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

'I Stuck to Plymouth, Plymouth Stuck to Me': Nancy Astor, Electioneering and Female Parliamentary Candidacy

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In November 1919, Nancy Astor won a Plymouth Sutton by-election, becoming the first woman MP to take her seat in the House of Commons. Astor was MP from 1919 to 1945 and won seven elections in total. A vast amount of material has been written on Astor's 1919 election campaign given its historical significance, but her subsequent elections remain a neglected area of study. This article focuses on all seven of Astor's election campaigns, exploring how her electioneering evolved over time and the distinctive features of each of her elections. Furthermore, it examines the interconnected relationship between Astor's gender, class, party, and nationality, and looks at the electability of women more broadly. It argues that all seven of Astor's election campaigns centred around broad principles of morality, social justice, and her long-standing commitment to Plymouth, coupled with anti-socialist rhetoric. Indeed, Astor presented little in the way of detailed policy plans and promises for the future. Despite standing as the official Conservative candidate, Astor was fiercely independent. She was a politician of conviction who championed issues of personal interest, both to herself and the Plymouth Sutton constituency. Astor's career as a campaigner is worthy of note given no other female candidate came close to winning seven elections in the interwar period, considering the multitude of obstacles female candidates encountered.

In November 1919, Nancy Astor won a Plymouth Sutton by-election, becoming the first woman MP to take her seat in the House of Commons. Reflecting on her 1919 election success, Astor remarked, 'When I stood for my first election in Plymouth I was not lacking in electioneering experience. I had gained it among the people I loved so well.'¹ Astor had enthusiastically supported the election campaigns of her husband, Waldorf Astor, who was the Conservative MP for Plymouth Sutton from 1910 to 1919. When Waldorf's father, the first Viscount Astor, died in October 1919, Waldorf inherited the viscountcy and was reluctantly elevated to the House of Lords. It was agreed that Astor would stand in her husband's place as a stop-gap candidate, whilst Waldorf tried to renounce his title and return to his seat in the House of Commons. Nonetheless, Astor remained MP for Plymouth Sutton from 1919 to 1945, and won seven election campaigns in total. Known for her charm and outspoken nature, Astor's electioneering style fascinated the electorate and press. Her election success made headlines around the world and represented a new era for British politics. Parliament was no longer a male-only space, and for the first time a woman was able to directly influence legislation.²

A vast amount of material has been written on Astor's 1919 election campaign considering its historical significance, but her subsequent elections remain a neglected area of study.³ This article focuses on all seven of Astor's election campaigns, exploring how her electioneering evolved over time and the distinctive features of each of her elections. Furthermore, it examines the interconnected relationship between Astor's gender, class, party, and nationality, and the electability of women more broadly. It argues that all seven of Astor's election campaigns centred around broad principles

¹ Autobiographical material by Nancy Astor, undated, MS 1416/1/6/87, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

² Astor held a wide range of views, some of which were anti-Semitic, which does not sit easy with the celebration of Astor as Britain's first female MP to take her seat.

³ Musolf's *From Plymouth to Parliament* offers an in-depth study of Astor's 1919 election from a rhetorical perspective and argues her 'campaign success can be attributed not only to her political affiliation, her wealth, or her sex, but most importantly to her communication skills' (1999: xi). Numerous biographies of Astor have focused on 1919 as a landmark occasion, but have glossed over her subsequent election campaigns (Sykes, 1972; Langhorne, 1974; Grigg, 1980; Masters, 1982; Fort, 2012).

of morality, social justice, and her long-standing commitment to Plymouth, coupled with anti-socialist rhetoric. She presented little in the way of detailed policy plans and promises for the future, as she was 'more interested in people than in ideas'.⁴ Astor's unconventional electioneering style aided her electoral successes, as did her wealth, party affiliation, and position as a wife and mother. Despite standing as the official Conservative candidate, Astor was fiercely independent. McCarthy argues the interwar period 'witnessed the growth of mass membership associations of a non-party character'; as a result, 'being 'non-party' was rapidly becoming the established modus operandi of the politics of pressure after the war' (McCarthy, 2007: 892–893). Astor drew on the tradition of downplaying sectional party appeals, which was popular amongst many women political activists. Indeed, Astor was a politician of conviction who championed issues of personal interest, both to herself and the Plymouth Sutton constituency.

In his biography of Astor, Sykes claims that her election technique did not change significantly throughout her political career. It was because of this 'sameness of performance' that Sykes does not offer a detailed account of Astor's six subsequent elections following her triumph in 1919 (Sykes, 1972: 316). And yet, there were subtle differences in Astor's election campaigns, influenced by the political mood of the country and the candidates who opposed her. Astor's career as a campaigner is also worthy of note considering that no other female candidate came close to winning seven elections in the interwar period, given the multitude of obstacles that female candidates encountered.

There is a rich variety of primary sources on Astor's electioneering, including personal papers and other archival sources, such as campaign material, personal accounts, and letters. This article draws extensively on Astor's seven election addresses, as candidate's addresses signalled the 'formal start of the campaign' and were 'the key means for candidates to set out their cause' (Thackeray and Toye, 2020: 6). Given Astor's circumstances and position within society, there is also a large amount of press coverage on her election campaigns. This has been invaluable in

⁴ Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

studying Astor's public meetings, interactions with constituents, and encounters with her political opponents.

Whereas the 1918 Representation of the People Act restricted the vote to women over thirty, under the terms of the 1918 Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act, passed on 21 November, any woman over the age of twenty-one was able to stand for parliament. This resulted in several women standing for election in the 1920s, when they were not eligible to vote themselves. Seventeen women across the political spectrum stood in the 1918 General Election, which took place on 14 December, but only Constance Markievicz was successful. As she stood for Sinn Fein, Markievicz was not prepared to take the oath of allegiance to the British crown and refused to take her seat. Women candidates had just twenty-three days to prepare for the election, which limited their chances of success, although Takayanagi notes that at least some women were preparing before the act passed (2012: 22). Nevertheless, female candidates had little time to nurse their constituencies and establish themselves in the local community. Lawrence's work (2009) has revealed the important role that nursing played in election campaigns, whereby candidates would attend community events and make donations to local causes in between elections. Moreover, no women were selected for safe seats, and as for the five women who stood as Independents, they lacked the resources and financial support of the party machine.

Fifteen out of the seventeen women who stood for parliament in 1918 were involved in the women's suffrage movement, in contrast to Astor who had no record of supporting the cause. Whilst Astor was involved in the Primrose League in Plymouth, she was conscious of her lack of suffrage work.⁵ After her election success, Astor recalled, 'I remember telling Mrs Fawcett and all of them that I apologised to them for being there' (BBC Woman's Hour, 1956). Astor's election to parliament initially disappointed those who had been involved in the women's suffrage movement, although she soon won them over (BBC Woman's Hour, 1956). The day after taking her seat, Astor sent a letter to the women's societies which expressed her hope of working with them, and desire to be of use to the women's cause ('Letter from Lady

⁵ Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

Astor to the N.U.S.E.C', *International Woman Suffrage News*, 2 January 1920: 58). In addition to her lack of suffrage work, Astor was a 'proud Virginian' with no formal education (BBC Woman's Hour, 1956). She first visited England in 1903, following the end of her unhappy marriage to Robert Shaw. Returning to England in 1905, she met Waldorf, who she later married in 1906. Waldorf was the son of the American-born millionaire William Waldorf Astor, who later became the first Viscount Astor. On her first visit to Plymouth in 1908, Astor recalled, 'The moment I got there I had the strangest feeling of having come home. It was not like a new place to me. I felt that here was where I belonged'.⁶ Astor claimed to feel a spiritual connection with Plymouth and saw the city as her Virginian home in England (Astor, 1923: 112).

Through supporting Waldorf in his election campaigns, Astor gained a large amount of electoral experience and knowledge on constituency affairs. She was also able to build a relationship with the electorate through canvassing and making speeches on the public platform. Astor was not merely, as she put it, 'The Candidate's Wife!'⁷ Her unpublished autobiography reveals the connection she felt to Plymouth and its people:

I knew Plymouth; I knew its narrow streets and alleys; I knew its mothers and infants. At my husband's elections I did not confine myself to being a figurehead of the platform... On the contrary I made it my business to know the people; to find out what they were thinking; to discuss points with them, and if need be, to argue with them. I was not a mere passive supporter of my husband.⁸

Thus, Astor was already an established figure in Plymouth by the time she stood for election. She was able to utilise the connections and constituency knowledge that she had gained prior to her election, unlike many early female parliamentary candidates who stood in the interwar period. Given the novelty of a female candidate, women

⁶ Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

⁷ Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

⁸ Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

tended to be selected for unwinnable seats that they had no prior connection to. In addition to her public work in Plymouth, Astor became a social and political hostess, famous for holding parties at Cliveden, the Astors' country home in Berkshire, and at St James's Square in London. As part of the political establishment, Astor understood the parliamentary process and was established in political circles; she later remarked 'I knew nearly everybody' (BBC Woman's Hour, 1956). Such connections were an advantage which few female candidates shared during the interwar years.

