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**'AN UNCONVENTIONAL MP': NANCY ASTOR, PUBLIC WOMEN  
AND GENDERED POLITICAL CULTURE**

## Nancy Astor, Women and Politics, 1919–1945

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Nancy Astor was the first woman elected to the House of Commons, in 1919. She succeeded her husband in his Plymouth constituency when he inherited a seat in the House of Lords, so avoided the discrimination which for decades prevented the selection of many women for winnable seats. She was not a suffragist, or, when elected, a feminist, but the hostility of many men, in and out of parliament, to her presence in the Commons stimulated her support for some, though not all, causes for which the women's movement campaigned. She promoted equal pay, equal work opportunities, custody rights and the equal franchise, among other things, with some success, but was dubious about divorce and birth control due to her faith in Christian Science and its moral strictures. She was passionately anti-war, so like other feminists and pacifists was an 'appeaser'. She was not a 'crypto-Nazi' as she was, and sometimes is, represented. She facilitated contact between women activists and MPs, male and female, and encouraged cross-party co-operation among women MPs. She was a popular and regular public speaker and widened the appeal of many aims of the women's movement among women who were dubious about feminism. She was a Conservative who never followed the party line and an active promoter of state welfare measures, especially for young children. She was popular in Plymouth and supported her constituents through World War Two, but stood down in 1945 and left politics when Labour was likely to win the seat in the landslide election. Overall, her greatest contribution is that she significantly raised the profile of women in British politics and assisted the very gradual shift to greater gender equality and expansion of state welfare between the wars and through World War Two.

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## Introduction

In December 1919, Nancy Astor was the first woman elected to the House of Commons, alongside 706 men. It was one more move in the long, slow shift towards gender equality in UK, still incomplete a century later. It followed the franchise reforms of 1918 and parliament granting permission for women to stand for election at age 21, younger than the age at which they had recently been allowed to vote.

In the Representation of the People Act, 1918, all adult men were enfranchised at last, after a century of campaigns since the Peterloo massacre in 1819. Previously 40% had been excluded, mainly due to a property qualification. The same Act enfranchised women only at age 30, and if they or their husbands possessed property of the value previously required of male voters, unless they happened to be among the few female university graduates, who qualified at age 30 to vote in one of the nine university seats, regardless of marital or propertied status. The age limit was due partly to women being a majority of the adult UK population: there were 107 females per 100 males in 1911, and 110 in 1921, following wartime deaths; women had long outnumbered men in the UK. Male politicians resisted a majority female electorate. The coalition government equally feared a socialist takeover following the enfranchisement of many working-class people, the growth of the Labour Party and the recent Russian revolution. They hoped to avert this danger by enfranchising only older, more affluent women, assuming they were less likely socialists than irresponsible young 'flappers' (Thane, 2018). The first woman MP was indeed a Conservative, but, like very many female voters, she was not always as conservative in her opinions and actions as some politicians hoped.

In November 1918 parliament voted that all women could stand for parliament when they reached the age of 21. The reform started with a parliamentary resolution submitted by Liberal MP Herbert Samuel, who regretted that he had not supported suffragism more enthusiastically (his wife was a suffragist). He claimed to have been convinced of women's potential to contribute to public life by their wartime work. He presented the reform as a logical consequence of the extension of the franchise, arguing for 21 as the lower age limit since the objection that the adult franchise would make women a majority of voters would not apply to candidates. Another

reason for this anomaly was that some MPs thought it hypocritical to demand equivalence with the franchise qualification for women when they themselves had been elected before they could vote, as unmarried men inhabiting lodgings or parental property, and not yet independent property holders. They argued that women could not be treated differently (Takanayagi, 2012: 20). Ellen Wilkinson was elected in 1924 as Labour's first female MP, aged 33 but was not eligible to vote in her home constituency because, she said, she had 'neither a husband nor furniture' (Takayanagi, 2012: 131–2). Nancy Astor was aged 40 in 1919, with a very wealthy husband, and could vote. In the December 1918 election 17 women stood but only one was elected, Countess Constance Markiewicz, an Irish nationalist and feminist who was in Holloway prison at the time for her role in the Easter Rising, and had been spared capital punishment because she was female. Like other Sinn Feiners she refused to take her seat in Westminster.

In the absence of sustained opinion polls before 1945 we cannot be sure how many of the new women voters fulfilled the politicians' hopes and voted Conservative. They certainly voted. The turnout was low among men and women in 1918 since the election came so soon after the end of the war and the franchise reform; many potential voters were unregistered. The next election in 1922 saw a 71% turnout; turnouts of 70–76% then characterized all inter-war elections. Journalists were curious about the new women voters and crowded around polling stations to assess them. Throughout the 1920s they commented upon high female turnouts and that women expressed independent views on political issues, not echoing their husbands as some expected, and indeed sometimes their husbands followed their political views. It was reported that they were not generally immovably attached to one party but were influenced by policies, and were not interested only in 'women's issues' but in foreign affairs, among other issues (Thane, 2001: 260–1).

### **Astor's Election**

Nancy Astor was American by birth and moved to Britain in 1904, following divorce after a brief, miserable marriage to a man who revolted her by drinking heavily and making excessive sexual demands. In 1906 she re-married wealthy Waldorf Astor, also

of American origin, who became Conservative MP for Plymouth Sutton in 1910. She had one son by her first marriage, who she raised in Britain, then four sons and one daughter with Waldorf between 1907 and 1918. Unusually, even for a wealthy family at this time, they all had long lives. Nancy canvassed and organized for Waldorf in his constituency and showed no evident interest in the contemporaneous women's suffrage movement or any other aspect of feminism. She did however have a correspondence with suffragette leader Emmeline Pankhurst in 1915, in which Pankhurst regretted the pacifism of many suffragists and hoped that her daughter, Christabel's, plan to revive *The Suffragette* journal would help to counteract this (Purvis, 2018: 378). We do not know how or why this contact between them came about, or any further details about it. However, in later years, Astor expressed warmth towards Emmeline and respect for her suffrage campaigning. When she was first elected she commented that the first woman to take her seat in the Commons should have been Emmeline or Christabel, presumably because their campaigns had made it possible (Purvis, 2018: 429).

