

[00:00:00.130] - Alys Mumford

Hello and welcome to a very special episode of On the Engender. I'm Alys Mumford and join me as we go back...in time.

[00:00:07.040]

[Jingle]

[00:00:26.330] - VO

On the Engender, Scottish Women and the Vote.

[00:00:36.450] - Alys Mumford

I could listen to that jingle all day long and huge thanks to the amazing Bossy Love who, when we said we'd love a version of the jingle which could have come from 1918, they just said, on it. Today, we're bringing you the first in a miniseries of On the Engender looking at Scottish Women and the Vote. Throughout 2018, we heard much made of the fact that it marked the centenary of the Representation of the People Act, which extended the right to vote to women. And of course, that does mark a huge step in the story of women's liberation. But what's often left out of the story is that not all women were given the right to vote, first off. That the women who fought for so long were vilified and criminalised, and that today, 100 years after the fact there are still many women in Scotland who are excluded from voting. We'll be bringing you some amazing people talking about the history and legacy of the suffrage movement in Scotland and some of the barriers which still exist today for young women, refugee and asylum seeking women, women in prison, trans women and non-binary people, and women facing domestic abuse. First though, we'll be hearing from the amazing Esther Breitenbach, who we recorded when she spoke at Engender's AGM about the suffrage movement in Scotland.

[00:01:48.490] - Alys Mumford

Hello, and welcome to you On the Engender, Scotland Feminist Policy Podcast. We're here at Engender's AGM, and we have a fantastic crowd of people. Can we hear them please?

[00:01:56.360]

[Audience cheers]

[00:02:00.110] - Alys Mumford

Oh look at that! Listeners, we didn't even do a practice run for that. It's pretty exciting. So today we're going to be talking about the centenary of some women getting the vote, not all women. It's 2018 and lots of people have been talking about this as a significant year. So we wanted to use On the Engender to explore this a little bit more. Look at what actually happened, what was the campaign around the vote and what does it mean for us today? Many women are still excluded from political processes, whether through institutional patriarchy and sexism or through legislation which doesn't allow them to vote. Even - we're recording this in the wake of the US midterms, and even though we just saw one and a half million people in Florida be enfranchised who previously weren't able to vote because they had a criminal record, in Scotland people who are currently in prison cannot vote. And there are lots of other ways which we still exclude people from democratic processes. So, during the course of this podcast, this is the first recording of it, we'll be exploring just some of those issues.

[00:02:57.230] - Alys Mumford

Dr. Esther Breitenbach is an Honorary Fellow in the School of History, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh. She's written really widely on women in Scotland, including on women in politics and on Scottish women's history and is a member of the committee of Women's History Scotland. She's been active in the women's movement in Scotland since the 1970s in various groups and campaigns and was a founder member of Engender, so you'll be hearing from her on other podcast episodes as well. And one of the editors of the Engender Gender Audit for a number of years. From 1998 to 2003, Esther worked on secondment in the Scottish Office, Scottish Executive Equality Unit and Women and Equality Unit in the Cabinet Office. From 2003 she continued to work on projects on gender statistics, including the Gender Audit commissioned by the Scottish Executive and published in 2007. More recently, she's been concentrating on Scottish women's history and other

historical projects. She's worked with Valerie Wright and Linda Fleming to produce the Women's History Scotland online learning resource about the women's suffrage movement in Scotland. It was launched earlier this year to commemorate the centenary of the Representation of the People Act in 1918, and we'll obviously link to that in the show notes. And I really would recommend checking it out. It's a fantastic resource.