The Election that Made History: Astor's 1919 By-Election

Following Waldorf's elevation to the House of Lords, Astor was persuaded to stand for election by Waldorf, acting as a 'warming pan' whilst he tried to renounce his peerage. Initially, the local constituency association was reluctant to select Astor as the Conservative candidate as they believed that a woman would lose the seat, a common issue which women encountered when seeking a nomination. Furthermore, the constituency association questioned Astor's suitability and whether she was a 'fit and proper person' for the job, considering her background as an American divorcee with no formal education, emphasising the importance of 'respectability' for female candidates (Fort, 2012: 160). Moreover, Astor was perceived to be a prohibitionist, which is likely to have done her few favours in a predominantly working-class constituency with strong connections to the city's naval dockyards. The Unionists had a long-standing association with the drink trade and the defence of the 'working man's pint' in several urban seats (Lawrence, 1993: 638–639). However, it was agreed that if Astor was to stand as a 'warming pan', whilst Waldorf tried to renounce his peerage, she would make an acceptable candidate. Not everyone was happy about Astor's selection. The Conservative Party Chairman, Sir George Younger, complained: 'the worst of it is, the woman is sure to get in' (Pugh, 2000: 155).

The by-election was scheduled for 15 November 1919 and soon became of international interest. Astor was opposed by the Liberal candidate Isaac Foot and the Labour candidate William Gay. The *New York Times* followed the campaign intently and stated that it was 'the most hotly contested Parliamentary bye-election campaign in its history' ('Astor Campaign Entering Last Lap', 10 November 1919: 17). Astor

was already a celebrity figure prior to her election, due to her position as a wealthy socialite, but her 1919 campaign catapulted her further into the public eye, aided by the popular press. Beers' work has shown how the Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson, elected in 1924, utilised the press to create a celebrity image of herself, which she exploited to push her political agenda (Beers, 2013). Astor similarly harnessed her celebrity image and established an identifiable public persona. She constructed and modified her public image to suit the situation as a way of broadening her political appeal. In turn, this ensured that constituents felt their interests would be represented by Astor in parliament. Astor presented herself as a wife, a stand-in for Waldorf, a mother, a representative for women and children, an advocate of the poor and disadvantaged, a champion of social reform, a supporter of soldiers and sailors, a straight-talking woman, and a local figure who understood the needs of the constituency. Her vibrant electioneering style further aided her political appeal and celebrity persona, given the shift towards the politics of personality in the interwar period. After 1918, politicians were increasingly portrayed as personalities in the press, as female voters and readers were perceived to favour celebrity gossip and human-interest pieces that they could relate to (Beers, 2013: 236–237).

Astor's malleable public image enabled her to appeal to a 'mixed constituency', as described by the *Daily Telegraph* ('Plymouth Election', 12 November 1919: 8). Plymouth Sutton was divided into seven wards consisting of Sutton, Compton, Laira, Vintry, Charles, Friary and St. Andrews. Given the city's close connection to the Royal Navy, Astor made sure to visit the Marine Barracks at Stonehouse. Never one to follow conventions, the *Dundee Courier* reported 'she introduced a novelty in electioneering by going into the sergeants' mess' ('Lady Astor's "bouts" at Plymouth', 13 November 1919: 5). Sutton was also a predominantly working-class constituency, with an electorate far removed from Astor's own aristocratic background. The constituency included fishermen, chemical workers, railwaymen and dockyard workers, but also a large number of old-age pensioners and children. Plymouth was hit hard by unemployment after the First World War, as 6,000 dockyard workers found themselves out of work (Musolf, 1999: 34). Addressing a meeting in the

Laira ward, known as a Labour stronghold, Astor declared that 'no one was more interested in keeping the Dockyard up than she was' ('Charity or Mutual Help', *Western Morning News*, 14 November 1919: 7). The presence of female voters added to the election excitement, as 17,175 women and 16,986 men were now eligible to vote in Plymouth Sutton (Musolf, 1999: 34). Although female voters outnumbered their male counterparts, Astor could not rely solely on the female vote, particularly as many would vote according to class loyalties, rather than gender. Astor's constructed and multifaceted image enabled her to appeal to Sutton's wide range of constituents, from servicemen and workers to poverty-stricken mothers and the elderly.

In the 1918 General Election, the Conservatives and Lloyd George Liberals had successfully united to fight the election under the coalition banner. Although Astor stood as a Conservative and supporter of the coalition government, 'her political views were usually way to the left of the average [Conservative] member' (Maguire, 1998: 84). In a 1956 BBC interview with the former suffragist Mary Stocks, Astor argued that she was 'mainly interested in women and children and social reform' and saw herself as 'an ardent feminist' (BBC Woman's Hour, 1956). Throughout her parliamentary career, Astor supported controversial issues such as the provision of nursery schools, equal pay and the employment of married women. When discussing the topic of party politics in her unpublished autobiography, Astor wrote, 'I have never been a good Party Member. In my time I have said harsh things about the Conservative Party and on many occasions I have found myself out of step with the Party.'⁹

Nonetheless, her proclaimed feminism must be assessed, given that Astor entered parliament through a 'non-feminist' route, and had never expressed an interest in becoming an MP before 1919. Indeed, Astor was a 'difference feminist' who championed stereotypical female concerns and expressed the need for women in public life due to their 'moral strength' (BBC Woman's Hour, 1956). Whilst Astor generally possessed liberal views, she could also be traditional in other ways. Despite being divorced, she voted against equalising divorce laws in 1922 and found the issue of birth control problematic, as she believed it would lower female moral standards.

⁹ Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

Her religious beliefs (she converted to Christian Science in 1914) and late-Victorian upbringing influenced Astor's moralistic feminism, which saw her champion causes such as temperance, the protection of children and the reform of prostitution and soliciting laws, issues that were not popular amongst her party. When discussing the laws of morality, Astor declared 'our moral customs are different for men and women, and I personally believe that our double moral standard is responsible for half the sin and evil in the world.'¹⁰ Astor's commitment to social reform followed a long tradition of female social reformers whose work stretched back to the nineteenth century. Similarities can be drawn between Astor's hope of creating an equal moral standard and the work of Josephine Butler, who campaigned against the Contagious Diseases Acts. In a 1928 broadcast, Astor declared that Butler was 'the greatest woman and most inspiring personality the nineteenth century produced' (Harrison, 1987: 77).

Astor centred her election campaign around her commitment to Plymouth and her long-standing connection to the city. She released her election address on 3 November 1919 and referred to her work supporting the 'soldiers and sailors, and their wives and children'.¹¹ Since Waldorf's selection as the Conservative candidate in 1908, the Astors had been politically active in Plymouth. They established day nurseries and children's homes in the poorest areas, and in 1917 gifted a playing field for school children to the Plymouth Education Authority. As Waldorf was unable to attend the opening, Astor presented the playing field on his behalf ('Mr. Fisher on Play Centres', *The Times*, 7 May 1917: 3). During the First World War, Astor also worked in the Naval Hospital when she was in Plymouth, and taught patients knitting and embroidery as part of their rehabilitation.¹² A supporter of Astor's campaign remarked that 'Lady Astor will be elected for what she has done already, and not for what she will do' ('Lady Astor Jokes with Fishermen, Opening Campaign', *New York Times*, 4 November 1919: 1). Throughout Astor's seven election campaigns, she relied heavily on her past record to appeal to voters, rather than her visions for the

¹⁰ Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

¹¹ Nancy Astor's 1919 Election Address, BRO/1, Ernest Brown Papers, Parliamentary Archives, London.

¹² Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

future. Astor's lack of policy plans did not go unnoticed; Labour supporters argued that Astor 'avoids discussing political issues except generally, and bases her claim for election on her power as a woman for getting things done' ('Lady Astor's Quips Amuse Plymouth: "Astorisms" Repeated Everywhere as She Continues Stirring', *New York Times*, 6 November 1919: 13).

Astor's lack of detailed policy plans was a deliberate strategy, as it broadened her appeal to voters. Such a strategy was in keeping with her image as a straight-talking candidate and woman of common sense, and helped to bridge the gap between Astor's aristocratic background and her working-class constituents. Astor received thousands of letters from members of the public after her election to parliament, including one from Mrs. L. Clibborn who wrote, '[I] admired your candour and plain speaking with your audiences.'¹³ Such an approach was unique to Astor in comparison to other female candidates, who tended to place greater emphasis on their future policy plans, rather than their past records. Yet, few women could emulate Astor's past record in Plymouth, especially as numerous female candidates were selected for unfamiliar seats that they had no prior connection to.

