

The women's man for Wimbledon, 1907

On 1 May 1907 Ivy Pretious, secretary of the Free Trade Union, received a "queer piece of news" from Bertrand Russell, with whom she had worked against Tariff Reform. "I am most likely," Russell said, "to stand in Wimbledon in the interest of Women's Suffrage.... I should not do it if there was a chance of getting it, as I am determined not to go into politics.... It is a howling joke, and amuses me almost as much as it annoys me."¹

How did it come to pass that a philosopher-mathematician, in the midst of a "very painful" period in his life,² should become embroiled in a Parliamentary by-election? Russell himself may not have been able to provide a fully satisfactory explanation. It was just that the suffragists of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), upon learning that the Liberal Party would not contest the Wimbledon seat left vacant by the resignation of Conservative M.P. C. Eric Hambro, decided to enter a candidate of their own. Their candidate had, of course, to be a man; and the most available man on such notice was the Hon. Bertrand Russell, a member of the NUWSS executive committee. Russell accepted, partly, no doubt, because he could not gracefully do anything else, and perhaps because - as he had told a correspondent the previous month - he was "tired and depressed, constantly trying to forget troubles it is useless to remember...."³ But probably the most important reason for Russell agreeing to stand was the fact that he "had been a passionate advocate of equality for women ever since in adolescence I read Mill on the subject" (*Autobiog.*, I, 155). In any case, as the *Wimbledon Herald* noted on 4 May, "the whole political world was startled by the announcement that the National Union ... had decided to run a candidate...."

At Wimbledon Russell faced a formidable Conservative opponent in Henry Chaplin, affectionately known as "the Squire", an old Parliamentary warhorse and Cabinet minister who had sat for the same rural Lincolnshire constituency (Sleaford) for thirty-eight years until he was swept away by the Liberal floodtide of 1906.⁴ During the campaign Chaplin's major speeches emphasized tariff reform and colonial preference, but, from time

¹Russell to Ivy Pretious (later Tennyson), 1 May 1907.

²*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. I (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1967), 156.

³Russell to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, 2 April 1907.

⁴For Chaplin (1848-1923), see *Dictionary of National Biography, Twentieth Century, 1922-1930*, pp. 171-74.

to time, he also deigned to take notice of "that little band of masculine women and feminine men" so vigorously opposing his candidacy (*Times*, 3 May 1907). Statements such as this by crusty old Tories like Chaplin outraged Russell because, as he had earlier told a suffragist friend:

I think women's suffrage important, not so much on account of the direct political effect, as because I detest the general assumption of women's inferiority, which seems to me degrading to both men and women. ...the most desirable effect of women's suffrage would be to root this assumption out of people's minds....⁵

As the first candidate ever to stand with women's suffrage as the foremost plank of his platform, Russell hoped that his challenge to a long-standing opponent of women's rights might help to educate the electorate on the justice and good sense of giving equality of citizenship to females. He added that on issues other than women's suffrage he was "a supporter of the Government ... a Free Trader and a strong believer in land reform" (*Daily Chronicle*, 4 May 1907). To illustrate the seriousness of their intentions, leaders of the NUWSS promised to flood Wimbledon with hundreds of women workers who would "leave no stone unturned to secure the return of our first candidate, the Hon. Bertrand Russell" (*Daily Mirror*, 4 May 1907).

To all of this Chaplin retorted that if he was being opposed "because he was an old offender upon the question of female suffrage ... he pleaded guilty to the charge." Some candidates, he continued, would promise "any mortal thing" - votes for women or even admission of women to Parliament - to be elected; and though he might be old-fashioned, he drew the line at that.

He trembled to think of what would happen in a Parliament composed of half men and half women. He had such reverence for women, for the purity of their home life, and respect for the unselfishness of their lives, that he would not be a party to leading them into paths which were foreign to their nature, to play a part not assigned to them, and away from the home life for which they were so eminently fitted.⁶

The lines were indeed drawn, and so began what the *Dundee Advertiser* (9 May 1907) called "one of the most remarkable contests that have ever been waged."

Russell recalled the Wimbledon campaign as "short and arduous," and filled with popular opposition to women's suffrage even more bitter than that he later encountered as an opponent of the Great War (*Autobiog.*, I, 153). When the subject was not greeted with violence or obscenity, it was treated - and this was almost worse - with "mere hilarity". Certainly such a tone was well expressed in a piece of doggerel which appeared

⁵Russell to Davies, 4 June 1906.

