I Incite This Meeting to Rebellion

Emmeline Pankhurst (October 17, 1912)

Emmeline Goulden Pankhurst (1858-1928) led the militant English suffragists from 1903 until the outbreak of World War I. She had first become interested in feminist causes at the age of fourteen, when she attended a lecture in her native city of Manchester given by Lydia Becker, the pioneer organizer of the British woman's movement. Pankhurst participated in the final phases of the struggle to secure passage of a Married Women's Property Act in Great Britain (achieved in 1882). She also worked with early suffrage groups.

Finally, discouraged by the inactivity and timidity of established suffrage organizations, Emmeline Pankhurst and some co-workers who were recruiting Manchester factory operatives for the suffrage campaign founded the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903. At first they were relatively few in number and had little money or political influence. How could they bring their fervent desire for political representation before the public? Not until 1905 was a workable strategy devised.

In that year Pankhurst's daughter, Christabel, and an associate, Annie Kinney, attended a Manchester political rally, and from the roof, repeatedly questioned the speaker about his party's policy on the suffrage issue. The two young women were forcibly ejected from the building. In the ensuing uproar, they were arrested and charged with obstruction. Both refused to pay the fines imposed and served prison terms instead.

The incident caused a great sensation in the nation's press and gave the suffrage cause its first big publicity boost in years. Continued disruption of political meetings for the next several years focused increasing attention on the women's demands and brought new vigor to the feminist cause—militant and conservative alike.

When the government evinced no readiness to back female suffrage, the militants gradually heightened their tactics. The government responded with increased violence. Sutragists who were arrested refused to eat; they were force-fed, a process which was both painful and dangerous. In March, 1912, the bitterness and disillusionment of the activist women exploded in a wave of window-smashing. Windows of shops on London's most elegant streets—Bond Street and Regent Street, for example—as well as the windows at 10 Downing Street (Where the prime minister lives in Britain) were assaulted by women wielding hammers. Emmeline Pankhurst and some 150 others were arrested and imprisoned. Within a few months, however, all had to be released because of their precarious states of health due to hunger strikes and forced feeding.
The following speech was delivered at Royal Albert Hall in London on October 17, 1912. It was Emmeline Pankhurst's first public address after getting out of prison and signaled still another intensification in the actions of her followers.

“IT is better that those who cannot agree, cannot see eye to eye as to policy, should set themselves free, should part, and should be free to continue their policy as they see it in their own way, unfettered by those with whom they can no longer agree.

I give place to none in appreciation and gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Pethick Lawrence for the incalculable services that they have rendered the militant movement for Woman Suffrage, and I firmly believe that the women's movement will be strengthened by their being free to work for woman suffrage in the future as they think best, while we of the Women's Social and Political Union shall continue the militant agitation for Woman Suffrage initiated by my daughter and myself and a handful of women more than six years ago.

So long as you keep in office an anti-suffrage Government, you are parties to their guilt, and from henceforth we offer you the same opposition which we give to the people whom you are keeping in power with your support.

We have summoned the Labour Party to do their duty by their own programme, and to go into opposition to the Government on every question until the Government do justice to women. They apparently are not willing to do that. Some of them tell us that other things are more important than the liberty of women—that the liberty of working women. We say, "Then, gentlemen, we must teach you the value of your own principles, and until you are prepared to stand for the right of women to decide their lives and the laws under which they shall live, you, with Mr. Asquith and company, are equally responsible for all that has happened and is happening to women in this struggle for emancipation."

There is a great deal of criticism, ladies and gentlemen, of this movement. It always seems to me when the anti-suffrage members of the Government criticise militancy in women that it is very like beasts of prey reproaching the gentler animals who turn in desperate resistance when at the point of death. Criticism from gentlemen who do not hesitate to order out armies to kill and slay their opponents, who do not hesitate to encourage party mobs to attack defenceless women in public meetings—criticism from them hardly rings true. Then I get letters from people who tell me that they are ardent suffragists but who say that they do not like the recent developments in the militant movement, and implore me to urge the members not to be reckless with human life. Ladies and gentlemen, the only recklessness the militant suffragists have shown about human life has been about their own lives and not about the lives of others, and I say here and now that it has never been and never will be the policy of the Women's Social and Political Union recklessly to endanger human life. We leave that to the enemy. We leave that to the men in their warfare. It is not the method of women. No, even from the point of view of public policy, militancy affecting the security of human life would be out of place. There is something that governments care far more for than human life, and that is the security of property, and so it is through property that we shall strike the enemy. From henceforward the women who agree with me will say, 'We disregard your
laws, gentlemen, we set the liberty and the dignity and the welfare of women above all such considerations, and we shall continue this war, as we have done in the past; and what sacrifice of property, or what injury to property accrues will not be our fault. It will be the fault of that Government who admit the justice of our demands, but refuses to concede them without the evidence, so they have told us, afforded to governments of the past, that those who asked for liberty were in earnest in their demands!

Be militant each in your own way. Those of you who can express your militancy by going to the House of Commons and refusing to leave without satisfaction, as we did in the early days—do so. Those of you who can express militancy by facing party mobs at Cabinet Ministers' meetings, when you remind them of their falseness to principle—do so. Those of you who can express your militancy by joining us in our anti-Government by-election policy—do so. Those of you who can break windows—break them. Those of you who can still further attack the secret idol of property, so as to make the Government realize that property is as greatly endangered by women's suffrage as it was by the Chartists of old—do so.

And my last word is to the Government: I incite this meeting to rebellion. I say to the Government: You have not dared to take the leaders of Ulster for their incitement to rebellion. Take me if you dare, but if you dare I tell you this, that so long as those who incited to armed rebellion and the destruction of human life in Ulster are at liberty, you will not keep me in prison. So long as men rebels—and voters—are at liberty, we will not remain in prison, first division or no first division."
H istorical Context
What is the context of this document? What events were taking place during the time period and/or location?
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Please answer the following questions:
1. Other than suffrage, what else is Pankhurst fighting for?

2. How did Pankhurst account for the violence of her own “militant suffragettes?”

3. Why does it seem that Pankhurst is resorting to outward “rebellion?”