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

Astor the Fairy Godmother: The Intoxicating Liquor Act 1923

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Before 1923, a teenager could go into a pub at the age of 14 to buy and drink beer; aged 16, he or she could also buy spirits. The Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons Under Eighteen) Act 1923 introduced the principle that people should be aged 18 to drink alcohol in bars, a situation which still exists today. The Act was the first successful private members' bill from a woman MP, Nancy Astor. Although well-known as a temperance advocate, Astor's role in this Bill is frequently underplayed, with her husband Waldorf often credited at her expense, and the significance of Parliamentary process not well understood. This paper will examine the background to Astor's Bill, which emerged from ongoing wartime liquor restrictions, a changing discourse over alcohol and public health after the First World War, and a petition signed by 116,000 teachers. It will analyse the Parliamentary passage of the Bill in the face of die-hard opposition from many of Astor's fellow Conservative MPs. Although amendments made in committee reduced the impact, this should not detract from Astor's considerable success in the House of Commons. Astor's Bill should be better recognised for its long-lasting impact on British society, as a success for temperance campaigners, and as one of the great achievements of Astor's Parliamentary career. Astor's Bill was also opposed by Edwin Scrymgeour, Britain's only Prohibitionist MP, and the paper will consider how his extreme version of alcohol control assisted Astor's more moderate approach.

Introduction: Astor the fairy godmother

The House, therefore, will see that it is in no way my Bill. I am simply the godmother, and I hope a fairy one.¹

Thus spoke Nancy Astor in the House of Commons, as the 'fairy godmother' of the Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons Under Eighteen) Bill in 1923. Despite her claim that 'it is in no way my Bill' because she insisted that credit should go to teachers and others who were promoting the Bill, it was universally known as 'Lady Astor's Bill' inside and outside Parliament. This was because it was her private members' bill, that is to say, a bill put forward by a backbench MP rather than a government minister. It successfully passed through both Houses of Parliament and became an Act on 31 July 1923.

Astor's Bill introduced the principle that people should be aged 18 to buy and drink alcohol in bars. Before 1923, a teenager could go into a pub at the age of 14 to buy and drink beer, perfectly legally; aged 16, he or she could also buy spirits.² If this seems strange to us today, it is testament to the long legacy of this Act. Although the Act itself has been superseded by later licensing legislation, the principle established by Astor lives on to this day.

Astor was a strong advocate of temperance: abstinence from alcoholic drink. This stemmed in part from family upbringing, religious views and personal experience (her first husband was an alcoholic), which led her to campaign on issues to ensure the moral safety of children. It was also part of her feminism and concern for children and young people; in her Parliamentary career Astor championed many causes affecting the lives of women and protection of children, including widows and orphans' pensions, provision of nursery schools, raising the age of consent and reducing maternal mortality (Pugh, 2004). Raising the drinking age was consistent with this. Her second husband Waldorf Astor shared her views on drink, and both spoke and published on the issue (N. Astor, 1923; W. Astor, 1925).

¹ House of Commons Debate (HC Deb) 9 March 1923, vol. 161, c916, Viscountess Astor.

² *Children Act 1908*, ch. 67.

Despite its lasting legacy, Astor's Bill is not well-understood today. She is remembered as an advocate of temperance, but her leading role in changing the law has been overlooked. Although there are many biographies of Astor (e.g. Collis, 1960; Sykes, 1972; Langhorne, 1974; Grigg, 1980; Masters, 1981; Fort, 2012), not one has an index entry for the Bill. Only Sykes covers its passage in detail, and he does not examine the Parliamentary sources. As with other aspects of Astor's life and legacy (Turner, 2019), a century on, an examination of her Bill is therefore well overdue.

Astor's Bill is also not recognised in the literature on temperance and the history of drink. An encyclopaedia of world temperance merely cites her 'supporting' raising the minimum drinking age in Britain as an achievement in her biographical entry (Sankey, 2003). Greenaway's study of drink and British policy-making does not mention Astor except as the 'formidable wife' of Waldorf, and does not consider her Bill even though it changed government policy (Greenaway, 2003b). The Children Act 1908, an important piece of child welfare legislation, is acknowledged in scholarship as having banned children under the age of 14 from bars, and Astor's Bill is occasionally given a brief mention as follow-up (Moss, 2009), but is usually not mentioned (Jennings, 2007; Berridge, 2013; Gutzke, 2016). Worse, Astor's Bill has even been confused with the Children Act: James Nicholls' book on the politics of alcohol states, 'In 1908, Lady Astor's Children's Act included a section banning under-fourteens from licensed premises' (Nicholls, 2009: 153), symptomatic of how Astor's Bill has been misunderstood and overlooked.

This paper will examine the background and context to Astor's Bill, and use Parliamentary debates and Astor's papers to analyse its Parliamentary passage. It will conclude that although amendments made in committee reduced the impact of the Act, this should not detract from Astor's considerable success in having a private members' bill passed through the House of Commons against considerable opposition, and her achievement should be duly recognised and remembered as part of her legacy. It will also find that the Act deserves better recognition as a success for temperance campaigners, and for its long-lasting impact on British society.

