel Pankhurst's aggressively anti-Labour rhetoric during her campaign likely cost her many votes, contributing significantly to her defeat.

### Contrasting Candidates: The Experiences of Pankhurst and Marshall

The 1918 general election was called on 14 November, a mere three days after the armistice ending the First World War, and the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act was hurriedly passed one week later, on 21 November. Although this ostensibly gave all women over 21 the right to stand in parliamentary elections, in practice its late passage meant that any woman candidate had extremely limited time to prepare a campaign before voters went to the polls on 14 December.<sup>23</sup> This contributed to the small number of women candidates nationwide. Only seventeen women stood: eleven from established political parties; five Independents, who stood entirely outside the party system, and Christabel Pankhurst, who stood as the Women's Party's only candidate.<sup>24</sup> She was one of only a very few candidates felt to have a genuine chance of success. Only two others were felt to have a chance of victory: Mary MacArthur, who stood as a Labour candidate in nearby Stourbridge, but was narrowly defeated, and Constance Markievicz who did succeed in Dublin St Patrick's but, as a Sinn Féin representative, refused to take her seat.<sup>25</sup> However, Pankhurst ultimately lost to her opponent, Labour's John Davison, who won a narrow victory with 52% of the vote.

Davison was one of 361 candidates fielded by the Labour Party in 1918, of whom only 57 were successful. His win was perhaps particularly notable in terms of his location; the majority of seats the party won were in 'northern England, Lancashire,

<sup>20</sup>Ward, 'The Development,' p. 53.

<sup>21</sup>'Smethwick a Parliamentary Borough,' *ST*, July 7, 1917.

<sup>22</sup>I. Cawood, 'The Impact of the 1918 Reform Act on the Politics of the West Midlands,' *Parliamentary History*, 37 (2018), 81–100, 82.

<sup>23</sup>M. Takayanagi, "'One of the most revolutionary proposals that has ever been put before the House': The Passage of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918,' in *Labour, British Radicalism and the First World War*, ed. by L. Bland and R. Carr (Manchester: MUP, 2018), pp. 56–72.

<sup>24</sup>From the established parties, there was one Conservative, four Liberal, four Labour, and two Sinn Féin women.

<sup>25</sup>C. Hunt, *Righting the Wrong: Mary MacArthur 1880–1921* (Alcester: West Midlands History, 2019); L. Berry-Waite, 'The Woman's Point of View,' p. 48.



Yorkshire, and the north-east', with eight in Wales, six in Scotland and four in London.<sup>26</sup> Labour did not do as well as it had hoped at this election: as Chris Wrigley has argued, the 'First World War had changed the political landscape in ways mostly favourable to the Labour Party', but the proximity of the election to the war's end did not perhaps allow the party to fully capitalize on this favourability, while the extension of the franchise afforded Labour only modest gains.<sup>27</sup> Most significant, however, was the ways in which the coalition government united to ensure that its candidates did not stand in opposition to each other, to avoid splitting the coalition ticket as an anti-socialist tactic aimed at minimizing the potential for a Labour victory.

Uniquely in the twentieth century, the 1918 election was not a straight partisan fight with clear delineation between parties.<sup>28</sup> The wartime coalition, led by the Prime Minister and Liberal, David Lloyd George, but with significant support from the Unionists, sought to retain power. Only about one third of the Liberal Party's MPs supported Lloyd George, with others backing the deposed ex-Prime Minister, and Liberal Party leader, Herbert Asquith. In an attempt to clarify the complicated situation, Lloyd George and the leader of the Conservative Party, Andrew Bonar-Law, issued coalition candidates with a letter of support, which Asquith disparagingly referred to as a 'coupon', a nickname that stuck. Couponed candidates would not stand against each other, uniting the anti-Labour vote at a moment of particular concern over the party's agenda in the aftermath of the Russian revolution.

Pankhurst was the only one of the seventeen women candidates to receive the 'coupon' of endorsement. As both Gullace and Purvis argue, this was largely due to the pro-government wartime activism of the WSPU; Lloyd George, especially, recognized their 'usefulness' both in promoting women's participation in the war effort, and their anti-Bolshevik, anti-pacifist stance.<sup>29</sup> It is perhaps also worth noting, however, that of the women candidates, there was only one Conservative and four Liberals, of whom two (Alison Garland and Margery Corbett Ashby) supported the Asquith faction of the party. Opportunities for other women candidates to receive the 'coupon' of endorsement were, therefore, limited.