Astor was careful to construct a respectable image of herself as a wife and mother, and positioned herself as representing the needs of the vulnerable and disadvantaged. In her election address she declared, 'I know the real Plymouth, its children and women, and its social problems better than any of the other candidates.'¹⁴ Women candidates were believed to have a 'special knowledge' of matters related to women, children and social reform. Such beliefs centred around women's supposedly 'innate' characteristics of empathy and selflessness, reinforcing stereotypical gender ideals. Lloyd George wrote to Astor to say he was glad of her nomination on the basis that 'there are a good many questions regarding housing, child welfare, food, drink, and prices in which it would be of immense advantage to the nation and to the House of Commons to have woman's point of view presented by a woman' ('Premier Hopes

¹³ Letter to Nancy Astor from Mrs. L. Clibborn, 29 November 1919, MS 1416 1/1/1721, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

¹⁴ Nancy Astor's 1919 Election Address, Parliamentary Archives.

To See Lady Astor Elected: Lloyd George Gives Cordial Approval to Her Candidacy, as Do Balfour and Fisher', *New York Times*, 9 November 1919: 5). The 'woman's point of view' provided an avenue for Astor and other female candidates to exploit, offering them an advantage against their male opponents (Berry-Waite, 2020: 47–48). Despite Astor's desire to champion 'women's issues', she ironically claimed not to be a 'sex candidate' during her campaign ('Lady Astor Jokes with Fishermen, Opening Campaign', *New York Times*, 4 November 1919: 1). As the city had close links to the Royal Navy, and equal franchise had not yet been granted, Astor was conscious not to alienate male voters, which explains the contradictory claim. If Astor was to succeed, she also needed to address issues outside of the women's sphere, such as the pressing issue of unemployment, and demonstrate her interest in local issues, including the fishing industry and naval dockyards.

Waldorf played an important role in Astor's 1919 election and her subsequent election campaigns, which aided her success. He often chaired her public meetings, coached her on speeches and drafted material for her. Given the novelty of a woman candidate, it is not surprising that Astor referred to Waldorf in her election address. Astor wrote of 'the special responsibility which, under the circumstances, would rest upon me as regards Plymouth, womankind, and my husband's past work' if she was elected.¹⁵ This added a level of seriousness to her candidacy, given that the press portrayed 'her campaign [as] a sort of circus' ('Lady Astor entertained by Women M.P.'s: Luncheon and Presentation at House of Commons', *Western Morning News*, 2 December 1944: 3). Likewise, in her adoption speech Astor declared, 'If you can't get a fighting man, take a fighting woman' ('Lady Astor Jokes with Fishermen, Opening Campaign', *New York Times*, 4 November 1919: 1). This sent a clear message to the electorate; by voting for Astor, the electorate would in effect be voting for Waldorf too, their former MP, demonstrating the importance of family connections. Moreover, the term fighting was an obvious reference to the First World War, with memories of the war still vivid in the electorate's mind. Election leaflets with slogans such as 'VOTE FOR ASTOR ONCE AGAIN!' were widespread, portraying Astor's candidature

¹⁵ Nancy Astor's 1919 Election Address, Parliamentary Archives.

as a continuation of Waldorf's.¹⁶ Referring to Waldorf helped to legitimise Astor's candidature and enabled her to appear less threatening to voters, adding a sense of familiarity to her campaign. Indeed, the electorate were more likely to vote for a woman if she was thought to be representing the views of a man, as it appeared less radical. Thus, Astor's marital status and connection to the Astor name gave her an advantage over single women who stood for election, or those without political husbands, as they lacked the political support and guidance available to Astor.

In keeping with the practice of many candidates at the 1918 'khaki election', Astor did not refer to the Conservative Party in her election address, but told the press she was a 'general supporter' of the coalition government. The *Common Cause* wrote, 'like so many other public spirited women, [she] is not willing to be tied hand and foot as a party candidate... She is determined to retain her freedom to vote according to her conscience' ('The Coalition Candidate for Plymouth', 14 November 1919). Unsurprisingly, many early female candidates tended to stand as Independents, or aimed to retain a level of independence even when standing for a political party. One of these was Eleanor Rathbone, a prominent suffragist who became the Independent MP for the Combined English Universities in 1929. Rathbone claimed that 'women with strong political aptitudes and interests had absorbed themselves in the suffrage movement... [and] had become more or less detached from party politics' (1936: 32).

Astor had an unconventional electioneering style which challenged society's perceptions of how a woman should behave. The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* referred to Astor as 'vivacious and unconventional... she is an entertaining electioneer and happy canvasser' ('Lady Astor to Contest Plymouth: Popular Unionist Choice', 27 October 1919: 5). Astor's public persona was effectively deployed in her exchanges with constituents. When interrupted by a heckler during her campaign, she exclaimed 'Don't give me any of your sass. I shall come right down there to you. What you fellows want is to stop yelling and get to work' (Fort, 2012: 166). Her informal electioneering approach baffled a British society who were not used to members of the established political elite acting in such a way, let alone a woman. There were

¹⁶ Election Leaflet, 'VOTE FOR ASTOR ONCE AGAIN!', 186/22/7, Waldorf and Nancy Astor Papers, Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Plymouth.

different expectations for British and American women, which enabled Astor to avoid significant criticism over her outspoken behaviour. Astor's unconventional approach regularly attracted press comment. The *Common Cause* observed: 'Her jokes and her quickness of repartee are the delight even of her opponents, and her immense personal popularity is everywhere obvious' ('The Coalition Candidate for Plymouth', 14 November 1919).

Not all of the good people of Plymouth were happy that an American might represent them in parliament. Astor was often heckled over her nationality, with shouts of 'Go back to America' (Musolf, 1999: 53). In response to such incidents, Astor would declare she was 'proud of her Virginian ancestry' and portrayed herself as a returning Pilgrim ('Fashionable & Personal', *Kent and Sussex Courier*, 14 November 1919: 7). The Pilgrim fathers had set sail from Plymouth in 1620 in search of refuge in the New World, many eventually settled in Virginia. Indeed, she declared to voters that 'with my Virginian birth and my Devonshire residence, I am just the woman to be the first in Parliament... I will bring to my task all the spirit of the Pilgrim Fathers' ('Lady Astor Talks to Women Voters', *New York Times*, 5 November 1919: 8).

Astor lacked class feeling despite her wealthy background; Fort argues she aimed to 'transcend class' and was known for visiting the poorest parts of Plymouth (2012: 164). In one such area whilst out campaigning, a coal heaver shouted at her 'What has your husband ever done for us?' Astor looked at the heckler and realised she knew him. She yelled back 'Charlie, you old liar... you know quite well what he has done' (Sykes, 1972: 224). This demonstrates the advantage that Astor had in knowing many of the electorate prior to her campaign through Waldorf's political work, and how despite her background, she was able to form connections with people from all walks of life. The *Western Mail* reported that 'As she went round amongst the poorest people – who are among her most ardent supporters – her progress was in effect a brilliant political success' ('Lady Astor Busy: Incidents in a Novel Bye-Election', 5 November 1919: 5). When discussing her reasons for wanting to enter parliament, Astor declared that she wanted to help the plight of the poor as 'life leans heavily upon them... [and] most heavily upon the children.'¹⁷ She had a common touch and

¹⁷ Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

constituents began to refer to Astor as 'Our Nancy', which continued throughout her political career ('"Our Nancy" Goes Electioneering', *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph*, 22 November 1919: 3).

The candidates had to wait until 28 November 1919 for the results to be announced; Astor joked to voters that she did not want to be sent to parliament 'with a stingy little majority' ('Astorisms: Everyone Confident at Plymouth', *Western Times*, 12 November 1919: 4). Astor won the 1919 by-election with more votes than her Labour and Liberal opponents combined, winning 51% of the vote with a majority of just over 5,000. Waldorf's attempt to gain support for a Peerage Bill, which would enable sons of peers to decline a seat in the House of Lords, was unsuccessful, and it did not pass the first reading. In the years that followed Astor's election to parliament, she dedicated much of her time to championing temperance reform, which alienated many in her party. Against the advice of Waldorf and many close friends, Astor used her maiden speech in 1920 to advocate for restrictions on the sale of alcohol, and highlighted the negative impact it could have on women and children. Astor recalled that 'after I had made my first speech there's not one single soul [who] thought that I would ever get back into the House of Commons' (BBC *Woman's Hour*, 1956). Despite the unpopularity of temperance, Astor introduced a Private Members Bill in the summer of 1922 which proposed new drink legislation. Astor's alcoholic father and first husband, Shaw, undoubtedly influenced her views, as she revealed in her autobiography: 'Temperance has always been my Crusade. I knew from my own life the sadness and misery caused by drink.'¹⁸ Whilst the Private Members Bill did not come to anything, Astor faced criticism for supposedly wanting to introduce prohibition.

