# THE FIGHT TO VOTE

by Susan Paris

***It's hard to imagine a world where women can't vote. Yet up until 1893, this was the reality. Not one country allowed women to have a say in their national government. In some parts of the world, it would stay that way for a long time. New Zealand was different. On 28 November 1893, women went to the polling booth for the first time. It was a famous victory – a radical change – but it didn't come without a fight.***

## Women's Rights

In early colonial New Zealand, women had few rights. Most worked at home, looking after their families, and left politics to men. In the 1860s, however, women began to speak out. They wanted equal rights in marriage, education, and employment. Most importantly, they wanted to help shape society. They wanted to vote.

Women in New Zealand weren't acting alone. They were influenced by feminists in Europe and Britain, who were also demanding legal equality and social justice – to stand as equal citizens alongside men. Mary Ann Muller, from Blenheim, followed what was happening in the women's movement overseas and became very outspoken about women's rights. Using the pen-name Femina (because many people disapproved of her views), Muller published articles in the local newspaper. These articles were controversial but widely read. So was Muller's pamphlet *An Appeal to the Men of New Zealand*. "How long are women to remain a wholly unrepresented body of the people?" she asked, the first woman in New Zealand to speak out in such a public way.

### Why the First?

Why were New Zealand women the first in the world to have suffrage (the right to vote)? Some historians think it was because the settler experience taught them to be independent and capable. Women often worked alongside their husbands to establish farms and homes. Together, they were building the new colony of New Zealand. A lot of women felt they had earnt the right to equality, and perhaps enough men came to share this opinion, too.

For many Pākehā settlers, New Zealand was also seen as a "new" country with the chance to make its own rules. Most immigrants had come from Britain, where there were lots of fixed ideas about social class and status. New Zealand could be different. People could make their own way in the world, whatever their backgrounds. These were democratic attitudes, and it makes sense that this kind of society would be sympathetic to the rights of women.

# 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.

"PURIFICATION."

## Kate Sheppard

"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.



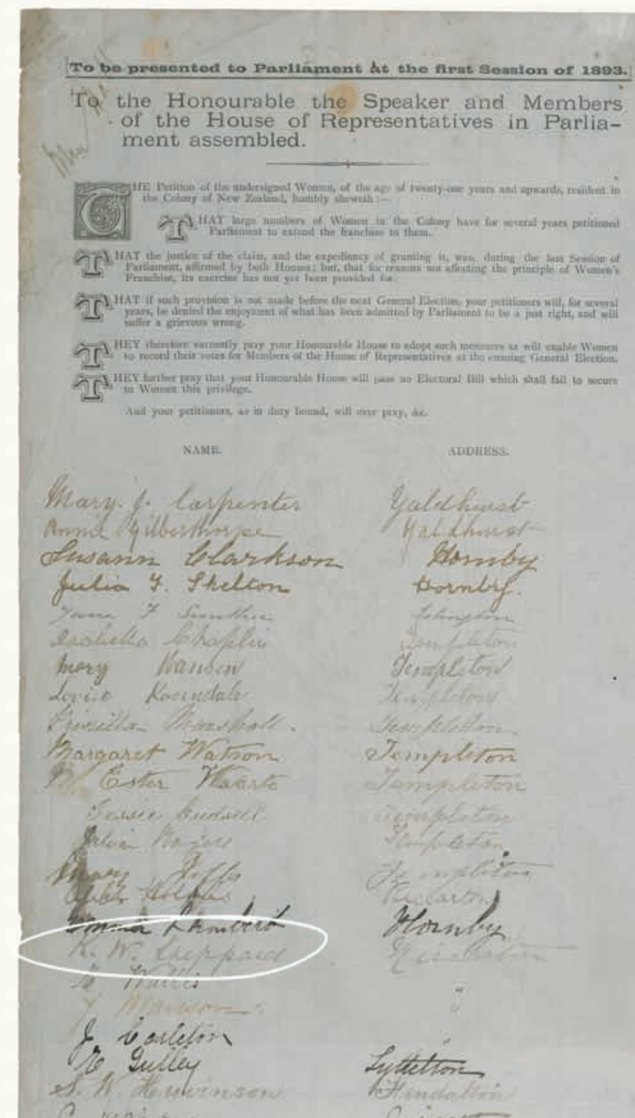
# The Fight Heats Up

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!

**RIGHT:** The July 1893 petition with a circle around Kate Sheppard's signature

**BELOW:** Propaganda from the opposition



To be presented to Parliament at the first Session of 1893.

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives in Parliament assembled.

THE Petition of the undersigned Women, of the age of twenty-one years and upwards, resident in the Colony of New Zealand, humbly sheweth:—

THAT large numbers of Women in the Colony have for several years petitioned Parliament to extend the franchise to them.

THAT the justice of the claim, and the expediency of granting it, was, during the last Session of Parliament, affirmed by both Houses; but, that for reasons not affecting the principle of Women's Franchise, its exercise has not yet been provided for.

