Politicians and Suffragettes

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN NEW ZEALAND, 1891-1893

From things immodest, strange and new,
From women of the genus 'blue',
From Radical or Liberal new —
Good One deliver us!

Anon., Dunedin, May 1892.

With the assumption of office by the Liberal Government in 1891, the success of the New Zealand suffrage movement in its attempt to achieve the enfranchisement of women seemed almost assured. In the session of 1891 a private member's Bill passed the Lower House but was rejected in the Legislative Council. In 1892 a Government-sponsored Bill passed both Houses but was rejected by the Government because of an amendment added by the Legislative Council. In September 1893 an Electoral Bill including women's suffrage passed both Houses and became law. To the casual observer of the debates and discussions of these years, obstacles in the path of this highly controversial and radical ideal may have seemed relatively slight. In fact, the measure passed amidst a confusion of petty plot and counter-plot, of lying and evasion, all of which throws interesting light on the working of parliamentary democracy in late Victorian New Zealand, and on the individual politicians prominent in Parliament at that time.

The conditions which made the year 1891 seem most favourable for the success of women's voting rights were both social and political. As was true of all western countries, New Zealand in the latter half of the nineteenth century had witnessed, with the growing influence of the feminist movement, a striking change in the position of women in society. Two factors were of particular importance: women had attained equality with men in education, from primary through to tertiary level; and women had entered the country's work force in unprecedented numbers including the professions of nursing, teaching, law and medicine. The result was a favourable climate of opinion for the passage of legislation to end the legal disabilities of women. Measures to equalise divorce laws, to repeal the Criminal Diseases
Act and to grant married women the right to hold property, had found protagonists in the New Zealand legislature in the 1870s and 1880s. Even before any public pressure was organised, attempts had been made to extend voting rights to women. In 1885 the first national women's society in New Zealand, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, had been founded, and had immediately become vocal in support of all aspects of feminist reform. Under the extremely able and energetic leadership of Mrs Kate Sheppard of Christchurch, the Union began systematic agitation for women's suffrage. By the full utilisation of the tools of current reform movements — public meetings, petitions to Parliament, letters to the papers, pamphlets, questions at politicians' meetings — the Union had by 1891 brought the issue very prominently before the public.

Such was the extent of public interest in the women's suffrage that it was one issue on which most candidates at the 1890 election had been forced to formulate and express their opinions. The results of the elections, with an apparent preponderance of pro-suffrage candidates returned to the House, made suffrage advocates extremely optimistic about their cause. But beyond this, general political conditions in the country were in any case far from inimical to such a revolutionary ideal. To begin with, the small legislature of this pioneering country lacked the strongly entrenched conservative element that was proving so hostile to women's rights in the older western countries. The party to the right, now in opposition, could be equated more justly with traditional nineteenth century English Liberalism than with the English Conservative Party. The majority party, counterpart in many ways of the 'new Liberals' on the English political scene, had preached a markedly radical programme in the elections, and with their enthusiasm for democratic ideals it was to be hoped that the interests of the female half of the population would not be overlooked.

To understand the course of women's suffrage through Parliament during the years 1891-3, however, it is essential to investigate not so much the attitudes of parties towards the ideal as those of groupings of politicians. In the early 1890s, when party organisation was as yet nascent, there was opportunity for far greater individual expression of opinion than in later years, and women's rights was an issue which led to considerable divergence of views within the parties themselves.

1 The Criminal Diseases Act, designed to prevent the spread of venereal disease, was offensive to feminists for two reasons: it deprived prostitutes, often young girls, of normal security under the law, and it discriminated against the female partner in sexual misdemeanour.
2 Married Women's Property Acts were passed in 1860, 1870, and under the Stout-Vogel Ministry in 1884. The others were not successful until women's suffrage had been achieved.
4 For example Lyttelton Times, 5, 13, 14 November 1890; New Zealand Herald, 22, 29 November 1890. Reports of various politicians' meetings all include their commitments on women's suffrage.
This was due, in the first instance, to varying personal opinions of
the question, arrived at from theoretical or emotional considerations,
as in society at large. For politicians, however, another question
loomed large on the horizon. For which party, right or left, would
newly-enfranchised women vote? The answer each individual politi-
cian arrived at was clearly reflected in the ardour with which he
espoused or spurned the women’s cause.

In 1891 one of the so-called ‘labour’ group of the Liberal party
asked in the House of Representatives: ‘What is the question facing
us politically? It is a better distribution of wealth. And the greatest
thing the working men can do is to bring their wives and sisters to
fight the battle against organised capital. For the left wing of the
Liberal party, the political result of the enfranchisement of women
was quite clear — women were radical in belief and action, and their
enfranchisement would prove of immense value to the Liberal party.
‘They [women] will be the very first to ask the reason why a few men
should be absolutely rolling in wealth, and wasting more in a day
than would keep some of these families for a month’, another
declared. These men staunchly upheld the principle of universal adult
suffrage — but their convictions on women’s radical political beliefs
most certainly spurred them on to far greater enthusiasm for the
cause, with the result that the labour group formed the body which
most strenuously pressed for women’s suffrage in Parliament during
the years 1891-3.