⁶*Westminster Gazette*, 4 May 1907 and *Tribune*, 14 May 1907.

in the *World* (4 May 1904):

THE WIMBLEDON ELECTION

Although we may oppose the plan
Of giving womenfolk a vote,
Still to the ordinary man
Few things are more engaging than
The Russell of the Petticoat.

As the Liberal *Daily News* (9 May) noted, it was "the comic side of the election" which appealed to Wimbledon electors, who "in the innocence and ignorance of their hearts ... [had] not appreciated the difference between the very staid and polite National Union ... and the Women's Social and Political Union..." There was, in fact, good reason for this since Conservative newspapers - with the notable exception of the *Times* - typically characterized NUWSS workers as "lady window-breakers" (*Daily Express*, 3 May), avowed enemies of the Government (*Globe*, 4 May) and advocates of physical force (*Bradford Argus*, 4 May). Most Liberal journals did make a clear distinction between the constitutional "suffragists" of the National Union and the militant "suffragettes" of the WSPU, but for many all women who wanted the vote were fair game.

Despite the forces arrayed against the women's cause, Russell was, according to his wife Alys, "much amused and excited" at the outset of the campaign.⁷ The first Mrs. Russell, an ardent worker for women's rights, was an effective speaker at the hustings and accompanied her husband almost everywhere. On a series of hastily scribbled postcards to her mother, Mrs. R. Pearsall Smith, Alys left a marvellously candid account of the contest. When her story is added to the voluminous collection of newspaper clippings, largely amassed by Mrs. Smith and preserved in the Russell Archives, a fairly complete picture of the campaign emerges.

In the early days of the contest, the suffragist mood was generally buoyant - and, so it seemed, with good reason. Not only were newspapers reporting on a "regiment of women" arriving from all parts of the country to work for "our dear Mr. Russell", but the NUWSS also succeeded in enlisting the services of Frank Massey, resident election agent of the Wimbledon Liberal Association, to take control of their campaign machinery. Massey, it was felt, would provide a professional touch while the female workers contributed energy and enthusiasm. Nineteen committee rooms were set up to coordinate suffragists' campaign activities and still another was established by the Free Trade Union which threw its support to Russell. As for the Liberal Party, neither its local nor national bodies offered him any official aid; but George Whiteley, the chief Government whip, announced to the press that Russell, as a fighter against Protection, had his personal sympathy and best wishes. In addition many

⁷Alys Russell to her mother, Mrs. R. Pearsall Smith, 3 May 1907.

Liberal newspapers, including the *Daily News*, the *Daily Chronicle* and the *Tribune*, endorsed Russell's candidacy.

In spite of such hopeful signs, however, the *Manchester Guardian* (6 May) found it difficult "to understand the high spirits in which Mr. Russell and the suffrage societies are entering upon the campaign...." The raw political facts were indeed formidable. For not only did the Conservatives have a majority of over 2,000 in the recent election, they also had a solid block of some 4,000 "outvoters" who could more than turn the balance. Furthermore, the suffragists, even if they obtained the services of a thousand volunteer workers, would be hard put to carry out an effective canvass in the vast, sprawling constituency which disgorged most of its 23,500 voters into London shops and offices during the day.

These factors - however important - were not the most significant reasons why very few could take "that eccentric gentleman, Mr. Bertrand Russell" seriously (*Manchester Courier*, 6 May). He was a "freak" candidate purely and simply because he advocated a cause most males still felt was a fit subject only for joking. Russell's first campaign meeting at Worple Hall, Wimbledon, illustrates how far some at least were prepared to take this jocular attitude. Before the chairman of the meeting could complete his introductory remarks, a free-for-all (probably staged) erupted in the rear of the hall. Order restored, Russell, in his own address, was allowed to proceed only to the point of declaring himself an avowed suffragist when hoots, groans, and calls of "no petticoat government" made his words inaudible. Of those who followed, including Alys Russell and three other women, only Ethel Snowden gave as good as she got, demanding of the disrupters: "How much were you paid?" But Mrs. Snowden was the last to be heard; and as a grand finale someone released two live rats into the hall making further deliberations all but useless. It could not be called an auspicious beginning for an election campaign, but as one provincial newspaper commented, neither were rats "a very convincing way of meeting women's claim to the parliamentary franchise" (*East Anglian Times*, Ipswich, 7 May).