[00:04:00.350] - Dr. Esther Breitenbach

Before I start, I'd like to do a plug for the new Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women that's just come out - just been launched by Edinburgh University Press. And I don't have any contributions in it, so I am praising here the work of others, do go and look for a copy. It has many suffragists and suffragettes in it, among other 1000 or odd other women across Scottish history. What I'm going to do here today is to give an outline, a brief outline of what is a very long and complex history and just try and focus on some key themes that hopefully people will be interested in discussing. As Alys has just mentioned, to commemorate the centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, Women's History Scotland has launched an online learning resource and it's free to download from the website - that's in the image there. And we point out that the history of the movement in Scotland remains patchy and despite important research that's already been published and we would like to encourage more research. The campaign for the Parliamentary Franchise for Women lasted from 1867 to 1928, in Scotland as elsewhere. And Scottish campaigns were part of a wider movement across Britain and Ireland and also part of international networks. As the issue was taken up in many countries across the world. This image here is of an early leaflet from the Edinburgh National Society for Women's Suffrage, which was formed in 1867. It was the first formed in Scotland, and by 1874 there were 62 Scottish suffrage committees across many locations in Scotland. But we don't unfortunately know what happened to many of these and they were perhaps short-lived. But some women involved doubtless took part in other women's rights campaigns. The Edinburgh one was continuous and I'll say a bit more about that later.

[00:06:09.990] - Dr. Esther Breitenbach

By the 1880s women were increasingly active in political organisations, raising the issue of enfranchisement there. For example, in the Primrose League, which was associated with the Conservative and Unionist party, the Scottish Women's Liberal Federation and emerging left wing political parties such as the Independent Labour Party. And here is an image of Lady Aberdeen, who is a prominent pro-suffrage Scottish Liberal. And the image - I have to say this because I think it's such a lovely image with her in her tiara. [Laughter]. She was later very involved in the International Council for Women. So she was quite an important figure right up into the interwar years. So while the campaign for the parliamentary franchise was going on, there was progressive enfranchisement of women at municipal level, school boards, parochial boards and parish councils, county councils and town councils. This is where some of the complexity of the history comes in and I'm not going to go into any details, but the qualifying conditions for women to vote and stand were not the same for these various elections. In Edinburgh, the Suffrage Society organised to ensure women were represented at local level, achieving considerable success with school boards and parish councils. So women were taking up elected positions in public office from 1873 onwards. Constitutional suffragism was growing from the late 1890s and when the Liberals came to power in 1906, the movement hoped for a government supported bill on women's enfranchisement. The Liberal Government failed to deliver and was met with increasing militancy by the Women's Social and Political Union, which had been formed in 1903. There were several women's Social and Political Union branches in Scotland, however, divisions among the membership led to the formation of the Women's Freedom League, which was committed to non-violent militancy, and it also had Scottish branches.

[00:08:19.170] - Dr. Esther Breitenbach

Constitutional suffragists did not support violent militant tactics, but there was cooperation between suffragists and suffragettes over events such as the 1907 Edinburgh demonstration. Ultimately, the much publicised militancy seems to have helped the suffragists more as their numbers grew far more than did those of the militants. In 1913 in Scotland, there were three women's Social and Political Union branches, 58 National Union of Women's Suffrage Society branches and ten Women's Freedom League branches. At the outbreak of war, the Women's Social and Political Union leadership threw

themselves into the war effort with patriotic fervour. Other campaigners were pacifists, becoming involved in organisations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Chrystal Macmillan was one of the leading members of that. She was at Edinburgh, she was a barrister. She took the case to the House of Lords to get the University vote for women - unsuccessfully. But we now have a building at Edinburgh University named after Chrystal Macmillan. There was also the Women's Peace Crusade founded by Helen Crawford and others in Glasgow, and there was activity in Edinburgh among women's Peace Crusade campaigners as well. As with down south, Manchester had an active Peace Crusade movement.