Their image of woman as a radical creature was shared by another
group in Parliament, a small number of Opposition members for
whom this supposed radicalism made the female suffrage anathema.
Women, they felt, were notorious for their championship of far-reaching radical reform, and did this not involve the type of governmental
interference already being perpetrated by the Liberals? Their fears
were voiced by G. G. Stead, editor of the Press, in a letter to Sir
John Hall:

I cannot help expressing the opinion that you are making a fatal mistake
in advocating the female franchise. It will double the majority against us
and make the country more communistic than it is all ready — When I
was in Lyttelton during the strike, the women were far and away worse
than the men . . . . There are more poor than rich in the world and the
poor women having no sense of justice or in fact of right or wrong will be
the most ardent supporters of spoliation. I have been amongst the poor
in Christchurch quite lately and it is among women that one hears the most
democratic and revolutionary theories.

5 New Zealand Parliamentary Debates (NZPD), LXXIII (1891), 536,
(Earnshaw).
6 ibid., 529, (R. M. Taylor).
7 G. G. Stead to Sir John Hall, 19 June 1891, Hall Papers, General Assembly
Library, Wellington.
The women’s vote, wrote E. A. Hankey, would definitely not be in the conservatives’ interest. ‘Certainly, one finds the ladies generally siding against glaring injustice, which is of course so much to the good — but then emotion in legislation is very much to be depreciated [sic], and especially so where economic principles are in question.’

The anxiety of this group of politicians and their close confederates in the country was patent.

The majority of Opposition members, however, cherished a different image of woman as a political force. For them, woman was undoubtedly a conservative element in the community, the upholder of the established institutions of church and state, the stabilising symbol of their civilisation and its values. This, they felt, was especially true of those of the sex they held to be the genuine examples of true womanhood — the country women. The Opposition members largely represented country seats. Their belief in the direction the women’s vote would take was conditioned by their view of women as largely domesticated, home-loving country wives; and these, they felt sure, would swell the conservative ranks.

It was widely believed by the Opposition that it had been the undue influence of the town, especially through the working of the ‘one man, one vote’ principle, which had enfranchised itinerant labour, that had caused their defeat in the 1890 election. The ‘one man, one vote’ principle had thrown political power into the hands of the scum of the population, an Opposition supporter from Wanganui told Sir John Hall. Women, however, had seemed very largely on the Opposition’s side. ‘I hope you will stick to the female franchise’, he advised, ‘for it seems the only possible set-off against the pot-house larrikin element in our politics.’

Even Sir John Hall, for many years a sincere advocate of feminist reforms, and the leader of the suffrage campaign in Parliament from 1891 to 1893, was not unswayed by the political implications of the measure. He wrote to a friend:

in the country districts and even throughout the colony generally, it will increase the influence of the settler and family man, as against the loafing single man who held a great voice in the last elections — But for them, all the seats would have come to our side. I cannot believe that those who have anything to lose will fail to bring to the polls the female voters belonging to them, and generally among womankind the drunkard and the profligate will not have much chance, which will be a great gain for us.

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8 E. A. Hankey to Hall, 19 November 1893, Hall Papers.
9 A member of the New Zealand Farmers’ and Country Settlers’ League said at an Annual General Meeting that ‘it was nonsense to speak of parties in New Zealand as Liberals or Conservatives, it was a case of town versus country’. Lyttelton Times, 14 July 1892.
10 Henry Field to Hall, 6 December 1890, Hall Papers. Compare also Col. Whitmore in the Legislative Council in 1892: ‘I do not deny for one moment that the country has been injuriously affected by the cities, and I have no doubt that the country will derive a certain proportion of assistance from the women, whose votes will to some extent counteract those of unthinking voters in the towns.’ NZPD, LXXVII (1892), 576.
11 Hall to Stead, 30 June 1891, Hall Papers.
Just as the faith in women’s potential radicalism held by back-bench Liberals was shared by certain anti-suffragists on the Opposition benches, so the faith of the majority of Opposition representatives in the quiet conservatism of the female mind had its effect on another Liberal group: the ministry itself. The Government was in an unenviable dilemma over the women’s vote. Elected on a radical platform, with backbenchers who fervently upheld the women’s demands, it was under considerable pressure to back the measure. As a group, however, its members were by no means firmly committed to women’s suffrage from personal conviction. Four, the Prime Minister, John Ballance, William Pember Reeves (both of whose wives were well-known feminists), Alfred Cadman and Joseph Ward, had previously given support in varying degrees to feminist measures, but the other four, Richard Seddon, John McKenzie, James Carroll and the Councillor Patrick Buckley, had been and remained antagonistic to it. Seddon was particularly hostile, had opposed the 1879 Suffrage Bill and in 1887 was said to have been the originator of a plot which killed Vogel’s Bill. ‘I will not have it said that the majority of this House are under petticoat government’, he had declared in 1886. ‘We shall have to look well to our laurels and assert our prerogative as the lords of creation before long.’

But for members of the ministry, of even greater significance than their personal convictions was their present political position. Elected at the head of their party, they were at last witnessing their ideals

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12 In 1893 the new Prime Minister, Richard Seddon, told a New Plymouth audience that it had been Mrs. Ballance who had converted her husband to women’s suffrage (Daily News, n.d. [1893], clipping from newspaper in Seddon Papers, Wellington), and during the suffrage campaign she wrote to Kate Sheppard that she would do everything in her power ‘to further the cause’ (Mrs. Ellen Ballance to Mrs. Kate Sheppard, 3 May [1891], Sheppard Papers, C.M.L., Christchurch) as she always had done. Her husband had been the first politician to introduce the measure in the House twelve years before. Ellen Ballance’s interest in this and all questions covering women’s status had led to her election as Vice-President of the International Women’s Progressive Society, the objects of which were ‘to put down sex bias, and class prejudice, and to promote friendly feeling between women of different countries, to improve the economic position of women, and take up women’s questions as they arise’ (New Zealand Graphic, 23 July 1892, p. 736). She attended debates whenever possible, and in 1891 caused a stir in the House when, on an anti-suffrage member’s declaration that women did not themselves want to vote, she passed round a petition in the Ladies’ Gallery which drew 68 signatures, assuring the House that they did in fact desire the vote (Press, 25 August 1891).