When, in 1925, Emmeline returned to Britain after a long sojourn overseas, feminist Viscountess Rhondda organized a reception for her. Astor rushed in from the Commons and said, dramatically, that she would resign her seat tomorrow if Mrs Pankhurst 'saw her way to take it'. Pankhurst replied, equally dramatically, 'If you want me there, if you think I can serve, if you think I can help, then, hard as the work is, I will go there if I am sent' (John, 2013: 381). She did not take over Astor's seat, but in 1926 she joined the Conservative Party, having once been a member of the Independent Labour Party, and agreed to stand as a party candidate. In 1927 she was adopted as Conservative candidate in the poor East London constituency of Whitechapel and St George's. It was generally believed to be unwinnable by a Conservative but she worked hard, with some apparent success, to win over working-class women from the socialism adopted by her daughter Sylvia, while holding to a feminist, gender equality agenda including support for the equal franchise. But she died in 1928 before she could contest an election (Purvis, 2013: 30–33). No more is known about her relationship with Astor.

In 1919, Waldorf's father died and he reluctantly inherited his viscountcy and seat in the House of Lords, having been forced to abandon the Commons. He made

clear that he aimed to divest himself of the title and return to the Plymouth seat. Meanwhile, he promoted Nancy as his stop-gap replacement until his return. She presented herself as a loyal wife, uninterested in a political career or in gender politics, and was safely elected, with a majority of 5,000. But it was impossible to renounce a peerage until, in 1963, Labour MP Anthony Wedgewood Benn (later better known as Tony Benn) persuaded parliament to change the law when he was in a similar situation. Waldorf could not return to the Commons and Nancy remained until 1945, always supported by her husband (Pugh, 2004).

She announced in the election campaign, 'I am not standing before you as a sex candidate. I do not believe in sexes or classes' (*Western Morning News*, 1919: 5). From the start she displayed an independence of mind, including in her relationship with the Conservative Party, which she was to demonstrate in parliament; she was not merely her husband's mouthpiece. She stated in her adoption speech: 'If you want a party hack, don't elect me. Surely we have outgrown party ties. I have. The war has taught us that there is a greater thing than parties and it is the State' (Law, 1997: 130). The campaign aroused massive media fascination with this wealthy, beautiful woman, perhaps not the sort of female MP they had expected. Like female, but not male, aspirants to parliament ever since (including Margaret Thatcher) she was asked whether she should not be at home caring for her children, five of whom were aged between one and twelve. She replied, 'I felt someone ought to be looking after the more unfortunate children. My children are among the fortunate ones' (Harrison, 1987: 79). In parliament she campaigned persistently for the protection of children against poverty and physical and sexual abuse, while her own children were safely cared for by servants.

### **Astor in Parliament**

Astor was introduced into parliament on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1919 by the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, and Conservative leader, Arthur Balfour. She found the Commons a lonely, often hostile, place and later recalled: 'When I stood up and asked questions affecting women and children, social and moral questions, I used to be shouted at for five or ten minutes at a time' (Takayanagi, 2012: 137). MPs would refuse her a place

to sit; she was grateful to Labour MP Will Thorne who gave her a seat when others did not (Harrison, 1987: 97). She claimed that her fellow Conservative, Winston Churchill, did not speak to her for two years after she arrived in parliament. He was notoriously hostile to women MPs and they disagreed about devolution in India, cuts to education, the General Strike and much else.

Facilities for women MPs were poor. Astor was allocated an office in the basement of the palace of Westminster which she had to share with other women MPs as they were elected; it became increasingly cramped as their numbers grew. The dining rooms were only gradually opened to them and they were banned from the smoking room where much lobbying took place. Not until 1931 did they gain a room where they could change and take a bath during long parliamentary sessions. When Astor first took her seat she found the small office filled with hats sent by milliners seeking publicity if she wore them in public. To avoid the media obsession with her appearance she took to regularly wearing a sober white blouse, black skirt, jacket and tricorn hat, with a white gardenia in her buttonhole, sent daily by the gardener at Cliveden, the Astor country house (Pugh, 2004). She and Ellen Wilkinson kept complaining about the press obsession with the appearance of women MPs, at this 'trivialization' of their role, and this has never ceased (Law, 1997: 207–8). Nevertheless, Astor liked to dress well and in 1928 made a dramatic entry into the Commons wearing a red hat and dress, and in 1931 in an ankle-length white silk ball dress (Harrison, 1987: 78).

Astor made more impact with her appearance and networking behind the scenes than with her speeches in parliament, which were frequent but rarely impressive, often lightweight, rambling and repetitious, and less effective than they might have been even in supporting her favourite causes. 'The Noble Lady gabbles and gabbles all the time', Aneurin Bevan unkindly commented in 1945 (Harrison, 1987: 94). Often her parliamentary performances degenerated into heckling matches, which was never hard in the Commons (Pugh, 2004). She adjusted in part to its style, becoming notorious for her interruptions of other members, verbally and with her fist, pulling faces or pointing her finger, but she seemed incapable of observing parliamentary rules, such as not referring to Members by name, despite the efforts of

Waldorf and Ray Strachey, the feminist who became her political adviser (see below), to coax her into better habits (Harrison, 1987: 93). Her style perhaps enabled her to survive in the otherwise all-male club that was parliament; she was not subservient to its conventions.

Her speeches could make an impact in other settings. They were more effective with working-class audiences because she said what she thought, and she was in demand by Conservative candidates seeking working-class votes. She replied to one such request in 1926: 'it is the poorer working woman that I like talking to, far better than your highbrows' (Harrison, 1987: 82). She enjoyed attacking the Labour Party in public, particularly for what she believed was the exaggerated emphasis on class of its intellectuals, especially as its vote rose in Plymouth through the 1920s and winning working-class votes became vital. She believed capitalism could benefit everyone more than socialism and encouraged property-ownership, but she cared about poverty and advocated state welfare reform. She had regular wrangles with Labour MPs in parliament, including when Labour was in government, because she felt they did not do as much as they promised to relieve poverty and unemployment, though she was at least as critical of the Conservative right-wing. She attacked the Conservative Duchess of Atholl for her cuts to education funding as a junior minister from 1924 as vigorously as she had previously attacked the Labour government for failing to raise the school-leaving age as it had promised. She argued against Ellen Wilkinson: 'One does not have to be poor to have a heart. Women who have money are just as much interested in infant welfare in this country as any other people' (Harrison, 1987: 83). She got on better with trade unionists, though she believed they did not do enough to help women workers. In the aftermath of the General Strike in 1926, with fellow MP Margaret Wintringham, she opposed Baldwin's vindictive anti-trade union legislation and supported the miners' wives as the mining strike dragged on.