The 1920s: Four Election Campaigns in Seven Years

With cracks forming in the coalition government and rumours of a general election on the horizon in early 1922, Astor's election agent, C. G. Briggs, began to discuss who might oppose Astor at the next election. In a letter to Waldorf on 28 February 1922, Briggs wrote 'that the Labour Organisation are favouring to bring forward a

¹⁸ Autobiographical material, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

woman candidate from London... the favourite at present for that purpose is Mrs. Philip Snowden.'¹⁹ Ethel Snowden was a national speaker for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and became a prominent figure in the Labour movement. Waldorf was however sceptical, replying on 1 March 1922 that 'You are as likely to get Mr Austen Chamberlain to come down and fight against Lady Astor for the Sutton Division as you are to get Mrs Philip Snowden'.²⁰ Snowden declined the invitation to stand as she believed Astor's work in parliament was invaluable to the women's cause. Although Captain George Brenan was eventually selected as the Labour nominee, such discussions demonstrate the perceived advantage of having a prominent female candidate to oppose Astor.

A general election was eventually called for 15 November. Lloyd George's failed election promises, such as the pledge to build homes fit for heroes, dominated the campaign. The 1922 General Election was significant for women; as Law notes, it 'was the first opportunity for women to present a serious challenge as political contenders' (1997: 141–142). Unlike in 1918, women candidates had time to look for seats and prepare for the election. Thirty-three women stood at the 1922 General Election, but only Astor and the Liberal Margaret Wintringham were successful, indicating that prejudice against women candidates was still rife. Wintringham was first elected in a 1921 by-election in Louth, inheriting her seat from her husband who had died whilst in office. Astor and Wintringham became great friends and worked across party on issues such as the provision of nursery schools, women police, maternity services and widow's pensions. During the 1922 election, Wintringham wrote to Astor: 'I am delighted no Liberal candidate is opposing you. All women, to whatever party they belong, owe you a debt of gratitude for your untiring efforts on their behalf.'²¹ For both of them, the women's cause came before party loyalty. Women MPs inheriting their seats from their husbands became a common pattern

¹⁹ Letter to Waldorf Astor from C. G. Briggs, 28 February 1922, MS 1416 1/1/1734, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

²⁰ Letter to C. G. Briggs from Waldorf Astor, 1 March 1922, MS 1416 1/1/1734, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

²¹ Election Leaflet, 'WOMEN AND LADY ASTOR', 3642/3156, Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Plymouth.

in the interwar period; Harrison argues that this 'male equivalence' assisted women's entrance into parliament, as it enabled women to present themselves as respectable substitutes to their husbands (1986: 625). Likewise, Vallance states that the 'halo effect' offered women an advantage, as it allowed female candidates to be selected for winnable seats. Their candidacy was also seen as an extension to their roles as wives and mothers, and helped dispel anxiety towards the novelty of a female candidate (1979: 27).

Astor's 1922 election campaign was far from plain sailing; a distinctive feature of this election was the arrival of an Independent Conservative candidate to oppose Astor, Dr Wansey Bayly, backed by the brewers. As no Liberal candidate stood in 1922, the election was a three-cornered fight against Bayly and the Labour candidate Brennan. Many members in the local Conservative association were angered by Astor's views towards alcohol and her recent Private Members Bill, which resulted in a minority transferring their support to Bayly. In his election address, Bayly claimed to stand for the 'true CONSERVATIVE principles' and claimed that 'we must have as our law makers men and women of BRITISH BIRTH', a clear dig at Astor's American roots. As was to be expected, he emphasised that he opposed Astor's Liquor Bill, arguing it was 'only PROHIBITION IN DISGUISE' and an attempt 'to interfere with the FREEDOM OF THE PEOPLE'.²² (Prohibition had been introduced in the United States in 1920). Astor responded to this criticism in her next speech, noting: 'I am an Alien... alien to almost everything Dr Bayly stands for – in home life and in public life' (Sykes, 1972: 295). Astor used her election address to further defend her views towards drink. Highlighted in bold print, the end of her one-page election address stated: 'You may be told I want to impose Prohibition by some Act or Bill. This is not true. I am not trying to take away anyone's beer. I want to give voters freedom to control the drink trade. Now the brewers too often control politics.'²³

²² Wansey Bayly's 1922 Election Address, DM668, Papers of the National Liberal Club, Bristol University Library, Special Collections.

²³ Nancy Astor's 1922 Election Address, MS 1416 1/1/1734, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

It was not only Astor's temperance views which alienated many Conservative supporters, but also her self-proclaimed intention of working above party politics.²⁴ One voter wrote to the *Western Morning News*, claiming they intended to transfer 'their favour to the Imperial Conservative candidate' who they saw as 'a genuine Conservative who does not require the backing of Liberals' ('Readers & Election Issues', 13 November 1922: 6). Criticism surrounding Astor's party loyalty dominated Bayly's campaign speeches; at a public meeting he declared 'I am opposing Lady Astor because I am a Conservative and not a Conservative, Liberal, Labour, Independent, and what-not' ('Dr. Bayly's Policy', *Western Morning News*, 8 November 1922: 3). The absence of a Liberal candidate undoubtedly benefited Astor's election success in 1922. Her nomination papers were signed by many notable Liberals and Mrs Isaac Foot, wife of the former Liberal candidate who opposed Astor in 1919, spoke in support of Astor at one of her public meetings. Mrs Foot explained to the crowd that although she was a Liberal, she supported Astor as 'the election in the Sutton Division was not a party question at all, and because Lady Astor stood for principles and not for politics' ('Progress of Lady Astor's Campaign', *Western Morning News*, 9 November 1922: 3). However, Astor's election campaign contained forceful anti-socialist rhetoric, and she heavily criticised Labour's capital levy policy.

Astor's campaign did not contain detailed policies that she hoped to implement if elected. Instead, it centred around a broad commitment to 'stand for morality in the home and in public life' and her past record in Plymouth.²⁵ She stated at a public meeting: 'I stand for national stability and progress... I stand for clean, democratic, and independent politics, and no truckling to the brewers. I stand for a single moral standard for men and women, and for fair play for the children, the England of to-morrow' ('Two Crowded Hours: Lady Astor defines her Principles', *Western Morning News*, 7 November 1922: 3). When questioned on specific policy areas at public meetings, Astor deflected such questions by utilising her image as a woman of common sense. On one such occasion, Astor remarked 'I do not pose as an expert on

²⁴ Nancy Astor's 1922 Election Address, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

²⁵ Nancy Astor's 1922 Election Address, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

all questions, but I do know the experts on most of the questions, and I am not above taking their advice' ('Lady Astor's Appeal to Plymouth. Principles Defined', *Western Morning News*, 28 October 1922: 3).

Despite Bayly's candidature, Astor won the 1922 Plymouth Sutton election with a majority of just over 3,000. The following year, she successfully introduced the Intoxicating Liquor (Sales to persons under 18) Bill, which made it illegal to sell alcohol to anyone under eighteen. Astor and Wintringham were soon joined by another woman MP. In May 1923, the Conservative Mabel Philipson won a by-election in Berwick-upon-Tweed. Like them she inherited her seat from her husband. Hilton Philipson had been forced to resign his seat after his election agent was found guilty of corruption and illegal practices. In her election address, Philipson utilised her marital status and claimed she intended to stand as a 'warming pan' for her husband, much as Astor had done in 1919.²⁶ The peculiar circumstances surrounding the elections of Astor, Wintringham, and Philipson did not go unnoticed. The *Wesley Methodist* noted that 'not one so far has been elected primarily on her personal merits as an individual. All three have appealed principally to their electors as the wives of their husbands'.²⁷ Not only did these women effectively inherit their seats from their husbands, but they were elected at by-elections. As a result, their candidatures were believed to be less permanent.

After seven months in office, the Prime Minister Andrew Bonar Law resigned due to poor health and was replaced by Stanley Baldwin. Despite the Conservative government winning a large majority in 1922, Baldwin called an election for 6 December 1923 as he wanted a mandate to introduce protective tariffs to help solve Britain's unemployment crisis. With debates surrounding free trade versus protection dominating the election, the press pondered over whether Astor would again receive Liberal support as she had in 1922, given her support for Baldwin's trade policy which clashed with the Liberals' long-standing commitment to free trade ('Political Activity in Plymouth', *Western Morning News*, 14 November 1923: 3). Questions

²⁶ Mabel Philipson's 1923 By-Election Address, PUB 229/1/1, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

²⁷ 'Chiefly for Women: Our Women Members of Parliament'. *Wesley Methodist*, 26 July 1923, MS 1416 1/7/56, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

arose as to whether the local Liberal Association would select their own candidate, or back Brenan, the Labour candidate, who supported free trade. To try and ensure that Plymouth Sutton remained a two-party fight, Waldorf wrote to Wintringham for assistance. He asked if she might consider writing to the Chairman of the Plymouth Liberals, requesting that no Liberal candidate stand against Astor, given that Astor had requested no Conservative candidate stand against her in Louth.²⁸ Wintringham responded that she had written to the Chairman and wrote 'I do sincerely hope no liberal opposition will be put up.'²⁹ Not only does this show Astor and Wintringham's support for each other, despite their party differences, but it also demonstrates Waldorf's continuous involvement in Astor's election campaigns.