Background and context: women, temperance and the First World War

The history of women and temperance in the UK is very under-researched, and Astor does not feature in the literature. Margaret Barrow's thesis on the British Women's Temperance Association (BWTA), later the National British Women's Temperance Association, remains the most comprehensive analysis of British women's temperance (Barrow, 1999; Barrow, 2000). Gemma Outen's more recent thesis examines the BWTA's splinter organisation, the Women's Total Abstinence Union (WTAU) and its periodical *Wings* (Outen, 2017). However, both Outen's and Barrow's work ends before the First World War, as does virtually all other literature on women and temperance (Outen, 2017: 17–21).

Studies of women and drink more generally have concentrated on perceptions of women drinkers and women's attitudes to alcohol, observing that women were and are particularly subject to moral judgement, especially when single young adults and when pregnant or caring for children. This harks back to 18th century ideas of gin as 'mother's ruin', especially for working-class women (Jennings, 2007; Gutke, 2016; Fenton, 2018). Fenton's study of women's experiences from the 1950s onwards finds that alcohol is not much associated with childhood except with the 'moral holiday' of Christmas, and is linked in adolescence with negotiating barriers to alcohol, independence and experimentation (Fenton, 2018). This demonstrates how deeply Astor's Bill changed British drinking culture for the long term. By putting this barrier in place, she embedded in law her belief that children should not drink alcohol and that pubs were not appropriate places for children.

UK temperance is usually positioned as a Victorian age movement (Harrison, 1971; Dingle, 1980). Brian Harrison's seminal book *Drink and the Victorians* ends its coverage in 1872, and he is clear that 'Temperance ceased to be a live political issue after the first world war' (Harrison, [1971] 2nd ed. 1994: 367). This position has been echoed in later historical surveys (Berridge, 2013: 48; Butler et al, 2017). Despite undoubted decline from its Victorian heyday, temperance organisations were active after the First World War, and campaigned on the specific issue of restricting the sale of alcohol to young people. Astor's papers include more than 200 letters to the

Minister of Education (Herbert Fisher) dating from October and November 1920, sent from branches of the National British Women's Temperance Association across the country which had passed a resolution against sale of liquor to people under 21 years old.³ The WTAU was also active in this period, and reported dutifully on the progress of Astor's Bill in *Wings*.⁴ The British Temperance League lobbied MPs during the passage of Astor's Bill, writing to MPs who were members of the standing committee.⁵

In the 20th century, new thinking came to the fore on public health issues, reflecting in part the military and imperial concerns for the nation's health during the Boer War and First World War. Rather than place the onus on individuals to change their behaviour by taking a pledge, the state moved to take responsibility and legislate for change. The UK re-framed its position on addictive substances from a situation where virtually everything was legal, towards state control for alcohol and tobacco, and prohibition of drugs (Berridge, 2013). By contrast, the USA went for prohibition of alcohol; the Eighteenth Amendment banned the sale, production and transport of alcoholic beverages between 1920 and 1933 (Rorabaugh, 2018). The UK women's temperance movement had strong links to the US Women's Christian Temperance Union, which undertook much international work and had a strong missionary arm. Astor was American-born and keenly aware of events and activity in the US, yet does not feature in this literature either (Tyrrell, 1991). The prohibition movement in the UK saw its main success in the election of Edwin Scrymgeour, leader of the Scottish Prohibition Party (SPP), of which more will be discussed below; however, scholarship on the SPP also overlooks Astor's Bill (Walker, 1970; Walker, 1973; Kemp, 2000; Stewart, 2018).

Historians have paid more attention to efforts by the British government to restrict the alcoholic drink trade during the First World War and beyond (Gourvish, 1997; Turner, 1980; Greenaway, 2003b; Duncan, 2013), which forms the backdrop to Astor's bill. As Astor said herself, 'Up to the eve of the war there was little ground for optimism

³ University of Reading, Astor Archives, MS1416/1/1/193.

⁴ *Wings: The official organ of the Women's Total Abstinence Union*, 1923.

⁵ HC Deb Standing Committee C 1923, cc951–952.

on the drink question' (N. Astor, 1923), but the war changed all that. From 1915, under the Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic), of which Waldorf Astor was an enthusiastic member, measures included reducing alcoholic strength of liquors and hours of sale, raising prices, introducing food and non-alcoholic refreshments in licenced premises, and prohibiting incentives to drink such as 'treating' (buying rounds).

Another aspect of the work of the Central Control Board was the 'Carlisle Experiment', the state management of public houses and breweries in the naval town of Carlisle. This began during the war as part of an effort to reduce drunkenness in certain areas. Many breweries and public houses were closed, with those remaining having strict management controls. For Astor, Carlisle was a shining example of success of 'disinterested management' (N. Astor, 1923: 273) of liquor, at a local level, and after she took her seat in the House of Commons in December 1919, it became the subject of her first speech in Parliament.