Nonetheless, this endorsement was one of but many reasons for Pankhurst's experiences as a woman candidate being somewhat atypical in this election. Perhaps most significant was her fame: although some of the other women candidates, such as Mary Macarthur who stood in nearby Stourbridge were well-known, Pankhurst was arguably the most recognizable of all the women candidates because of her work in the WSPU. Before 1914, the WSPU's increasingly violent tactics led the government to imprison many members for their militancy, with prisoners frequently going on hunger strike. However, when war was declared, the Pankhursts called a halt to all suffrage campaigning, transforming themselves and their organization into patriotic supporters of the war effort, and adopting increasingly right-wing, nationalistic rhetoric in support of the conflict. This caused significant divisions within the WSPU, with some members

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<sup>26</sup>C. Wrigley, 'The Labour Party and the Impact of the 1918 Reform Act,' *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 37 (2018), 64–80, 74.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>28</sup>For useful overviews of issues discussed in this paragraph, see: T. Wilson, 'The Coupon and the British General Election of 1918,' *Journal of Modern History*, 36 (1964), 28–42; M. Farr, 'Waging Democracy: The British General Election of 1918 Reconsidered,' *Cercles*, 21 (2011), 65–94.

<sup>29</sup>Gullace, 'Christabel Pankhurst', 336; Purvis, 'The Women's Party,' pp. 645.

leaving to form smaller organizations which continued to campaign for women's enfranchisement.<sup>30</sup>

By 1917, when it was clear that legislative changes would soon enfranchise certain women, the Pankhursts and a minority of WSPU members founded the Women's Party, to represent women's interests in parliament. The Women's Party began to make preparations for the expected postwar election, and, when this was declared, Christabel began by contesting Devizes, in rural Wiltshire. However, after only a few days' campaigning, it was decided that she would contest Smethwick instead. The reasons for this switch remain unclear. June Purvis suggests that she may have been attracted by the large number of 'industrial' women electors in Smethwick, perceived to be her largest support base and who were lacking in Devizes.<sup>31</sup> The official explanation, given by Emmeline, was that Smethwick was 'a new constituency' so 'no sitting member ... could be aggrieved' by their challenge.<sup>32</sup> This was not, however, entirely accurate.

In advance of the election, a coalition candidate had already been identified for Smethwick: Major Samuel Thompson was from a wealthy local family and had been actively involved in Smethwick's public life and Unionist associations for several decades.<sup>33</sup> He was given the coalition's endorsement, but when Pankhurst announced her intention to switch to Smethwick, he was asked by Lloyd George and Bonar-Law to step aside, to allow her a straight fight with Labour's John Davison. Thompson duly did so but appears to have felt some bitterness about his treatment. On the eve of the election, while chairing a campaign meeting for Pankhurst, he insisted that stepping aside had been 'a very great sacrifice to him', adding that 'for what reason the mandate had been sent down, he did not know'.<sup>34</sup> His less than ringing endorsement that 'I could have wished that she sought some other place' was greeted, according to the *Smethwick Telephone* with 'a fervent "and so do we"' from his supporters in the crowd; nonetheless, he suggested that voters return the 'compliment' Pankhurst had paid in choosing to contest Smethwick by 'try[ing] to return her'.<sup>35</sup>

His lack of enthusiasm may have been compounded by the high-handed remarks of members of the Women's Party who campaigned for Pankhurst in Smethwick. Ex-WSPU organizer Phyllis Ayrton, who took a leading role in organizing the campaign, suggested early on that voters should 'want to be represented by a woman known all over the world, rather than by anybody who had only a local reputation', which likely did little to endear Pankhurst to any wavering Thompson supporters.<sup>36</sup> This was perhaps unwise, as his support appears to have extended beyond the Unionist Party. As the *Birmingham Mail* reported, Thompson's withdrawal not only upset local Unionists, but 'a large number of Liberals ... who had promised the Major – a most popular man – their support, and it is by no means certain that they will transfer that

<sup>30</sup>A. Hughes-Johnson, "'Keep Your Eyes On Us Because There Is No More Napping": The Wartime Suffrage Campaign of the Suffragettes of the WSPU and the Independent WSPU,' in *The Politics of Women's Suffrage: Local, National and International Perspectives*, ed. by A. Hughes-Johnson and L. Jenkins (London: New Historical Perspectives, 2021), pp. 129–59.

<sup>31</sup>Purvis, 'The Women's Party,' p. 645.

<sup>32</sup>'Why Miss Pankhurst Selected Smethwick,' *Birmingham Post (BP)*, November 27, 1918.

<sup>33</sup>'Pen Sketch of the coalition candidate,' *ST*, November 23, 1918.

<sup>34</sup>'Meeting at Theatre Royal,' *ST*, December 14, 1918.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>'Miss C. Pankhurst,' *BG*, November 26, 1918.



support' to Pankhurst.<sup>37</sup> In the event, many did not. Turnout was low; at around 55%, it was slightly below the national average of 57%, and it is possible that some of those who did not vote may have included those who resented the perceived interference by the coalition leaders in local affairs.<sup>38</sup>

Pankhurst's fame, meanwhile, likely did little to mitigate the impact of her aggressively anti-Labour, anti-union rhetoric. As established, Labour had had growing success in Smethwick's municipal politics before the war, with trade union membership also increasing before and during the conflict. Indeed, by the time of the election, the Unionist-supporting *Birmingham Mail* acknowledged that there were estimated to be '20,000 trade unionists in the borough, and 5,000 co-operative society members'.<sup>39</sup> Such figures, though challenging to verify, are nonetheless indicative of the strength of the local labour movement, and contemporary understandings of its strength.