Interestingly, Astor placed a greater emphasis on her policy and future intentions in 1923, compared to her previous elections. At three pages, her election address was also significantly longer than her previous election addresses, with a whole page dedicated to outlining her policy on unemployment. Astor claimed that she supported Baldwin's policy given the abnormal circumstances that Britain was facing, but stated 'I am not advocating permanent Protection or a Universal Tariff'.³⁰ She went on to emphasise, in capitalised bold print,

'I AM ABSOLUTELY AGAINST FOOD TAXES', which free traders claimed would result from the higher costs of importing foreign food into a tariff-protected Britain, given the impact this would have on mothers and working families.³¹

The focus on the future, rather than the past, was likely due to the pressing issue of unemployment and tariffs, and a demand from the electorate to know where candidates stood on these issues.

Nonetheless, Astor continued to campaign on a broad commitment to social reform, and again was heavily critical about the perils of socialism and the capital levy

²⁸ Letter to Margaret Wintringham from Waldorf Astor, 16 November 1923, MS1416/1/1/1747, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

²⁹ Letter to Waldorf Astor from Margaret Wintringham, 20 November 1923, MS1416/1/1/1747, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

³⁰ Nancy Astor's 1923 Election Address, DM668, Papers of the National Liberal Club, Bristol University Library, Special Collections.

³¹ Nancy Astor's 1923 Election Address, Bristol University Library, Special Collections.

in her election address. She told constituents at a public meeting, 'Social reform... is still in the forefront on my programme. I appeal to all Liberals to help me fight for those reforms which all parties have in their programmes, but which few politicians have in their hearts' ('Increasing the pace in Sutton', *Western Morning News*, 27 November 1923: 3). By this point, the Liberals had decided not to run a candidate to oppose Astor, to which she was 'deeply grateful' for ('Increasing the pace in Sutton', *Western Morning News*, 27 November 1923: 3). Although her election address did not discuss social reform as much as her past elections, she ended her address with the sweeping statement, 'I do not promise to cure all your troubles at once, but I will strive to change the world into a much better place for your children.'³² Such a statement emphasised Astor's identity as a mother and reinforced the notion that female candidates were expected to focus on stereotypical female concerns. Astor was often criticised for abandoning her children to enter parliament, a criticism faced by all female candidates who had children. A coal heaver once shouted at Astor: 'A woman... should be at home, looking after her children' (Fort, 2012: 167). To such incidents, Astor would reply that her children were well looked after, and that her aim was to look out for the more unfortunate children (Sykes, 1972: 219).

Although thirty-four women stood in 1923, Astor's electioneering continued to make headlines in the national press. Numerous newspapers reported on one particularly humorous story, which saw Astor climb through a window in order to reach the platform at a packed-out meeting. The *Dundee Evening Telegraph* stated that Astor was the first candidate in the history of elections to utilise the window in order to access the platform due to her immense popularity (many a male politician had clambered through a window to escape an unruly public meeting) ('Got in Through the Window', 23 November 1923: 4). Despite criticisms of Astor's trade policy, she won the election with a majority of 2,676 votes. The election also represented a significant breakthrough for female MPs, as eight women were elected across the political spectrum. Astor and Philipson were joined by another Conservative, the Duchess of Atholl, and Wintringham was joined on the Liberal benches by Vera Terrington. For the first time, Labour women were elected to parliament: Margaret

³² Nancy Astor's 1923 Election Address, Bristol University Library, Special Collections.

Bondfield, Susan Lawrence, and Dorothy Jewson all won seats. It was also notable that the three Labour women MPs were all unmarried, proving that women were capable of entering parliament on their own merit. Nonetheless, the fact that it had taken Labour women five years to enter parliament indicated the ongoing challenges they faced. As male dominated trade unions largely funded the election campaigns of Labour candidates, it was difficult for women to secure funding as male candidates were prioritised (Graves, 1994; Hunt and Hannam, 2002).

Nationally, the Conservatives were not so fortunate; although they won the most seats, they did not have a majority. As a result, the Labour Party, led by Ramsay MacDonald, formed its first government with the support of the Liberals. Nonetheless, relations between Labour and the Liberals soon broke down which led to Herbert Asquith calling a motion of no confidence in MacDonald. After only nine months in office, MacDonald called another general election. Nationally, Conservative election rhetoric centred around the notion that the Labour government had failed and was in thrall to extremist interests. The Zinoviev letter, which was published shortly before the election and was alleged to demonstrate close relations between the government and the Soviet leadership, exacerbated anti-socialist scaremongering. Therefore, it seemed that Astor was in a stronger position than in her previous election ('Political Call to Arms: General Election Outlook', *Western Morning News*, 4 October 1924: 3).

And yet, little changed for Astor in the 1924 General Election, held on 29 October. She was once again opposed by Brennan, and unsurprisingly anti-socialist rhetoric dominated her election campaign. Half of Astor's election address, which was now four pages in length, focused on criticising the Labour Party. It began by outlining the failures of the Labour government and included sub sections titled '*LABOUR'S BROKEN PROMISES*', '*SOCIALISM NO REMEDY*' and '*RUSSIAN TREATY*'.³³ Labour's alleged broken promises included immediate work for all, building more houses, the abolishment of slums, and the failure to enact an equal franchise. Only one page of Astor's address was dedicated to her past record and policies. 1924 was

³³ Nancy Astor's 1924 Election Address, PUB 229/4/6, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

the first time that Astor had stood in opposition to the sitting government, which could explain the new centrality of anti-Labour rhetoric in her campaigning. With no Liberal candidate standing for Plymouth Sutton, Astor continued to appeal to Liberal supporters and reiterated her 'record of hard work' and 'position as a social reformer'.³⁴ Numerous leaflets were targeted at erstwhile Liberals, indicating that Astor was fighting for the principles they cared about – 'the spirit of progress and the desire for sound reform'.³⁵ Voters were asked to trust Astor based on her record of service: 'I have represented you in three Parliaments. I have worked for Plymouth for fifteen years. I shall not fail you.'³⁶

It was a message that the voters of Plymouth took to heart. Astor was returned with a majority of 5,079 and the national Conservative victory was overwhelming. Initially, the impact of the Zinoviev letter was thought to be enormous, but recent scholarship has suggested that its influence has been exaggerated (Bennett, 2018). Despite Astor's increased majority, she saw 1924 as a disappointment for the women's cause. Four women were elected, and only Astor, Atholl and Philipson retained their seats. Much to Astor's dismay, Wintringham lost her seat to the Conservative Arthur Heneage. She was however joined by Wilkinson, the Labour MP for Middlesbrough. Despite their opposing political views, they became 'devoted friends' (Sykes, 2012: 325).

In the years leading up to the 1929 General Election, held on 30 May, an array of reforms were passed, most notably the 1928 Equal Franchise Act which Astor strongly supported. This granted equal voting rights to men and women from the age of twenty-one. Known as the 'flapper election', there was great interest in how the young female vote would influence the election ('Men Overwhelmed', *Daily Mail*, 29 April 1929: 15). The election in Plymouth Sutton was a three-cornered fight and the toughest contest that Astor ever fought. The campaign took place at a time of growing unemployment, and memories of the government's handling of

³⁴ Election Leaflet, 'Liberals and Lady Astor', MS 1416 1/1/1754, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

³⁵ Election Leaflet, 'Liberals and Lady Astor', Reading University Library, Special Collections.

³⁶ Nancy Astor's 1924 Election Address, Conservative Party Archive.

the General Strike in 1926, and the subsequent passing of the controversial Trade Disputes Act, created a difficult environment for Conservative MPs such as Astor who were seeking to defend working-class, industrial seats. Astor was opposed by the Liberal Thomas Henry Aggett, a local man from nearby Teignmouth, and the Labour candidate William Westwood. Social reform remained a principle part of Astor's campaign. Prior to this election, she established a Welfare Work Centre in Plymouth in 1925 with Waldorf. Named Virginia House after Astor's birth place, it ran clubs for both the young and old, and provided educational services ('Welfare Work Centre. Lord and Lady Astor's Gift to Plymouth', *Western Morning News*, 7 December 1925: 3). However, despite Astor's practical commitment to social reform, socialism was becoming a more appealing option for much of the electorate.