In 1934, the Labour-supporting *Clarion* newspaper described her as 'the tomboy of British politics', who was 'always quarrelling and always making up' (Harrison, 1987: 84). She infuriated the Conservative Party conference in 1939 by advocating abolition of flogging. She was a reforming centrist who could not simply identify

with any party line. The young, radical, Harold Macmillan found her a 'great help and inspiration' in his early days in parliament from 1924 (Harrison, 1987: 87). She welcomed the coalition National Government in 1931 and its continuation through the war as a middle way between opposing parties, but she believed that it was not reformist enough before the war, not sufficiently improving or restoring cuts to education, housing, unemployment benefit and child welfare.

In 1920 she was joined in parliament by the Liberal Margaret Wintringham who also replaced her husband, on his death. It was widely believed that the wives of former MPs replacing their husbands were less threatening than other women because they were assumed to represent their husbands' views. Unlike Astor, Wintringham was a former suffragist, active in women's organizations as well as in the Liberal Party, but they co-operated and, as we shall see, both supported causes promoted by women's organizations. In the next general election in 1922 they both retained their seats while 31 other women stood unsuccessfully. Many women who lacked the advantage of a husband's reflected glory wanted to stand for parliament, but for decades sexist prejudice prevented their selection for winnable seats for any party. This problem remains in 2020, when women, still a majority of the UK adult population, form only 34% of MPs, the highest proportion ever seen in parliament. The largest number of women elected between the wars was 15 in 1931, when 62 women stood.

### **Astor and Feminism**

Feminists were dubious about Astor when she was elected because she had no record of supporting women's causes, but leaders of women's organizations worked to win her support, aware of the value of a representative in parliament. Ray Strachey was a leading activist and parliamentary adviser to the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), as the suffragist National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), founded and led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett, renamed itself in 1918. Now that women had the vote, NUSEC became dedicated to helping them to use it, providing training in public speaking, committee work, campaign procedures and other essential skills of public life, informing women about political issues and procedures, and campaigning alone and with other organizations for reforms. It

focussed initially on causes that its supporters thought particularly urgent: equal voting rights; equal pay for equal work; reform of the laws on divorce and prostitution; establishing 'an equal moral standard'; pensions for civilian widows; equal parental rights to custody of children; and opening the legal profession to women.

Strachey described Astor as 'lamentably ignorant of everything she ought to know' (Pugh, 2004), then became her political secretary, dispelling the ignorance by advising and briefing her on issues promoted by the women's movement. Astor was responsive, perhaps grateful for support in an often hostile male-dominated political world. In 1921 she took over the Consultative Committee of Women's Organizations (CCWO), established by NUWSS in 1916 to coordinate pressure for franchise reform. It became more active when reorganized by Astor to provide a link between women's organizations and male and female MPs, promoting networking among activists and politicians to promote the women's causes, with some success. Forty-nine women's associations were affiliated to it, including NUSEC, the National Council of Women (NCW), the Six-Point Group, and Liberal and Conservative, (though not Labour), women's organizations. At least 130 women's associations were politically active in the 1920s, almost certainly drawing into public life a larger number and a wider social range of women than ever before (Law, 1997: 232–7). They included women's trade unions, professional, confessional and single-issue groups including the National Union of Women Teachers, the Council of Women Civil Servants, the (Roman Catholic) St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, the Union of Jewish Women and the Women's Co-operative Guild, the largest working-class women's organization, founded in 1883. In shifting coalitions they worked together on many issues, and the whole women's movement benefited from Astor's skills at socialization.

In 1921, Astor also became Vice-President of the feminist Six-Point Group (SPG). This was established by Viscountess Rhondda, who founded the influential weekly publication *Time and Tide* in 1920. This was produced wholly by women and designed to give broad coverage of political issues, not only those concerning gender equality, in order to inform and educate enfranchised women (John, 2013: 285ff). The SPG, supported by Rebecca West among others, promoted six reforms that they thought especially urgent and attainable if they put pressure on parliament. The 'six points'

were: i) improved support for unmarried mothers and their children; ii) pensions for widows and their children; iii) stricter laws against assaults on children; iv) removal of gender inequality in the child custody rights of parents, which allowed only fathers to have custody of children over the age of ten; v) equal pay for teachers; and vi) equal pay and equal rights of appointment and promotion in the civil service. Astor supported all of these both within and outside parliament, and all but the final two were achieved in the 1920s. On another issue, Gottlieb describes the SPG as a 'feminist anti-fascist front' (Gottlieb, 2015: 40–1). It campaigned in the elections in 1922, 1923 and 1924, publishing a 'Black List' of MPs who opposed women's interests and a 'White List' of those for whom women should campaign and vote (John, 2013: 267–402). Astor also supported Lady Rhondda's bid in 1922 for the seat in the Lords left by her deceased father along with his title, which she inherited in 1918, just as Waldorf had reluctantly inherited his father's seat. The bid failed. The campaign continued but women were not admitted to the Lords until 1958 and then only as Life Peers. They were allowed to hold seats by inheritance from 1963.

