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## **Contesting Women's Right to Vote: Anti-Suffrage Postcards in Edwardian Britain**

### **Abstract**

This paper uses multimodal critical discourse analysis to explore the ideologies and messages promoted by anti-suffrage postcards produced in Britain between 1909 and 1914. It identifies five salient themes across the postcards: subversion of gender roles; physical ridicule of women; mental ridicule of women; violence towards women; and imagined future. Then, using five prototypical examples as a case study, it argues that, despite these postcards' aim to present anti-suffragists as united in their common objective of opposing women's suffrage, they contained clear paradoxical messages. This can be seen in their juxtaposition of masculinised women who neglected their family duties and feminine women who turned Parliament into a maleless space, as well as the conflation of suffragists and suffragettes. It concludes that this postcard propaganda campaign ultimately failed because of the power of militancy, mass opposition to the brutal treatment of suffragettes and the outbreak of World War One.

### **Keywords**

Britain, Edwardian, suffrage, women, postcards, propaganda

*This is "The House"<sup>1</sup> that man built  
The House that our statesmen for years have controlled  
Ruling the world with mind fearless and bold;  
Can woman expect to rule such a house  
She that's afraid of a poor little mouse:  
No! No!! Suffragette your place is not yet,  
Inside the house that man built.*

This disparaging rhyme was created as part of a 1910 postcard series produced in Britain by Birn Brothers Ltd to express opposition to the women's suffrage movement. Since the late nineteenth century, women had been campaigning vociferously for the right to vote. This campaign grew in momentum during the Edwardian era (1901-14) as supporters split into two fields: the suffragists, who believed in peaceful, constitutional methods, and the suffragettes, who were willing to take direct, militant action for the cause. In tandem, organised campaigns against women's suffrage developed. As suffragette action turned increasingly violent from 1909 onwards, the two leading anti-suffrage groups – Women's National Anti-Suffrage League and Men's League for Opposing Woman Suffrage – merged to become the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage.<sup>2</sup> This union led to a massive propaganda operation against women's suffrage, using the new, cheap, visually appealing and easily disseminated format of the picture postcard. The anti-suffrage theme was quickly adopted by canny commercial publishers who recognised the profitability of wading into the suffrage debate.

Picture postcards were an ideal medium because they domesticated opposition to women's suffrage and made it easily palatable for the general public through simple pictures, bold colours and catchy slogans. Often playing upon the multiple meanings associated with a particular semiotic resource (i.e., words, image, color, typography), they served as 'polysemic weapons',<sup>3</sup> designed to make the complex political situation seem straightforward, anti-suffrage actions just and desired, and the disconcerting consequences of giving women the vote believable and attainable.<sup>4</sup> Not only were picture postcards ubiquitous, low cost and portable, but they did not present the demands of literacy that books or newspapers did. Furthermore, they could be circulated widely, with senders holding power over the images (i.e., messages) their recipients would obtain.<sup>5</sup> This meant that postcards could intrude into the 'sanctum sanctorum' of family homes, turning "potentially threatening political events into unthreatening everyday occurrences,"<sup>6</sup> which made their messages even more powerful. This power was also wielded through the 'common sense' perspective that these postcards infused into a contentious debate by using such tropes as hyperbole, irony and metaphor, as well as stereotyping and mocking or satirical tones.<sup>7</sup>

With the recent centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act,<sup>8</sup> growing attention has been paid to the hard-fought campaign for women's suffrage in Britain. Recent studies have been carried out on suffrage theatre,<sup>9</sup> prison writings and embroidery,<sup>10</sup> the 1911 census boycott,<sup>11</sup> autobiographies<sup>12</sup> and newspaper representations,<sup>13</sup> to name but a few examples. However, within a British context, surprisingly little attention has been paid to postcards since the seminal work of Lisa Tickner in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, most work on these postcards has been carried out by social historians or art historians, who have neglected the way in which complex messages and ideologies, at times paradoxical, are embedded in

their design. As Catherine H. Palczewski<sup>15</sup> has stated, ignoring the role of postcards in the ideological campaign behind women's suffrage is the equivalent of studying a contemporary political campaign and ignoring the use of the internet or televised commercials. Thus, this study will break new ground by shining a sociolinguistic lens on anti-suffrage postcards using multimodal critical discourse analysis (MDCA) to investigate a previously unexplored dataset of 180 anti-suffrage picture postcards published in Britain between 1909 and 1914 and held in the Suffrage Postcard Project digital archive.<sup>16</sup> I will identify the five themes that reoccur across the anti-suffrage postcard genre and use five examples that are characteristic of these themes to examine how different linguistic and visual resources were used to construct arguments against women's suffrage. In doing so, I will demonstrate clear contradictions in their rhetoric and iconography, which challenged the unity of anti-suffragists, reflected their lack of consensus and, ultimately, led to the postcards' failure in gaining public support for their cause.

The Suffrage Postcard Project digital archive used for this study is led by Kristin Allukian (University of South Florida, USA) and Ana Stevenson (University of the Free State, South Africa), and aims to provide an easy-to-search digital archive of postcards for research and teaching on the suffrage era. The ever-expanding archive currently contains approximately 500 postcards brought together from personal collections and special collections in order to provide a central space that challenges the often fragmentary perspective that small postcard collections can present. The current study is one of the first to make use of this rich resource. The Archive's sheer quantity of postcards not only facilitates the identification of general themes and patterns across anti-suffrage postcards, but also makes it possible to compare these with techniques used in pro-suffrage postcards. Furthermore, its inclusion of postcards from personal collections means that many postcards have been brought to light for the first time, thus offering new data that has not been explored in previous studies of the pro-/anti-suffrage postcard.

The five prototypical examples used in this study are analysed using MCDA. MCDA brings together two important methodologies from the field of sociolinguistics: multimodality and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Multimodality is concerned with how different semiotic resources work together to make meaning,<sup>17</sup> while CDA seeks to demonstrate how certain practices, ideas, values and identities are promoted, naturalised and transmitted through discourse.<sup>18</sup> In adopting an MCDA approach, linguistic and visual strategies can be explored in terms of how they shape the representations of events and persuade people to think about them in a particular way.<sup>19</sup> When applied to anti-suffrage postcards, MCDA has the potential to reveal how anti-suffragists were able to manipulate the public by employing a range of semiotic resources to promote opposition to women's suffrage and convince the British public that women's place was in the domestic, not the political, realm. However, it will also demonstrate how these postcards were often paradoxical in nature, conflating suffragists and suffragettes, and juxtaposing masculinised women who neglected their family duties with feminine women who turned Parliament into a maleless space.

My approach to MCDA draws particularly on the work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, who established a visual social semiotic toolkit to analyse images, colour, typography and texture,<sup>20</sup> as well as the work of Per Ledin and David Machin,<sup>21</sup> who developed robust concepts from CDA that can be used in tandem with multimodal analysis to identify buried discourses in texts and reveal the ideologies that they represent. Throughout this study,

MCDA is also supported by evidence from newspapers and parliamentary records to reduce the subjectivity of analyses and ensure that they are grounded in historical facts and broader iconographic traditions. In historicising our understanding of the way in which semiotic resources can be used to promote specific ideologies, this study will shed new light on the suffrage movement and demonstrate how postcards could be used as cultural weapons to sell and advertise anti-suffrage as if it were a consumer product and, in doing so, extend arguments beyond those found in traditional print media. Its findings will also encourage scholars to rethink contemporary communicative practices, particularly in terms of how the roots of modern forms of political propaganda can be traced back to the Edwardian postcard, and recognise how postcards serve as an important ‘battleground for different versions of history’.<sup>22</sup>

### **A Brief Overview of The ‘Woman Question’**

The long and difficult struggle for women’s suffrage in Britain started in 1832 when an individual petition was presented to the House of Commons by Henry Hunt MP, on behalf of Mary Smith of Stanmore, Yorkshire, requesting that women be granted the right to vote. In that year, the Parliamentary Reform Act was passed, which extended the vote to a larger number of men but was the first time that women were explicitly excluded from the franchise.<sup>23</sup> In 1866, the first mass women’s suffrage petition was submitted to Parliament by John Stuart Mill MP, this time with 1,500 signatures collected by the Women’s Suffrage Committee. The petition led to the first debate on votes for women, with Mill tabling an amendment to the recently proposed Second Reform Act, asking for the enfranchisement of all households, regardless of sex. Although the amendment was defeated by 194 votes to 73, private bills in favour of women’s suffrage were put forward to Parliament on an almost annual basis from this date onwards.<sup>24</sup>

Around the same time, the National Society for Women’s Suffrage was created by Lydia Becker – the first national group to campaign for British women’s right to vote. Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, dozens of similar groups developed across the country. As it became increasingly necessary to provide a united front, in 1897, seventeen of these groups merged into the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).<sup>25</sup> Led by Millicent Fawcett, the society advocated peaceful demonstrations and protests. However, some of its members supported militant actions to draw attention to their plight. Consequently, in 1903, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed from a fracture in the group and led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia. Initially, the WSPU’s tactics were to cause disruption and civil disobedience, but the lack of government action incited them to undertake more violent acts, such as vandalism, arson and assault, which resulted in imprisonment and force-feeding.