As was to be expected, Astor made a special appeal in her election address to women between the ages of twenty-one and thirty, who had recently been enfranchised: 'I appeal for support to men and women of all parties, and of no party; and in particular to the new Women Voters.'³⁷ Nonetheless, Astor failed to provide any detail in her address on how she would support the new female electorate. Although she discussed her social reform programme, the issues she referred to, such as housing and nursery schools, were more likely to appeal to women over thirty, than women between the ages of twenty-one and thirty, reiterating Astor's lack of detailed policy plans. This was in keeping with Conservative Party propaganda which made few direct appeals to the new female electorate, and instead tended to see female voters as a homogenous group. As Thackeray's work has shown, 'the Conservative Party's broad appeal to women... continued to focus overwhelmingly on the home, welfare and social reform' (2018: 55).

Astor's opponents similarly made an appeal to female voters, each dedicating a section of their election addresses to women's questions.³⁸ Interestingly, Margaret McMillan, a prominent figure within the Plymouth Labour Party, spoke in support

³⁷ Nancy Astor's 1929 Election Address, DM668, Papers of the National Liberal Club, Bristol University Library, Special Collections.

³⁸ William Westwood and Thomas Henry Aggett's 1929 Election Addresses, DM668, Papers of the National Liberal Club, Bristol University Library, Special Collections.

of Astor. She told audiences she was supporting Astor as she was a true supporter of nursery schools and babies. When one woman asked, "Isn't Lady Astor in the House of Commons representing her class?"... "No!" said Miss McMillian. "Lady Astor's in Parliament representing the poor and suffering."³⁹ Although it was rare for such a prominent Labour supporter to speak on the public platform in support of Astor, McMillian's actions demonstrate the ongoing importance that female political activists gave to electing capable women to parliament, a concern which could sometimes outweigh party loyalties.

Out of all seven of Astor's election campaigns, 1929 was the most gruelling; the *Western Morning News* reported 'there has rarely been an election when the political battle has been waged with greater intensity' ('Big Unionist Gathering: Astor Family at Guildhall', 29 May 1929: 4). Despite McMillian's support and her previous election successes, Astor knew her Labour opponent Westwood was likely to win given the national turn against the Conservatives. Three days before the election, she went to 'the worst tenement in the worst street in Plymouth, a Communist stronghold', aiming to appeal to Westwood's most likely supporters ('Lady Astor Storms a Red Stronghold: The World's Greatest Canvasser', *Daily Express*, 28 May 1929: 1). Ever alert to the advantages of press publicity, Astor brought a *Daily Express* reporter with her and the incident made front page news the next day. On entering a crowded courtyard, with over a hundred hostile women, Astor shouted "So you are a pack of Bolshies, eh?"... A man caught her roughly by the shoulder, and she raised [her] umbrella' to him, demonstrating the physical harassment female candidates often encountered ('Lady Astor Storms a Red Stronghold: The World's Greatest Canvasser', *Daily Express*, 28 May 1929: 1). Now she had the audience's attention, she shouted "Twenty years you have known me... Twenty years; and this Westwood man is brought against me. Who and what is he? He has only just come and we do not know what he looks like... Believe me, don't believe darned idiots who come round louting fake promises." ('Lady Astor Storms a Red Stronghold: The World's Greatest Canvasser', *Daily Express*, 28 May 1929: 1). This was followed by cheers of 'Good old Nancy' from

³⁹ 'MISS MARGARET McMILLAN', Reprinted from *The Western Independent*, 19 May 1929, 186/22/7, Papers of Waldorf and Nancy Astor, Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Plymouth.

the crowd. Astor's actions show her determination to capture the working-class vote and her ability to draw upon her constructed public persona as a means of advancing her electability.

It was not only Waldorf who supported Astor's political career; as time went on, Astor's children began to speak in support of their mother on the public platform. In 1929, the Astor's oldest son, William, addressed a crowded meeting on the eve of the poll. He claimed the 'personal attacks on my father and mother have been disgusting and unchristian' and emphasised the Conservative government's 'proud record' and 'confident leader... Mr Baldwin' ('Big Unionist Gathering: Astor Family at Guildhall', *Western Morning News*, 29 May 1929: 4). Similarly, Astor's daughter, Phyllis, briefly addressed the meeting, 'asking the audience to work hard and vote for her mother' ('Big Unionist Gathering: Astor Family at Guildhall', *Western Morning News*, 29 May 1929: 4). Three of Astor's sons went on to serve as MPs: William for Fulham East and subsequently Wycombe; Michael, for Surrey East; and Jackie, following his father and mother in serving as MP for Plymouth Sutton between 1951 and 1959. It is no coincidence that three out of Astor's six children entered parliament, emphasising the significance of established channels of power and political prestige associated with the Astor name. Nonetheless, as Astor's only daughter Phyllis did not enter public life, Nancy Astor was the only woman to benefit from the Astor name when pursuing a political career, and only as a direct result of Waldorf's elevation to the House of Lords. The opportunities provided by family connections must therefore be seen within the context of a male-focused patriarchal model.

Astor was not the only candidate to include family members in her election campaign. Aggett, the Liberal candidate, brought his wife and six-year old daughter to women's meetings, whereby his daughter would ask the audience to 'vote for her daddy' ('Big Unionist Gathering: Astor Family at Guildhall', *Western Morning News*, 29 May 1929: 4). By utilising his female relatives, Aggett could argue that he was able to represent the interests of women and children, just as much as Astor could. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that 'flappers' were 'far more interested in the women members of the candidate's family than in the candidate himself' ('When the Fight Has Finished', 31 May 1929: 12). Although it would be naive to read too much into

this, male candidates continued to utilise female relatives, both in their propaganda and on the public platform, to help convey their message to female voters.

Astor won the election with a majority of 211 votes, the closest she ever came to losing her seat. She polled 16,625 votes, in contrast to Westwood's 16,414 votes, and Aggett's 5,430 votes. It is likely that without the Liberal candidate, Astor would have lost the election. In the 1922, 1923, and 1924 general elections, the absence of a Liberal candidate had contributed to Astor's success, while the adoption of a Liberal candidate in 1929 had ensured she was not defeated. Although Astor claimed to be above party politics, her close call in 1929 highlights that she was not immune to suffering from the changing political mood of the country. With Labour now the largest party in the Commons for the first time, MacDonald started his second term as Prime Minister, with the support of the Liberal Party under the leadership of Lloyd George. A record number of female MPs were elected in 1929 and Astor invited them to lunch to celebrate their successes. Fourteen women were elected across the political spectrum, although sixty-nine women stood for election.

The National Government and Astor's Political Decline

Whilst the second Labour administration began optimistically, the government soon encountered severe economic problems following the onset of the Great Depression and a growing unemployment crisis. In August 1931, the Labour Cabinet split on whether to accept budget cuts, of which the most contentious was a cut to unemployment benefit which had been recommended by the May Committee. In the resulting crisis, the government was forced to resign and those who had favoured the cuts, including MacDonald, the Prime Minister, and Philip Snowden, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, left the Labour Party. An all-party National Government was formed to deal with the crisis, led by MacDonald. Although initially designed as a temporary expedient, the National Government called an election for 27 October to seek a mandate for cuts in spending and 'a free hand' to deal with the crisis, which raised the prospect of protective tariffs being introduced to shore up the economy.

As a National Government victory was expected, Astor's own election success was thought to be inevitable, despite facing criticism over her recent visit to Russia and questions over her effectiveness as an MP. There is evidence to suggest that

Astor considered standing down in 1931, in favour of her son William (Sykes, 1972: 403–404). Nonetheless, Waldorf believed that it was too late to make this decision, and Astor remained the Conservative candidate for Plymouth Sutton. While the discussion came to nothing, this highlights the importance of family networks in holding political office and the perceived influence of the Astor name. This time the election was a two-party fight, and Astor was opposed by the Labour candidate George Ward. Interestingly, his election agent was Brenan, who had opposed Astor in the 1922, 1923 and 1924 general elections.

The circumstances of the National Government chimed well with Astor's longstanding concern with promoting an appeal that went beyond conventional party interests. She had first been elected in 1919 when a coalition government was in power and there was widespread hostility to a return to the conventions of pre-war party politics. Astor stated in her 1931 election address that 'The country to-day needs the help of the best men in all Parties' and advised electors to 'Drop Party politics. Think only of the Nation and support the National Government.'⁴⁰ Indeed, Astor argued that they needed to learn from the experience of the Great War, when a political truce had been called: 'We won the war because men in all Parties worked together. We have not yet won a stable peace because partisanship in politics prevented co-operation. But now is our chance.'⁴¹ Such rhetoric invoked notions of patriotism and sacrifice, by urging voters to put the nation before party politics.