As well as Carlisle, histories of drink also note more general effects from the war. After 1919 drink was regarded less as a cause of societal problems than a symptom, with a focus on deeper social causes such as housing, education and working conditions (Greenaway, 2003b: 114). Levels of beer consumption and convictions for drunkenness dropped, with other leisure pursuits and goods attracting spending instead. New housing also inspired new types of pub more attractive to middle-class women, serving food and providing toilets (Jennings, 2007: 193–201). Arguments were even made that the ban on children in bars ran counter to the efforts to make pubs more family friendly (Moss, 2009). In this context, Astor's Bill provides evidence that older discourses about the evils of drink and the virtues of temperance were not dead by 1923; as debates show, passions still ran high in the House of Commons.

Setting the scene: Astor's maiden speech

Three years before introducing her Bill, Astor rose to make her maiden speech in the House of Commons on Liquor Traffic (Restrictions) on 24 February 1920.⁶ This had been raised by Sir J. D. Rees, who begged to move:

⁶ HC Deb 24 February 1920, vol. 125, cc1623–1630, Astor.

That this House, while not desiring to return to the pre-War hours of opening licensed premises, is of opinion that all vexatious and unnecessary restraints and restrictions upon the liberty of the subject in respect of the strength, supply, and consumption of alcoholic liquors should be abolished.⁷

Traditionally, new MPs choose uncontroversial subjects for their maiden speeches and are received respectfully. But as Sykes remarked, Astor 'could hardly have chosen a more unpopular cause than the defence of the Carlisle experiment' (Sykes, 1972: 243). Astor herself was obviously aware of the difficulties, saying, 'I am perfectly aware that it does take a bit of courage to address the House on that vexed question, Drink,'⁸ but clearly felt that she could not let a debate on this subject pass. She spoke of how the Carlisle experiment had reduced drunkenness among women and saved the lives of children, how the work of the Control Board had led to national efficiency, and claimed some brewers had made millions in war profits. She addressed the question of Prohibition:

I am not pressing for Prohibition. I am far too intelligent for that... I hope very much from the bottom of my heart that at some time the people of England will come to Prohibition... But we are not yet ready.⁹

As the first woman MP to take her seat at Westminster, Astor's speech was also the first ever by a woman member of the House of Commons.¹⁰ She linked the need for drink reform to newly enfranchised women voters:

I do not think the country is really ripe for prohibition, but I am certain it is ripe for drastic drink reforms. [HON. MEMBERS: "No!"] I know what I am talking about, and you must remember that women have got a vote now

⁷ HC Deb 24 February 1920, vol. 125, c1609, Sir J D Rees. Rees was a former civil servant in India; he died in 1922.

⁸ HC Deb 24 February 1920, vol. 125, c1624, Astor.

⁹ HC Deb 24 February 1920, vol. 125, c1628, Astor.

¹⁰ Constance Markievicz was elected in December 1918 but as a member of Sinn Fein, never took her seat at Westminster.

and we mean to use it, and use it wisely, not for the benefit of any section of society, but for the benefit of the whole.¹¹

Astor was followed by William Carr, MP for Carlisle, who hoped that the Carlisle experience would provide constructive ideas for future drink traffic management. Carr was also making his maiden speech but was rather overshadowed as the government minister, Herbert Fisher, rushed to congratulate Astor on her 'speech of brilliant and vivid eloquence... I venture to think that it is appropriate that the first speech delivered in this historic assembly by a woman should have been delivered upon a topic in which the interests of women are so closely involved.'¹²

There was no division on the motion, as the Speaker refused to allow Rees' question to be put before the sitting ended. Liquor traffic restrictions continued in Carlisle: the Central Control Board was abolished in 1921, but the local Council of State Management took responsibility, and state management did not end in Carlisle until 1974. More broadly, the Licensing Act 1921 continued some of the wartime restrictions, including hours of sale and alcoholic strength (Gourvish, 1997; Duncan, 2013).

Astor's preferred option: the 'Local Option'

Astor's maiden speech had demonstrated her priorities and set the scene for her Parliamentary attitude on that vexed question of Drink. Her Parliamentary efforts were initially focussed on the 'local option' or 'local veto'. This would empower a parish, borough or urban district to take a vote on the sale of intoxicating liquor in their area, with options such as 'no change', 'reorganisation' (giving power to a local body to undertake disinterested management) or 'no licence'. There was precedence for this approach as the Temperance (Scotland) Act 1913 had already introduced the local option in Scotland. The war delayed any local votes until 1920 after which some districts did 'go dry', although the overall effect was limited (Kemp, 2000).

¹¹ HC Deb 24 February 1920, vol. 125, cc1629–1630, Astor. Women over the age of 30 who met minimum property qualifications were given the Parliamentary vote in 1918; equal franchise came in 1928.

¹² HC Deb 24 February 1920, vol. 125, cc1642–1643, Fisher.