13 Mrs. Reeves was prominent in Christchurch feminist circles and her interest in the suffrage battle in Parliament may be judged by a letter to Sir John Hall: ‘We are going to have our franchise after all. Isn’t it glorious? . . . My husband is to be relied on. I have seen to that.’ (Mrs. W. P. Reeves to Hall, 1 August [1891], Hall Papers.)

14 The Bill had passed its second reading in the Lower House by 41 votes to 22 (NZPD. LVII [1887], 257). During its committee stage, proceedings continued to 1.00 a.m. by which time a great many suffrage supporters had gone home. All bar one of the anti-suffrage faction, clearly by design, remained behind, and they instigated a sudden division to defeat the principle of the Bill, which they won by 21 votes to 19 (ibid., 372). It was Seddon who then rose and demanded that Vogel withdraw the Bill, pointing out that it had now been rendered useless.

15 ibid., LIV (1886), 565.
being translated into reality and their security for the time being
seemed assured. Yet the women's vote involved a gamble by which
this security could be utterly destroyed. They were in a position to
appreciate the logic of an anti-suffrage Liberal who asked: ‘If the
votes of women are to strengthen and increase the Liberals, what need
is there for them? . . . Have not members been returned in a suffi-
cient majority to give us a Liberal House? If that be so, then why
should the Liberal side of the House vote for this question, when
there is a risk that it will result in a Conservative reaction?’16 Ballance
himself, clearly the suffragists’ best hope in the Cabinet, was certainly
weighing the measure's political implications. In 1890 he had conjet-
tured that ‘Women may be Conservative while ignorant, but Liberal
when instructed’17 — hence only of long-term benefit to his party. In
1891, in a vein similar to that of the Opposition pro-suffrage faction,
he said he was ‘somewhat doubtful as to how the experiment would
work out as affecting the state of the parties. He believed that in the
cities the women's vote will be cast mainly in favour of the Liberal
Candidates, and that in the country the preponderance of their voting
power will go to the Conservatives.’18

The ministry faced two unpleasant alternatives. One was to oppose
the suffrage and arouse the wrath of the suffrage movement, includ-
ing their own vocal back-benchers. The other was to back the suffrage
and gamble seriously with their political future. Ballance and Reeves,
so rumour had it, were ready for the gamble, their fellows were in a
more cautious mood.

There was yet another issue which influenced the attitudes of vari-
ous politicians to women's suffrage: that of temperance. The nine-
teenth-century temperance movement, in New Zealand as in the
United States, had evolved a special relationship with its fellow re-
form movement, feminism. By attracting women in considerable
numbers, and subsequently offering them equality of status with men
in their societies, temperance had served a two-fold function for the
feminist movement. On the practical side, women learned the tools of
political agitation; on the ideological side, women became aware with
increasing intensity of the injustice of the social and legal disabilities
their sex was still heir to. It was natural, then, that politicians with
temperance leanings, such as Robert Stout, Alfred Saunders and
James Fulton, should be in the forefront of the cause for the emanci-
pation of women.

It was similarly not surprising that the enfranchisement of women
should have been anathema to that dire enemy of temperance, ‘the
drink trade’, and its chief supporters in Parliament. In a country
where licences to sell alcoholic liquor were granted as a result of a
public vote, and where women figured so prominently in the ranks
of the teetotallers, brewers and publicans alike saw their vested

16 NZPD, LXXIII (1881), 511.
17 ibid., LXVIII (1890), 394.
18 Auckland Star, 24 August 1891.
interests gravely threatened by attempts to enfranchise women. Thus in the years 1891-3 there arose in Parliament what was termed the 'licensed victuallers' party or cabal'.¹⁹ This was led by Henry Fish of Dunedin and drew on politicians from both sides of the House, including W. Dawson, G. Swan, G. Fisher, E. Blake and W. Carn-cross. On the surface, the political weight such a group could carry might have appeared negligible. Fish was notorious for his histrionics, lack of proportion, and lengthy tirades delivered to rapidly thinning audiences, while of Fisher it was said, 'A stranger would listen spell-bound to his awful declamation, but there are very few strangers left in Wellington.'²⁰ The rest were virtually political nonentities. Their importance in these years was to be in the utilisation of their anti-suffrage wiles by another distinctly more powerful body, namely, the ministry.

When the new Parliament met for the first time in January 1891, women's enfranchisement was one of the principal issues before it. Various currents of thought were to enter into the manoeuvres over the issue in the next three sessions. There were Liberals who espoused women's rights as part of a brave new world in the making, and who felt assured of women's support for left-wing reforms. There were Opposition members who shared this belief in woman's radical nature, and feared their vote accordingly. There were Opposition members who cherished the hope that the quiet conservative outlook they saw in their womenfolk would boost the future political hopes of their party. There were the Cabinet members varying widely in their personal attitudes to the suffrage, but united in doubts as to the effect of the measure on their political ambitions. And finally there were the traditional arch-enemies of teetotaller and drinker with their opposing stance on this as on so many contemporary issues. The influence of these conflicting beliefs can be traced in the course of women's suffrage through Parliament in the years 1891-3, as now one group, now another, gained the upper hand.