This did not mean that Astor was above reproducing the kind of anti-socialist appeals which had been a hallmark of her campaigning, and that of many Conservatives during the 1920s, with half of her address focused on criticising Labour and its apparent failure to put country before party when in power. Labour, she claimed, had broken their pledge 'to cure unemployment' and the last two years had shown they were 'only good for electioneering' and not for governing.⁴² When McDonald had tried to take a tough line to deal with unemployment by cutting

⁴⁰ Nancy Astor's 1931 Election Address, MS 1416 1/1/1760, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

⁴¹ Nancy Astor's 1931 Election Address, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

⁴² Nancy Astor's 1931 Election Address, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

spending, he had been 'deserted' by many of his Cabinet colleagues.⁴³ Speaking at a packed-out women's meeting, Astor declared, 'I am proud to serve under a man who, after giving up his whole life to one party, when a national crisis comes is prepared to give up that party and stand for the nation' ('Sutton's "Silent" Election: But the Women taking a Keen Interest', *Western Morning News*, 14 October 1931: 3). Of course, this put Astor in an awkward position, pledging to support a Prime Minister who she had previously ridiculed in past elections.

The irony of Astor's position was not lost on Ward, who criticised Astor's support for MacDonald and her lack of policy plans. In a letter to voters, Ward stated that Astor had no clear policy other than to 'support MacDonald in whatever policy he decides to carry out', whilst at the same time highlighting how Astor had previously joked that the late Labour government, led by MacDonald, 'could not run a tripe shop'.⁴⁴ Indeed, only half a page of Astor's four page election address focussed on the future, in which she proposed to support the Prime Minister and the national government, with no concrete reference to policy plans (although it should be noted that the National Government programme was notably light in 1931, given its calls for voters to give it a 'free hand'). This was not good enough for some who feared the likely abandonment of Britain's long-standing attachment to free trade. When an audience member at one of Astor's election meetings asked if Astor would provide an 'honest answer' on whether she was in favour of tariffs, Astor simply replied 'I believe the question of tariffs and Free Trade is an economic one and not a political one, and I would like to see it taken right out of politics' ('Women's Interest in Sutton: Lady Astor Among Unemployed', *Western Morning News*, 15 October 1931: 4). Likewise, Ward remarked at an election meeting, 'I hope that Lady Astor will have something to say about the National Government's policy, or make some serious political statement, indicating to us what her intensions are' ('Appeal Women Voters: Lady Astor's Special Meetings', *Western Morning News*, 24 October 1931: 11). Unlike

⁴³ Nancy Astor's 1931 Election Address, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

⁴⁴ Letter to electors from George Ward, 24 October 1931, MS 1416 1/1/1767, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

Astor's previous five elections, social reform did not feature heavily in her campaign, given the financial situation of the country. She noted that 'Social Reform has been postponed. It must not be given up.'⁴⁵

Reflecting on Astor's advocacy of the National Government at an election meeting, Ward told the audience, 'I would like to ask the question, what is a National candidate? If that means one who has done his bit for his country and is a British subject I claim to fill the bill' ('Lady Astor or Mr. Ward?', *Western Morning News*, 13 October 1931: 7). Ward's attack on Astor's claim to represent the national interest is noteworthy, as he emphasised that he was a British subject, whilst she was not. Similarities can thus be drawn between Ward's attack on Astor's American nationality and Bayly's anti-American rhetoric in 1922. Despite her long-standing attachment to Plymouth, Astor's opponents continued to use her nationality against her, portraying Astor as an outsider.

Such accusations did little to dent Astor's popularity, however, and she won with a greater majority than expected, polling 24,277 votes and achieving a majority of 10,204. Astor was a beneficiary of public anger at the record of the previous Labour government, which led to a landslide victory for the National Government Conservatives, who won 470 seats and subsequently dominated membership of the National Government after the election. Labour women, who often represented marginal seats, suffered disproportionately from the party's collapse in support. All nine Labour women MPs lost their seats, although a few would eventually return to the House of Commons. However, fifteen women were returned to the new parliament. The year 1931 saw thirteen Conservative women enter parliament, many for the first time, including Florence Horsbrugh, Irene Ward and Mavis Tate. Astor welcomed the new female MPs as always, but complained that there were still too few women in parliament.

Between 1931 and 1935, Astor's parliamentary performance declined. In 1934 she opposed the Government's policy on unemployment and also made a disastrous speech with regards to the Hotels and Restaurants Bill, in which she accused certain

⁴⁵ Nancy Astor's 1931 Election Address, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

MPs of taking bribes from the drink trade to defend their interests in the House of Commons.⁴⁶ The 1935 General Election held on 14 November, which followed McDonald's retirement and his replacement as Prime Minister by Baldwin, was fought under the backdrop of the growing threat of European fascism. As a result, foreign affairs dominated the election, most notably the issue of British rearmament. By this point, Germany had left the League of Nations and was rearming at an alarming rate. Although Baldwin believed a certain level of rearmament was needed, he did not want to make it a central election issue. The public were believed to be largely pacifist after the results of the Peace Ballot of 1934–1935, and therefore Baldwin did not want to risk alienating voters. The Peace Ballot 'revealed a genuine support for collective security' (Ceadel, 1980: 838), and aimed to educate the electorate and influence the National Government (McCarthy, 2010: 366). Baldwin pledged to support the League of Nations and famously said that there would 'be no great armaments' ('Mr. Baldwin on Peace: Pledge of 'No Great Armaments"', *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 1 November 1931: 1). Astor endorsed Baldwin's policy, and was once again opposed by the Labour candidate Ward. This was to be Astor's last election campaign, with Sykes noting, 'She would have been astonished and distressed to know that this was the last election she was to fight' (1972: 423).

Astor's election campaign in 1935 closely resembled the one that she had fought four years previously. She continued to emphasise the failure of the late Labour Government, and championed the successes of the National Government, most notably its achievement on reducing unemployment by one million.⁴⁷ The major difference in Astor's election address in 1935 was its focus on peace, security, and removing the causes of war. Astor stated in bold print: 'I stand for the League of Nations', and want 'to end the war between Italy and Abyssinia... within the framework of the League'.⁴⁸ She went on to declare that she 'support[ed] collective disarmament' and public works schemes to decrease unemployment and revitalise industries such

⁴⁶ House of Commons Debate, 9 February 1934, vol. 285, c1525–1526.

⁴⁷ Nancy Astor's 1935 Election Address, MS 1416/1/1/1800, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

⁴⁸ Nancy Astor's 1935 Election Address, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

as fishing, which many in south Devon depended on.⁴⁹ As always, Astor closed her election address by focusing on her past record and broad principles; it read, in bold print, 'For twenty-five years Lord Astor and I have worked for you in and out of Parliament. Please help me again to work for Plymouth and for National Recovery, Wellbeing, Security and Peace.'⁵⁰ It is interesting that in her last election address, Astor referred to Waldorf and their joint record of working for the constituency. The year 1935 was seen as the Astor family's jubilee election, with husband and wife representing Plymouth Sutton continuously since 1910.

Like all of Nancy Astor's previous election campaigns, 1935 'was full of good humour' as she continued to entertain the crowds whilst out campaigning ('Lady Astor on the Barbican: An After-Election Promise', *Western Morning News*, 4 November 1935: 5). The *Western Morning News* described a story of how 'A burly drayman chided her ladyship for being photographed with a crowd of children', highlighting Astor's ability to utilise the press to construct a maternal image of herself, as she had done since 1919. In response to this incident Astor retorted "'Very well, I will come over with you" and for a moment there was a merry game of hide and seek as he tried to dodge Lady Astor among the crowd' ('Lady Astor on the Barbican: An After-Election Promise', 4 November 1935: 5). Much press attention was given to the Astor family's jubilee election; the *Belfast Telegraph* reported on the story and explained how 'Lord Astor appeared on her platform the other night, and said that "all the angels in heaven could not mechanise Lady Astor or make her into a tame voting machine' ('An Astor Silver Jubilee', 5 November 1935: 7). This shows how the Astors' parliamentary careers were seen as a continuation of each other's. Moreover, even towards the end of Nancy Astor's political career, she remained just as independent as she was in 1919.