Astor introduced a Liquor (Public Control) Bill in August 1922,¹³ which sought to introduce the local option and create a central compensation fund from profits of reorganised areas. It followed a similar bill from Bishop Burge, the Bishop of Oxford.¹⁴ The Bishop's bill was introduced a number of times in the House of Lords during the 1920s, attracting the support of as many as fifty Peers in 1924 (Greenaway, 2003b: 131–132). But Astor's local option bill did not progress in the Commons: without benefit of Parliamentary time, it did not even get as far as a second reading.

The 1922 general election: a Prohibitionist MP

In November 1922 there was a general election, and Astor was punished for her stance on liquor with a rival independent Conservative candidate backed by the drink trade, Dr Hugh Wansey Bayly (or Bayley) in her seat, Plymouth Sutton. A medical practitioner with war service as a surgeon, Bayly led the Imperial Conservative Association of Plymouth, and stood for a 'lower beer tax, a big army and control of venereal disease' (Kinnear, 1973: 81). Bayly's attempts to persuade prominent women from both ends of the political spectrum to oppose Astor did not bear fruit. The Conservative Countess of Selborne wrote:

It is true I disagree with her about the amount of control which should be applied to the liquor trade, but she has done such yeoman service in matters in which I and other women take the deepest interest that I should be very sorry to see her out of Parliament (Collis, 1960: 114).¹⁵

There was no Liberal candidate, so Bayly split the Conservative vote in what would have otherwise been a straight fight between Astor and Labour. Bayly got more than 4,000 votes, but Astor won with a reduced majority of more than 3,000.

¹³ Liquor (Popular Control) Bill, HC Bill 229, 1922. Presented by Astor in August 1922, supported by Mrs Wintringham, Trevelyan Thomas and J. H. Thomas.

¹⁴ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, c915, Astor.

¹⁵ Mrs Snowden wrote similarly, 'I am a Labour woman, but the work which Lady Astor is doing for women and children both in Parliament and the country makes her services invaluable' (Collis, 1960: 114).

Elsewhere, in Dundee the UK got its first, and only, Prohibitionist MP – Edwin Scrymgeour, leader of the Scottish Prohibition Party. The SPP was founded in Dundee in 1901 to secure the abolition of drink through independent political action. It had branches elsewhere in Scotland, but its impact was felt most in Dundee, where it was represented on the town council from 1908. The party reached its high point with the election of Scrymgeour in 1922, who famously ousted Winston Churchill, although Churchill's defeat has rather overshadowed Scrymgeour's achievement – he topped the poll and held the seat until 1931. Dundee was a two-member seat in 1922 (the other being E. D. Morel for Labour), thus potentially allowing voters to choose one conventional MP and one more idiosyncratic one. Scrymgeour had been prominent in local politics for many years, and it was believed he had visited virtually every household in Dundee several times. He was known for his charisma and rhetoric, for having crusaded against vested interests before the war, and now supporting peace, arbitration and disarmament. Importantly, Scrymgeour's wider programme was substantially that of the Labour party, including public ownership of industry. Kemp argues that the SPP was part of the Labour movement, not an isolated sect (Walker, 1970; Kemp, 2000; Stewart, 2018).

On the surface, Scrymgeour's election might seem a welcome development for Astor, surely a natural ally. Astor may have tried to make a connection with Scrymgeour as she frequently invited him to receptions at her home, perhaps hoping for a connection, but he chose not to attend – Kemp describes his papers 'littered with invitations with "Declined" scrawled on them' (Kemp, 2000: 200). Scrymgeour is likely to have felt little in common with Astor, her Conservative politics or position in high society. And given his complete unwillingness to compromise, he may not even have felt any affinity with her in relation to drink. His position was that anyone not for Prohibition was regarded as being decidedly against it: SPP members were forbidden to vote in elections unless a candidate pledged to prohibition was present. Astor's cherished local option was 'the supreme heresy' (Walker, 1973: 364). Ultimately, it is likely to have worked in Astor's favour to have Scrymgeour's extreme position placed alongside her own much more moderate aims. Although her opponents might throw accusations of Prohibitionism at her, with him in the Commons, she would never be the Prohibitionist MP.

The 1922 general election ended the period of post-war Coalition and brought in a Conservative government led initially by Andrew Bonar Law and subsequently by Stanley Baldwin. Labour were the main party of opposition, led by Ramsay Macdonald, with Liberals still a significant force but split between Asquith and Lloyd George factions. Astor's party was therefore in power, but this was not directly helpful to her temperance ambitions. The drink trade was far more influential in the Conservative party than in the Liberal or Labour parties (W. Astor, 1925).