Despite this, as both Cawood and Gullace have noted, Pankhurst lost no opportunity to equate the Labour Party with Bolshevism.<sup>40</sup> As election day neared, for example, she told electors that they would have to choose whether to vote 'for the Union Jack or the Red Flag; for their country or against their country; for Christabel Pankhurst or Davison', claiming that the Labour party 'had been captured ... by Bolshevik forces' and was 'beyond the hope of salvation'.<sup>41</sup> While she appears to have stopped short of outright accusing Davison of being a Bolshevik, her comments that she 'judged people by the company they kept' or that 'it was an old and true saying, "birds of a feather, flock together"', suggest that she felt voters would be able to draw their own conclusions from her insinuations.<sup>42</sup> She also frequently cast aspersions on Davison's character, remarking, for instance, that 'she had had no opposition [in Smethwick], except for a few pale-faced conscientious objectors'.<sup>43</sup>

Davison had not been a conscientious objector; indeed, as John Ward writes, he had 'supported the war effort and [spoke] at recruiting meetings', and was well-respected locally.<sup>44</sup> He had been born in Smethwick in 1870, and, as a friend wrote in a short biography for the *Smethwick Telephone*, 'it is appropriate that Smethwick, which depends for its prosperity on the iron and steel industries', had selected a man 'born in the trade, and who has been connected with it all his life'.<sup>45</sup> Both his father and grandfather had worked in Smethwick's iron industry, and Davison had held local and national office in the Friendly Society of Ironfounders for three decades. A close colleague of Arthur Henderson, Davison was frequently selected as a union negotiator in disputes involving the trade before and during the First World War and had been appointed to a committee advising the Board of Trade on dealing with postwar conditions in the industry.<sup>46</sup> His commitment to workers' rights in general, and to the industry which predominated the town specifically, was well-known and had made

<sup>37</sup>'Midland Polls,' *Birmingham Mail (BM)*, December 7, 1918.

<sup>38</sup>'How the Midlands Polled,' *BP*, December 30, 1918.

<sup>39</sup>'Birmingham Scenes,' *BM*, December 14, 1918.

<sup>40</sup>I. Cawood, 'Life after Joe: Politics and War in the West Midlands, 1914–1918,' *Midland History*, 42 (2017), 92–117, 98; Gullace, 'Christabel Pankhurst.'

<sup>41</sup>'Miss Pankhurst's Candidature,' *ST*, December 14, 1918.

<sup>42</sup>'Meeting at Theatre Royal.'

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>Ward, 'The Development,' p. 53.

<sup>45</sup>'Mr John Davison,' *ST*, November 30, 1918.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

him a respected figure. He also had the advantage of having been selected as Labour's candidate in December 1917, allowing him to begin to campaign a year in advance, familiarising himself to local electors.<sup>47</sup> Though his ultimate victory over Pankhurst was narrow – he won by a mere 775 votes – his success must be contrasted against a national picture of 'poor' results for Labour.<sup>48</sup> Thus, although Davison was little known outside of the constituency, in Smethwick Pankhurst's fame did little against his local connections and established union credentials.

The extent to which Pankhurst's gender impacted on her loss is less clear. As Purvis and Gullace demonstrate, she ran on a feminist agenda.<sup>49</sup> The Women's Party advocated for equality in many arenas – including the workplace, the home, and in politics – and promised to implement a system of 'co-operative house-keeping ... to reduce the burden of wives and mothers', which included 'co-operative housing schemes that had central heating, a hot water supply, central kitchen, central laundry, medical services' among other attributes.<sup>50</sup> What is less clear is how well these policies were received in Smethwick. Reporting in local newspapers suggests she made little attempt to localize them – for example, by suggesting where in Smethwick these new co-operative living arrangements might be constructed – and there is little evidence either way regarding how male or female voters received such overtly feminist policies. Indeed, one of her few concessions towards Smethwick itself appears to have been a promise to 'open an office' there, should she be elected, in which 'a local secretary' would work, perhaps indicating that she would not be a familiar figure to residents.<sup>51</sup>

Despite this, and not insignificantly, there is no evidence surviving in any local newspapers that she faced any opposition purely because she was a woman candidate. Although, as noted, Thompson and his supporters appear to have resented her arrival and his consequential removal, there is nothing to suggest this resentment was because she was a *female* candidate – his being forced by the coalition leaders to step aside for a well-known male candidate could well have caused equal bitterness. Of course, on an individual level, male (or, indeed, female) voters may not have wished to support a woman candidate because of personal prejudice. Gullace suggests that 'many men were probably as unlikely to vote for a party with such a gendered name as they would have been to wear a woman's hat to the polls'.<sup>52</sup> This is not, in itself, an unreasonable assumption. However, it is worth noting that even if some – or indeed many – voters in the constituency felt so privately, this was not, it appears, an acceptable view to express publicly. None of the local newspapers, including the more moderate *Birmingham Gazette* whose loyalties lay outside of the coalition, suggested that Pankhurst was in anyway unqualified to be an MP because of her gender alone, nor did they report on any voters suggesting so at election events. Given that not all women were yet enfranchised, and indeed, that women had only been eligible to stand for parliament for three weeks by the time election day arrived, this suggests that the woman

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<sup>47</sup>'A Candidate for Parliament,' *ST*, December 8, 1917.