While there had always been opposition to women’s suffrage, there was no formal group that campaigned against the cause. In 1908, as the fight became increasingly extreme, the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League was established. Led by the author Mary Ward, the League quickly gained support and had over 15,000 paying members and more than 100 branches nationwide by 1909.<sup>26</sup> The League produced its own newspaper – *Anti-Suffrage Review* – to spread their anti-suffrage message and developed a ‘Forward Policy’, which promoted women’s place in the ‘domestic sphere’ rather than in the world of politics.<sup>27</sup> In 1910, the League decided to merge with the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage and

became the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage. As Julia Bush notes, its female members recognised that a mixed-sex group offered prestigious male speakers, greater fundraising opportunities and the prospect of direct parliamentary influence.<sup>28</sup>

Reasons for opposition to women's suffrage were multifaceted but often rooted in popular prejudices. Many believed that women were destined to fulfil a specific role in society as caregivers and educators and that politics was not 'compatible with [their] nature'.<sup>29</sup> To become involved in politics would supposedly 'masculinise' women and could potentially subvert the entire social order by undermining the gendered foundations of domestic life.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, some argued that the actions of the suffragettes had proven that women were 'uncontrollable' and mentally unable to handle political matters, while others felt that women lacked the necessary intellect to make a rational choice on who to vote for.<sup>31</sup> Finally, certain individuals thought that women's suffrage would threaten Britain's imperial power, making the country look weak to other nations that were still male-oriented.<sup>32</sup>

It is against this turbulent backdrop that anti-suffrage postcards were produced by anti-suffrage groups and commercial publishers alike to gather public support against the women's cause. These postcards drew heavily upon the traditions of political caricature in popular periodicals, such as the satirical magazine *Punch*, depicting women in a cartoonish manner to project fears about the disasters that would unfold both domestically and politically if they had the right to vote. By mimicking stereotypes naturalised in 'common knowledge' and legitimated by scientific discourses, these postcards tapped into the collective consciousness of the broad middle-class public, aiming to convince men to uphold the status quo and avoid disturbing the sanctity of family life, and women not to turn to suffrage and become 'masculinised'.<sup>33</sup> However, their often humorous nature hid ideological meanings behind the argument that they were 'just a bit of fun',<sup>34</sup> therefore granting them with a more subtle persuasive power than the overt tactics of newspaper articles, manifestos, meetings and marches.

### **Key Themes of Anti-Suffrage Postcards**

Using the dataset of 180 anti-suffrage postcards collected from the Suffrage Postcard Project digital archive, I have identified five key themes that reflect their principal communicative functions: fearmongering on subversion of gender roles; physical ridicule of women; mental ridicule of women; incitement of violence towards women; and fearmongering on imagined future. Despite the previous studies that have been carried out on anti- and pro-suffrage postcards, just Florey<sup>35</sup> has attempted to group these postcards into themes. As Florey's categorisation concerned US suffrage postcards, some of the themes he identified are not replicable in a British context. Moreover, his categorisation established themes based on the central image in the postcard (e.g. children, animals, country bumpkins), which is problematic because it ignores the subtleties of ideologies and the way that different semiotic resources work together to create meaning. As this study will show, the same image could be used across postcards with a range of differing communicative purposes (e.g. babies to imply women are neglecting womanly duties, are highly emotional or have childish ideas). This becomes particularly apparent when using digital archives, such as the Suffrage Postcard Project, that enable postcards to be arranged systematically. Therefore, when exploring ideologies and

arguments in anti-suffrage postcards, it is far more beneficial to group them by communicative function.

In Table 1, I set out the five key themes that I have identified and the typical imagery, colours, slogans and figures that appear across anti-suffrage postcards. The table serves as a useful classification system for those exploring the anti-suffrage postcard genre and helps to clearly identify recurring semiotic features and their significance in constructing particular arguments.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

**Fearmongering on subversion of gender roles:** This type of postcard is defined by its emphasis on the impact that women's suffrage would have on the traditional gender roles of Edwardian society. As the table indicates, images on these postcards tend to show frazzled husbands dashing around the house trying to cook, clean and look after their children while their wives, dressed in their finest clothes, go out to work. Often, these wives are portrayed smoking or getting onto a bicycle – two activities that were considered harmful to the feminine image<sup>36</sup> – while the children are scruffy and the houses are dirty, implying that women's emancipation will lead to the neglect of their families. These images are typically accompanied by such slogans as 'The Way It's Going' or 'The New Woman'. In other examples, the husband comes home from work to find an empty house and a note from his wife left on the table stating that she has gone out and there is no dinner prepared. Again, slogans work to strengthen the message of the image: 'the suffragette not at home'.<sup>37</sup> These postcards are emotionally provocative as they appeal to the traditional expectations around male and female roles, as advocated by Victorian self-help books, such as John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) and Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859), that still remained popular in the Edwardian period.

In some cases, these postcards show violent scenes, with the angry wife, who is often dressed in the green, purple and white colours of the WSPU, throwing plates or yelling at her husband as he cowers under the table in fear. Using colours associated with the most rebellious of suffrage groups was an important means of justifying the anti-suffrage cause in a way that would not be as effective if the colours associated with the more peaceful suffragists were used. In a similar vein, other postcards metaphorically depict the imagined future domestic arrangement through images of a large cockerel and several chicks to emphasise the 'henpecked' husband. Slogans that append these types of images tend to call directly to husbands across Britain, asking them 'what would you do in a case like this?' or frame the scene from the husband's viewpoint: 'I wish I was single again'.<sup>38</sup> Equally, some postcards in this subgenre show the husband pushing a pram and passers-by mocking him for not standing up to his wife. In all of these cases, emphasis is placed on the fact that votes for women will somehow give women the power to dominate men, although in no case is it explained how this will come about or why.<sup>39</sup>

The images in these postcards sit in opposition to those of pro-suffrage postcards, which took advantage of women's nurturant role by using real photographs of leading figures in the suffrage movement, often purposely staged in formal portraits dressed in gowns and holding books in order to portray the campaigners as feminine, well-educated and respectable. In doing

so, they gave the pro-suffrage movement the moral high ground over the low tactics of anti-suffrage campaigners and demonstrated that women could hold positions of authority yet still remain faithful to their role as mothers or wives. This response was in line with pro-suffrage campaigners' broader aim of promoting an autonomously created system of values derived from women's own experience rather than in equivalence to men.<sup>40</sup> These postcards were overwhelmingly produced by suffrage societies rather than commercial publishers, which enabled campaigners to take control of their own image in a bid to reverse the adverse publicity of anti-suffrage postcards.<sup>41</sup>

**Physical ridicule of women:** In this type of postcard, the central aim is to ridicule the physical appearance of women who support suffrage, often by exaggerating their features, in order to imply that their ugliness and ideology are interrelated. As Edwardian society expected women to marry and settle into traditional roles, these postcards serve to frame those who support the suffrage cause as abnormal misfits whose appearance and beliefs set them outside the general order.<sup>42</sup> Often, the women in these images are middle-aged and have such unflattering features as pointy noses, buck teeth and scraggly hair. They also tend to be depicted in trousers – a symbol of their 'manliness' – and carry umbrellas, which act as makeshift weapons to attack supposedly innocent men around them. As spinsters were popular figures of fun in Edwardian music halls, as well as in novels and *Punch* magazine, publishers only had to repackage the old image in new ways.<sup>43</sup> In many cases, they did so by using actual figures of the suffrage movement, albeit in an uncomplimentary manner, such as Emmeline Pankhurst (leader of the WSPU) or Millicent Fawcett (leader of the NUWSS). Many of the accompanying slogans ('suffragettes who have never been kissed; 'girls I didn't marry'<sup>44</sup>) also imply that women only become invested in the suffrage cause out of bitterness and resentment at being spinsters, which stands in direct contrast to the suffrage wives in the 'subversion of gender roles' postcard theme. In framing the fight for women's suffrage in this way, the postcards suggest that women do not have any serious concerns about politics and are only taking an interest out of personal resentment to men.