Russell, at least, remained undeterred. On the following Tuesday Alys reported that she and Bertie were traveling all over the constituency, having "such amusing interviews" and receiving "a good hearing and even a few cheers."⁸ The *Westminster Gazette* (8 May 1907) also noticed on an improved atmosphere, remarking that Russell's "good-humour" had squelched the unruly element. Unfortunately, however, the riotous behaviour of anti-suffragists had not quite run its course. As Alys related to her mother: "On the way home, I got an egg (new-laid fortunately) over my left eye, the first baptism of the election. I am afraid it will

swell up, but [it] will make good platform material."⁹ (In all newspaper reports and in the *Autobiography*, I, 153-54, the egg is referred to as "rotten," but the victim's testimony as to its freshness seems decisive.) In reporting this "unfortunate incident" (Conservative papers) or "election outrage" (Liberal papers), correspondents on both sides revealed the contemporary tendency to class women as wilting, or at least shrinking, violets - noting that Mrs. Russell would probably be "incapacitated for the remainder of [the] campaign". Actually, all Alys got from her "election egg" was "a slight and not unbecoming bump", a lot of sympathy and a public letter of apology from Henry Chaplin. Still accompanied by his wife, Russell made the most of the incident by canvassing the next day "in a covert-coat ... liberally splashed with egg-yolk." Mrs. Russell told the *Daily News* (9 May) that such events were "all in a day's work" and informed her mother that both she and Bertie were "flourishing" and that he was "enjoying himself immensely."¹⁰

The flood of sympathy which the bad manners of anti-suffragists had brought to the Russells caused a momentary flutter of concern in the Tory press. The *Daily Express* (7 and 8 May), for example, while not abandoning its crude anti-feminist humour, pointed up the fact that Russell was increasingly disassociating himself from purely suffrage issues and presenting himself as a serious Radical politician. Such a situation, said the *Morning Post* (8 May), "would be amusing if it were not treacherous." The *Standard* (13 May) went as far as to say that women's suffrage had been "completely placed in the background" and that Russell had launched a personal assault on Chaplin through a series of "gross libels".

Whether or not the attacks on Chaplin were libels, it certainly was true that they had gone far afield from women's suffrage. In answer to a Chaplin poster quoting the average voter as saying "No, thanks, my dear. You mind the baby, and leave politics to me. I am going to vote for Chaplin and Empire" the Russell camp responded: "Why didn't Mr. Chaplin mind the baby when he was President of the Local Government Board from 1895 to 1900?" and went on to note the high infant mortality rates during that time. Russell's committee also issued a poster advising Wimbledon to "follow Sleaford and reject the man who wants to tax your children's food" and another proclaiming "Every vote given a Tory is a vote given in favour of dear food" (*Daily Chronicle*, 8 May and *Westminster Gazette*, 14 May).

But for all the attention paid to other issues, the heart of Russell's message was votes for women and the bulk of his workers were women who

⁸Alys Russell to Mrs. Pearsall Smith, 7 May 1907.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Alys Russell to Mrs. Pearsall Smith, 7 and 9 May 1907.

wanted the vote. Two of these resolute workers were Mary Spring-Rice and M.E. Massie, who dashed off notes to their candidate to cheer him up "after the appalling seriousness of most of your helpers and constituents" and to relate some of the trials and pleasures of young female canvassers in Wimbledon. Miss Massie told of "horrid, fearfully flirtatious" villa men and how she "refrained from offering a cigarette" to the ladies she interviewed for fear of defaming the candidate's character. Mary Spring-Rice recounted the amusing story of "an old parson who after disappointing me by announcing he was opposed to both Suffrage and Free Trade said he would vote for you as a Protestant.... It is hard luck on you to fight a constituency like this. A Liberal in Wimbledon, at least a Suffrage Liberal, seems to be as rare as a Dodo!"¹¹