When the sessions of 1891 began, it was clear that the Government's initial decision was to ignore the women's suffrage altogether and see what the reaction would be. Thus, when they introduced their Electoral Bill dealing with other details in the electoral law, no mention was made of women's enfranchisement. Suffrage supporters in Parliament immediately voiced resentment at the omission and announced their intention of amending the Bill during its committee stage. Sir John Hall, who had already initiated a private member's Female Suffrage Bill, undertook this task on 19 June, but the hearing was adjourned before a division was taken.²¹

Despite the Government's promise that the debate would soon be resumed, it appeared to many that they were in fact keeping the

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¹⁹ NZPD, LXXIII (1891), 527.
²⁰ Lyttelton Times, 28 July 1892.
²¹ Evening Star, 20 June 1891. There was a ball that night at Government House.
measure back. Hall reported to the suffrage leader, Mrs Kate Sheppard, that some active but secret opponents, undoubtedly (he thought) the liquor ring, were working against them. Their tactics included a rumour intended to frighten new members of the House, that, if the women’s vote were passed, new elections would have to be held immediately.22

It was nine months before the interrupted debate on the Electoral Bill was finally resumed. With Ballance ill the House was left in charge of Reeves, who faced obstructionist tactics from the liquor faction. By stone-walling tactics, the group succeeded in keeping the House sitting till 2.30 a.m. without reaching a division on the suffrage issue. Then, amidst angry outbursts, the three remaining ministerial members, Reeves, Ward and Cadman, joined forces with the liquor group in their attempt to thwart a division, and won by a narrow margin against Liberal backbenchers and Opposition suffragists.23

It was a precedent for many similar incidents over the next three years when the Cabinet, clearly keen to defeat the suffrage, but equally hopeful of concealing their unenthusiastic feelings, were glad to make use of the obstructionist tactics of the liquor faction for their own ends.

The ministry had not, however, seen the end of the women’s rights issue for that session. Suffrage supporters in and out of Parliament were furious at this night’s work, and the following day seventeen pro-suffrage politicians, including Hall, Alfred Saunders and several labour members, formed a committee to put pressure on the Government to take up the measure again.24 As a result Ballance promised, not to take up women’s suffrage on a party basis, but at least to set aside a day for the subject’s full consideration. And so on 24 August a full discussion of the pros and cons of the issue took place in Parliament. In all, sixty-seven members voted or paired in the division, and the result was a healthy majority of twenty-five in favour of the suffrage.25 Of the ministers, Ballance, Reeves, Cadman and Ward26 voted in its favour, Carroll, the only minister to speak, voted against it along with McKenzie. Seddon did not vote.

After this clear expression of favourable opinion, the Government now faced considerable pressure to take up the suffrage and see it successfully through its stages that session. These manoeuvres were complicated by a new political factor. Alfred Saunders, an independent who generally supported the administration, reported that Hall was attempting to turn the suffrage issue to the Opposition party’s ends. He was trying to persuade the Liberal pro-suffrage group to withhold their support from the Government generally unless they agreed to make the suffrage a party measure. ‘It is every day made

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22 Hall to Kate Sheppard, 22 June 1891, Sheppard Papers.
23 NZPD, LXXIII (1891), 309. Result of division: 20 votes to 18.
24 Saunders to Kate Sheppard, 17 August 1891, telegram in Sheppard Papers.
25 NZPD, LXXIII (1891), 550-1.
26 When the division list was published Ward was paired against the Bill, but he later declared this had been a mistake. NZPD, LXXIV (1891), 223.
more and more plain that he would sell us all if he could finally defeat the Gov. policy bills and he comes round every day to urge us to do something in the way of threatening the Govt. . . . I think you will see that the most fatal curse would be to allow ourselves to be used as a decoy in Sir John's hand. Thus a crack was appearing on party lines in the hitherto solid pro-suffrage ranks.

But the Government was not easily browbeaten. When Hall's Female Suffrage Bill was in committee on 3 September, the Cabinet voted solidly in favour of an amendment moved by Blake of the liquor faction to postpone the operation of the Bill until 31 March 1894 — in other words, until after the next general election. The Liberal whips had tried to convince their back-benchers that the Government could easily delay the next election until then, but the amendment failed by five votes. 'Every strong member of the Government is strongly opposed to woman's franchise, and trusting them to strain the law to get it into operation, would indeed be leaning on a broken reed,' was Saunders's sour comment. Again, that same day Carroll, Seddon, McKenzie and Ward joined forces with the liquor ring in a proposal to allow women voters the right to stand for Parliament. The real intention behind the amendment was a hostile one. This step was held to be extremely revolutionary, and would thus ensure that the predominantly conservative upper house could not possibly pass the Bill. Because, however, a number of genuine suffragists saw this step as only a logical corollary to the franchise, the amendment passed by thirty votes to twenty-four, and was thus incorporated in the Bill which passed its final stages.

It was to the Legislative Council that the anti-suffragists looked for the defeat of the Bill. The upper house had already rejected a number of the Liberals' radical measures, and there was every expectation that women's suffrage would meet with the same fate. They were not disappointed. In the crucial debate on the Bill it became clear that many members feared for the social and political consequences of the measure, and on 19 September the second reading was defeated by seventeen votes to fifteen. Patrick Buckley, the only Cabinet member in the Legislature Council, voted against the Bill. The division list showed the same apparent disregard for party lines that had characterised the divisions in the lower house.