Again, the real photographs used in pro-suffrage postcards work to challenge these cartoon images of women in anti-suffrage postcards. The photographs show the women as young and stylishly dressed, thereby signalling that suffrage and womanliness go hand in hand. Furthermore, no postcards make any attempt to ridicule the physical appearance of men generally or anti-suffragists more specifically. By avoiding direct engagement with the belittling messages of anti-suffrage postcards and using photographic evidence, rather than cartoons, to demonstrate their feminine qualities, these postcards enabled women to undermine the stereotypes about their lack of femininity and win sympathy for their cause.

**Mental ridicule of women:** This third anti-suffrage theme is concerned with ridiculing the mental capacity of women in terms of their ideas and beliefs. In these postcards, women are frequently depicted as crying babies or tantruming children in order to frame their views as petty and foolish. These images are often accompanied by the strapline 'I want the vote', which reduces the women to whinging cry-babies. Crying baby images also simultaneously imply that women are setting a bad example for their children who weep for their absent mothers. In these cases, the little girls are often dressed in pinks and whites to show their innocence or are



changing into a pair of trousers to suggest that they are being 'tainted' by their mothers' behaviour. The message of these images is often also accentuated by the child spilling food or drink onto the floor in frustration – a statement on the wildness of children without the civilizing influence of their mothers and, again, used here to belittle the cause. Similarly, some postcards describe the women as 'wild wives' and show committee meetings in which women are waving umbrellas around erratically. Other images portray women as geese, playing upon the bird's noisiness and its habit of walking in a straight line to imply that women create a ruckus and follow their leader aimlessly without the ability to think for themselves.

Another common way of ridiculing women in these postcards is to suggest that they are only advocating universal suffrage to obtain physical/romantic attention from men. This is reflected in the frequent images of protesting women expressing delight at being carried away in the arms of police officers, with such captions as 'Slow march, constable, I'm having the time of my life'.<sup>45</sup> These messages were particularly distasteful given the events of Black Friday in 1910 when a suffragette demonstration was broken up by police officers who proceeded to beat and sexually assault many of the women to 'teach them a lesson'.<sup>46</sup> Similarly offensive postcards show Christabel Pankhurst – the 'pin-up girl' of the cause – being spanked by police officers with the strapline 'Miss Spankdfirst', implying that she is akin to a rebellious child who needs a 'slap on the bottom'. This type of image was also an erotic and violent evocation of a visual image prevalent in Victorian pornography, indicating how publishers drew upon known iconography and resignified it to fit their own intentions.<sup>47</sup>

In other cases, women are portrayed shouting angrily but not entirely sure of what they are shouting about: 'we only want what the men have got' and 'we don't know what we want but we'll get it', being popular slogans that appear alongside.<sup>48</sup> Again, this serves to frame the women as intellectually inferior and not suited to the world of politics. There is also a large number of postcards that draw upon the connotations of the Cat and Mouse Act, depicting the suffragette as a vicious female cat attacking the tomcats around her or, alternatively, standing on a chair frightened of the mice running past.

Again, pro-suffrage postcards aimed to combat these negative portrayals through the use of photographic evidence. Images of marches and processions countered the idea that women did not know what they were fighting for and, instead, depicted them as disciplined, well-organised and dedicated to the cause. However, high-quality artistic drawings of the Artists' Suffrage League and Suffrage Atelier also show that some pro-suffrage groups were not afraid to strike back with disparaging postcards. Drawings of donkeys, for example, were often used to symbolise anti-suffragists as foolish, while a series called 'Anti-Suffragist Types' showed images of men alongside captions such as 'The man who thinks that women have no right to Vote because they can't defend their Country'.<sup>49</sup> These postcards also mocked the fact that women did not have the right to vote, yet prisoners, lunatics and drunkards did,<sup>50</sup> thereby galvanising sympathy for the cause. These arguments played out in miniature reflected the broader argument of the women campaigners that they held a higher regard for religion, morals and the sanctity of human life and, therefore, had a better understanding of newer concerns of state, such as education, health and poverty, than men.<sup>51</sup>

**Incitement of violence towards women:** This type of anti-suffrage postcard depicts violence towards women involved in the suffrage campaign, suggesting that they should be physically

prevented or restrained in any way possible in order to ‘cure’ them of their ‘illness’ (i.e., the belief that women should vote). These images sent clear messages of bodily intimidation and threatened the bodily integrity of women activists.<sup>52</sup> Many images make reference to the fact that women talk too much by depicting violent ways of silencing them, such as clamping their tongues in vices or mangles or nailing their tongues to posts with a hammer. These images are typically accompanied by the slogans ‘Peace at last’ or ‘There’s no end to a woman’s tongue’.<sup>53</sup> Women are also shown tied in ropes, chains or handcuffs locked tight with padlocks and weighed down with heavy weights to prevent them from moving. In these images, they often have their heads clamped in painful devices, which were associated with asylum patients, implying that these women were mentally defective. Another common theme was to depict the horrors of force-feeding, with images of smiling doctors pinning down crying women, gagging them and inserting a tube into their nose or mouth. The involuntariness and intrusiveness of this experience has been likened to rape,<sup>54</sup> again showing how suffragettes were considered unworthy of dignified treatment because they had ‘violated’ their role as women by campaigning for the right to vote. This notion is also emphasised by cards that show women caricatured as monsters that need to be slain, implying that their will to vote had defeminised them and turned them into non-humans. In most cases, the women in these images are dressed in greens, purples and whites to imply that they belong to the WSPU rather than the peaceful suffragist groups. In doing so, it aims to justify the acts of violence towards them in an ‘eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth’ manner, given that the WSPU carried out their own militant acts to obtain the right to vote. In line with this, the most common figures to appear in these postcards are Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel. Although not as well known, Marion Wallace Dunlop also appears in some cards, perhaps because she was known as the first suffragette to go on hunger strike in Holloway Prison.<sup>55</sup> Despite being a member of the NUWSS, Millicent Fawcett can also be seen in some examples, indicating how the lines often blurred in public consciousness between suffragists and suffragettes.

Again, most pro-suffrage postcards relied on first-hand photographic evidence, such as images of Black Friday, to publicise the cruelty of men towards women. In using real images as opposed to cartoons, they were able to showcase the reality of their situation rather than relying on fabricated or exaggerated accounts and, thus, gain more sympathy. Some hand-drawn images also aimed to showcase the cruelty of men, yet did so through allegorical imagery rather than overt depictions of violence. In one postcard, for example, we see a man allegorised as ‘Prejudice’ hitting the blindfolded female ‘Justice’.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the pro-suffrage campaign used allegory to promote idealised representations of the suffrage movement (e.g. Britannia, Justice, Liberty). By using allegories, the pro-suffrage movement played upon a well-known artistic tradition, yet subverted it to fit their own goals.

**Fearmongering on imagined future:** This final anti-suffrage postcard theme evokes an imagined future in which women have the right to vote. The scenes depicted in these cards often catastrophise and lampoon the attainment of women’s suffrage in terms of its consequences on family life and the political sphere. A key theme of many of these postcards is ‘voting day’, whereby images tend to show a woman on the point of casting her vote in the ballot box when she recalls a menial household task that she has to perform and runs out of the polling station to complete it (e.g. ‘While in the act of voting, Mrs Brown remembers that she

has left a cake in the oven!’<sup>57</sup>). Along the same lines, ‘voting day’ images show the woman leaving her house while her husband remains with their crying children on his lap or doing the washing. Often, straplines play upon the phonetic similarity between suffrage and suffer to describe the husband as a ‘sufferer’ or ‘suffering’ from his wife’s ‘suffrage’.