[00:09:45.390] - Dr. Esther Breitenbach

The Scottish Women's Hospitals, set up by Elsie Inglis and run voluntarily on being turned down by the War Office, were funded by the Constitutionalist Women's Suffrage Society. So there's a lot of fundraising and action to support that during the war and also women volunteering to go and serve with the Scottish Women's Hospitals. At the same time, negotiations continued over a suffrage bill. An important point to note was that the form of the demand for the parliamentary franchise was always that women should get the franchise on the same terms as men, and this was a restricted franchise dependent on a property qualification that meant not just ownership of property but also rented property of a specified value. And neither the constitutionalists nor the militant societies were demanding universal adult suffrage, although some women would have supported that principle. So the differences between the suffragists and suffragettes are not over the nature of the demand but over the tactics. Support for the demand in that form that is, on the same terms as men came from Scottish Women's Liberal Federation, the Primrose League, the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association, as well as non-party suffrage societies. Thus, even among those who supported the parliamentary franchise, many would have not supported universal suffrage. By contrast, the Labour Party and Labour organisations supported universal suffrage, for example, the Scottish Trade Union Congress, although the Scottish Cooperative Women's Guild supported demand for votes for women on the same terms as men from 1893. So there were some differences in the Labour movement. In 1912, the Labour Party resolved that no franchise reform would be acceptable if it failed to include women. And as a result of that declaration, the Constitutionalist Suffrage Society has agreed to support Labour in election campaigns. This was not universally approved by their membership and resulted in some loss of members. For example, in Glasgow.

[00:11:53.130] - Dr. Esther Breitenbach

The bill, negotiated in 1917, was a compromise sought by suffrage leaders like Millicent Fawcett to be the best they could then get. At this stage campaigners were not even demanding that women be allowed to stand for parliament, but in late 1819 the Parliament Qualification of Women Act was passed, allowing women over 21 to stand, although ironically not women over 21 to vote. [Laughter]. The act stipulated that women over 30 could register as electors if they, or their husband if they were married, qualified for the local government franchise. This retained an element of property qualification, particularly biased against single working class women, such as living in domestic servants and non-householder spinsters. Thus, by 1921 only around 79.2% of Scottish women 30 years or more had the vote. Altogether, women made up 40.5% of the Scottish electorate at that time. And as Michael Dyer, who's written about the changing franchise in Scotland, has commented, the higher age limit and other restrictions for women and I quote "marred its status as a democratic franchise, thereby tarnishing the democratic credentials of the legislation as a whole." That is, it is legislation on the one hand, universal franchise for men over 21 on a residential basis. But for women there's an age restriction and a property qualification restriction

[00:13:26.458]

[record scratch sound effect]

[00:13:27.430] - Alys Mumford

For many people that's just where the story of the suffragettes ends. And I'm so pleased Esther went on to talk about the campaigning which followed this first victory and the refusal to settle for half measures. Hearing about the organisations many women went on to found afterwards, puts me in mind of the amazing tenacity of the Women for Independence movement, the Women 5050 campaign, and many others who use electoral disappointment, whether in the results, the nature of

campaigning, or the lack of women's voices to motivate them to carry on fighting for change.

[00:13:55.243]

[record scratch sound effect]

[00:13:56.170] - Dr. Esther Breitenbach

Following the 1918 act, suffrage societies transformed themselves into new organisations. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies branches became Society's Equal Citizenship in 1919, while Women's Citizens Associations had been begun forming in 1918. By 1919, 14 towns in Scotland had Women's Citizens Associations. There were fewer societies for equal citizenship in 1927, only four in Scotland, although they often cooperated in their activities. Women's Citizens Associations had a strong local focus, supporting women to stand for local government and having women counsellors as members. Receptions with counsellors, Province and Lady Province and MPs were a regular occurrence. Women's Citizen Associations and Societies for Equal Citizenship concerns included women's access to public life and professional employment, public health, women and children's welfare, housing and public morals, and as I was having conversation with Ruth earlier, also women as jury members and women police and so on. Given the separate Scottish legal system, there was also a specific focus on Scottish legislative reform. The Women's Citizens Associations and Societies for Equal Citizenship took up the issue of the equal franchise, passing resolutions in support. For example, the Edinburgh Women's Citizens Association resolved in support of an equal franchise in 1919 and in Dundee in 1921. But most of the lobbying took place from 1926 onwards. The Conservative leader, Stanley Baldwin had pledged in 1924 that the Conservative Party would, if elected, examine equalising the franchise. And that pledge in itself was a reaction to Labour Party Private Members Bill of 1924, which was, however, rejected on a second reading in February 1925. A Cabinet Equal Franchise Committee was set up in 1926 and the Scottish Secretary of State, Sir John Gilmore, was a member of it. Between 1926 and 1928, letters were sent to Gilmore supporting the Equal franchise, including from the Edinburgh Society for Equal Citizenship, the Edinburgh Women's Citizens Association, the Glasgow Society of Equal Citizenship and Women's Citizenship, Women's Citizens Association amalgamated, and the Scottish Council for Women's Citizens Association. All these names are all a bit of a mouthful. But these hardly constituted a flood, the letters to Sir John Gilmore, and I think we have to speculate that there was more lobbying than this, as many Women's Citizens Associations would have had regular contact with local MPs, so they were probably lobbying their MPs rather, perhaps in the Scottish Secretary. But I'm not sure that we'll ever find evidence to demonstrate that.