Generally, Astor supported what she defined as moderate feminism and aimed to appeal as widely as possible to women who were not associated with the organizations of the women's movement, who indeed often felt alienated by intellectual feminists who dominated the movement. As she put it in 1930, she sought to mobilize opinion among 'the real women, not the sort that is neither male nor female; I mean the real old-fashioned, courageous, sensible, solid, cup-of-tea women'. In so doing she widened the appeal of many aims of the women's movement (Harrison, 1987: 79–80). She believed that women could bring society together, over-riding class. She particularly approved of the Women's Institutes, established from 1915 by suffrage supporters, on a Canadian model, designed to help rural women, who often lived in poor conditions, campaign for improvements including in housing, and to encourage cross-class co-operation to achieve change. They aimed to draw in vicars' and landowners' wives as well as those of labourers, on a basis of equality, challenging the established rural social hierarchy (Andrews, 2015). Astor's social status and wealth increased the respectability of women's causes in some circles.

## Fighting for the Equal Franchise

Among other campaigns, Astor also worked for the equal franchise. In March 1921 she chaired a meeting for this purpose, which was made up of representatives of women's organizations that ranged from the Shop Assistants Union to the University Section of the Women's Freedom League. They pointed out that, among the 28 countries which had enfranchised women since 1918, only the UK had discriminated by age. In 1923, with Wintringham, Eleanor Rathbone (President of NUSEC) and Labour's Margaret Bondfield, Astor spoke at a London rally supporting the equal franchise organized by NUSEC, representing more than 50 women's groups. In return, women's organizations worked for her and Wintringham in general elections. In 1924 she spoke in parliament in favour of a Labour Bill on the equal franchise and against an amendment placing women's voting age at 25 to keep them a minority of voters. She said that the opposition to the Bill 'represented nobody except people who were living in the Middle Ages' (Law, 1997: 196–7). But the Bill failed when the Labour government fell.

Behind the scenes she put pressure on Baldwin's Conservative government which succeeded it, while restraining extra-parliamentary feminists from what she believed would be counter-productive agitation (Harrison, 1987: 75). Baldwin stated in the 1924 election campaign that the party believed in equal political rights, though this was not in the Conservative manifesto and no action followed. As Baldwin dragged his feet, deterred by opposition within the party, (including Churchill's), and strident resistance from sections of the popular press, especially the *Daily Mail*, 'agitation' became unavoidable. Liberal and Labour Private Members' Bills went nowhere, lacking government support. NUSEC and other associations organized demonstrations, meetings and deputations to ministers, hinting at a return to militancy if nothing changed. In July 1926 a big demonstration was held in London, when 3,500 women, of all parties and backgrounds, marched to Hyde Park, including Emmeline Pankhurst, Millicent Fawcett and other veteran suffrage campaigners, wearing their prison badges, along with Astor. Late in 1926 an Equal Franchise Cabinet Committee was established; however Ministers

feared the electoral effects of equality too much to accept it, although it was supported by the 1927 party conference and the Conservative Women's Advisory Committee, who believed that it would harm the party's reputation among women if Conservatives did not introduce the equal franchise, and that they would gain votes from doing so.

Activism continued, courting maximum publicity and support, without response from the government, until, in March 1927, Baldwin met a deputation from the Equal Political Rights Campaign Committee, introduced by Astor, including Eleanor Rathbone and Lady Rhondda, representing 56 women's associations (John, 2013: 384–5). He excused his inaction on the grounds that he had been preoccupied by the General Strike, the miners' strike and war in China and promised a statement soon. Lobbying continued until, in April, Baldwin announced a Bill for the next session of parliament extending the franchise to women at age 21, rejecting continuing Conservative demands for it to be granted at age 25. After so many broken promises, the campaign continued, becoming more intense when the next session was delayed until February 1928. On the day of the State Opening of Parliament, suffragists delivered a petition to the Prime Minister's house and a letter to the King at Buckingham Palace, while cars, driven by women, festooned with placards demanding equal votes, circled Parliament Square to the sound of whistles and car horns. The King's Speech promised 'Proposals will be brought before you for amending the laws relating to the Parliamentary and local government franchise' (*Hansard*, 1929: col. 8). That evening, Baldwin informed parliament that an Equal Franchise Bill would be introduced, enabling newly enfranchised women to vote in the election due in 1929. Introduced in March, it passed easily through parliament, though 218 MPs stayed away from the second reading when there were just ten votes against (Law, 1997: 208–218). Women were at last allowed to vote at age 21 on the same terms as men, enfranchising 5,221,902 women. The electorate became 53% female. Labour won most seats in the 1929 election, confirming the fears of the *Daily Mail* and other opponents of the equal franchise.

## **Astor, Women Voters and Campaigners**

Partially gaining the vote in 1918 marked not the end but the beginning or continuation, and strengthening, of many women's campaigns, pursued by means of extra-parliamentary pressure and lobbying in the absence of a significant female parliamentary presence, encouraged and briefed by NUSEC, the Six-Point Group and others of the flourishing women's organizations of the inter-war years. These organizations generally remained independent of political parties in order to put pressure on all parties and appeal to women of diverse views, though their members might join parties. And they supported party candidates, male and female, who supported their policies in local and central government elections. Partly due to their encouragement, women voters, including, (but not limited to), members of these organizations, impressed their views on MPs, male and female, by writing letters, the main form of communication available to them at the time, on many policy issues, reminding them that women's votes mattered, and demanding their attention. Astor received 1,500 to 2,000 letters each week, which was not unusual for MPs, and she worked hard to respond to them.

The political parties did their best to win women's support, and women were active in all parties, as they had been for many years. As the electorate grew in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, male-dominated parties found women indispensable as canvassers, fund-raisers and organizers, and established women's branches even while denying them the vote. In Astor's party, the Conservative Primrose League, which was founded in 1884, included 64,003 'Dames' by 1900. After 1918 the Conservatives sought to increase women's involvement and support, giving them one-third representation at all levels of the party organization, presided over by a Women's Advisory Committee at Conservative Central Office, although their influence on policy was not great. Female membership of the party grew to approximately one million by 1928 (Pugh, 2000: 125; Jarvis, 2001: 289–316; Berthezene and Gottlieb, 2018). There were similar adjustments in the other main parties and female membership grew: the Women's Liberal Federation from 71,000 in 1924 to 100,000 in 1928; and in Labour Women's Sections from 100,000 in 1924, to 200,000 in 1925, to 300,000 in 1930 (Thane,

2001: 253–288). Astor worked to mobilize women in her constituency for the Conservative party.