Other images go one step further, suggesting to viewers that giving women the right to vote will eventually lead to the ‘horror’ of them gaining seats in the House of Commons as MPs. These imagined images of cabinet minister meetings are depicted as tea parties where women gossip and complain about their husbands, eat chocolates, style each other’s hair and let their children run wild. They tend to be framed within a backdrop of ‘feminine’ pinks or ‘dangerous’ reds to emphasise the unnaturalness of letting women into this typically male domain. Alternatively, women are shown smoking and playing cards in cabinet meetings, implying that they have become wild and masculinised because of their emancipation. In contrast to the pinks and reds of the other images, these draw upon more masculine blues. In all cases, men are noticeably absent from this imagined future in the House of Commons, suggesting to viewers that to grant suffrage to women will ultimately lead to the downfall of men. Ironically, many of these imagined scenes are framed sixty years into the future (e.g. ‘Meeting of Cabinet Minister 1978’), which is, in fact, around the time when Britain obtained its first female prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. In many of these images, Emmeline Pankhurst still remains a key figure, depicted as only now delivering her maiden speech in Parliament. Again, as we have seen previously with her daughter Christabel, she is depicted as a caricature Mrs Spankhurst, which makes a mockery of her cause and reduces her to the pornographic image of a ‘naughty schoolgirl’.

The ‘imagined future’ is also a theme used by pro-suffragists and shows how these cards often worked in a dialogic battle with each other, serving as a ‘call and response’ mechanism. This is particularly clear with the poem outlined at the beginning of the article that pro-suffragists repurposed one year later to describe a parliament made up of men and women: ‘The women as well as the men preside; They both hold the reins and no one complains; For the men now admit that the ladies have brains.’ In the pro-suffrage imagined future, the House of Commons is a civilised place with men and women sitting together, reading books and politely awaiting their turn to speak. Again, in using this type of imagery, the pro-suffrage cause takes the higher ground, choosing not to attack men or stereotype them, but instead, argue that a system that allows both men and women to have a political presence is beneficial for the country.<sup>58</sup>

### **Anti-Suffrage Postcards: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis**

Providing an overview of the five recurring themes in anti-suffrage postcards is important in building an understanding of the way in which different semiotic resources were used to foster opposition to women’s suffrage. However, applying MCDA to individual examples can help to uncover subtleties in their messages and also reveal contradictions in their design. In the section below, I will provide a comprehensive MDCA of one prototypical postcard that is representative of each of the five themes identified in Table 1. This will enable me to put forward arguments in the concluding discussion on why the anti-suffrage postcards were paradoxical and why the anti-suffrage campaign was ultimately met with a lack of success.

## 'The suffragette not at home': Fearmongering on Subversion of Gender Roles

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

The postcard in Figure 1 was produced by the London publisher C.W. Faulkener & Co Ltd in 1910 and shows a chaotic scene in a middle-class household, where the husband, Ted, has returned from work to find a note from his wife, Alice, informing him that she has gone to an important committee meeting and will be home late. Ted subsequently attempts to make dinner for their two children with disastrous consequences. Ted's oldest child has just toasted some bread and is carrying it to the table on a toasting fork, while Ted himself pours tea into a teapot, spilling half of the contents onto the family cat who runs away in fright. Even the small baby watches the scene with a look of dismay on its face and its hands stretched out in surprise. Bread and tea were strongly associated with households that lacked suitable domestic economy and formed the staple diet for manual workers because little effort or money was required to prepare them.<sup>59</sup> Any Edwardian viewing this image would have immediately understood the deeply rooted class connection of these culinary choices and associated the emancipation of the woman with not only the breakdown of the family but, even worse, downward social mobility. The family's middle-class identity is 'given off' subtly through visual clues: the son's Norfolk suit, the father's red waistcoat and shiny shoes, the baby's frock and the white tablecloth – itself a symbol of purity and cleanliness.<sup>60</sup> A major irony with this image is the fact that most middle-class households had at least one domestic servant to take care of cooking and cleaning,<sup>61</sup> so the likelihood of such a situation occurring was minimal. Nonetheless, it served to shock and unsettle middle-class men, in particular, who feared their wives' increasing independence.

Alice's neglect for her family is also made apparent by the abrupt 'telegraphic speech' of her note, which omits personal pronouns and articles, giving the impression that she is in a rush to leave. This is further emphasised by the note's casual position on the floor rather than on the expected place of the kitchen table. It is also seen in the fact that the image on the back wall is not the typical 'Home Sweet Home' sampler or religious painting typical of Edwardian houses, but rather a large poster with a list of women's suffrage meetings. The intrusion of the political into the family home turns the highly charged issue of women's suffrage into an 'unthreatening decorative fixture,'<sup>62</sup> implying that the fight for women's suffrage has become a natural part of the family's everyday life and Alice's husband is powerless to stop it.

The various red hues of the clothing in this image act as symbolic visualisers of danger ahead, as well as frustration and sacrifice.<sup>63</sup> Red has a long association with martyrdom<sup>64</sup> and is employed here to suggest that the husband has forcibly foregone his own life for his wife. This message is in line with that of other anti-suffrage postcards, which depict men with haloes around their heads or describe them as 'Madonnas'.<sup>65</sup> The sequence of red followed by white (tablecloth) and green (carpet) also evokes the colours of the NUWSS, hinting at the organisation through a visual metaphor. The image's strapline, however ('The Suffragette not at home'), is a clever play on 'At Home' – the name of the WSPU's regular branch meetings – and works here to transmit the 'dangers' of what happens when a woman does not stay within her expected domestic realm.<sup>66</sup> This clear conflation of a suffragist and suffragette organisation into one image through visual cues shows how anti-suffragists and publishers frequently did

not distinguish between the two, either out of laziness, a desire to justify their arguments by considering all women to be militant or genuine confusion between their differing aims and methods. Indeed, both Gupta<sup>67</sup> and Pederson<sup>68</sup> have shown that newspapers of the period regularly confused the different organisations and used ‘suffragist’ and ‘suffragette’ interchangeably, suggesting a blending of their individual identities in public consciousness aided by media and visual culture.

All three pairs of eyes – of Ted, the baby and the boy – are turned away from the viewer, staring at the dinner scene. Kress and van Leeuwen<sup>69</sup> describe this pose as an “act of offer” because it ‘offers’ the individuals to the viewer as ‘objects of contemplation [...] as though they were specimens in a display case’. Not only does this encourage deeper engagement with the postcard’s message, but it also leaves the viewer feeling helpless because he/she cannot intervene in the situation. The only individual facing the viewer is the cat whose eyes create a visual form of direct address. The cat is a symbolic choice because of its association with the 1913 Prisoners’ Temporary Discharge for Health Act, passed by the Government to discharge suffragettes on hunger strike from prison and then imprison them again once they had recovered. The Act was widely known as the Cat and Mouse Act because the government were acting as ‘cats’ toying with the suffragette ‘mice’.<sup>70</sup> Here, the cat’s foregrounded position, direct address and running pose imply that, despite the chaos around, it has a plan that might save this family (i.e., the 1913 Act). Again, the insertion of a symbol clearly associated with the suffragettes, not the suffragists, is at odds with the image’s NUWSS colour scheme, but fits with Edwardian media discourse that constantly reported on ‘suffragists’ in Holloway Prison being force-fed.<sup>71</sup>

### ‘Husbands for old maids’: Physical Ridicule of Women

<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>

The postcard in Figure 2 was produced in 1910 by an unspecified publisher and shows an imagined scene at a suffrage committee meeting. On the righthand side is the speaker emphatically addressing the group of nine women who have assembled to listen to her. The speaker is deliberately portrayed unflatteringly, with unkempt hair, bulbous nose, protruding teeth, red face and flat feet. Her elevated position, depicted from a high vertical angle and long shot, manipulates the point of view and compels the viewer to look up, thereby implying authority and the idea of the woman as ‘battleaxe’,<sup>72</sup> while her slightly hunched stance with pointed right finger and rolled-up newspaper in her left hand also indicate aggression,<sup>73</sup> emphasising the association between women’s suffrage and violence. This is further accentuated by ‘Votes for Women’ printed on the newspaper, which was the rallying call of the WSPU – the militant sector of the suffrage cause. However, the range of colours in which the women are dressed gives the impression that members of various groups (e.g. WSPU, NUWSS, Women’s Freedom League [WFL]) have come together, most likely not the publisher’s intention, but rather a reflection of their short-sightedness of the significance of colour in the women’s suffrage moment. Similar to what we saw above, postcards in this subgenre frequently confuse suffragettes and suffragists, with many examples showing images

of ugly women brandishing umbrellas described in the caption as ‘suffragists’. Again, these examples indicate how publishers and anti-suffragists obscured the differences between suffrage groups in order to forward their argument that all women in support of suffrage were dangerous and unladylike.