The year 1891 had been an important one for the course of women's suffrage. It had witnessed a great deal of full and open discussion on the subject in Parliament, and had shown that a big majority of the elected house favoured its adoption. The Government had spent the

27 Saunders to Kate Sheppard, 29 August 1891, Sheppard Papers.
28 NZPD, LXXIV (1891), 222-3.
29 Saunders to Kate Sheppard, 2 September 1891, Sheppard Papers.
30 NZPD, LXXIV (1891), 228.
31 ibid., 223.
32 ibid., 470. The two Maori members, Wahawaha and Taiaroa, voted against the Bill, which gave rise to a complaint that the women's franchise had been defeated by the Maori vote.
year trying to avoid taking responsibility for this radical measure which ought by its nature to have been attractive to them. Ballance had presumably remained favourable, but taking into consideration the hostility of many members of his Cabinet, and with his own natural fears of the measure's electoral results, he had clearly acquiesced in manoeuvres for its defeat. It was a policy that became impossible to follow again in 1892. Such was the vehemence of the protests their actions had aroused, from the suffrage movement in general but most significantly from their own party members, that in 1892 the ministers at last agreed to adopt women's franchise as a Government measure. They could have every hope that the Legislative Council would kill the Bill as in the previous year. Its passage through the lower house, however, would have to receive their full backing.

The 1892 Electoral Bill, which included the principle of women's franchise, had a quiet journey through all its stages in the House of Representatives. The liquor faction attempted the same obstructionist tactics as the previous session but with no success. First, the Cabinet was no longer backing them. Secondly, the ranks of the anti-suffrage group had dwindled in numbers since 1891. Saunders had put it thus: 'Fish's abominable [sic] conduct drove everyone from him and members are on the look out for some excuse to go over as woman's champions now that they see women will get a vote whether they support it or not.' Many erstwhile enemies were hence to be found piously upholding the women's claims, and thus the wiles of Fish and his cohorts did not meet with their former success.

Rumour had it that anti-suffrage Cabinet members had pinned their hopes on the Legislative Council's rejection of the Bill as in the previous year. But the concern for their parties' future that lower house members were revealing was clearly reflected in the attitudes of their upper house fellows. The Opposition party members, for example, were unwilling to see their representatives facing an electorate of newly-enfranchised women with a history of opposition to women's rights. There was, however, a promise that many of these Councillors insisted on as a price for their support. The Opposition party had pinned their hopes on strong support from country women at the polls, yet these were the very women who might find difficulty in reaching voting centres. Was it reasonable, asked Dr. Grace, to expect women in country districts to ride ten, twelve or fifteen miles in

33 Only Carroll broke the solidity of Cabinet support in the session.
34 Saunders to Kate Sheppard, 26 August 1891, Sheppard Papers.
35 Thomas Mackenzie was an example of this rapid changing of sides. A longtime opponent of the suffrage, he wrote to Hall in June 1892: 'By the way, I am going to support the Female Franchise business, I can now see that as an expedient we cannot have anything better to save the country seats' (T. Mackenzie to Hall, 6 May 1892, Hall Papers). Compare this with Hall's letter to Mrs. Sheppard a few months later: 'Mr. Thomas Mackenzie was on our side last Session, in consequence I expect, of the feelings in his constituency' (Hall to Kate Sheppard, 4 November 1892, Letterbooks, Hall Papers).
order to vote, especially if the weather was inclement? To safeguard what they believed to be their party’s interests, a number of Opposition members agreed to join the suffrage ranks if a so-called ‘electoral rights’ amendment was added to the Bill. This permitted postal voting for all women, as well as for the few migratory labourers who were mentioned in the Bill. An Opposition Councillor declared that anyone who opposed this amendment ‘meant to deprive the farmers’ wives and daughters of the means of recording their votes’. It was added to the Bill by a vote of thirteen to eight. Following this, the crucial clause granting women the suffrage passed by fourteen votes to five, and a few days later the third reading was successfully concluded.

With the electoral rights amendment to hamper it, the Electoral Bill and women’s suffrage were still not safely into harbour. The Liberal party was known to be wary of postal voting, even for a tiny number of people, in case it should work against the secrecy of the ballot which they felt essential for their cause. For those anti-suffrage members, especially in the Cabinet, itching to fight a rear-guard action, a perfect opportunity had presented itself. Vociferous objections were soon pouring forth, and with it a new rumour, this time concerning the Legislative Council. The Opposition party there had known perfectly well that electoral rights would be most unpopular with the Liberals. Rather than reject the Bill outright as in 1891, and bring down on their heads the wrath of the suffrage movement, they had added this amendment assured that the Government would reject the Bill and thus face the odium for the defeat of women’s rights. Alfred Saunders was told by the Councillor Barnicoat that electoral rights had been introduced by the Council ‘as a cunning device to get the Bill killed’. The Liberal press reiterated this view continually over the next few months, together with their reasons for fearing electoral rights. In the view of the editor of the *Lyttelton Times*: ‘the object of the amendment is to afford the Conservative classes a means of influencing the votes of the domestic and other females who are more or less dependent on their patronage’. They believed, or so they said, that a mistress might demand to see a servant’s papers, or an employer those of his women workers.