<sup>48</sup>Wrigley, 'The Labour Party,' 72–4.

<sup>49</sup>Purvis, 'The Women's Party'; Gullace, 'Christabel Pankhurst.'

<sup>50</sup>Purvis, 'The Women's Party,' 641.

<sup>51</sup>'Miss Pankhurst's Election Address,' *The Suffragette*, December 13, 1918.

<sup>52</sup>Gullace, 'Christabel Pankhurst,' 339.

parliamentary candidate was accepted remarkably quickly, even where this did not translate into electoral success.

As established, Davison was only narrowly victorious in 1918. At the following three general elections, of 1922, 1923 and 1924, he won re-election but again narrowly, taking 51, 55 and 52% of the vote respectively against Unionist candidates.<sup>53</sup> In 1926, he retired due to ill-health, necessitating a by-election in which Labour's candidate, Oswald Mosley, secured a majority of 57% against a Unionist and a Liberal.<sup>54</sup> Given Mosley's personal popularity, the establishment of Smethwick as a relatively safe Labour seat, and Labour's prominence ahead of the 1929 general election, there was little doubt that Mosley would be victorious again when this was called.<sup>55</sup> He was again opposed by a Unionist and a Liberal. The Unionist, Alfred Wise, was selected in early 1928 and worked hard to establish himself with the local party over the year prior to election, such as by actively supporting Conservative candidates in municipal elections, and participating in the party's social events particularly those organized by the Smethwick Women's Unionist Association, possibly with a view to courting the newly enfranchised voters in this election.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, Maude Marshall arrived in the contest much later, shortly after the election had been called; the *Smethwick Telephone*, at least, appears to have initially understood that there would not be a Liberal candidate that year.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, she had limited opportunity to establish herself within the constituency.

Marshall's campaign was very different to Pankhurst's, though it was, in many ways, typical of the experiences of women parliamentary candidates from established political parties who had stood in the intervening years. The number of women standing for election had gradually increased – by 1924, 42 women stood – but in total, only eleven women had been elected to parliament before 1929.<sup>58</sup> That Marshall should not be successful was, therefore, fairly typical of the experience of most women. Locally, this was only the second time a Liberal candidate had stood in Smethwick – the party did not stand a candidate in any contest until the 1926 by-election – and following her defeat, they did not stand another candidate there until 1964. The *Telephone* therefore praised Marshall's 'courage in coming to face the difficulties which Smethwick presented', with the constituency regarded as 'an uphill fight' for the Liberals.<sup>59</sup> Even she acknowledged this: when she presented her nomination papers and £150 deposit, she quipped that she 'hope[d] she would get her money back in good time'.<sup>60</sup>

The tacit acceptance that she was unlikely to do well was largely due to Labour's dominance in Smethwick, but the continued decline of the Liberal Party likely did not help her chances. Indeed, though she was one of 25 Liberal women standing in this election – the highest number, by some margin, the party fielded in the interwar years, which was possibly connected to the franchise extension – 24 of these were beaten.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>53</sup>F. S. W. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918–1949* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

<sup>54</sup>'The Member for Smethwick,' *ST*, December 25, 1926.

<sup>55</sup>For wider context on Labour in this election, see: D. Redvalsden, "'Today is the Dawn': The Labour Party and the 1929 General Election,' *Parliamentary History*, 29 (2010), 395–415; for Mosley: D. Howell, 'The Sheik ... A Valentino in Real Life: Sir Oswald Mosley and the Labour Party, 1924–1931,' *Contemporary British History*, 23 (2009), 425–43.

<sup>56</sup>'The Conservative Association,' *ST*, 14 July 1928; 'The Women Unionists,' *ST*, September 15, 1928.

<sup>57</sup>'The Campaign,' *ST*, March 16, 1929.

<sup>58</sup>Of these, four were Conservative, three were Liberals and four were Labour representatives.

<sup>59</sup>'The Liberals,' *ST*, 30 March 1929; 'The Liberal Candidate,' *ST*, April 20, 1929.

<sup>60</sup>'The Nominations,' *ST*, May 25, 1929.

<sup>61</sup>Cowman, *Women in British Politics*, p. 121.