Just like the speaker, the nine women in the crowd are equally depicted pejoratively in terms of both physical appearance and the garishness of the patterns of their clothes. Again, this clash serves to signal their ‘abnormality’ because they have willingly chosen to go against the expected norms of how women should dress and behave. In Edwardian Britain, the prevailing image of female beauty was a brunette with pompadour hairstyle, pale skin, rosy cheeks and naturally red lips,<sup>74</sup> influenced by popular music hall stars Gabrielle Ray, Lily Elsie and Zena Dare. Here, the artist has taken these features but subverted them and contorted them into something maniacal and repulsive, implying that those who support suffrage are not just ugly on the outside but also on the inside. This idea of degeneracy as a product of unnatural environments and inferior breeding ties in with physiognomic and eugenic theories that were popular at the time.<sup>75</sup> Here, the women’s ugliness is also signalled by their devious expressions, characterised by shifty eyes and smirks. Their lack of engagement with the viewer creates an insider/outsider dichotomy, whereby the women are hashing out a secret plan that will wreak havoc on British society and disrupt its traditional order and structure.<sup>76</sup> The signs on the wall behind the crowd of women also serve to mock their cause. ‘Down with man!’ is written in bold, red capital letters on the first sign, implying that the only reason that women are concerned with the right to vote is to criticise men out of a bitter resentment for being middle-aged spinsters. Here, women’s general concern with laws being ‘man-made’ is appropriated and corrupted by the postcard publisher who uses it to frame the women as rancorous. However, the argument in itself is paradoxical, working in direct opposition to the arguments in other postcards that, in supporting suffrage, women were abandoning their husbands and children. This irony is further emphasised by the sign which appears alongside and is meant to be read in conjunction: ‘Husbands for old maids’. The old maid was a popular term for an unmarried childless woman in Edwardian Britain, especially one who had become embittered because she was unlikely to ever get married. Here, the slogan implies that the primary reason that women want to have a voice in politics is to obtain husbands for themselves. Again, this presents a clear contradiction with the previous postcards that framed pro-suffrage women as abandoning their families. The strapline in the foreground of the postcard, which bears strong resemblance to newspaper cartoons, also serves to accentuate the ‘pointlessness’ of the women’s cause: ‘At the suffragette meetings you can hear some plain things – and see them too!’ This cutting remark plays on the polysemy of the word ‘plain’ as something simple and unremarkable to indicate that both the discussions and the appearance of suffragettes are unsophisticated and unpleasant. Again, we see how the word ‘suffragette’ is used as a ‘one size fits all’ term to encompass all the women at the meeting regardless of their backgrounds and aims. Here, attacking the women’s physical appearance serves as an easy way to cut short their individual arguments, providing support for Ramsey’s<sup>77</sup> belief that even when images of women appear in non-traditional texts, norms are reiterated regarding how they are expected to look and act that override their arguments or objectives.

## 'I will see the government': Mental Ridicule of Women

<INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE>

The postcard in Figure 3 was produced by Raphael Tuck & Sons in 1910 and shows the image of a little girl on the threshold of 10 Downing Street, her way being blocked by a policeman. It was created as part of a six-part series, which shows the little girl's descent into suffragism as she protests in Trafalgar Square, tries to meet the prime minister and is subsequently arrested and put in prison. This series drew on a longer tradition of similar engravings going back to William Hogarth (e.g. 'A Harlot's Progress, 1732; A Rake's Progress, 1734) and, therefore, would have been familiar to Edwardian viewers. By bringing past and present discourses into dialogue with one another, the publisher not only develops relations of intertextuality that create new meanings, but also grants legitimacy and value to its message through its culturally specific and contextual language and imagery.<sup>78</sup> When viewed alongside other anti-suffrage cards of children, however, we see a clear paradox between portrayals of the child as free-thinking and independent (seen here), the child as requiring the guidance of her mother and the child as being cared for by her 'feminised' father.

In all six cards, the girl is the only photographed element of the image, all other aspects being hand-drawn and tinted. Photographs carry high modality, bearing witness to a particular moment in time and, thus, conveying truth and realism, even if this representation is not neutral.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the emotional weight of these postcards is particularly strong. As we have seen, this was a tactic used frequently by pro-suffrage groups in their own postcard campaign. Furthermore, in being the only real-life part of the image, the girl is portrayed as the sole element that can be helped or changed by the viewer's intervention, which is emphasised by her direct gaze. Given that the image of the girl has been hand-tinted by the publisher, the colours become laden with symbolic meaning, the green, white and gold of her clothing evoking the WFL (a splinter group of the WSPU led by Charlotte Despard). Her association with the WFL is further emphasized by the visual similarity between her position at the gates of Downing Street and real-life images of WFL members chained to railings. Thus, the image of the girl infantilises the women's movement and equates their actions to that of a child who knows no better. In the final postcard in this series that shows the girl behind bars, her dress changes to red: although this colour was probably used by the publisher to indicate danger, its strong association with the NUWSS produces a certain irony, suggesting that the girl has moved from the militant WFL to the non-militant NUWSS and that her actions with the latter organisation have landed her in prison. These discrepancies indicate the publisher's lack of awareness of the significance of colour in the suffrage movement and the continued conflation of all women campaigners into one group.

In the image, the girl looks directly towards the viewer with her arms outstretched and bottom lip pouted in an effort not to cry. Kress and van Leeuwen<sup>80</sup> describe this gesture as an act of 'demand' because it forces the viewer to enter into an imaginary relationship with the child. In this case, the child is pleading with the viewer to help her get in to Downing Street and speak to the Prime Minister. This is further emphasised by the phrase 'I will see the Government' printed below, which we immediately interpret as coming directly from the child. The deontic modality of 'will' serves as a direct challenge to the policeman who is preventing

her from achieving her objective. As viewers, we are encouraged not to feel sympathy for the girl but rather pity her as a naïve child with foolish ideas about women's suffrage. Here, the girl's floral hat and smart dress place her in direct contrast to the ugly middle-aged suffragettes of other anti-suffrage postcards, implying that she might still have time to be 'saved' (i.e., give up on the idea of women's suffrage) before she becomes an embittered old maid.

By comparison, the policeman has his back turned completely away from the viewer and is looking towards the door of 10 Downing Street with his hands nonchalantly placed in his pockets. His stance brings distanciation and objectivation to the image, framing him as indifferent to the girl's cause and prepared to ignore her until she eventually gets tired and goes away.<sup>81</sup> This distance is further emphasised by the height difference between the policeman and the girl, as well as the fact that, unlike the girl, the policeman's image is hand-drawn rather than taken from a photograph. The lack of engagement between the two participants creates a disjointed narrative that represents the absence of sympathy between the Establishment and the suffrage cause. The girl is further kept at a distance from the police officer by the locked gates, which serve as both a physical barrier that prevents her from reaching the prime minister, as well as a metaphorical barrier that signals the obstacles between the women's cause and the government's own stance. The gates also carry connotations of the portcullis, a historical fortification gate, but more significantly, the symbol of Parliament and the symbol on badges awarded by the WSPU for those imprisoned in Holloway.