Both candidates made direct appeals to female voters; at an election meeting, Astor remarked, 'My opponent is trying to get hold of the votes of the women. But he has come to Sutton sixteen years too late for that. I may not understand Socialistic

⁴⁹ Nancy Astor's 1935 Election Address, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

⁵⁰ Nancy Astor's 1935 Election Address, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

theories, but I do understand practical politics' ('Mobilization Order for Sutton', *Western Morning News*, 31 October 1935: 5). Such a statement ridiculed what Astor regarded as abstruse, esoteric and inherently nonsensical ideas. In doing so, she presented herself as a woman of common sense, whilst 'othering' her opponent as out of touch with reality. Likewise, numerous election pamphlets emphasised Astor's work for women and children, including how she spoke and voted in favour of increasing Children Allowances, or the 'Endowment of Motherhood' as it was sometimes called at the time (a cause which had been championed by Rathbone) (Pedersen, 2004).⁵¹ Ward similarly appealed to female voters and utilised his wife's gender and position as a working-class mother, an advantage that Astor did not have. In an appeal to voters from Ward's wife, Nancy Ward emphasised the increase in food prices and lack of job opportunities for children leaving school under the National Government. She ended her appeal by stating 'As a wife of a working man, and mother of two children, I ask you to vote for my husband... who really understands the needs of a working class home.'⁵² Nancy Ward's appeal gave the impression that only a candidate from the working classes could understand the problems of a working class family, an experience from which Astor was far removed.

Astor's last election ended in great success, as she won with a majority of 6,097 against Ward. Hopes of a Labour revival were dashed, with the National Government achieving another sizable majority of 247 seats. Nonetheless, only nine female MPs were elected, much to Astor's disappointment, although she welcomed the return of Wilkinson, one of the most capable of Labour's women MPs, to the House of Commons.⁵³ From 1936 onwards, Astor's reputation suffered significant damage due to her close friendship with Phillip Kerr, an ambassador to Adolf Hitler, and the doings of the 'Cliveden Set'. The communist journalist Claud Cockburn, who coined the term, believed the Astors and their elite group of friends were meeting at

⁵¹ Election Leaflet, 'Lady Astor and the Children', 186/22/7, Papers of Waldorf and Nancy Astor, Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Plymouth.

⁵² 'Mrs. WARD TO SUTTON WOMEN', *GEORGE WARD'S ELECTION NEWS*, November 1935, MS 1416/1/1/1784, Papers of Nancy Astor, Reading University Library, Special Collections.

⁵³ For more information on Ellen Wilkinson, see Beers (2016).

Cliveden to formulate pro-Nazi policies. Branded as fascists and Nazi sympathisers, Astor's reputation never recovered. As a lifelong advocate of peace, Astor endorsed Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement (who became Prime Minister in May 1937). Harrison notes that 'Her [Astor's] support for appeasement in 1938, far from reflecting fascist values, embodied (however misguided) their opposite: a hatred of war, a respect for women, and a down-to-earth preparedness to face realities and seek a middle way' (1986: 653). It was only with hindsight that Astor realised the severity of her mistake in supporting appeasement.

Astor was unable to restore her public image, although she attempted to make amends and prove her patriotism during the Second World War. The Astors offered Cliveden to the Canadian Red Cross to use as a hospital (as they had done in the First World War), and spent most of their time in Plymouth. Astor tried to keep morale high by leading tea dances on Plymouth Hoe, visiting shelters and supporting Waldorf in his duties as Lord Mayor of Plymouth (Waldorf served as Mayor from 1939 to 1944). Nonetheless, the political establishment could not forget the 'Cliveden Set' and she remained unpopular amongst her party, who now saw her as a liability. By the end of the war, Astor 'had more critics than supporters' in her local Conservative Association and Waldorf believed the party might not re-adopt her as a candidate in the next election (Sykes, 1972: 554). The Government announced there would soon be a general election once the fighting was over in Europe, and Waldorf, and the Astor family, were anxious that Astor should not be humiliated. In November 1944, Waldorf told Astor of his concerns, and said that if she ran for office, neither Waldorf nor the family would support her. Sykes argues this revelation was an appalling 'blow to Nancy... one from which she never recovered' (1972: 554). Astor was angered by Waldorf's intervention, but reluctantly decided to stand down.

In a letter to Sir William on 29 November 1944, Astor wrote she would not be standing for re-election, and as such, the letter was 'nearly the hardest letter I have ever had to write.'⁵⁴ She explained how her love of Plymouth had only grown during

⁵⁴ Letter to Sir William from Nancy Astor, 29 November 1944, 186/19/8, Papers of Waldorf and Nancy Astor, Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Plymouth.

the war, ending it with 'I pray God whoever succeeds me will love and serve her as I have tried to do.'⁵⁵ Astor and Waldorf announced the news to the press on the 1 December 1944; their joint letter noted, 'after the strain of five years of war, with its numerous heavy responsibilities, Lord Astor informed Lady Astor that he did not at his age feel physically able to go through the heavy strain and stress of another contested election' ('Lady Astor To Retire', *The Times*, 2 December 1944: 2). It went on to describe the political partnership they had forged over thirty-five years, concluding that 'It would be difficult for Lady Astor to stand again without his [Waldorf's] help' ('Lady Astor To Retire', *The Times*, 2 December 1944: 2). Concerns over Waldorf's health was used to mask Astor's unpopularity, and explain her decision to not contest Plymouth Sutton again.

Ironically, the announcement was made on the same day Astor was celebrating twenty-five years since her election to parliament in 1919. A celebratory luncheon at the House of Commons was organised with twenty-eight past and present female MPs, including Wintringham, who spoke of 'her ladyship's great kindness and generosity to her' ('Lady Astor entertained by Women M.P.'s: Luncheon and Presentation at House of Commons', *Western Morning News*, 2 December 1944: 3). It was clear that Astor blamed Waldorf for her departure from the House; at the luncheon it was reported that she was 'disappointed at having to give up this public work after 25 years' and claimed 'it is my husband's wish, and I act always as an obedient wife' ('Lady Astor entertained by Women M.P.'s: Luncheon and Presentation at House of Commons', *Western Morning News*, 2 December 1944: 3). Such a statement represented a decline in Astor's relationship with Waldorf, and highlighted that even as Britain's first female MP to take her seat, Astor was still a wife and constrained by the decisions of her husband.

The 1945 General Election in Plymouth Sutton was particularly interesting as both the local Liberal and Labour parties selected female candidates; Joan Gaved stood for the Liberals and Lucy Middleton stood for the Labour Party. The Conservatives selected Lawrence Grand, who the Astors supported. Labour won a landslide victory

⁵⁵ Letter to Sir William from Nancy Astor, Plymouth and West Devon Record Office.

in 1945, and for the first time, a Labour candidate won the Plymouth Sutton seat. Middleton was MP for Plymouth Sutton until 1951, when she was succeeded by Jackie Astor, reiterating the importance of family connections and the Astor name in the city.

This article has provided an in-depth exploration into Astor's seven election campaigns, offering an insight into her unconventional electioneering style and the development of her election strategies. Although it is easy to dismiss Astor's electoral successes as inevitable due to the advantages that she had in contrast to other female candidates, her skill as an effective campaigner should not be overlooked. Astor's public speaking ability, crafted public persona, and refusal to adhere to social norms, set her apart from other female candidates. Despite standing as a Conservative in a predominantly working-class constituency, Astor's appeal went beyond class boundaries. She was able to form connections with people from all social backgrounds and championed matters related to social reform. Astor was careful to construct a respectable image of herself as a wife and mother, who could represent the 'woman's point of view' in parliament, an approach which was subsequently adopted by many female parliamentary candidates in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵⁶

Astor's electioneering tactics generally remained the same throughout her seven election campaigns, each focused on her maintenance of principles of morality and social justice, along with her everlasting commitment to Plymouth. Readers of Astor's election addresses generally found few detailed policies for the future, but much discussion of her past record. This deliberate strategy was in keeping with her constructed image as a straight-talking politician and aimed to broaden her political appeal. While she tended to refer to general Conservative policy plans, Astor repeatedly highlighted her independence and appealed to both Liberal and Labour supporters. Her views on national issues were often influenced by the problems that Plymouth faced, particularly with regards to social conditions and the plight of the fishing industry and the local dockyards. She was not a conventional party politician, but a politician of conviction who championed issues that were of personal interest to

⁵⁶ For more information, see the PhD thesis Berry-Waite (forthcoming).

her. At times, this approach chimed with the political mood of the day. Astor had first been elected as a supporter of the Lloyd George coalition and was a loyal supporter of the National Government after 1931 and its stated aim to put country before party. Despite her claim to be above party politics, anti-socialist rhetoric played a major role in all of Astor's election campaigns, not least when Labour appeared close to power or formed the government of the day.

The end of Astor's electoral career, initiated by Waldorf's intervention, may be of a disappointment to contemporaries given its non-feminist undertones. Nonetheless, it is likely that Astor would have lost her seat if she had contested the 1945 General Election, given Labour's landslide victory. Although Astor held a liberal outlook on the world, her stance would not have been radical enough for a post-war electorate. Waldorf's personal and political support undoubtedly contributed to Astor's election successes, as did the Astor name, but her skill as an effective campaigner should not be overshadowed by her family connections. Astor's commitment to Plymouth Sutton and its constituents aided her lengthy political career; as she recalled in 1956, 'I stuck to Plymouth, Plymouth stuck to me' (BBC Woman's Hour).

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