The issues which most concerned women MPs and voters were reflected in the MPs' contributions to parliamentary debates. According to Brian Harrison's analysis, they spoke most often on welfare issues, including housing, health, education, and unemployment, all of which were of particular concern to their female constituents and on which many women felt let down by male MPs. Before the war the failings of a male-controlled parliament to improve social conditions had driven many women into the suffrage movement. They also spoke frequently on equal pay, reform of family law and the equal franchise, all major campaigning issues for women's organizations (Harrison, 1986: 623–654). Social welfare issues occupied 41% of Astor's contribution to debates from 1919–1945. The women spoke also on foreign affairs, especially as another war drew closer, though this took only 3% of Astor's debating time, compared with the 14% average of other women MPs (Harrison, 1987: 90). Women MPs also played a role in parliament as members of select committees, often, though not exclusively, those concerning 'women's interests', though Astor was a member of only one select committee, on the Criminal Law Amendment and Sexual Offences Bill of 1920 (Takayanagi, 2013: 181–212). She lobbied hard and successfully for the inclusion in the resulting Act of a clause abolishing the male defence of 'a reasonable cause to believe' that a female was above the age of consent.

There was much co-operation among women MPs, of different parties and none, to bring to the attention of parliament issues which most concerned women voters and women's organizations. Astor worked hard to promote this co-operation through the CCWO, but this disbanded in 1928 over disagreements on policy. When the 1929 election produced 14 women MPs she tried to persuade them to work as a coordinated group, almost as a women's party, but the nine Labour women refused to cooperate. Often ambivalent about her own party affiliation, she believed that other women MPs should be willing when necessary to put non-party issues first, and indeed to see themselves as women first and party members second (Harrison, 1987: 80). She continued to organize networking events, alcohol-free because she was committed to temperance, and to work closely with other women MPs, including Wintringham,

Wilkinson and Eleanor Rathbone after the latter's election as an Independent MP for the Combined English Universities in 1929. Astor found it difficult to be emotionally close to anyone, male or female, but she could treat her female colleagues with generosity. She paid for Ellen Wilkinson's sister to have treatment abroad for her acute respiratory infection, which Ellen and her family could not afford, and in 1929 booked a seaside hotel for Ellen to recuperate from a similar respiratory problem. Their friendship steadily deepened (Beers, 2016: 117, 213).

On occasion all the women MPs united: in November 1930 this occurred on an attempt to reform the law which stipulated that upon marriage a British woman marrying a man of another nationality must take his nationality and lose all British nationality rights. This was the case in many countries, and was a major campaigning issue for the international women's movement, which appealed for support to the League of Nations (Miller, 1992). However, the law remained unchanged in Britain until the British Nationality Act removed this gender inequality in 1948. In 1932, the women united to oppose cuts to married women's rights to unemployment benefit, justified by the government on the grounds that they were supported by their husbands, but this was also unsuccessful.

### **Astor and Reform**

Astor was especially active in promoting certain reforms that she thought would be beneficial to society as a whole, due to her strong desire to reduce poverty and improve social conditions, and also on gender equality issues particularly important to women, often working with women's organizations and women MPs on both sets of measures. She said that she felt like a voice crying in the wilderness raising them in parliament. But her perception of social good was not always shared by other reformers. In 1923 she successfully promoted a Bill banning the sale of alcohol to under-18s, in keeping with her temperance beliefs, which did not enthuse all feminists, and it reduced her majority in the following election as those with interests in breweries campaigned against her (Pugh, 2004). It did not increase her popularity among men when she stated that England's cricketers had recently lost the Ashes to Australia because the Australian team, unlike the English, did not drink (Pugh, 2000: 247).

She was more in line with women's organizations in supporting pensions for civilian widows and orphans. These were on the priority lists of NUSEC and the Six-Point Group because these single-parent families were perceived to be as needy as those of servicemen killed in the war, who received pensions as civilians did not. Astor supported Labour Bills in 1920 and 1924, the latter lost when Labour lost office, and then supported the Widows, Orphans and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act introduced by Neville Chamberlain as Minister of Health in 1925. His strong reforming record in that role aroused her lasting admiration, even when he took on the more contentious role of a Prime Minister seeking the 'appeasement' of Hitler.

Less successful was her persistent support for publicly-funded nursery schools, which took over from temperance as her chief mission from the late 1920s, part of her wider commitment to the welfare of children from their earliest years. She recognized, as subsequent research has clearly shown, the crucial importance of improving their health, education and capacity to socialize in their early years in order to improve their prospects in later life. But successive governments were unresponsive, not least because she presented her case so poorly in parliament, wearying members with repetitive speeches rather than winning them over. She was also a strong supporter of raising the school-leaving age to 15. With widespread support, this was passed by parliament in 1936, and timed to start on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939. However, on this date, Hitler invaded Poland, war was declared and the school-leaving age remained unchanged until 1947. She did not support the Beveridge Report of 1942 or take part in the debates, having shown little interest in social insurance, the focus of his report. But, like Beveridge, she supported Eleanor Rathbone's long campaign for family allowances, introduced in 1945 when she joined Rathbone's final successful fight to have the allowances paid to mothers, not, as proposed in the original Bill, to fathers (Pedersen, 2004: 364–366).

Another issue to which Astor became committed during the 1920s, continuing through the war, was gender equality of pay and opportunities at work. Through the inter-war years there were active campaigns by women in the public sector, where men and women often did the same work- for example as teachers- but for unequal pay and unequal promotion opportunities, and women were obliged by

the 'marriage bar' to leave their jobs permanently on marriage (Glew, 2016). Astor believed that married women should have the opportunity to be employed as public servants, though she thought that in reality most would give up on marriage (Harrison, 1987: 79). In 1936 Ellen Wilkinson introduced a Private Members Bill providing equal pay in the clerical, executive and administrative grades of the civil service, which was supported by the, mixed sex, staff associations. Astor and six of the seven other women MPs who voted supported Wilkinson; the exception was the Conservative Duchess of Atholl, who, said Astor, 'never sees straight about women' and the Bill passed its first reading in the Commons (Harrison, 1987: 76). Stanley Baldwin, then Prime Minister in the National Government, thought it appropriate to make this an issue of confidence in the government, which ensured that parliament overturned it (Glew, 2016: 137). Astor rebuked Baldwin behind the scenes for giving in to Conservative die-hards (Harrison, 1987: 76).