#### 'What I would do with the suffragists': Violence Towards Women

<INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE>

The postcard in Figure 4, produced in 1909 by an unspecified publisher, shows the disturbing image of a woman tied to a chair with her feet shackled and head clamped in a padlocked device. The woman's head and body are turned directly to the viewer in an act of 'demand', beseeching them to intervene and save her from this act of violence.<sup>82</sup> The beads of sweat on her face, wincing expression and splayed fingers indicate that she is in pain, but also that she is resigned to her fate and will face it head on. The image draws upon historical connotations of the systematic silencing of women in asylums<sup>83</sup>, yet, in doing so, ironically accuses the women of both fulfilling and deserting her feminine characteristics at the same time (i.e., as a sufferer of hysteria vis-à-vis as a supporter of suffrage). Tickner also notes this irony in newspaper articles of the period which argue that female hysteria explains why middle-class women have become 'hooligans'.<sup>84</sup>

While the physical appearance of the woman in the postcard has led some people to speculate that she represents Emmeline Pankhurst,<sup>85</sup> the image gives off subtle clues that the woman is, in fact, Muriel Matters – an Australian suffragette who played an integral role in the WFL. Not only does the woman in the image have a similar hairstyle and outfit to those of Matters (particularly the belt and brooch) and is wearing colours associated with the WFL,<sup>86</sup> but the '56lbs' on the weight is significant, which makes reference to the 56lbs of handbills promoting women's suffrage that Matters dropped from an airship that she flew over the Houses of Parliament during its official opening by King Edward VII on 16 February 1909.<sup>87</sup>



This postcard was produced just one month later, so the event and image of Matters would have been fresh in viewers' minds. It shows the speed at which publishers reacted to current affairs and played upon the public's opinion with provocative imagery.

Depicting Matters as chained and tied not only served to warn other women what they could expect if they continued to revolt, but also aimed to humiliate Matters particularly because of its association with one of her own protests that took place just a few months earlier. In October 1908, Matters entered the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons and chained herself to the grille – a piece of ironwork that obscured women's view of parliamentary proceedings – to raise attention to it as a symbol of women's oppression. Although Matters was arrested, her use of two strong padlocks meant that she could not be separated from the grille and it had to be removed completely to release her.<sup>88</sup> According to Matters, the device she wore (padlocked chains attached to a belt) was commonly used to quieten troublesome patients in sanatoriums, so part of her aim was to recontextualise it as a symbol of the fight for freedom rather than restraint.<sup>89</sup> In this postcard, the artist has belittled Matters' brave act by returning the shackles and two padlocks to their original context of use and, thus, their original associations with repression and control.

The postcard bears a striking resemblance to the front cover of Edwardian religious fiction books, made popular at the time by the widespread prize book movement that awarded such books to children in school and Sunday school settings.<sup>90</sup> Like the postcard image, these books tended to feature eye-catching cloth boards with full-colour illustrations and titles in decorative lettering.<sup>91</sup> They also had similar titles, such as 'What would Jesus do?', 'What wilt thou have me to do?', 'What will you give up for Jesus?' and 'What a little cripple did.'<sup>92</sup> As viewers would have been highly familiar with this book genre, the postcard image would have shocked and disturbed them because it subverted the expected norms of the genre, which focused on following the Bible's messages and treating others with care and respect. This is further accentuated by the use of the first person in the slogan, the *I* imploring viewers to adopt the position of the narrator and share his/her belief that this is the correct way to treat women who wish to have the right to vote. Despite the women's appeal for help with her eyes, the viewer is unlikely to empathise with her as she does not resemble traditional images of damsels in distress.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, the red backdrop signals her out as dangerous and, therefore, unworthy of being saved. The title's ruled lines are also reminiscent of children's schoolwork and institutional education, evoking repetition and, thus, engraining the message into the viewer's head.<sup>94</sup> The lines' resemblance to bars also reinforce the overall imprisonment iconography of the postcard.

Like many of the other postcards in the dataset, this example shows a major element of irony in its strapline that focuses on 'suffragists' while its image is of a suffragette. As suffragists were often accused of harbouring private militant sympathies, this card may deliberately serve as a warning to suffragists of what will happen to them if they support non-constitutional methods of support. However, given that suffragists were often confused for suffragettes and became targets of abuse in public marches and newspaper discourse, it is far more likely that this wording reflects the publisher's lack of willingness to engage with the myriad views on women's suffrage and, instead, deliberately blur the lines between groups in order to present all women as militant and, therefore, influence anti-suffrage support.

<INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE>

The postcard in Figure 5 was produced by the Edinburgh publisher WR&S Ltd in 1910 and shows an imagined scene from the future in a Britain where women have obtained the right to vote and have subsequently been elected to Parliament as MPs. The postcard was produced as part of WR&S Ltd’s ‘Reliable Series’, thus giving credibility to its overall message and acting as an unofficial authority on the future of Britain under female suffrage. Through its use of exaggeration, stereotyping and manipulation of public discourse, the postcard acts as a form of visual hyperbole that aims to capture the attention of viewers and warn them of the escalating dangers of granting female suffrage.

The centre of the image shows the raised dais in the House of Commons around which several women are gathered and involved in a heated debate. The woman on the left has her legs crossed, torso bent, right hand on hip and left hand pointing forward leaning on the Bible, while the woman on the right is depicted in a flat cap and brandishing an umbrella with her mouth open wide. Both figures serve to frame the women negatively by playing upon the two leading stereotypes of suffragettes: as harridans and as masculinised women. The cap also evokes the threat proposed to the status quo by extension of suffrage to working-class men.<sup>95</sup> The fact that the two women are facing one another implies a total rejection of the viewer and, instead, offers the women as items of information that urge the public to reflect on the perils of universal suffrage.<sup>96</sup> This detachment is further emphasised by the social distance between the viewer and the image, created by the full-body views and their oblique angles.<sup>97</sup> The bill on top of the raised dais indicates that the women are arguing over ‘Man and How to Treat It’. The use of the impersonal pronoun ‘it’ highlights their belief that men are worthless as people and are to be considered as objects – an ironic view given the political climate in which this card was produced. The bill itself also suggests that if women are given positions of power, they will abuse it by targeting men in any legislation they put forward.

A pot of tea and a teacup are also placed on top of the raised dais, giving the impression that if women are allowed to take part in parliamentary debate, they will only use it as an opportunity to have a tea party. While seemingly innocuous, tea parties had a heavy association with rebellion in Edwardian Britain because tea shops offered a meeting point for suffrage supporters. In a 1910 advertisement for Alan’s Tea Shop in Oxford Street, London, for example, the owner stated, ‘A large room may be enjoyed for meetings. No charge for members of the WSPU’.<sup>98</sup> In this image, a typically domestic object associated with homeliness and femininity acquires a new meaning where it is seen by anti-suffragists as a dangerous implement in the same way as the more obvious umbrella or the overturned mace on the despatch box.

The physical appearances of the women, which draw upon connotations of masculinity, contradict the highly feminine activities that they are carrying out on both sides of the Commons (Government and Opposition). We see one woman at the back nursing a baby, alluding to the fact that children will be admitted to the Commons because they need their mothers to look after them (despite the fact that other postcards have shown women as spinsters or husband being forced to undertake childcare duties). This woman is flanked by two others

– one who is applauding at the scene before her and the other with her hands raised and mouth open in a surprised gesture. Again, these figures play upon stereotypes associated with women’s character, either as someone who is overly excitable or who scares easily, going against the aggressive nature that other postcards have so strongly emphasised. In the foreground, there is a woman sitting with her dog and looking in a hand mirror. Her back is turned to the viewer, giving the impression that she is disconnected from her surroundings and is more concerned with the way she looks, again contradicting the notion of suffrage supporters not caring about their appearance.<sup>99</sup> To the left is a woman in the attire of the Speaker, but she is reading a novel (typically associated with female reading practices) rather than paying attention to the debate around her. The typically green benches and carpet of the House of Commons are depicted in pink and white, also suggesting the intrusion of femininity on a typically male domain and contradicting the previous assertions of ‘masculinised’ females.