Hilda Runciman, the Liberals' only sitting woman MP, was defeated and only Megan Lloyd George, whose name held particular sway, was victorious. As a far less established member of the party, it is unsurprising that Marshall, as a woman candidate especially, should be asked to contest such an unwinnable constituency. It is unclear why Smethwick – as opposed to any other unwinnable place – was chosen, though it is unlikely that she had much choice in the matter. It is possible that she initially hoped that the opportunity would help equip her with the experience required for a later contest, but she was either never selected, or never stood, in any further contests before her death in 1941.<sup>62</sup>

Marshall conducted her campaign as a candidate fully enmeshed within the Liberal Party, and unlike Pankhurst, made nothing of her gender. In earlier elections, particularly 1918, women candidates typically 'justified their candidatures by drawing on gender ideals' and 'argued the "woman's point of view" was needed in Parliament on matters concerning women and children', as Lisa Berry-Waite notes.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, Marshall made no reference – as far as surviving newspaper reporting suggests – to any special qualifications she might have for the role as a woman candidate, instead positioning herself as someone with the professional expertise necessary to become an MP. For example, at one meeting, she drew on her experience as a civil servant working in Whitehall. This, she informed voters, had 'taught her the way about Government offices' and she felt that if a constituent had a problem 'it would not be necessary to ask a question in the House of Commons [because] she could find her way to the right Department and probably be able to put the matter in the right way to the right man'.<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, and in contrast to Pankhurst, she made no explicit appeals to women voters. Although no copy of her own election manifesto survives, the *Smethwick Telephone* reported many of her speeches near verbatim, and in these she positioned herself as supporting in full the Liberals' 1929 manifesto. She most frequently spoke on issues of unemployment and the Liberals' plans to 'conquer it', although at local meetings she spoke extensively on unemployment problems in the south Wales mining industry, making no mention of its impact on the very different industries of Smethwick.<sup>65</sup> At an earlier meeting, she spoke to voters at length about 'the question of Peace ... upon which she felt very strongly and held decided opinions', detailing her work within Cardiff's League of Nations Union and her 'several visits' to the League of Nations' headquarters.<sup>66</sup> The issue of peace became increasingly gendered in the interwar years, but this was often tied to motherhood and women's supposed innate pacifism.<sup>67</sup> As far as surviving evidence suggests, Marshall did not attempt to gender her work in this way, although contemporary audiences may have intrinsically understood this as a gendered issue. At no campaign events in Smethwick did she make explicit appeals to women voters and, unlike both Mosley and Wise, she did not hold events specifically for women voters. For example, Mosley's wife, Cynthia, who was also

<sup>62</sup>For the Liberal Party's selection process, see: A. Ranney, *Pathways to Parliament* (London: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 248–68; 'Liberal Worker's Will,' *Evening Despatch*, January 14, 1941.

<sup>63</sup>Berry-Waite, 'The Woman's Point of View,' p. 57.

<sup>64</sup>'The Liberals,' *ST*, April 27, 1929.

<sup>65</sup>'The Liberals,' *ST*, March 30.

<sup>66</sup>'The Liberals,' *ST*, March 16.

<sup>67</sup>H. McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations; Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c.1918–45* (Manchester: MUP, 2011).

standing as a Labour candidate, hosted meetings for women voters in Smethwick while Alfred Wise also held several ‘women’s meetings’ where he and his wife were given ‘a very enthusiastic reception’.<sup>68</sup> Marshall’s approach does seem to have secured her more votes than the Liberal candidate in the 1926 by-election – she increased the Liberals’ share by around 50%, but this still only amounted to 11% of the vote.<sup>69</sup>

Pankhurst and Marshall ran campaigns that were very different in nature. Pankhurst was a particularly well-known candidate, who ran outside of the party system, on an overtly feminist platform making explicit appeals to women voters. Marshall, on the other hand, was firmly enmeshed within the party machine, and made nothing of her gender and no appeals to women voters. Unlike Pankhurst, she was not well-known, even within her own party and certainly not within the constituency. That neither could win, either as such a well-known figure, or as an established party nominee, against Labour candidates arguably demonstrates that the constituency of Smethwick might stand as an important case study of wider trends in contemporary British politics: the decline of the Liberal party and the emergence of Labour as the main opposition party; the postwar entrenchment of party politics, and the significant challenges women faced in winning elections. Equally, however, the failure of both women to secure election here is not, in itself, indicative of a failure of local women to engage in politics in Smethwick. Indeed, reframing both contests through the local broadens our understanding of the ways in which ordinary women voters did, and did not, choose to engage with parliamentary politics in the aftermath of enfranchisement.

### Smethwick’s Women Voters, 1918-1929

Christabel Pankhurst arrived in Smethwick less than three weeks before election day without any form of constituency party to provide practical support for her campaign. Although the Women’s Party had in effect grown out of the WSPU, there had been no branch of the latter established in Smethwick in the pre-war years. Indeed, no suffrage organization had been active in Smethwick before 1918, although nearby Birmingham had seen an active suffrage movement.<sup>70</sup> Her campaign was run entirely by a few ex-WSPU stalwarts who remained loyal to the Pankhursts: Flora Drummond, Birmingham WSPU organiser Phyllis Ayrton, and the Kenney sisters.<sup>71</sup> Like the Pankhursts, none of these women were native to the area, with Ayrton only taking up her post in 1914.<sup>72</sup> This was noted at the time: ‘There are no local women among the speakers’, commented the *Birmingham Gazette*, while the *Birmingham Mail* reported that, within days of Pankhurst’s candidature being declared, Smethwick was ‘flooded with lady workers’ from the women’s movement.<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, by election day, the *Mail* spoke admirably of the campaign, suggesting it had ‘worked wonders in arousing public interest’,

<sup>68</sup>‘Lady Cynthia as the Trouble Mender,’ *ST*, 9 March 1929; ‘Women’s Meeting at Bearwood,’ *ST*, 25 May 1929. No reports of special meetings for women held by the Liberals appear in the papers; it is possible they were held, but not reported on, but this seems unlikely given the reporting of other parties’ meetings, and the special interest in the newly enfranchised woman voter this year.