A big campaigning issue for women of all classes was birth control (Debenham, 2014; Cook, 2004). Astor converted to Christian Science in 1914, following an illness, and, according to their strict moral code, she had doubts, fearing that making contraceptive information and appliances readily available would encourage immorality. In 1930 she refused the vice-presidency of the National Birth Control Association (now the Family Planning Association). But she was concerned that frequent child-bearing exacerbated the poverty and poor health of working-class women and drove them to the, sometimes fatal, dangers of back-street abortions. Compared with abortion, she thought birth control the lesser evil and her moral principles were not immovable. She gave money to the cause and was one of only three women to speak in its support in parliament between the wars, supporting Labour's 1931 measure allowing local health and welfare clinics to give free birth control advice to married women (only) whose lives would be endangered by another pregnancy. She supported the establishment of a birth control clinic in Plymouth in 1933, saying 'when I see those poor mothers with too many children and dreading another pregnancy I cannot help feeling that it is right to save them' (Harrison, 1987: 78).

She was even more out of line with leading feminists on divorce reform. Between the Reformation and 1857 divorce was illegal in England and Wales, other

than by the expensive process of obtaining a private Act of Parliament. When it was introduced in 1857 the sexual double standard was built into the new law: a man could divorce his wife just for adultery (only), but a wife had to prove adultery plus another 'aggravation', including severe violence, sodomy or bestiality. In Scotland, by contrast, divorce had always been possible, on equal grounds between men and women, though remarriage was almost impossible because the churches refused to marry divorced people and civil marriage did not exist until 1939, as it had in England and Wales since 1836 (Cretney, 2003: 161–318). The divorce law in England and Wales had long been criticized by women activists and many others because, apart from the double standard, the legal procedures were too expensive for most people to contemplate. Also, there were realistic fears that the state of the divorce law led many people whose marriage was unsustainable to separate, then to form unmarried, cohabiting 'illicit unions' with new partners, often posing as respectably married. In Scotland such relationships could be legally registered; they composed 12% of all regular partnerships between the wars (Thane and Evans, 2012: 8–13). In 1912 a Royal Commission, whose members included the Archbishop of York, recommended reform of the law in England and Wales in order to make divorce cheaper, introduce gender equality and eliminate immoral cohabitation, but nothing changed (Cretney, 2003: 209–214; Thane and Evans, 2012: 11). From 1918 it was a major campaigning issue for women activists and one of NUSEC's key objectives.

The Matrimonial Causes Act, 1923 was drafted by NUSEC, introduced in the Commons as a Private Members' Bill, it passed with unusual success without government support. It established the principle of gender equality in the divorce law in England and Wales (Cretney, 2003: 217–224). It also provided for adequate alimony, since the difficulty of supporting themselves and their children trapped many women in miserable marriages; it abolished the previous £2 limit on maintenance orders. Furthermore it introduced curbs on increasingly salacious reporting of divorce cases by the expanding popular press. As with most of the reforms for which women lobbied, NUSEC's draft was modified in parliament. The grounds for divorce remained more restrictive than it proposed, retaining adultery, by either partner, as the essential precondition for divorce, though it was not the

only cause of marriage breakdown. NUSEC accepted it as a first step. No divorce was possible in Northern Ireland, except by the expensive process of private Act of Parliament, until 1939 when limited procedures were introduced.

In 1937 further legislation, introduced by the writer and Independent MP, A.P. Herbert, and supported by women's organizations, extended the grounds for divorce in England and Wales, allowing husbands and wives to seek divorce after three years' desertion, or for adultery, cruelty or 'being of unsound mind and continuously under care and treatment' for at least five years, while a wife could sue for rape or sodomy. But divorce remained expensive, impossible if one partner refused, and heavily stigmatized for women. The number of divorces rose but unknown numbers still resorted to secret cohabitation with new partners following a marriage break-up (Thane and Evans, 2012: 34–35).

Astor initially opposed divorce reform, underpinned by her Christian Science morality, despite the fact that she was herself divorced under the gender equal US divorce law. She argued publicly that women had not really gained from equal divorce rights in America. This brought complaints of hypocrisy and letters from women pleading for help to end their unhappy marriages. Having alienated many women activists and other supporters of reform, she felt driven to vote for the 1923 Act out of sympathy for other women (Pugh, 2000: 246), again putting her care for women's needs above her religious commitment. She remained equivocal about further reform in the 1930s.

On other issues she strongly opposed gender inequality, including the unequal child custody rights of parents. Fathers had sole rights to custody of children aged 10 or over, an issue which also trapped women in unhappy marriages for fear of losing their children. Changing this was among the key issues for both NUSEC and the SPG. After a long struggle, the 1925 Equal Guardianship Act gave mothers equal rights with fathers to make legal claims for custody of their children following a marriage break-up. It followed seven unsuccessful Private Members Bills that had been proposed since 1920, most drafted by NUSEC and promoted by them within and outside parliament. It was a popular issue among women; by 1923, 49 women's organizations supported reform (Takayanagi, 2012: 271). MPs complained at the size

of their postbags as women voters pressed them to support it. Partly in consequence, the issue received considerable support in the Commons, though the Home Office was hostile and Conservative governments refused their support (Takayanagi, 2012: 78–9). Astor and Wintringham put pressure on successive governments. The 1924 Labour government supported another Bill introduced by Wintringham, but then, since they did not have a majority and it seemed unlikely to pass, introduced a compromise Bill drafted by NUSEC, designed to mollify civil service and legal objections by removing the right of courts to enforce maintenance payments by fathers to mothers gaining custody. The fall of the Labour government halted progress, but the Bill was reintroduced by the Conservative government which followed, supported by Astor, and passed easily through parliament. But mothers could only gain custody by applying to a court, and the courts were still inclined to support fathers over mothers; if mothers succeeded, they could have difficulty extracting maintenance from reluctant fathers (Cretney, 2003: 569–575).