The strapline of the image informs viewers that this is a ‘peep into the future’ and describes the chamber as the ‘House of (un)Commons’, given the peculiarity of women being in a political role. This message is in line with other propaganda postcards produced at the same time, namely those in opposition to Home Rule in Ireland, which showed a disastrous future should Ireland come under its own governance.<sup>100</sup> In a similar vein to anti-suffrage rhetoric, these postcards played upon stereotypical images of the Irish as unintelligent country bumpkins that would bankrupt Ireland and turn Dublin into a grazing pasture for animals if they were in charge. When viewed as an ensemble, the imagery on the postcard shows a clear paradox, simultaneously suggesting that women are spinsters and wives, ugly and beautiful, masculine and feminine, male haters and male embracers, interested in and bored by politics. It exemplifies the challenges that pro-suffrage supporters faced and the often ambiguous and flawed arguments around denying them the right to vote.

### **Concluding Discussion**

The Edwardian era was a turbulent political period, characterised by an increasingly militant campaign for women’s suffrage led by the WSPU. Horrified by the way that ‘respectable’ women were acting, the National League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage (NLOWS) was formed in 1910 with the aim of convincing the general public that granting women the right to vote would be dangerous for Britain’s future. The NLOWS, together with commercial publishers, launched a massive propaganda campaign through the medium of the picture postcard, promoting the perilous consequences of women’s suffrage in a cheap, palatable and engaging format. Shining an MCDA spotlight on a large body of anti-suffrage postcards in the Suffrage Postcard Project digital archive offers a new perspective that uncovers their key messages and demonstrates that their ideologies often sit at odds with one another.

On the one hand, postcards indicate a fear that gender roles will be subverted and men will be left at home to cook, clean and care for children while women go to work. This is reflected in the masculinisation of women as smoking, riding bicycles and playing cards and looking highly unflattering with their buck teeth, unkempt hair and garish clothing. Yet, on the other hand, in this imagined future, women are depicted in Parliament in highly feminised scenes, dressed in pink, gossiping, bouncing babies, putting on make-up, reading and styling each other’s hair. Equally, while many postcards portrayed women as neglecting their wifely

and motherly duties by becoming involved in the suffrage campaign, others showed them as sexually repressed, bitter spinsters that only became involved in the campaign to gain attention from men. Again, this shows a striking ambiguity in the arguments why women supposedly wanted to have a voice in politics: for something to do, out of hatred for men, for romantic purposes, to have more independence. In some cases, these differing views on women are even amalgamated into the same image, showing them as both fulfilling and deserting their feminine qualities at the same time (e.g. depictions of suffragettes as hysterical and locked in an asylum). This inconsistency is also apparent in the portrayal of women as crying children, cats, mice and monsters, indicating, in some cases, that they should be punished, while, in others, that they could still be saved. Another major paradox is in the conflation of suffragettes and suffragists, particularly in violent postcards, suggesting that both were engaged in militant acts and, therefore, needed to be punished. In conflating the two causes, publishers and anti-suffragists served to delegitimise the movement and influence the general public that all pro-suffrage women were dangerous. Finally, an additional layer of complexity is brought by the fact that people would have come across these postcards displayed collectively in shops and, thus, viewed them as a unified body of commentary on the suffrage movement. However, as MCDA shows, the ideas propagated often did not sit comfortably together. Thus, in their attempts to promote opposition to women's suffrage, these postcards, in fact, provide conflicting images that may have even appealed to some members of the public and convinced them of the legitimacy of women's suffrage or shocked them into support.

While the anti-Home Rule postcard campaign carried out in Ireland around the same time was successful at drawing attention to Ulster's cause and convincing the British government to exclude Ulster from any Home Rule plans,<sup>101</sup> the anti-suffrage postcard campaign did not gain the same traction. There are several possible reasons for this. First, the number of people who supported suffrage far outweighed those who did not. While it has been argued that militancy hindered support for women's suffrage in Britain, many Edwardians, in fact, gained sympathy for the campaign after seeing the brutal treatment to which women were being subjected through force-feeding, physical violence and sexual assault. Equally, seeing these violent scenes echoed humorously through the postcard may have been considered distasteful and steered those who were 'on the fence' about suffrage towards support. **Second, suffragists and suffragettes participated in such a wide range of creative and bold ways to draw attention to their messages that they overshadowed the efforts of anti-suffragists. Even their postcards seemed to acquire 'cult status', with surviving pro-suffrage postcards bearing no postmark and often autographed by leaders, suggesting that they were largely hand-exchanged or kept by the purchaser as souvenirs.**<sup>102</sup> This is in direct contrast to anti-suffrage postcards that were mainly posted anonymously and hint at an embarrassment or unwillingness for the sender to be directly tied to the views on the cards. Furthermore, the pro-suffrage campaign's predominate use of photography on their postcards, rather than exaggerated cartoons, carried notions of truth and was, therefore, more emotionally charged, which may have been led to **greater support for their cause.** More broadly, as women began to see what their sex could be capable of, thousands from all social classes and political persuasions became roused to participate in the suffrage campaign and their enthusiasm overtook the banal anti-suffrage messages of expected gender norms. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, upon the outbreak of World War One, Emmeline Pankhurst immediately suspended the activities of the WSPU,

encouraging all women to prove themselves by playing an active role in the war efforts. An estimated two million women replaced men in employment, demonstrating that they were capable of doing jobs beyond those in the traditional domestic sphere.<sup>103</sup>

As the war was coming to an end in 1918, the Representation of the People Act was put forward to Parliament, proposing the right to vote for all women over thirty who met a property qualification. The Bill achieved cross-party support, passing immediately through the House of Commons. When it reached the House of Lords, Lord Curzon, the president of the NLOWS, agreed not to oppose it because he did not wish to start a clash with the Commons. His decision led other members of the Lords to follow suit and the Bill was passed by 134 votes to 71 on 6 February 1918, leading to the disbandment of the NLOWS and bringing an end to the anti-suffrage postcard campaign.<sup>104</sup> Nine months later, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 was approved, granting women over twenty-one the right to stand for election as a Member of Parliament. Finally, in 1928, a new Act was established, widening suffrage by giving women electoral equality with men: now, all men and women aged over twenty-one, regardless of any property qualification, could vote.<sup>105</sup>

Today, while women in Britain can vote and participate in political life on equal terms to men, they still find themselves belittled or unfairly discriminated against, as illustrated by such recent examples as David Cameron's 'calm down, dear' and Jeremy Corbyn's 'stupid woman' remarks, as well as the fact that eight out of ten MPs are men.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, much of the same iconography and rhetoric of the anti-suffrage postcards can be found online, particularly in memes, which bring unfair attention to women's appearance over intellect, suggest that her predetermined role in life is as a mother or wife or frame her as nagging and gossipy.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, the recent Karen memes, in particular, show frightening parallels with caricatures of suffragettes in their depiction of an entitled and demanding middle-aged Caucasian woman.<sup>108</sup> The persistence of sexism in an online environment shows that these historical postcards are more important than ever, not only to educate people about women's long struggle for equal rights, but also to provide lessons on how to treat women fairly and encourage the development of counter-discourses that enable such derogatory messages to be subverted or reclaimed. In doing so, these postcards can move beyond their function as collective memories of an important political event and be used for educative purposes to encourage and empower people to strive towards a more egalitarian society.

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<sup>1</sup> "The House" being the Palace of Westminster – the meeting place for the two houses of the Parliament of the United Kingdom: the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

<sup>2</sup> Bush, 'British women's anti-suffragism and the forward policy, 1908-14'

<sup>3</sup> Santino, *Signs of War and Peace*, 134.

<sup>4</sup> Klich, cited in Bokak-Lindell, 'Postcards from the Propaganda Front'

<sup>5</sup> Palczewski, 'The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam', 384.

<sup>6</sup> O'Hagan, "Home Rule is Rome Rule": Exploring Anti-Home Rule Postcards in Edwardian Ireland.

<sup>7</sup> Florey, *American Woman Suffrage Postcards*, 213.

<sup>8</sup> The Act granted the right to vote to women over thirty who met minimum property qualifications.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Pacheco Costa, 'The use of irony as a subversive element in suffrage theatre'; Paxton, *Stage Rights!*

<sup>10</sup> Eltis, 'A class act'; Jones, 'Articulating the threatened suffragette body'; Daly Goggin, "'Bold Bad Ones'" in Stitches.

<sup>11</sup> Waters, 'The Campaign for Women's Suffrage in York and the 1911 Census Evasion'; MacDonald, "'No Vote No Census'".