Astor's Bill: a Private Members' Bill

As the new Parliament began, a House of Commons cross-party Temperance Group was formed in January 1923, chaired by Astor's good friend Margaret Wintringham (Liberal), the second woman MP to take her seat at Westminster. Astor and Philip Snowden (Labour) were vice chairmen, and its secretary was Isaac Foot, Liberal MP for Bodmin, who had unsuccessfully stood against Astor in Plymouth Sutton in 1919, but clearly bore no grudges. The group aimed to ballot for temperance bills and watch over temperance interests generally.¹⁶

There were various routes for private members' bills in 1923 as at present, but the only way to stand any chance of success is to come high in the ballot. A ballot of interested backbenchers takes place early in a Parliamentary session, with the first twenty names out of the hat determining precedence, and private members' bills are given Parliamentary time on thirteen Fridays in a session. In practice, government and cross-party support is also required for any bill to progress. In the early 20th century, private members' bills were often used to debate 'big issues' such as women's suffrage and constitutional change in order to attract publicity and discussion. Gradually, through the 1920s and 1930s, private members' bills became less controversial as MPs came to use them as a method of introducing legislation on minor reforms (Bromhead, 1956; Sharpe and Evans, 2017). Astor's Bill is a good example of the kind of minor reform that was practical and possible via a private members' bill.

¹⁶ *Wings*, January 1923.

Astor won third place in the ballot in 1923, with Scrymgeour not far behind in seventh place. After the ballot she said, 'Fancy old Scrymgeour and me in the first seven places! It really looks as if what he said was true and God is on the side of temperance' (Collis, 1960: 118). However it became apparent that Scrymgeour's own bill would be for full prohibition, and Astor distanced herself accordingly (N. Astor, 1923). Both Astor and Scrymgeour had achieved places which ensured that their bills would at least receive a second reading. In the event, Astor's Bill would be one of ten private members' bills to pass, out of 82 private members' bills introduced in 1923, a success rate of 12%. This is compared to seven of 66 private members' bills introduced in 1922 (10%), and just three of 119 introduced during 1924 (2.5%) (Bromhead, 1956: 190). Although the numbers are small, the figures show that Astor was again fortunate in her timing, as 1923 was in fact a reasonably successful year for private members' bills in this period.

The genesis of the Bill: the teachers' petition

Having won a ballot place, Astor could have easily reintroduced her 1921 bill on the local option. However, this was not likely to be well received in the Commons, and would not get government backing. Nor would it gain her much support in Plymouth, where Bayly's candidature had shown substantial opposition on this subject, or from women's organisations (Collis, 1960). There was therefore really no reason for her to pursue it other than pure principle, and unlike Scrymgeour, Astor recognised the value of practical politics over principle.

Instead she chose to put forward a bill restricting the sale of intoxicating liquor to under-18s. She had been targeted by the temperance lobby on this issue; her papers include a letter from the Teachers National Petition Committee and the Temperance Council of the Christian Churches of England and Wales, asking MPs to enter the ballot to put forward this bill.¹⁷ She could be assured that it would enjoy enormous public support, demonstrated by the Teachers' Petition. In 1921, the Teachers National Petition Committee had instigated a petition signed by 115,867 teachers from public, secondary and elementary schools. It read:

¹⁷ University of Reading, Astor Archives, MS1416/2/6.

We the undersigned teachers, serving in the schools of England and Wales, having at heart the moral and physical welfare of the young people among whom we work, and being earnestly desirous that the good effects anticipated as the outcome of those Clauses of the Education Act which raise the age for compulsory education to 18, shall not be thwarted and endangered by countervailing influences, earnestly pray His Majesty's Government to take steps to prohibit the serving of Intoxicating Liquors of all kinds on Licensed Premises or in Registered Clubs under the age of 18.¹⁸

The petition was delivered to Herbert Fisher, then President of the Board of Education, by a deputation of representative teachers introduced by Viscount Bryce on 15 April 1921 (Bryce died in 1922 but Astor continued to refer to it as 'Lord Bryce's petition'). Fisher had been responsible for the raising of the school leaving age to 14 in the Education Act 1918 (parts of the Act also made provision for vocational training to age 18, hence the wording in the Teachers' Petition). The petition may have had some effect on him: by 1923 he was a backbencher and one of the formal supporters of Astor's Bill.

The drafting of the Bill: the role of Waldorf

There was only a short time to draft the Bill before it was introduced into the House of Commons on 16 February 1923. It was a short bill to 'Amend the law relating to the sale of intoxicating liquor to persons between fourteen and eighteen years of age'. Waldorf Astor's support for temperance including the local option was well-known, and there has been a tendency by some historians to stress his involvement with the Bill at Astor's expense. For example, Greenaway (2003a) gives joint credit to the couple: 'Between them, they helped pass legislation in 1923 to increase the age for drinking in licensed premises to eighteen'. Similarly, Fort says the Bill was 'masterminded by Waldorf' (2012: 205).

What the Astor papers demonstrate is that Waldorf was indeed very important in drafting the Bill and lobbying behind the scenes; he organised the draft, got legal

¹⁸ University of Reading, Astor Archives, MS1416/2/6.

advice, and sought support inside and outside Parliament. This is summarised best by Sykes (1972: 299–304) and shines through in the bill files in the Astor archives, which comprise much background material including gathering signatures for the Teachers' Petition, extensive notes on how to combat specific points that might be raised against the Bill, attitudes of specific MPs and their connections to the trade, correspondence and a huge amount of press cuttings.¹⁹ All Waldorf's research, lobbying and analysis was obviously extremely valuable for Astor; indeed, it was essential.