<sup>69</sup>‘General Election,’ *ST*, June 1, 1929.

<sup>70</sup>N. Gauld, *Words and Deeds: Birmingham Suffragists and Suffragettes 1832–1918* (Alcester, 2018).

<sup>71</sup>L. Jenkins, ‘“It wasn’t like that at all”: memory, identity and legacy in Jessie Kenney’s *The Flame and The Flood*,’ *Women’s History Review*, 29 (2020), 1034–1053, 1037.

<sup>72</sup>Gauld, *Words and Deeds*.

<sup>73</sup>‘Smethwick Change,’ *BG*, 6 December 1918; ‘Midland Polls,’ *BM*, December 7, 1918.

holding ‘scores of meetings’ at which Pankhurst ‘gained many supporters’ and concluded that ‘if Miss Pankhurst is not among the first women MPs, it will not be for lack of work’.<sup>74</sup> Although this work clearly did not, in the event, pay off and a degree of caution must be afforded to an account from the Unionist-supporting paper, it certainly seems that her events were well-attended, suggesting that women in Smethwick were at least interested enough in the election to attend political meetings. Even if this was only due to the novelty factor of this being the first contest since 1910, the first in which women could vote, or the first to see a woman candidate, this is nonetheless significant. Furthermore, while a gendered breakdown of voting is not available, her narrow loss to Davison suggests that she was assured of the support of a not insignificant number of women electors at the polls.

However, there is further evidence that at least some women in Smethwick participated in her campaign more actively, most particularly through the nomination process. As now, this was essentially a formality which ensured that only the official party candidate appeared on the ballot paper and required candidates to pay a deposit. However, only registered electors in a constituency were able to nominate candidates. The ‘lady workers’ who had ‘flooded’ into Smethwick were therefore ineligible to participate in the event, and, unlike a candidate from an established political party who could draw on members of a constituency association to nominate them (even if the candidate was not known to local members him or herself) Pankhurst had no such organization to fall back on.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, both she and Davison, the Labour candidate, were able to draw on the support of a number of local women to support their candidatures. Fortuitously, the *Smethwick Telephone*, in its reporting, recorded the names of all those who nominated both candidates. Davison’s nominators – 25 women and 47 men – were simply listed by surname (‘Mrs Sands’) and it is therefore challenging to offer much by way of further analysis of the names which appear on the list.<sup>76</sup> It is reasonable to assume that most were members of, or at least broadly supportive of, the Labour Party but regrettably local party records do not remain in existence for this period.<sup>77</sup> This is not the case for Pankhurst, whose nominators were named in full, and their addresses supplied (‘Mrs Clara Williams, 72 Lewisham Road’). In total, 24 women and 37 men nominated Pankhurst, slightly fewer than had supported Davison, though not significantly so, especially given that the Women’s Party did not have an equivalent constituency association.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, it is notable that, just a few months after women’s enfranchisement and in an area not known for its feminist activism, almost 50 women in the constituency were politically active and engaged enough to participate in what was, fundamentally, a dull procedural exercise.

The women who nominated Pankhurst generally appear to be women from the upper end of the working-classes, if not the lower-middle classes. Of the 24, all but four

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<sup>74</sup>‘Birmingham Scenes.’

<sup>75</sup>‘Midland Polls.’

<sup>76</sup>‘Nomination Day,’ *ST*, December 7, 1918.

<sup>77</sup>In 1921, a Mrs Sands was elected a Labour councillor in Smethwick; it seems possible that this was the same woman but even this cannot be proven.

<sup>78</sup>‘Nomination Day’. The 24 women were listed, with address, as follows: Clara Williams; Janette Hill; Elizabeth Cox; Mary Westwood; Alice Bartlett; Elizabeth Smith; Helen Crisp; Rose Cornforth; Jane Evans; Margaret Kay; Mary Fletcher; Ada Hill; Emily Bowden; Edith Bowden; Louisa Atkinson; Mary Edinborough; Eva Whitehouse; Fanny Whitehouse; Annie Bentham; Rose Shotton; Mary Shepherd; Eliza Price; Elizabeth Sidwell and Sarah Roberts.



could be traced back through census returns, allowing for a broader understanding of who Pankhurst's local supporters were to be gleaned than that which has been understood elsewhere.<sup>79</sup> Both Purvis and Gullace assert that young, working-class 'munitionettes' were Pankhurst's most ardent supporters, citing reporting from *Britannia*, the Women's Party journal, which claimed that such women made frequent donations to the Party's funds – indeed, Purvis even suggests that Pankhurst switched to contesting Smethwick because of the larger number of industrial women there compared with rural Wiltshire.<sup>80</sup> Notably, however, there is no mention in local newspapers of 'munitionettes' attending Pankhurst's campaign events in Smethwick. In any case, such women – as both Purvis and Gullace acknowledge – would, because of age and property restrictions in the 1918 Act, have been unable to vote in the election, and thus could not have participated in the nomination process.