<sup>12</sup> Elliott, "'Women who dared to ask for the vote'"; Edwards, 'The Regiment of Women'.

<sup>13</sup> Boyce Kay and Mendes, 'Changing Representations of the Suffragette Emily Wilding Davison in British Newspapers, 1913–2013'; Ryan, *Winning the Vote for Women*.

<sup>14</sup> Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14*. Anti-suffrage postcards have been explored in far greater depth in a US context. See, for example, Palczewski, 'The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam'; Florey, *Women's Suffrage Memorabilia*; Florey, *American Woman Suffrage Postcards*; Florey, 'Postcards and the New York Suffrage Movement'.

<sup>15</sup> Palczewski, 'The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam', 384.

<sup>16</sup> <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net>

<sup>17</sup> Ledin and Machin, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Machin and Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Machin, 'What is multimodal critical discourse analysis?'

<sup>20</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*; Kress and van Leeuwen, 'Colour as a semiotic mode'; van Leeuwen, 'Towards a Semiotics of Typography'; Djonov and van Leeuwen, 'The semiotics of texture'.

<sup>21</sup> Ledin and Machin, 'Multi-modal critical discourse analysis'; Ledin and Machin, *Doing Visual Analysis*; Ledin and Machin, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*.

<sup>22</sup> White, 'The Writing on the Wall', 322.

<sup>23</sup> Hall, 'The Rule of Difference', 107.

<sup>24</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*, p. 16.

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- <sup>25</sup> Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies 1897-1914*.
- <sup>26</sup> Bush, *Women Against the Vote*, 189.
- <sup>27</sup> Bush, 'British women's anti-suffragism and the forward policy, 1908-14'.
- <sup>28</sup> Bush, 'The anti-suffrage movement'
- <sup>29</sup> Crozier-De Rosa, 'Shame and the anti-suffragist in Britain and Ireland', 10.
- <sup>30</sup> Bush, 'The anti-suffrage movement'
- <sup>31</sup> Bush, *Women Against the Vote*, 277.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 109.
- <sup>33</sup> Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 161.
- <sup>34</sup> van Leeuwen, 'Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodality', 288.
- <sup>35</sup> Florey, *American Woman Suffrage Postcards*.
- <sup>36</sup> Richardson and Willis, *The New Woman in Fact and Fiction*, 12-13.
- <sup>37</sup> See <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/353>, for example.
- <sup>38</sup> See <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/61> and <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/14>
- <sup>39</sup> Florey, *American Woman Suffrage Postcards*, 216.
- <sup>40</sup> Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, 18.
- <sup>41</sup> Watson, 'Text and Imagery in Suffrage Propaganda', 7.
- <sup>42</sup> Florey, cited in Lewis, 'These Anti-Suffragette Postcards Warned Against Giving Women the Vote'.
- <sup>43</sup> Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 164.
- <sup>44</sup> See <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/938> and <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/130>
- <sup>45</sup> See <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/18>
- <sup>46</sup> Kelly, *Seeing Through Spectacles*, 328-29.
- <sup>47</sup> Bauman and Briggs, 73.
- <sup>48</sup> See <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/158> and <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/126>
- <sup>49</sup> See <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/373>
- <sup>50</sup> See <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/969>
- <sup>51</sup> Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, 11.
- <sup>52</sup> Floerke Scheid, 'Human Bodies Human Rights', 44.
- <sup>53</sup> See <https://collections.womenslibrary.org.uk/museum/museum-object/974443/> and <https://collections.womenslibrary.org.uk/museum/museum-object/973769/>
- <sup>54</sup> Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, 134.
- <sup>55</sup> Lennon, 'Fasting for the public', 19.
- <sup>56</sup> See <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/237>
- <sup>57</sup> See <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/360>
- <sup>58</sup> Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, 18.
- <sup>59</sup> Ketabgian, 'Foreign Tastes and "Manchester Tea Parties"', 127.
- <sup>60</sup> McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 211.
- <sup>61</sup> Thompson, *The Edwardians*, 38.
- <sup>62</sup> Richards, *Commodity Culture of Victorian Britain*, 134.
- <sup>63</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, 'Colour as a semiotic mode', 343.
- <sup>64</sup> Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color*, 63.
- <sup>65</sup> See, for example, Palczewski, 'The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam'.
- <sup>66</sup> Cowman, 'Doing Something Silly', 266.
- <sup>67</sup> Gupta, A corpus linguistic investigation into the media representation of the suffrage movement.
- <sup>68</sup> Pederson, Hunger-Strikers, Anti-Suffragists and Celebrity.
- <sup>69</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 124, 119.
- <sup>70</sup> Hattersley, *The Edwardians*, 214.
- <sup>71</sup> British Newspaper Archive search brings up a far greater number of hits for "suffragist" than "suffragette" in relation to the Cat and Mouse Act, Holloway Prison and force-feeding.
- <sup>72</sup> Harrison, 'Visual social semiotics', 49.
- <sup>73</sup> Ledin and Machin, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*, 81.
- <sup>74</sup> Payne, Winakor and Farrell-Beck, *The History of Costume*, 563.
- <sup>75</sup> Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 204.
- <sup>76</sup> Ledin and Machin, *Doing Visual Analysis*, 61.
- <sup>77</sup> Ramsey, 'Addressing Issues of Context in Historical Women's Public Address', 353.
- <sup>78</sup> Briggs and Bauman, 'Genre, Intertextuality and Social Power', 157.
- <sup>79</sup> Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*; Harrison, 'Visual social semiotics', 56.

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- <sup>80</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 122.
- <sup>81</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 119.
- <sup>82</sup> Ledin and Machin, *Doing Visual Analysis*, 61.
- <sup>83</sup> Scull, *Hysteria*, 7.
- <sup>84</sup> Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 204.
- <sup>85</sup> See speculation on the comment thread in the Propaganda Poster group on Reddit: [https://www.reddit.com/r/PropagandaPosters/comments/wc80k/what\\_i\\_would\\_do\\_with\\_the\\_suffragists/](https://www.reddit.com/r/PropagandaPosters/comments/wc80k/what_i_would_do_with_the_suffragists/)
- <sup>86</sup> See, for example, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lseilibrary/45332455032/> and <https://msmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Matters2.jpg>
- <sup>87</sup> Royal Air Force Museum, 'Flying and Votes for Women'.
- <sup>88</sup> Wainwright, *Miss Muriel Matters*, Chapter 14.
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>90</sup> See, for example, <https://bpsc.library.ualberta.ca/collections/victorian-and-edwardian-childrens-fiction>
- <sup>91</sup> O'Hagan, 'Principles, Privileges and Powerlessness in the Edwardian Prize Book', 507.
- <sup>92</sup> S.W. Partridge & Co. and Religious Tract Society 1899 and 1904 publishers' catalogues consulted at Cardiff University's Special Collections and Archives.
- <sup>93</sup> See O'Hagan, 'Home Rule is Rome Rule' for female representation of Hibernia used to gain viewers' sympathy.
- <sup>94</sup> Schaffner, *Writing as Punishment in Schools, Courts, and Everyday Life*, 14.
- <sup>95</sup> Black, *A History of Britain*, 93.
- <sup>96</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 119.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>98</sup> Cited in Chapman, 'The argument of the broken pane', 241.
- <sup>99</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 119.
- <sup>100</sup> See, for example, O'Hagan, "'Home Rule is Rome Rule'".
- <sup>101</sup> O'Hagan, "'Home Rule is Rome Rule'".
- <sup>102</sup> Nicholson, *The Encyclopedia of Antique Postcards*, 196.
- <sup>103</sup> Smith, *Suffrage Discourse in Britain during the First World War*.
- <sup>104</sup> Interestingly, Ticker notes that many of the images of women in anti-suffrage postcards were repurposed, now to show opposition to 'feminist lecturers' and 'temperance fanatics', *The Spectacle of Women*, 163.
- <sup>105</sup> Beaumont, 'The Women's Movement, Politics and Citizenship, 1918-1950s'.
- <sup>106</sup> BBC, 'Is politics sexist?'
- <sup>107</sup> Drakett *et al.*, 'Old jokes, new media'.
- <sup>108</sup> Freeman, 'The "Karen" meme is everywhere.'