The Wimbledon campaign reached its peak on the Saturday before the poll (11 May), with fifty meetings hearing over one hundred fifty speakers for both sides. Russell and his supporters, including over a dozen Radical MPs, stuck to the issues of women's suffrage and the cheap loaf, and perhaps took some sardonic pleasure in the announcement that the Church Association and National Protestant League would support Russell on account of his views on temperance and education (*Times*, 13 May). Chaplin, on the other hand, warned his followers that the greatest enemies were over-confidence and apathy. The Radicals, he said, fearing an open fight, had adopted a "Suffragette" (Chaplin, to do him justice, probably did not know the difference) candidate in order to lull Conservatives into the belief that there was no need to vote. But the truth of the matter, said "the Squire", was that "the whole of the Radical machinery, their full resources, and their best speakers" had been thrown into the struggle. Every Conservative and right-thinking man was therefore urged to do his duty (*Morning Post*, 14 May).

On polling day, Tuesday, 14 May, the rain fell in torrents.

At 12:30 p.m. the next day, the High Sheriff of Surrey announced the result from a platform erected outside Queen's Hall, Wimbledon, where the ballots had been counted:

Chaplin (C)	10,263
Russell (Suffragist) . .	3,299
Majority	6,964

Chaplin was magnanimous in victory, noting that "after a long experience of political contests ... never do I remember one which has been fought so fairly and straightforwardly ..." (*Wimbledon and District Gazette*, 18 May). Russell seconded the victor's remarks, but the extent of his defeat must have been somewhat disconcerting. Not only had Chaplin received seven hundred more votes than the Conservative in 1906, but

¹¹M.E. Massie and Mary Spring-Rice to Russell, [May 1907].

Russell had polled over four thousand less than the Liberal (*Times*, 16 May). Liberal newspapers were quick to point out that Chaplin's majority had nothing to do with a decline in the Government's popularity. Rather it was the result of Liberal voters' refusal to support an independent candidate, whatever his credentials (*Westminster Gazette*, 15 May). The Conservative press naturally saw "the Squire's" victory as a crushing defeat for two Radical principles: free trade and, to a lesser extent, women's suffrage. Chaplin himself noted that the defeat of the first had been a "staggering blow" to the Government and the rejection of the second had indicated "the folly of a change in our Constitution to which I am certain the vast majority of women ... are ... entirely opposed ..." (*Daily Mail*, 16 May and *Herald*, 18 May).

Some prominent Liberals did write to Russell apologizing for their party's lack of real support,¹² but the Government with a majority of over four hundred survived very nicely despite Chaplin's "staggering blow". What of women's suffrage? Sylvia Pankhurst of the WSPU felt that the election had meant nothing at all to the movement since it was apparent that "Russell cared very much more for Liberalism than he did for Women's Votes ... [and] had no intention of standing out against the wishes of his party leaders in order to press forward the Women's Cause." On the other hand, one official of the NUWSS, who wrote to console Russell, went so far as to say that the election has been a "glorious victory" for the cause - first because a man had made votes for women the primary issue and second because 3,300 other men had voted in support of that issue.¹³ Perhaps Frank Massey, Russell's election agent, had the last word. After congratulating the defeated candidate on "a most gallant fight against enormous odds", Massey went on to note that a copy of one of B.R.'s books on mathematics "certainly makes me appreciate the joke of your getting mixed up with politics."¹⁴

Whether or not Russell took the remark as a compliment is not recorded, but he was always proud of his public stand on behalf of women's rights and indeed continued to work in the movement until the outbreak of the Great War. Much later in life he remarked that "few things are more surprising than the rapid and complete victory of this cause throughout the civilized world. I am glad to have had a part in anything so successful" (*Autobiog.*, I, 1955). While most of those interested in real equality for women would submit that Russell was overly sanguine in his

¹²L.T. Hobhouse to Russell, 16 May and G. Graham Lacey to Russell, 18 May 1907.

¹³Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette* (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1911), pp. 169-71 and Bertha Mason to Russell, 15 May 1907. Also see Bertha Mason to *Times*, 17 May 1907.

¹⁴Frank R. Massey to Russell, 21 May 1907.

estimate of total victory, it is also true that the women's cause has come some way since the spring of 1907 when rats and eggs were the most potent male (and female) arguments against the demand for sexual justice. It is entirely fitting that the twentieth-century's great apostle of human liberty should have played so prominent a public role in those early days.

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