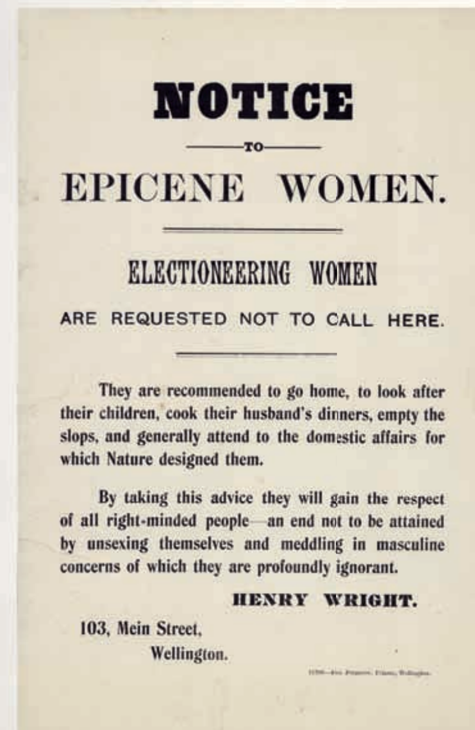
THAT if such provision is not made before the next General Election, your petitioners will, for several years, be denied the enjoyment of what has been admitted by Parliament to be a just right, and will suffer a grievous wrong.

THEY therefore earnestly pray your Honourable House to adopt such measures as will enable Women to record their votes for Members of the House of Representatives at the ensuing General Election.

THEY further pray that your Honourable House will pass no Electoral Bill which shall fail to secure to Women this privilege.

And your petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

| NAME. | ADDRESS. |
| --- | --- |



NOTICE

TO

EPICENE WOMEN.

ELECTIONEERING WOMEN

ARE REQUESTED NOT TO CALL HERE.

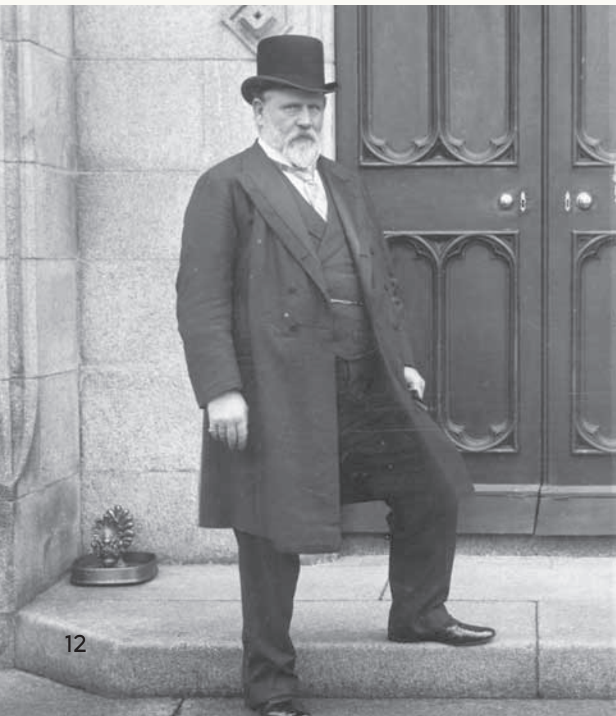
They are recommended to go home, to look after their children, cook their husband's dinners, empty the slops, and generally attend to the domestic affairs for which Nature designed them.

By taking this advice they will gain the respect of all right-minded people—an end not to be attained by unsexing themselves and meddling in masculine concerns of which they are profoundly ignorant.

HENRY WRIGHT.

103, Mein Street,
Wellington.

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.

**RIGHT:** Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst being arrested in London in the early 1900s

**FAR LEFT:** Richard Seddon, Prime Minister of New Zealand 1893–1906

## Suffragettes

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.

**ABOVE:** A poster from the British suffrage campaign

**RIGHT:** Women in Auckland in 1899 going to vote in the national election

## OTHER FEMALE FIRSTS

**1893** All women over the age of twenty-one, both Pākehā and Māori, gain the right to vote in New Zealand.

**1894** Women in South Australia gain the right to vote and stand for the South Australian parliament.

**1902** All white women in Australia gain the right to vote in federal elections.

**1906** Women in Finland gain the right to vote. The following year, nineteen women MPs are elected in Finland.

**1918** Some British women over the age of thirty gain the right to vote and can stand for parliament.

**1919** New Zealand women gain the right to become MPs.

**1920** Women in the United States gain the right to vote.

**1933** Elizabeth McCombs becomes the first female MP in New Zealand.

**1949** Iriaka Rātana becomes the first Māori woman to be elected to parliament.

**1962** Aboriginal women in Australia gain the right to vote.

**1971** Swiss women gain the right to vote and stand for parliament.

**1997** Jenny Shipley becomes New Zealand's first female prime minister.

**1999** Helen Clark becomes New Zealand's first female prime minister to win a general election.

**2001** Dame Silvia Cartwright is New Zealand's Governor-General. Helen Clark is Prime Minister. Sian Elias is Chief Justice. Margaret Wilson is Attorney-General.

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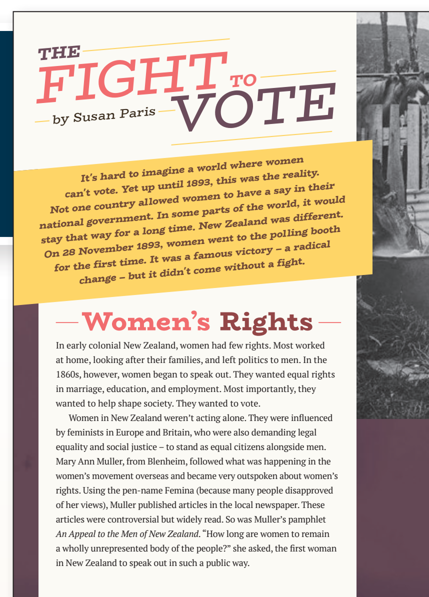
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