Astor was a keen and generous supporter of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH), descended from the organization founded by Josephine Butler to campaign for repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s and still campaigning to end legal discrimination against female prostitutes. In the 1920s AMSH demanded that the government stop distributing contraceptives to servicemen, place brothels out of bounds to them, stop compulsory medical inspection of women (only) suspected of passing VD to the troops, and end free treatment of VD for servicemen (only). They believed that men should be continent, as was expected of women, but nothing changed. Concerning civilians, they campaigned to raise the age of (heterosexual) consent from 16 to 18, also unsuccessfully. They also campaigned for abolition of the male legal defence against prosecution for sex with an under-age woman -that they believed her to be above the age of consent – which, as we have seen, Astor helped to achieve. In 1925 she introduced an unsuccessful Bill to repeal the law on street soliciting which only penalized women, since prostitution itself and male use of prostitutes were not illegal. Each year about 300 women were arrested under the law, and Astor and AMSH strongly criticized the absence of penalties for male use of prostitutes (Pugh, 2000: 247–8).

The desire of Astor and AMSH to prohibit indecent behaviour in public and the wider ambition that they shared with many women's organizations to protect women in public, including from excessively officious interpretations of the law by policemen, led them to battle for the appointment of women police. They expected them to be sympathetic to other women experiencing and reporting offences, including domestic violence, as policemen notoriously were not. They also saw this as a valuable extension of women's work opportunities. Women, including suffrage campaigners, had set up voluntary police patrols during the war. From 1920, local authorities could appoint women to permanent police posts, though there was strong resistance and few did so. In 1922 the Geddes committee, established to recommend cuts to public spending as economic depression descended, recommended disbanding women police, which would hardly have made a major saving. In parliament, Astor and Wintringham fronted a campaign to save policewomen, led by NCW and supported by 59 women's organizations. The Home Office was hostile but Geddes' proposal was not implemented. Instead, the Home Secretary ruled that the appointment of policewomen should be left to local discretion. Later in 1922 the Metropolitan Force announced that 20 women would be retained, but half the local authorities employing women police terminated their contracts. Astor, along with NCW and other women's organizations, carried on campaigning to increase the number and responsibilities of policewomen, but by 1939 there were just 174 policewomen in a total force of 65,000 in England and Wales; just 43 of 183 local authorities in Great Britain appointed them (Jackson, 2006; Law, 1997: 104).

As unemployment grew from late 1920, Astor and other women were concerned about the impact on women. In 1922 she chaired a CCWO conference on women and unemployment, and fought persistently for equal treatment of married women in the unemployment assistance system. From 1924 Astor became a member of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) fund-raising committee. The YWCA saw its main concern as support for young working women. It established hostels to give them safe places to live, investigated complaints about work conditions, assisted compensation claims, provided information on labour law and established a health insurance scheme since young women were often ineligible for National Health

Insurance. Astor supported all these activities and in parliament supported women's rights at work whenever possible (Law, 1997: 7). Women's employment took up one-tenth of her debating contributions during the 1920s and in World War Two she pressed the government to make greater use of women workers (Harrison, 1987: 74).

In 1927 Astor became President of the Electrical Association for Women (EAW); Ellen Wilkinson was a Vice-President. The EAW was modelled on the Women's Engineering Society, founded in 1921 to encourage employment of women in engineering. EAW was founded in 1924 'to collect and distribute information on the use of electricity, more particularly as affecting the interests of women' (Law, 1997: 7). It aimed to involve women in the growth of this new industry by enabling them to learn about and use new labour-saving devices, promoting their representation on public bodies, such as the new Electricity Boards, and developing new educational and employment opportunities for them. It was supported by women's organizations representing all classes. The EAW in turn joined the equal franchise demonstrations (Law, 1997: 6).

### **The Coming of War**

In the late 1930s Astor continued to support women's causes, including campaigning, unsuccessfully, for the admission of women to the diplomatic service. Following further pressure, this was reluctantly accepted by the Foreign Office in 1946, on the condition that no more than 10% of recruits each year were female (McCarthy, 2014). Like many other women, she gave less attention to these issues as war approached because her chief desire was to avoid another war. Consequently, like other feminists and pacifists, she supported Chamberlain's early attempts at appeasement. She publicly supported the international women's peace movement, notably as a 'stalwart', as Gottlieb describes her (Gottlieb, 2015: 30), of the strongly anti-Nazi International Alliance of Women (IAW). At their conferences in Istanbul in 1935 and Copenhagen in 1939 her speeches won enthusiastic applause. In Istanbul she told the audience that 'Hitler's failure to let women help Germany seems to be far more dangerous to the peace of Europe than all his armies and aeroplanes'. In a different setting, her commitment to peace and opposition to rearmament brought her jeers at the Conservative women's conference in 1934 (Gottlieb 2015: 75–9).

Astor asserted repeatedly that her commitment to feminism, democracy and social reform made it impossible for her to support Nazism or any other form of dictatorship, but this did not prevent her being widely accused of fascist sympathies at the time and since (Gottlieb 2015: 79–81). One cause of the attacks was her determination to maintain a relationship with the German Embassy in London, including inviting von Ribbentrop, the German Ambassador, to entertainments at Cliveden. She explained that this was not because she supported the Nazi government, but was done in the, ultimately vain, hope of retaining 'what little influence I have' to change the policies of that government (Gottlieb 2015: 45–6). However, this did not prevent her moving a resolution, passed unanimously in the Commons in 1933 and sent to the German Ambassador, expressing dismay at the Nazi dismissal of women from government service. She enjoyed giving lavish entertainment to a variety of people, not always wisely chosen, at the Astor's grand country home. Another visitor to Cliveden several times in 1939 was the diplomat Adam von Trott, executed in 1944 for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He hoped to use the Cliveden network to persuade Lord Halifax, a frequent visitor, and others that if they abandoned appeasement he and his allies would overthrow Hitler and prevent his waging another war on Britain. Allies as well as enemies of Hitler sought to infiltrate the British elite through joining events at Cliveden, including Stephanie Hohenlohe, who was close to Hitler and the lover of one of his close aides. Astor's sometimes poor judgement of people and strategies reinforced criticism, though there were limits: she refused to meet the representative of the German government, Gertrude Scholtz-Klink, described by Hitler as 'the perfect Nazi woman', when she visited London in March 1939 (Gottlieb, 2015: 61–5).

