

Voting as Counter-Revolution – how the politicians who gave us the vote saw things 100 years ago



A hundred years ago, the British ruling class decided to extend the vote to women over thirty and to working class men. By doing this they hoped to restore people's faith in parliamentary government and thereby counter any revolutionary tendencies inspired by the Russian Revolution. As Sylvia Pankhurst said in 1923:

Quote:

'The legal barriers to women's participation in Parliament and its elections were not removed until the movement to abolish Parliament altogether had received the strong encouragement of witnessing the overthrow of Parliamentary Government in Russia and the setting up of Soviets. ... The upholders of reaction ... were by no means oblivious to the growth of Sovietism when they decided to popularise the old Parliamentary machine by giving to some women both votes and the right to be elected. - Workers' Dreadnought, December 1923.

If anyone has any doubt about the *counter-revolutionary* nature of voting and parliamentary elections, here are some quotes from various parliamentarians in 1917:

Quote:

'The line between order and revolution is as thin as it can be. ... [The extension of the vote] stands out as the one hopeful buffer between Govt. by Constitutional method and revolution.' - Lord Islington, *Letter to Lord Curzon, January 1917.*

Quote:

'Is this House of Commons going to waste month after month ... with the sorry spectacle of wrangling over questions of franchise when these tremendously vital problems [of labour, women, industry etc.] are being fought outside? As a matter of fact, you will have revolution if you try that game.' - Ramsay Macdonald, [Hansard, May 1917](#).

Quote:

'It seems to me that to give women suffrage is to adopt a conservative measure which is likely to allay discontent, to promote justice, and to maintain the efficiency of the representative authority in Parliament.' - Lord Hugh Cecil, [Hansard, June 1917](#).

Quote:

'We do not grant the vote for fitness [i.e. that every voter is fit to understand every political consideration]; we grant it ... for the protection of the State, in order that through the ballot box the State may learn, from the organised opinion of those who have grievances and who desire their remedy, what those grievances are. I suggest that the vote is granted nowadays on no kind of fitness, but as a substitute for riot, revolution, and the rifle.' - Earl Russell, [Hansard, December 1917](#).

Quote:

'What is it in the example of Russia that we should not imitate? Not the fact that she has introduced manhood and womanhood suffrage, but that she did not do it in time. "Too late," is a motto which may be found written over the victims of every revolution. We do not intend that it shall be found written over the ruins of this House.' - Earl of Lytton, [Hansard, December 1917](#).

And if anyone has any doubt about the counter-revolutionary nature of the Labour Party - whoever leads it – here is another quote from Sylvia Pankurst:

Quote:

'The social patriotic parties of reform, like the British Labour Party, are everywhere aiding the capitalists to maintain the capitalist system, ... are everywhere working against the Communist revolution, and they are more dangerous to it than the aggressive capitalists because the reforms they seek to introduce may keep the capitalist regime going for some time to come. When the social patriotic reformists come into power, they fight to stave off the workers' revolution with as strong a determination as that displayed by the capitalists, and more effectively, because they understand the methods and tactics and something of the idealism of the working class. ...

We must not dissipate our energy in adding to the strength of the Labour Party; its rise to power is inevitable. We must concentrate on making a Communist movement that will vanquish it. The Labour Party will soon be forming a Government; the revolutionary opposition must make ready to attack it.' – [Workers' Dreadnought, February 1920](#).

The extent to which the prevention of revolution was the reason the ruling class extended voting rights is remarkable. Here is another quote from the parliamentary debates of a century ago:

Quote:

'I think the introduction of women into this great democratic foundation of the nation would be a step forward in broadening it and giving it a more miscellaneous and more enlightening view. I believe the days of class Government are over, even as regards the Labour Party. In many respects they come before the country as a class Party today. I am sure they will cease to do so. ... I want to see a system of government in this country in which the whole nation is represented. Unless the whole nation is represented there would be a lack of that stability which is essential if we are to be free from the danger of such revolutionary movements as we see in countries where government is less organised.' – Viscount Haldane, [Hansard, January 1918](#).