However, none of this should detract from the role of Astor herself as the person who had to actually get the Bill through the House of Commons, who had to stand up in the face of fierce and often rowdy opposition, make the case, and argue each point. She needed a sound grasp of the facts and figures in order to do so, and like all MPs, relied on experts to provide this. Waldorf was assisted by Arthur Sherwell of the Temperance Legislation League, a former Liberal MP, and by Robert Montgomery KC, a licensing expert. Astor needed a strong supporting cast behind her, but she was not just a mouthpiece for others. On the contrary, her passion and knowledge of the subject shone through in every one of her Parliamentary debates.

The passage of the Bill: arguments in favour

Astor's Bill was formally supported by eleven MPs in a good demonstration of cross-party and national support. These were her fellow Temperance Group members Wintringham, Foot and Snowden; heavyweight former cabinet ministers Herbert Fisher (showing the Teachers' Petition influence), Sir John Simon and Arthur Henderson; teachers Morgan Jones and Charles Crook; independent-minded Conservative Sir Robert Newman; and Samuel Chapman and William Hutchison (Scottish Unionists representing Edinburgh South and Glasgow Kelvingrove respectively). The Bill had its second reading, when principles are debated, on 9 March. Astor introduced it with credit to the teachers:

This Bill is the result of a petition presented two years ago by Lord Bryce at the instance of the teaching profession; 116,000 teachers asked for

¹⁹ University of Reading, Astor Archives, MS1416/2/5-12.

legislation on these lines. They said that it was in the interests of the mental and moral development of adolescents.²⁰

Astor was keen to show broad support, explaining that the Bill had the support of 'all organised women', some of the highest medical authorities including the *Lancet*, and leaders of all the Churches.²¹ She drew on her own personal experience, declaring that the Bill had to apply equally to boys and girls not only on grounds of equality, but because as a mother of five sons she knew that boys were equally in need,²² stating:

When I look into the eyes of a child and see the hope and the purity there, I do not know what it is, but there is something about the eyes of a child that gives me courage to stand up against the worst opposition that any woman has ever had to face.²³

Charles Crook made his maiden speech seconding the Bill. As a member of the executive of the National Union of Teachers, he called it the 'Teachers' Bill,' and drew on his own knowledge and experience to stress the importance of physical and mental development between the age of 14 and 18, which made alcohol particularly harmful at that age. Although some hostile MPs challenged the expertise of teachers, probably most would have agreed with the opinion of Robert Morrison, who said, 'I am more entitled in a matter like this to be impressed more by a petition signed by 116,000 teachers than to take notice of a letter such as I received this morning from a firm of brewers.'²⁴

As well as Crook, other MPs made their maiden speeches during the debate. This included James Galbraith (Conservative, Surrey Eastern), a barrister who declared he was persuaded by the statistics; and W. A. Jenkins (Liberal, Breconshire

²⁰ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, c915, Astor.

²¹ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc915–316, Astor.

²² HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, c917, Astor.

²³ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc920–921, Astor. Robert Morrison (Tottenham North, Lab Coop), a former schoolmaster, also referred to the effect of women's suffrage, c67.

²⁴ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc921, Crook. HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc969, Morrison.

and Radnorshire), who wanted to protect the young. Galbraith and Jenkins were among several to refer to the impact of lobbying.²⁵ Foot referred to lobbying by the other side, with the drink trade disguising itself as a temperance organisation.²⁶ Others who spoke in support of the Bill included several proclaiming themselves temperance advocates, such as James Brown (Labour, South Ayrshire), a self-declared prohibitionist and miner; Sir Arthur Shirley Benn (Conservative, Plymouth Drake) a businessman; and Thomas Lowth (Labour, Manchester Ardwick), a railwayman and trade unionist who criticised the effect of alcohol on public health: 'Many young men were unfit for the Army during the War. It was a matter of pride to my wife and myself that we provided five of our family who were in sufficiently good health for the Army.'²⁷ There was also a sympathetic MP from the drink trade, Sir Patrick Ford (Liberal Unionist, Edinburgh North). Edwin Scrymgeour was present and tried to speak twice, but was not called by the Speaker despite his protests.²⁸

As well as a fairy godmother, Astor was also called an 'angel of peace'²⁹ and an 'angel of light'.³⁰ Several MPs referred to the need to protect children without parents, including the Solicitor-General, Thomas Inskip, who spoke of apprentice boys in London.³¹ Although some tried to argue that the Bill would disproportionately affect the working-classes, Philip Snowden stated clearly that the Labour party was unanimously in favour of this Bill and had passed a resolution to that effect.³² Snowden also spoke in support of the welfare angle, comparing arguments used to support children aged eight working in coalmines and factories in the past.³³

²⁵ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc946, Galbraith. HC Deb 9 March 1923 vol. 161, cc949, Jenkins.