The amendment eventually killed the Bill. Three successive conferences between the two houses broke down, and Seddon, acting-

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36 NZPD, LXXVIII (1892), 260.
37 ibid., 790.
38 ibid., 316.
39 ibid., 317. The voting initially was recorded as 13 votes to 6. The clause had read ‘Person’ includes ‘woman’, and Col. Whitmore had proposed the hostile amendment to insert the words ‘does not’ before ‘include’. Pollen, who was deaf, did not realise that the question had been put in the negative and had thus voted contrary to his intentions (ibid., 404).
40 e.g. Ballance to Christchurch Knights of Labour, 27 July 1892, Ballance Papers, Letterbook, Turnbull Library, Wellington.
41 Saunders to Kate Sheppard, n.d., September 1892, Sheppard Papers.
42 26 September 1892.
Premier because of Ballance’s new illness, as chief representative of the Government, clearly gave no opening for compromise as tales of his rudeness and belligerency became widespread. Saunders wrote:

When Seddon was new as a Minister the sense of the new responsibility restrained him considerably and we saw less of his verbosity and unlimited conceit but now that circumstances have placed him in front he talks and acts like a blown frog as his conceit and daily impudence know no bounds. Mr. Hutchinson and Pinkerton are the only two members I find who would resolutely resist Seddon’s tricks to get rid of the franchise. I have no doubt that Seddon has pledged himself to the publicans . . . . to stop the franchise and he thinks the simple advocates of the measure can be and are easily hood-winked by his cunning.

J. Mackenzie admits to me that none of the Ministers want the franchise except Ballance, but he insists upon it that Ballance does want it.43

Amidst Opposition taunts that the Government, astonished that the Council had passed the measure contrary to expectation, now exaggerated the importance of the amendment as an excuse to get rid of the Bill,44 the conference broke up in failure. When, on 8 October, Saunders moved that the Council’s amendment should not be considered of sufficient importance to warrant dropping the Bill, his motion was defeated by twenty-one votes to thirty-four.45 Against it had been ranged the Cabinet, the liquor group, and some backbench Liberals who, it was reported, had been whipped into line by the ministry’s exercise of ‘all their party brute force, and who followed the ministers into the lobby pulling wry faces at having to swallow all their principles and professions, and assist to kill a measure they really desired to see pass’.46 Party cohesion was clearly growing. Supporting Saunders were the Opposition party, including its anti-suffrage wing, clearly relishing an opportunity ‘to give the Government a slap in the face’,47 together with a core of Liberal rebels, Hutchison, Rees, O’Connor and E. M. Smith, who refused to toe the party line.

And so, taunted an Opposition member, ‘The Government was dangerously near success in carrying their own proposal so that it was perhaps no wonder that Mr. Seddon, exhausted with his efforts to defeat a measure while appearing to defend it, should — so it is reported — fall on the neck of a burly brewer with a fervent “Thank God, old fellow, we’re all right yet.”’48

The women suffragists were left to mourn the fate of their cause once again. ‘That anyone’, wrote Kate Sheppard, ‘devoting a quarter of an hour to calm consideration of the question, could possibly think that to deprive 120,000 persons of the right to vote is preferable to

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43 Saunders to Kate Sheppard, 30 September 1892, Sheppard Papers.
44 NZPD, LXXV (1892), 154 (Rolleston).
45 ibid., LXXVIII (1892), 817.
46 Evening Post, 10 October 1892.
47 New Zealand Times, 8 October 1892.
48 Otago Daily Times, 24 April 1893.
running the risk of a few postmasters opening sealed papers, passes our comprehension. **COULD A WOMAN BE MORE STUPID?** Mrs. Sheppard had reckoned without the influence of party politics.

Eighteen ninety-three was the last year in the life of the existing Parliament, and it was therefore a year of maximum effort on the part of all factions concerned with the women's suffrage struggle. Women leaders and their male sympathisers were determined to try their utmost to secure the franchise in time for the November elections. More public meetings were held, more branches of the Franchise League were formed, a petition signed by more than thirty thousand adult women was presented to Parliament. Politicians were besieged with deputations, letters, telegrams and questions at their public meetings. The enemies of women's suffrage became particularly active. In April Thomas Bracken, secretary of the Licensed Victuallers' Association in Christchurch, sent a circular to all publicans urging them to organise around a political platform, one of its two main planks being opposition to women's suffrage. Later in the year the same body encouraged the formation of the Anti-Woman's Suffrage League, prominent mainly in the Wellington area.

Greater preoccupation with the women's suffrage issue was evident in Parliament as well. Particularly in the thinking of the Premier, a significant development was taking place. Personally a convinced suffragist, he had over the previous two years wavered between principle and expediency on the issue. With a general election looming at the end of the year, he had clearly come down on the side of his party's political security. His fears however, though easily appreciated within his Cabinet, were not so simple to communicate to his party at large.

In January 1893 Ballance wrote a long letter to Stout, relating his anxiety about the franchise. Should it be passed that session, he believed that very few women would have time to enrol:

> The forward ones, who are connected with organisations and those that can influence will of course register. This class is nearly all against us now [because of their anger at what they saw as the Ministry's dishonest handling of the issue] and the result will be crushing and overwhelming defeat for the Liberal party. To save us from humiliating defeat, it is necessary that we should have two or three years to organise, when by committees and by discussion, we should bring a large section of the women into line with the Liberal party. If we declare this openly, there will be a howl, and an attempt made to damage us, that we do not intend to give the Bill force or wish it to become law. I am in favour of the Women's Franchise being placed on the Statute Book — indeed a great majority of our party insist upon it — and what we have to do I think is to educate our party to see

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40 Prohibitionist, 8 April 1893.
41 Prohibitionist, 15 July 1893.
42 Taranaki Herald, 18 September 1893.
the absolute necessity of postponing the coming into operation of the
principle . . . until the New Year.53

In a similar vein he wrote to those of his back-benchers who were
the most ardent and idealistic advocates of the women's cause. He
told David Pinkerton:

Probably you yourself are in the position that you will receive a large sup-
port from the women of Dunedin, but from what I can hear you are per-
fectedly safe as it is. I do not myself like to disappoint the women workers
who are looking forward to the franchise as a means of redressing their
grievances but the present Liberal party has done very much for the cause
of labor [sic] generally — I cannot think they would refuse to wait for one
Parliament in order to obtain so great a boon which has been granted in
no other country in the world, with the exception of one State of America.54

In April, however, Ballance died, and Seddon, regarded by the
suffrage movement as their arch-enemy in the Cabinet, succeeded him
as party leader. Suffragists had already heard the rumours that the
Government would pass the franchise clause that session but not
allow women to vote until the election three years hence. With Seddon
as Premier, however, even this hope seemed slim, though he was
forced to maintain the Government belief in it. 'He really wants to
defeat women's franchise', Hall assured Mrs. Sheppard, 'and he is
very cunning — there is no knowing in what way he might turn or
twist anything you say to him.'55 Her reply was that it would at
least be interesting to see how he managed to wriggle out of it.56

In a deceptively quiet fashion the Electoral Bill with its clause
enfranchising women passed through the lower house. When Hall's
own private Suffrage Bill was at its second reading, he reported that
its opponents were too afraid to let it be seen how few they were,
and absented themselves, so that one pro-suffrage member, Meredith,
was forced to act as teller to enable a division to take place. Only
Fish and Rolleston remained to vote against it.57 Not a single member
of Cabinet stayed for the division.

The Government's own Electoral Bill passed all its stages with
little incident. At one stage Seddon attempted to keep the Bill back
from its turn in the order paper but his action was quickly foiled by
Stout and Saunders. 'Seddon will hardly dare to go against me and
Stout', Saunders reported, 'as although he is strong in numbers he
is very weak in reputation just now having been found out in several
lies which it seems he cannot help telling.'58 The second incident
concerned Maori women. There was some doubt as to whether the
franchise would apply to Maori women also, but when the issue

53 Ballance to Stout, 10 January 1893, Letterbooks, Ballance Papers.
54 Ballance to Pinkerton, 11 January 1893, Letterbooks, Ballance Papers.
55 Hall to Kate Sheppard, 24 May 1893, Sheppard Papers.
56 Kate Sheppard to Hall, 2 June 1893, Hall Papers.
57 NZPD, LXXX (1893), 549.
58 Saunders to Kate Sheppard, 28 July 1893, Sheppard Papers.
came up in committee ‘the voices of the friends of the Maori ladies rose in such a roar’,\textsuperscript{59} that there was no doubt that Maori as well as Pakeha women would be enfranchised.

It had not been expected that the Cabinet would openly oppose the Bill in the lower house; it would reserve its ammunition for the Legislative Council proceedings, where twelve new Government Councillors had taken their seats. The critical phase was as usual the committee stage, where opponents of the measure began to propose their hostile amendments. Evidence of the ministry’s double dealings immediately became public. The new Councillors who had been appointed to the upper house for the express purpose of facilitating the passing of Liberal business were not all supporting the franchise. Even the strongly pro-Government \textit{Lyttelton Times} felt that any opposition from them on the issue would be inexcusable, as the suffrage had been the most important policy measure thrown out in 1892,\textsuperscript{60} while Saunders maintained that Seddon had publicly promised that the new Councillors would be pledged to support the issue.\textsuperscript{61} Seddon calmly replied to all protests that he did not agree that the new Councillors should support the Government on every issue, and it was soon apparent that at least half were in strong opposition to it. The committee stage commenced on 29 August, with each wavering Councillor clutching a telegram from the Auckland Women’s Franchise League, ‘Understand fate of franchise depends on your vote. Oh, fail us not!!’\textsuperscript{62} and with each faithful supporter wearing a present of a white camelia in his buttonhole. Thomas Kelly, one of the new Councillors, moved an amendment to postpone the operation of the Bill till October 1894.\textsuperscript{63} Rigg, another newcomer, and a declared opponent of the suffrage, proposed another to allow women to become members of Parliament— a hostile amendment, in that it would have given the ministry grounds for rejecting the Bill. Both amendments failed, Rigg’s by only three votes. A motion proposed by Whitmore directly opposing the suffrage, failed by twenty votes to eighteen, with six new Councillors, H. Feldwick, T. Kelly, J. Kerr, E. Richardson, J. Rigg and W. Walker on Whitmore’s side.\textsuperscript{65} A motion from the Opposition extending electoral rights to women failed by one vote.\textsuperscript{66} It had been rumoured that the ministers, expecting this clause to pass, had pinned their hopes on it as the lever to wreck the Bill, and five new Councillors voted for it.

‘Never before, in the history of New Zealand, has any measure excited such deep and general interest’, reported the \textit{Auckland Star}. ‘Men watched the various phases of the contest in the Council far

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Auckland Star}, 9 August 1893.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Lyttelton Times}, 16 August 1893.
\textsuperscript{61} NZPD, LXXX (1893), 608.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{New Zealand Herald}, 28 August 1893.
\textsuperscript{63} NZPD, LXXXI (1893), 384-5.
\textsuperscript{64} ibid., 508.
\textsuperscript{65} ibid., 432.
\textsuperscript{66} ibid., LXXXII (1893), 43.
more closely than they regarded the price of shares or the fluctuations in their daily business, whilst the great majority of women of all classes let the fashions slide, and waited breathlessly for the news given in the morning or evening newspapers. At last the committee stage was completed with the women's franchise clause intact and without hostile amendment. As the third reading of the Bill approached, Saunders reported that the brewers' party in the lower house had become fearful of the Council proceedings, and had extracted a promise from Seddon that three more of the new Councillors would vote against the reading if necessary, at the last minute. The ministry, he continued, took an assessment of opinion in the upper house, and found that one more vote was needed to ensure the defeat of the Bill. Kelly, one of the new Councillors, had left himself paired in favour of the measure, but Seddon obtained his consent by wire to alter his vote. The battle was not yet over, however. Reynolds and Stevens, two Opposition Councillors who had always opposed the women's suffrage without the addition of electoral rights, discovered what Seddon had done. So incensed were they at his manipulations that rather than let Seddon get his own way, they themselves switched sides and cast their vote in the Bill's favour.