Instead, Pankhurst was able to draw upon the support of a group of older, and better off, women. The average age of the 19 who could be traced through census returns was 47; most were married with children, and their husbands were generally employed in the professions or in skilled manual work. Few of them were engaged in paid employment: only six gave an occupation on the 1911 census, of whom four were single, making work more of a necessity. Of these, three (Alice Bartlett and the Whitehouse sisters) were teachers and one (Janette Hill) was a doctor, neither an occupation of the industrial working classes. Only two married women worked: Elizabeth Sidwell 'assisted' in her husband's grocery shop, while Eliza Price was perhaps one of the few to be struggling financially in 1911. Her husband, a blacksmith, was then noted to be out of work, and the family, which included her young sons, may well have subsisted largely on the income she bought in, as a boot dealer. The Prices' apparent pre-war financial precarity may have led Eliza to wartime munitions work, but here she seems an exception. The other women who nominated Pankhurst generally appear to have been far more fiscally secure: about a third had experience of employing domestic servants – five had in 1911 (Fletcher, Hill, both Bowdens and Shotton); two others (Kay and Atkinson) had in 1901, and the Sidwells employed a live-in shop assistant.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, their geographic stability between 1911 and 1918 suggests a corresponding degree of financial security: 19 of the 24 were resident at the same address in 1918 as 1911.

Without direct testimony from these women, it is impossible to know what motivated them to support Pankhurst in this election. It must be assumed that they were attracted by various aspects of the party platform or, perhaps, by the prospect of being involved in a political campaign led by a woman, in this first election in which women might formally participate. What is perhaps most notable, however, is that although the group was small in number, the women appear to have been politicized by her campaign, rather than any prior political experiences. None appear to have been actively involved in either the suffrage movement, or – with one exception – local politics in Smethwick before this. A search of the suffrage press for their names for the

<sup>79</sup>Smith, Evans, Bentham and Roberts could not be traced, but all others could be found on the 1901 or 1911 census from which the evidence in this paragraph and the next is derived.

<sup>80</sup>Purvis, 'The Women's Party,' pp. 646–647; Gullace, 'Christabel Pankhurst,' p. 340.

<sup>81</sup>Employing servants was generally considered a mark of distinction between classes. L. Schwartz, *Feminism and the Servant Problem: Class and Domestic Labour in the Women's Suffrage Movement* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019).

period 1900 to 1918 reveals no matches, suggesting that they were not active members of any suffrage organizations – although this, of course, did not mean that they did not support the cause more generally. Similarly, a search for their names within the local newspapers reveals no matches in connection with political organizations. Only one woman had a previous involvement with local politics – Emily Bowden had been Mayoress when her husband, George, had been Mayor of Smethwick in 1904.<sup>82</sup> George Bowden was a Liberal representative on the town council, but there is no surviving suggestion that his wife was involved in Liberal politics through her husband's connections. Furthermore, perhaps because these women did not have a constituency association to hold them together in the way that Davison's Labour nominators did, they did not maintain an active involvement in Smethwick's politics after this election. Nonetheless, their role here – albeit small – is evidence that ordinary women voters in the town did play an active role in Pankhurst's campaign.

The evidence for local women's active participation in Maude Marshall's 1929 campaign is more limited, although this must in part be due to the Liberals' more general decline in this period. Certainly, she had the advantage that Pankhurst did not of having a constituency party to provide some of the practical, local assistance needed during a campaign.<sup>83</sup> Smethwick had a Liberal Association and a Women's Liberal Association (WLA) during this period, though records of these organizations do not survive, so it is challenging to fully understand how far both members of either were involved in her campaign. A *Telephone* article from 1928 refers to '130 names' having been recently 'added to the membership [of the WLA]' but little other detail survives, other than the name of its President, a Mrs Logan.<sup>84</sup> Mrs Logan appears to have been one of very few local people actively involved in the campaign; only she and the president of Smethwick's Liberal Association, Joseph Lones, were among residents who frequently supported Marshall's candidature at campaign meetings, with other speakers Liberal party activists from Cardiff.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, a lunch honouring Marshall's efforts in the campaign was held a couple of weeks before the election in Cardiff, not Smethwick, at which Mrs Logan and Joseph Lones were the only local representatives present.<sup>86</sup> Even on election day, the *Telephone* reported that Marshall toured the constituency, 'accompanied by Miss Howell, who has been associated with her at Cardiff', rather than with Smethwick activists.<sup>87</sup>

As in 1918, all the candidates required local electors, rather than outside party agents, to formally nominate them. Unlike in 1918, the *Telephone* did not print the names of those who nominated each candidate, so it is harder to trace the gender profile, or indeed any further detail, on each candidate's supporters. This was likely due to their sheer number: on the appointed day, Mosley arrived with 119 papers, Marshall with 24, and Wise with 20.<sup>88</sup> It is reasonable to assume that Joseph Lones

<sup>82</sup> Mayoress was an honorary title conferred most usually on the Mayor's spouse. 'Mayoral Elections,' *BM*, November 9, 1904.