Other parliamentarians realised that it might take more than the Labour Party and representative government to prevent industrial unrest. Here is one advocating workers' control of industry:

Quote:

'The second main cause of unrest of which I wish particularly to speak is the dehumanisation of industry. ... Very often, especially among the younger men, a strike is simply the blind assertion of personality against conditions which clog and hamper it. ... If [the British working man] can see that the industrial system, which he has only too much reason to dislike and to resent is going to be extended in a way which will give him some greater measure of control, he will be willing, I believe, to accept this. Plainly, the first steps must come from the masters; and, if it is not presumptuous to say so, I hope that those steps will be taken, not grudgingly, but in a spirit of confidence. The risks are very great. No one knows better than I do the risks which are involved. But what is the alternative risk? It is the risk of ending the war with the outbreak of another period of embittered industrial strife. The only hope for the future, as far as one can see, is the increase of knowledge and the sense of responsibility among our workers; and the surest way of spreading knowledge is to give experience, and the surest way of educating the sense of responsibility is to give trust. Therefore I venture to think that the best way at present of meeting the industrial unrest is to see how much is reasonable in the demand of our workers for a greater measure of control.' – The Archbishop of York, [Hansard, November 1917](#).

And here's another prescient quote from Sylvia Pankhurst, written at the time of the 1918 election:

Quote:

'As for the Labour Party – if all, and more than all, its candidates were elected, even if, by reason of their numbers, it could capture the reins of Government, it would give us nothing more than a wishy-washy Reformist Government, which, when all the big issues that really matter came to be decided, would be swept along in the wake of capitalist policy.' – [Workers' Dreadnought, December 1918](#).

At a time when illusions in Labour Party style reformism are higher than they have been for forty years, here are some more quotes from a century ago:

Quote:

'I do not believe you are ever going to have anything like revolution in a country where you have the best part of adult suffrage and where you have a free system of election.' – Edward Hemmerde (Liberal), [Hansard, November 1917](#).

Quote:

'There may be a revolutionary feeling in the air; but the great safeguard against revolution always has been, and is now, wise constitutional reform, and it is only when the masses of our people see that our political institutions are broad-based and are real expressions of the popular will, and that there is full and free access to Parliament for all sections and classes of the community, that the spirit of revolution can be exorcised.' – Herbert Samuel (Liberal), [Hansard, December 1917](#).

Quote:

'Let us measure the cost of our housing proposals by the cost of Bolshevism to the country and the cost of revolution. The money we propose to spend on housing is an insurance against Bolshevism and revolution.' – Major Astor (Conservative), [Hansard April 1919](#).

Quote:

'Unless we can get the people with us there will be changes of another and worse character effected. ... In the past ... we have had the burning spirit of revolution spread among the people and there has

actually had to be bloodshed before franchise reform was carried; if we do not want to provoke that result we must face these things in a calm atmosphere with a desire to have these things settled.' – George Wardle (Labour), [Hansard, May 1917](#).

Quote:

'I do not know anything in this country that will bring about a revolution ... so much as this lack of houses amongst our working classes.' – James Brown (Labour), [Hansard, May 1919](#).

Quote:

'You are going to increase [unemployment] benefit to 18s. a week. It is not enough, and we are not prepared to accept that 18s. as a settlement. We have asked for 40s. ... It has been said, and may be said again, that it is encouraging those people who would rather receive doles than work. ... All I can say is that, if you cannot set up machinery to deal with the malingerers, you should give us a chance and we will deal with them. ... A man or woman who would abuse a privilege of that kind deserves the most severe punishment that could be meted out to them.

...

Unemployment produces poverty, poverty produces discontent, and discontent produces revolution. The breeding-ground for Bolshevism is poverty and destitution. ... The Labour party are at the present moment, figuratively speaking, sitting on the safety valve. ... To prevent disaster, to prevent disturbances, to prevent uprising, to prevent tumult, sorrow, suffering and bloodshed, any price you pay is cheap in the end. The Labour party is going on constitutional lines and will continue to do so. The Labour party is anxious to prevent any of these things occurring.' – James Wignall (Labour), [Hansard, February 1921](#).

Quote:

'The greatest assistance and encouragement that could be given to Bolshevik propaganda in this country is the unrest and the fear of unemployment. ... It is only when causes contribute to revolutionary propaganda that revolutionary propaganda can take root, and the greatest safety any country can have is by removing the causes of unrest and dissatisfaction.' – James Sexton (Labour), [Hansard, February 1921](#).