Thus, on 8 September 1893, women's suffrage passed the New Zealand Legislature, without amendment, by a vote of twenty votes to eighteen in the Legislative Council. 'So complicated is the position', wrote the New Zealand Herald, 'and so obscured have been the real merits of the question . . . that it is hardly too much to say that the enfranchisement of woman has been accomplished by her enemies.' The Electoral Bill had been passed by the action of the Government's anti-suffragist enemies to spite the openly pro-suffrage but secretly anti-suffrage ministry.

There being no amendments with which the Government might disagree, the Bill was accepted by them, but there was still a flicker of opposition left. The eighteen Councillors who had opposed the measure took the virtually unprecedented step of petitioning the Governor, Lord Glasgow, to withhold his consent on the grounds that it was unconstitutional to pass such a revolutionary measure on the eve of a general election, and further petitions to this effect were circulated widely — mainly through the hotels — by the liquor trade. But on 19 September Seddon was able to telegraph Kate Sheppard thus: 'Electoral Bill assented to by His Excellency the Governor at quarter to twelve this day and trust now that all doubts as to the sincerity of the Government in this very important matter

67 Auckland Star, 22 November 1893.
68 Saunders to Kate Sheppard, 9 September 1893, Sheppard Papers.
69 Auckland Star, 11 September 1893. The Evening Star reflected similarly later (19 September 1914): 'Political tricksters were tricked and hoisted up with their own petard.'
70 Lyttelton Times, 12 September 1893.
71 New Zealand Herald, 13 September 1893.
has been effectively removed. And so the principle of woman’s suffrage passed into New Zealand law, preceded only by the State of Wyoming in the United States, and the Isle of Man. Women exercised their newly-won right in the November elections of the same year, both enrolling and voting in unexpectedly large numbers.

Basically, women’s suffrage passed in 1893 because the feminist movement had so altered the status of women in the colony that the extension to them of national voting rights seemed to many a logical step. Together with the general absence of strongly entrenched conservative opinion, and the upsurge of radical thought in the early nineties, certain other political factors assisted the measure in these years. Comparative fluidity in party structure allowed Opposition members to vote without embarrassment for a Government-sponsored measure, and Liberal back-benchers to desert their leaders when necessary for a personal principle. The calibre of such suffrage leaders as Sir John Hall, Alfred Saunders and Robert Stout lent considerable prestige to the cause. In particular the adherence of Ballance to the ideal had been pivotal in that, as Premier, he had been able to persuade the ministry in 1892 to adopt women’s suffrage as a party measure.

Yet paradoxically the death of Ballance and the rise of the arch-anti-suffragist, Seddon, to leadership of the party worked to the advantage of the measure in 1893. Earlier that year Ballance had launched an attempt to convert the Liberals to agree to the postponement of the suffrage until after the 1893 election. The esteem of the party for their leader, coupled with the acknowledged sincerity of his feminist convictions, could well have resulted in the shelving of the measure for at least three years, and possibly for a decade. Seddon, on the other hand, was greatly distrusted by back-bench Liberal suffragists, and had not yet acquired the mastery over the House which was evident in the later years of his premiership. Thus his manipulations to prevent the passage of the Bill were foiled at every turn.

An amateur poet, in 1893, sang praises for the passage of the women’s vote:

New Zealand, O my country,
I thrill with pride this day,
To think where Nations pause and shrink,

72 Seddon to Kate Sheppard, 19 September 1893, Sheppard Papers.
73 Wyoming women were enfranchised in 1869, women property-holders on the Isle of Man in 1880, Colorado women in the same year as New Zealand women, and South Australian women in 1894.
74 Despite the fact that only six weeks remained for enrolment after 19 September, eighty per cent of the adult female population registered, and eighty-five per cent of those voted — proportions which compared very favourably with those in the male population. New Zealand Year Book 1893.
75 As the Liberals were returned to power in 1893 and in subsequent elections, Seddon ironically became one of the world’s most enthusiastic advocates of women’s suffrage, which he recommended highly to one and all on his trips abroad. See newspaper clippings in Seddon Papers.
Again thou lead’st the way!
Thou hast brush’t aside mere cavil,
And to honest doubt hast cried:
‘Tho’ the Universe crash round us,
We shall stand on Justice’s side.’\textsuperscript{76}

But in fact many of the politicians who passed this measure had done a good deal of pausing and shrinking, and its final passage was due more to good luck than idealistic endeavour. The universe did not crash round them. Women, as it turned out, voted from much the same motives as their menfolk. The political scene changed only slightly. And within a few short years the women’s vote was operating as calmly and unobtrusively as not a few other radical experiments in this small, stable dominion.

\textit{Melbourne}

\textsuperscript{76}David Will M. Burn, from \textit{The Glorious 19th}, Oamaru, October 1893.