²⁶ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc956, Foot.

²⁷ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc958, Lowth.

²⁸ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc953, c983.

²⁹ Crook (echoing Astor, who had said she wanted to be an angel of peace). HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc921.

³⁰ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc941, James Brown.

³¹ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc982.

³² HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc938, Brown; cc973, Snowden.

³³ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc976, Snowden.

A stepping stone to Prohibition? Arguments against the Bill

Opposition to the Bill came entirely from the Conservative benches. It was led by Walter Greaves-Lord (Conservative, Lambeth Norwood), a barrister, who dissected the detail, pointed out some anomalies, stressed practical difficulties and hinted darkly several times that the Bill, if passed, would eventually lead to prohibition.³⁴ He was seconded by Major Sir George Hamilton (Conservative, Altrincham), who drew a picture of 17 year-old boys out for long bike rides deprived of having a pint of 'good British ale' along the way. He declared he would have supported the Bill if it just applied to spirits, or to girls.³⁵

Those using their maiden speeches to oppose the Bill included Rear-Admiral Sir Guy Gaunt (Conservative, Buckrose) who remembered himself toiling hard in San Francisco aged 17 and needing a beer.³⁶ Indeed, there was something of a race to the bottom to be the youngest drinker present. Lieutenant-Colonel Martin Archer-Shee (Conservative, Finsbury) remembered, 'I was a cadet... at the age of 13, and even then the State provided us with beer and cider, and you could have more than one glass if you desired it.' Greaves-Lord went a year younger: 'I had beer served to me at home from the time I was twelve, and that I do not feel one bit the worse for it, but, in fact, rather the better'. Frederick Banbury (Conservative, City of London) outdid them all:

... I believe that from about 10 to 11 years of age I always had beer at my dinner, which I had in the middle of the day. When I was at Winchester we always had beer at dinner and supper.

[An HON. MEMBER: "Look at the result!"]³⁷

Such stories were obviously entertaining, but perhaps not helpful to their tellers: as Snowden remarked, 'I am very anxious that as much time as possible should be given to the opponents of this Bill and therefore I shall not speak very long.'³⁸

³⁴ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc927; cc930, Greaves-Lord.

³⁵ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc935–937, Hamilton.

³⁶ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc942, 944. Gaunt was to later resign his seat following a sex scandal.

³⁷ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc972, Archer-Shee; cc931, Greaves-Lord; cc961, Banbury.

³⁸ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc973, Snowden.

But Banbury clearly took pride in leading the opposition to Astor's Bill. He was a well-known backbench opponent of legislation and change: as his biographer notes, 'in his opinion there was too much legislation and he generally opposed bills proposed by private members' (Carlyle, rev. Matthew, 2008). This was exacerbated by his attitude towards women as MPs; 'The advent of women members into the house he regarded as nothing short of an outrage' (Carlyle, rev. Matthew, 2008). He spoke vociferously against women becoming MPs during debate on the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 (Takayanagi, 2012: 19–31). Astor's very existence in Parliament therefore exemplified something that Banbury had argued long and hard against.

Banbury denied that there was a drink problem in the UK, and he held no truck for the example of other countries ('It is the duty of the Colonies to follow us, not for us to follow the Colonies'), lobbying letters or the teachers' petition, harking back to a supposed golden age when the father was the head of the household and the mother stayed at home and looked after the children: 'I fail to see why the teachers should interfere.'³⁹ This would not have come as a surprise to Astor; Banbury had previously wrecked an equal guardianship bill that she had supported in 1921 (Takayanagi, 2012: 83–99). A long-term opponent of any women's suffrage, he opposed equal franchise all the way to its passage in 1928, even after his elevation to the House of Lords in 1924 (Takayanagi, 2012: 108–139).

The Government position was set out by William Bridgeman, Home Secretary. He was not personally sympathetic to the cause and voted against the Bill. But as a Government minister, Bridgeman provided the support that Astor needed: he would not put the whips on, allowing a free vote.⁴⁰ The Bill promptly passed two divisions, with clear victories of 335 to 70 and 338 to 56. It was a great moment for the temperance movement. Maud Scott from the WTAU was present, reporting:

There were times during the day when cheering words of support and encouragement came from almost unexpected quarters, and at others

³⁹ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc965; 966; 965; 964, Banbury.

⁴⁰ HC Deb 9 March 1923, vol. 161, cc987, Bridgeman.

remarks that dashed all hopes on the rocks of disappointment and despair... it was a revelation to find out how many there were who, by kindly attitude, show that they sympathise with the work which is doing so much to help the young people.⁴¹

Committee amendment: 'Knowingly'

Although the government did not guarantee time for the Bill to progress, Astor's high place on the private members' bill ballot meant that it was early enough in the session for time to be found. The Bill came to Standing Committee C on 27 March, and was further discussed on 10, 12 and 17 April. The committee was chaired by J. H. Thomas (a supporter, although he remained resolutely neutral in his role as Chairman), with 63 members including fourteen added to the Committee for this Bill, including Astor, Crook, Foot, and Charles Roberts. Sykes says that Waldorf Astor asked Roberts to pilot the Bill through committee, but that Roberts' temperance connections made him more of a hindrance than a help (Sykes, 1970: 299). Roberts' wife Cecilia was president of the BWTA, succeeding her mother Rosalind, Countess of Carlisle.

