

Emmeline Pankhurst: Fighter for Women's Rights [B2]

Brillante oratrice, ha svolto un ruolo fondamentale nella lotta per il suffragio femminile. Nei suoi quarant'anni di attivismo ha affrontato tragedie, aspri conflitti, violenze da parte della polizia ed è stata imprigionata in diverse occasioni.

Considered the most important British women's rights political activist in history, Emmeline Pankhurst formed and led the Suffragettes, a women-only militant group which demanded voting rights for women. She also fought bravely and [tirelessly](#) for the poor and oppressed. Pankhurst was born Emmeline Goulden in Manchester on 14 July 1858. Her parents were strong supporters of the Suffragist movement, which campaigned for parliamentary votes for women through peaceful [means](#). After attending her first women's suffrage meeting aged fourteen, Emmeline declared herself a committed suffragist. In 1879, she married Richard Pankhurst, a supporter of women's rights. They would have five children.

SHOCKED BY POVERTY

In 1889, she founded the Women's Franchise League, demanding women's right to vote in local elections — which was achieved in 1894. In the 1890s, she worked with the poor in Manchester and was shocked by their conditions. She believed that universal suffrage would be “a requisite for the end of poverty and social [hardship](#).”

TURNING TO MILITANCY

For decades, governments had refused to give women the parliamentary vote. Tired of constitutional methods, in 1903 Pankhurst helped found the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) with her [elder daughter](#) Christabel. Pankhurst's [motto](#) was “[Deeds](#), not words.” Her other daughters, Sylvia and Adela, became members. The [right-wing](#) press

mocked them as 'Suffragettes'. So they appropriated the term, adopting it themselves. Over the next decade, politicians, the press and the public (and some suffragists) would be astonished, and often shocked, at the militant tactics of the WSPU, which included huge demonstrations from all classes, violence against the police, and even arson.

PRISON AS PUBLICITY

Pankhurst and her colleagues were arrested and put in prison many times. They started a campaign of hunger strikes. The Government decided to force-feed the women, using rubberpipes. On Black Friday, 18 November 1910, police reacted violently when three hundred suffragettes tried to enter Parliament. The campaign became even more radical, with members setting fire to public buildings, pillar boxes and a railway carriage. Then, on 4 June 1913, came the movement's most iconic moment. WSPU member Emily Davison was killed when she decided to protest by running in front of the King's horse at the Epsom Derby. In 1913 the Government introduced the brutal 'Cat and Mouse Act': women on hunger strike in prison were released and then re-arrested when they were better — again and again.

WINNING THE VOTE

In 1914, with the arrival of World War One, both sides called a truce. Pankhurst encouraged women to help the war effort, thinking it was the best way to prove they deserved the vote. Two million women occupied the jobs of men doing military service. After the war, the Government could no longer ignore the suffragist movement's demands. The Representation of the People's Act in 1918 gave voting rights to women over thirty. Ten years later, a second act gave men and women over twenty-one equal voting rights. The suffragist movement had finally triumphed. Pankhurst never saw her dream come true, however. She died on 14 June 1928, a few weeks before the second act. Family tragedies, bitter conflicts with her two younger daughters, police brutality, and harsh conditions in prison had exhausted her. But this brave woman had played a fundamental part in winning the

vote for women. In 1999, Time magazine named her one of Time's 100 Most Important People of the 20th Century.

A GREAT ORATOR

Emmeline Pankhurst was a brilliant orator. On 13 November 1913 she delivered one of the greatest speeches of the 20th century. Titled 'Freedom or Death', in one passage, she spoke about "why women have adopted revolutionary methods in order to win the rights of citizenship." She called the movement's actions a "civil war": "In our civil war, people have suffered, but you cannot make omelettes without breaking eggs; you cannot have civil war without damage to something. [...] No more damage is done than is absolutely necessary, that you do just as much as will arouse enough feeling to bring about an honourable peace for the combatants."

TRAGEDIES AND BITTER FAMILY CONFLICTS

Pankhurst's family life was full of tragedies and bitter conflicts. Her first son, Frank, died of diphtheria aged four in 1888. Grief-stricken, Pankhurst commissioned two portraits of her dead son, but she was unable to look at them and hid them in a bedroom cupboard. She then lost her second son, Henry, in 1910. She was very close to her first daughter, Christabel, but fell out with her other two daughters, Sylvia and Adela, who were pacifists and opposed the war. Adela also disagreed with the movement's militant tactics. Her mother gave her a one-way ticket to Australia, £20 in cash and a few clothes. Adela would never see her family again. Then, in 1927, Sylvia, aged forty-five, gave birth to a son but refused to name the father. Her mother cut ties with her and the two never spoke again.

Glossary

- **ties** = legami
- **motto** = motto
- **pillar boxes** = cassette postali
- **carriage** = carrozza
- **to bring about** = dar luogo a
- **pipes** = tubi
- **arouse** = suscitare
- **cupboard** = armadio
- **mocked** = deridere
- **arson** = incendio doloso
- **hunger strikes** = scioperi della fame
- **rubber** = gomma
- **deserved** = meritare
- **commissioned** = commissionare
- **Deeds** = azioni
- **one-way ticket** = biglietto di sola andata
- **truce** = tregua
- **bitter** = amaro
- **hardship** = difficoltà
- **right-wing** = di destra
- **force-feed** = alimentare con la forza
- **Act** = legge
- **harsh** = dure
- **delivered** = pronunciare
- **tirelessly** = instancabilmente
- **means** = mezzi
- **elder daughter** = figlia maggiore
- **astonished** = stupiti
- **demonstrations** = manifestazioni
- **no longer** = non più
- **Grief-stricken** = afflitta dal dolore
- **fell out** = litigare