Nevertheless, left-wing journalists in particular kept up the onslaught on Astor as leader of a 'Cliveden set' of elite Nazi-sympathizers and anti-semites. Cartoonist David Low produced a series of cartoons in the *Evening Standard* in 1937 and 1938 featuring the 'Shiver Sisters', a.k.a. the 'Cliveden set', goose-stepping, led by Astor in Nazi uniform, images reproduced in a successful pantomime at the Communist-run Unity Theatre in London in 1938–9. Astor found this pillorying and the thousands of abusive letters she received deeply disturbing, writing a letter to the left-wing *Daily*

*Herald* in May 1938 denying the existence of the pro-fascist 'set', almost certainly correctly. Waldorf, as closely identified with Cliveden as Astor, had been one of the first British politicians to meet Hitler and had alienated him by asserting that Anglo-British relations could only improve if the Nazis mitigated the plight of the Jews. There is equally little evidence that Nancy was anti-semitic (Gottlieb, 2015: 74–5). She repudiated Oswald Mosley's attempt to develop fascism in Britain, in 1935 telling a National Government rally that the British people 'could not stand fascism—it was too farcical, and if it ever came we should all die laughing' (Harrison, 1987: 97). She was on Himmler's Black List for immediate arrest when the Nazis invaded Britain – an unlikely fate for a sympathizer. Astor was among the Conservatives who forced Chamberlain from office in 1940, abandoning pacifism now that war had come, transferring her allegiance to her old enemy, Winston Churchill and cheered in the Commons for doing so (Gottlieb, 2015: 74–5).

Astor continued to be somewhat less active on women's questions during World War Two, partly because she worked hard at supporting the people of Plymouth through the war. But she did not give up entirely. In 1940 the Woman Power Committee emerged from a meeting of women MPs in Astor's London house. Composed of the women MPs, it met regularly throughout the war, pressing for more nursery places to enable mothers to work and for equal pay, among other things. In January 1944, it created the Equal Pay Campaign Committee (EPCC), led by women MPs and supported by women's organizations. One of its leaders, Conservative MP Thelma Cazalet Kerr, moved an amendment to the 1944 Education Bill to grant equal pay to teachers. This passed the Commons by 117 votes to 116, with Astor among the supporters. The following day, Churchill diverted his attention from the war to emulate Baldwin's response to the vote for equal pay in the civil service in 1936: he came to the Commons to insist that this was a matter of confidence in the government and the vote must be withdrawn. The House gave in, to avoid the inevitable election if the government lost a vote of confidence. The women won another amendment abolishing the 'marriage bar' in teaching (Pugh, 2000: 278–279). The Board of Education accepted this because they anticipated a post-war shortage of teachers. In fact the marriage bar effectively died out in most occupations during the war due to demand for labour and was not

revived in the post-war labour shortage, except in parts of the financial sector and in the diplomatic service, where it survived until 1973.

The EPCC maintained its demands for equal pay until Churchill compromised by establishing a Royal Commission on Equal Pay, which reported in 1946. After a thorough analysis of the public and private labour markets it concluded in favour of 'equal pay for work of equal value', but argued that implementation in the near future would harm the post-war, post-depression economic recovery. Three of the four female members disagreed and supported mandatory equal pay (Thane, 1991: 184–191). The post-war Labour government agreed with the majority and nothing changed. The EPCC campaign continued, until in 1955 the Conservative government, keen to win women's votes, granted equal pay in the public sector. The private sector had to await Labour legislation in 1970, though fully equal pay has yet to be achieved.

Astor remained in parliament through the war and, with her husband, supported the people of Plymouth through severe bombing. Always capable of being entertaining, she helped raise morale by performing cartwheels to entertain the sailors – still agile in her sixties, after years of regular exercise and a daily cold bath – and leading dancing on the seafront, Plymouth Hoe. Waldorf persuaded her that she risked defeat in the 1945 election, as Labour's victory loomed. Reluctantly, she stood down and ceased political activity (Pugh, 2004).

## Conclusion

This paper has focussed upon Nancy Astor's contribution to raising the profile of women in UK politics and to social reform, moving the country gradually towards greater gender and social equality, because this is underestimated in historical memory, in which she is still more often identified with Nazi sympathies. She was indeed a long-time supporter of Chamberlain's appeasement policy, but this was because, like many feminists and pacifists, she was desperate to avoid another war, not because she supported Hitler. She wanted to sustain a civilized discourse with Germans, not because she was pro-Nazi, but with the (hopeless) ambition of winning them over. She could not support any movement so hostile to women's rights and to democracy.

In UK politics she used her parliamentary position, her social skills and her wealth to promote the policies that she supported, including funding social occasions, sometimes at Cliveden, bringing together politicians, male and female, and women activists. She had a hard time from sections of the press, but Bingham concludes from his survey of the popular press between the wars that Astor was also among the ‘female pioneers’ whose achievements ‘were often given generous coverage and regarded as pointers to a more equal future’ (Bingham, 2004: 247). Because she had no history of feminist campaigning before entering parliament and was a Conservative, she could appeal to and influence women who felt alienated from the women’s movement by their own conservative ideologies and acceptance of popular negative stereotypes of feminism. Her social position, especially combined with her populist style, helped challenge perceptions of women’s movements as composed of middle-class, left-of-centre intellectuals, hence she gave feminism respectability in the eyes of some potential opponents. She also contributed to the slow but steady expansion of state welfare through the inter-war years by supporting improvements, particularly to maternal and child welfare, child care, education and housing. She was flexible, able to be persuaded out of her initial resistance to feminism and not immovably constrained by the rigid moral strictures of her religious faith when they conflicted with her feminist and social commitments. Always pragmatic, hard-working and energetic, Astor never followed the party line with the Conservatives or in women’s organizations, always making up her own mind, with good and bad effects.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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