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Should the British government apologise for “torture” of suffragettes?

Posted on 15 February 2012. Tags: [force-feeding](#), [Suffragettes](#), [torture](#), [women's vote](#)



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WVoN co-editor

Should the British government apologise for the “torture” of suffragettes who were force fed while imprisoned during their campaign for the vote for women?

Brenda Dean, the former head of the print union, SOGAT, said



after hearing an [interview broadcast on Radio 4](#) with suffragette Maude Kate Smith that it would be "entirely appropriate" for the government to apologise.

One of around 180 people who were [interviewed](#) by historian Brian Harrison in the mid to late 1970s, Smith was force fed while imprisoned in the city's Winston Green prison in 1912 for smashing windows in London's Oxford Street.

The secretary for the Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU) Birmingham branch described the "anguish" of having a tube forced into her nostrils or down her throat and food poured in that hadn't been properly cooked or softened:


"It's such intense pain, it picked me up once and threw me across the cell," she said, adding that she finally gave up resisting and eventually became "docile" because of the pain.

"The politicians took the decision of force feeding," said Dean, now Baroness of Thornton-le-Fylde, who was one of the guests on Radio 4's The Lost World of the Suffragettes.

"The suffragettes may as a group say we would prefer to see quicker emancipation of women than perhaps an apology, but nevertheless, you can't but listen to that interview and come to the conclusion that this was not force feeding, this was torture."

Force feeding was later abandoned and the government, led by Herbert Asquith, introduced what became known as the Cat and Mouse Act, which allowed for the temporary release of women who were on hunger strike only to rearrest them when had recovered.



 ni Chakrabarti, director of Liberty, said she was also in no doubt that the accounts of "inhuman and degrading" force ing by women amounted to "torture":



Slider should never forget that even in relatively recent memory our government was prepared to tolerate behaviour of that," said Chakrabarti, adding that she could not "be quick to judge the women who took militant action against a state that was prepared to perpetrate that kind of cruelty".

But the recordings, which have never been broadcast before and are now owned by the Women's Library at the London Metropolitan University, also revealed the divisions that existed among women about the methods they should use.

Founded in 1897, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) focused on recruiting members and winning support of the political class and members of parliament.

When Emmeline Pankhurst became frustrated with the organisation's lack of progress, she set up the women-only organisation, the WSPU, in 1903 with her daughters Christabel and Sylvia.

It is thought that Christabel persuaded her mother that direct action was necessary, and with the slogan "Deeds, not words" began a campaign of militant action that included attacking ministers, stone throwing, setting fire to their houses and even a plot to disrupt the canal system by blowing up part of the canal in Birmingham.

"Suffragette" was first used by the Daily Mail in 1906 as a derisory term for the women who used direct action tactics but they adopted it enthusiastically as they carried out their high-profile campaign over the next decade:

The Suffragettes understood the power of the media and their stunts aimed for maximum impact. On 1 March 1912, for instance, women stood in front of plate glass windows Marble Arch to Tottenham Court Road, in front of shops and offices and government offices along London's Oxford street, Bond St, Haymarket and the Strand and at 5 pm took hammers from muffs or stones from their pockets and smashed windows.

The women who took part were flying in the face of convention and many admitted they were afraid, including Leonora Cohen who described her "terror" before carrying out her "deed" of smashing the glass case that held the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London.

"It was never done for fun, they had to get the notice of the public and that was their way of doing it," she said.

Women over 30 with property were given the vote in 1918 and this was extended to all women over the age of 21 in 1927. Controversy has continued over the decades as to whether the militant suffragettes actually helped or hindered the cause.

Dean argued that although the suffragists were probably more effective in the long term, the militants also played a part:

"If you look at any major social change within it somewhere has been a degree of militancy, it has to, in a sense, to focus on it," she said.

"I'm not saying I agree with burning down houses, but at the turn of the century the whole social order was very different indeed."



crabarti concluded that it was important to judge the actions of the women in context and remember that they were not g in a democracy:



some extent their struggle is akin to the struggle of black people living under Apartheid in South Africa – they are not in current context."

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