

Module 02: Should Women Vote? The Politics of Suffrage

Evidence 3: Emmeline Pankhurst, "Why We Are Militant," 1913

A

Introduction

Thirty years later, Emmeline Pankhurst, the founder of the Women's Social and Political Union, delivered a speech in New York City outlining the main objectives of the militant suffragettes.

Questions to Consider

- Compare the language used by Pankhurst with that of Mill and Fawcett: are their arguments for women's suffrage the same?
- Who is she trying to persuade?
- What additional information might you need to understand the source?

Document

When we were patient, when we believed in argument and persuasion, they said, "You don't really want it because if you did, you would do something unmistakable to show you were determined to have it." And then when we did something unmistakable they said, "You are behaving so badly that you show you are not fit for it" ...Well, in Great Britain, we have tried persuasion, we have tried the plan of showing (by going upon public bodies, where they allowed us to do work they hadn't much time to do themselves) that we are capable people. We did it in the hope that we should convince them and persuade them to do the right and proper thing. But we had all our labour for our pains, and now we are fighting for our rights, and we are growing stronger and better women in the process. We are getting more fit to use our rights because we have such difficulty in getting them...We know the joy of battle. When we have come out of the gates of Holloway at the point of death, battered, starved, forcibly fed as some of our women have been—their mouths forced open by iron gags—their bodies bruised, they have felt when the prison bars were broken and the doors have opened, even at the point of death, they have felt the joy of battle and the exultation of victory. People have said that women could never vote, never share in the government, because government rests upon force. We have that this is

not true. Government rests not upon force; government rests upon the consent of the governed; and the weakest woman, the very poorest woman, if she withholds her consent cannot be governed...We ask you to show that although, perhaps, you may not mean to fight as we do, yet you understand the meaning of our fight; that you realise we are women fighting for a great idea; that we wish the betterment of the human race, and that we believe this betterment is coming through the emancipation and uplifting of women.

Source:

Emmeline Pankhurst, "Why We Are Militant" (1913).