<sup>83</sup> For such, see: S. Ball *et al*, 'Elections, Leaflets and Whist Drives: Constituency party members in Britain between the wars,' in *Labour's Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities and Experiences of Labour Party Members, 1918–1945*, ed. by M. Worley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 7–32.

<sup>84</sup> 'Midland and District,' *ST*, February 11, 1928; 'General Election'. No further detail on Mrs Logan is available.

<sup>85</sup> 'The Liberals,' *ST*, May 18, 1929.

<sup>86</sup> 'The Liberal Candidate,' *ST*, April 20, 1929.

<sup>87</sup> 'Polling Incidents,' *ST*, June 1, 1929.

<sup>88</sup> 'The Election Nominations,' *ST*, May 25, 1929.

and Mrs Logan were among those who formally nominated Marshall, with the paper noting that, ‘the Liberals took credit for “an all-round representation of old and new voters”’, suggesting that they had actively courted at least some newly enfranchised women. It was the Unionists, though, who mentioned specially that ‘half the papers handed in ... were completed by new women voters’.<sup>89</sup> Although this implies that only around ten women had signed the papers – not an overwhelming number, particularly compared with the number of supporters Mosley claimed – it is nonetheless notable that the Unionists appear to have actively sought out the support of newly-enfranchised women, as this reflects the party’s wider success in appealing to the female electorate in interwar Britain, and the increasing opportunities for women to be active within local party structures.<sup>90</sup> Given the strength of the Labour Party in Smethwick, however, it is unsurprising that there should be so many more voters prepared to nominate Mosley.

Mosley’s personal popularity, and the strength of the Labour Party both locally and nationally in 1929, all but assured him victory. Nonetheless, despite the challenges Marshall faced, there is some evidence that she was able to engage certain women voters in her campaign – but perhaps notably, outside the traditional setting of a party meeting. Although her remarks at these were covered in detail by the local press, there is little to suggest that these were attended in large number by local voters. Indeed, after one meeting, the *Telephone* reported, ‘there were no questions of the candidate’, suggesting voters were either less than enthused, or in sparse attendance.<sup>91</sup> Instead, it appears that at least some Smethwick women were interested in hearing from Marshall, particularly on her policies regarding unemployment, outside of such settings. In the week of the election, the *Birmingham Gazette* reported on her ‘interesting experience’ when ‘she was specially invited by the women in one of the poor streets to give them an educational talk’ on the topic of unemployment. The paper noted that this group of women – no further detail was given on who, or how many, they were, though the reference to them being on one of the ‘poor streets’ suggests it is likely that they were working-class – told Marshall that ‘they did not want a political speech ... but a simple statement on unemployment without political rancour’. Marshall, the paper reported, ‘told them of her experiences as a social worker in London and illustrated her points with details of her services at the Ministry of Labour’.<sup>92</sup> Once again, she drew on her professional expertise, but what is perhaps most notable is that these women actively asked for a talk given ‘without political rancour’. Arguably, this perhaps indicates that certain women were politically engaged enough to be frustrated with the contemporary political discourse at least surrounding the issue of unemployment. Whether they thought that Marshall, as a woman candidate specifically, might bring a different perspective to the issue is something about which it is impossible to do more than speculate, however.

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<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup>See for example: D. Jarvis, ‘Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s,’ *Twentieth Century British History*, 5 (1994), 129–52; N. Fleming, ‘Women and Lancashire Conservatism between the Wars,’ *Women’s History Review*, 26 (2017), 329–49.

<sup>91</sup>‘The Liberals,’ *ST*, April 27, 1929.

<sup>92</sup>‘Round the Midlands. Smethwick,’ *BG*, May 25, 1929.

## Conclusion

While Smethwick was unusual in witnessing not one, but two, women parliamentary candidates between 1918 and 1929, in other ways, experiences in general elections there typified a number of broader trends within British politics at the time, particularly regarding the rise of the Labour party and the decline of the Liberals, and the difficulties women parliamentary candidates faced in securing election. Despite neither Pankhurst nor Marshall being successful in their campaigns, there is nonetheless evidence that women voters in the constituency engaged with both contests, although perhaps to a greater degree in the case of Pankhurst. While the lack of available party records negates a complete understanding of both campaigns, this article has demonstrated the significance of utilizing local newspaper reporting to more fully understand how ordinary women were able to engage in the political process after they won the right to vote, broadening our understanding of women's politics, and indeed politics more generally, in the post-enfranchisement era.

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## Notes on contributor

*Anna Muggeridge* completed her PhD at the University of Worcester in 2021. She currently works as an Associate Lecturer and as a Research Fellow in History at the University of Worcester.

## ORCID

Anna Muggeridge  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9722-649X>