[00:17:00.250] - Dr. Esther Breitenbach

The Cabinet Committee papers reveal that there was still much resistance in the Conservative Party to the universal franchise. The idea of women becoming the majority of the electorate was still a sticking point, but there was also resistance to further enfranchisement of working class electors. Fears about young people of both sexes were also expressed. They were thought to be easily influenced and irresponsible. The options of including both the retention of age restrictions and property qualifications were considered, but it was eventually conceded that only an adult franchise on a residential basis would meet the Prime Minister's pledge. The first two women MPs for Scotland, Duchess of Atholl, was elected in 1923. She was, ironically, an anti-suffragist -[laughter] - but you know, happy to put yourself forward for election once the franchise had been granted. When the equal franchise became law in 1928, there was a mass celebration of the enfranchisement of women in the Usher Hall, organised by over 30 women and young people's societies. Lady Frances Balfour was in the chair, and Jennie Lee was introduced by Balfour as one of the monstrous regiment of younger women who are coming into the vote. And Jennie Lee expressed her gratitude of younger women to the pioneers like Lady Frances, Jennie Lee was to go on to become Scotland's second woman MP at a by-election in February 1929 at the age of 24. Ironically, then still too young to vote as the act did not come into force until the General Election of May 1929.

[00:18:42.420] - Dr. Esther Breitenbach

The theme today is the legacy of the vote, and what I've done is briefly outlined very, very briefly, the contribution that women in Scotland made to gaining equal political rights of men defined in terms of the right to vote. Yet this can constitute a narrow focus, notwithstanding both its real and symbolic

significance. The women who organised in 1867 to demand the parliamentary franchise did not confine themselves to this demand or the sphere of action. Rather, they organised to gain entry to higher education, to public life and political office at municipal level, and they contributed to policy debates, particularly concerning the interests of women and children. They also created institutions to advance women's education, health and political education. To be sure, there were class differences. And again, that's an area that deserves a lot more research. And different organisational vehicles for articulating women's demands and interests. But there was a shared commitment to active citizenship which became a watchword in the interwar years. The much broader engagement with political and public life that this represents were a significant legacy of the campaign for the vote as we're the continuing efforts of women to achieve greater political representation in local, central and more recently devolved government.

[00:20:07.860]
[Applause]

[00:20:19.350] - Alys Mumford

I really hope you enjoyed hearing from Esther. In our next episode of this miniseries we'll hear from Ruth Boreham who's going to talk about the amazing women who used the opportunity of the 1911 census to push for voting rights - no persons here only women. Thanks for listening.

[00:20:40.570] - Amanda Stanley

This episode of on the Engender was hosted by Alys Mumford and was recorded live at Engender's AGM in Edinburgh with guest Esther Breitenbach. The podcast was produced by Amanda Stanley on behalf of Engender and the jingle featured throughout was written, performed and remixed, especially for this miniseries by Bossy Love. You can follow Engender on Twitter @EngenderScot and join in the conversation by using the hashtag #OnTheEngender.