The Bill had a tumultuous time in committee, with much argument, several divisions and a number of amendments. Some amendments were fairly minor or neutral, such as clauses to ensure that the Bill had the same effect in Scotland (which had different licensing laws) as in England and Wales, or necessary for drafting purposes. However, two important amendments were made which materially altered the Bill from Astor's original intentions. The first of these was the introduction of the word 'knowingly', so the Act as passed declared that a licence holder would not:

... **knowingly** sell or allow any person to sell, nor shall any servant of his **knowingly** sell to be consumed on the premises any intoxicating liquor to any person under the age of eighteen years; and no person under the age of eighteen years shall purchase or attempt to purchase in any licence premises any intoxicating liquor for his own consumption therein [my emphases].⁴²

⁴¹ *Wings*, April 1923: 64.

⁴² *Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons Under Eighteen) Act, 1923, c.28.*

The 'knowingly' amendment was introduced by Greaves-Lord, who argued that it was unjust to convict people who didn't know they were committing an offence. The Bill promoters counter-argued that this effectively gave licencees an 'out', with Astor saying that the amendment would make the Bill of little value.⁴³ The promoters were following Arthur Shelwell's advice in correspondence: 'The word "knowingly" is sure to be pressed because it is a destructive amendment and would make mince-meat of the Bill.' Shelwell clearly realised the need to be pragmatic, though, as he went on:

For all that, if the case should become desperate and **if** [his emphasis] the government would adopt the bill with 'knowingly' in (and the bill couldn't be got otherwise) I think I would be inclined to accept it simply because it would mean so much to get the 18 age-limit made statutory. But in the meantime I would fight it hard.⁴⁴

The arguments over people 'knowingly' committing an offence has clear echoes with other debates around morality in this period, in particular around age of sexual consent, of which Astor was well aware. The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 included a defence of 'reasonable cause to believe' that a girl was sixteen years old and therefore old enough to consent, which was obviously open to abuse. Feminist organisations including the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) had been campaigning on this and related issues for many years. In 1920, when Astor served on a Select Committee on Criminal Law Amendment and Sexual Offences Bills, she lobbied on behalf of AMSH behind the scenes, although Caroline Derry notes that she did not speak on the committee for fear of diverting attention from the issues (Derry, 2020) – such was the novelty value and profile of the one woman MP. Opposition tactics used by hostile MPs in 1921 included a proposed wrecking amendment to make gross indecency between women an offence, effectively to criminalise lesbianism; this was rejected by the Lords (Derry, 2020). Although 'reasonable cause to believe' could not be completely abolished, a compromise was

⁴³ HC Deb Standing Committee C 1923, 27 Mar 1923, cc871–900.

⁴⁴ University of Reading, Astor Archives, MS1416/2/5.

reached where the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1922 retained this defence only for men under 24 who had not previously been charged with a similar offence. This 'young man's defence' was a step forward but still very problematic, and demonstrates the difficulty in getting such reform through in the teeth of Parliamentary opposition (Doyle, 2012).

So when Astor listened to the 'knowingly' debate on her liquor bill in 1923, she would have been well aware of similar debates where compromise had been necessary for any progress. The 'knowingly' amendment passed on division, with 24 votes to 16. As well as those who wanted to kill the Bill, those voting for 'knowingly' included some of the Bill's supporters, including Charles Crook. Waldorf related glumly back to Shelwell, 'We were let down badly in committee C. Some of our so-called friends, including the representative of the teachers [Crook], two or three Liberals and a Labour man or two voted for insertion of the word knowingly.'⁴⁵ Analysis of the division shows that the Liberals who had let Astor down included Sir Ryland Adkins, Major Cecil Dugdeon and Sir Beddoe Rees; the Labour men were David Adams and Thomas Lowth.⁴⁶ Clearly Greaves-Lord's argument had resonance beyond Conservative die-hards, who would not be swayed in their beliefs.

Committee amendment: alcohol with food

The second amendment which reduced the impact of the Bill made an exception to the age 18 rule by allowing some forms of alcohol to be supplied to 16 and 17 year olds with meals. As passed, the Act read:

Provided that nothing... shall prevent the sale, supply, or purchase of **beer, porter, cider or perry to or by a person over the age of sixteen** years where such liquor is sold, supplied, or purchased **only for consumption at a meal to be consumed at the same time** in such portion of the

⁴⁵ University of Reading, Astor Archives, MS1416/2/9.

⁴⁶ *Report from Standing Committee C on the Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons Under Eighteen) Bill*, HC 54 (1923).

premises as is usually set apart for the service of meals, not being a bar... [my emphases]⁴⁷

Before Astor's Bill there was a distinction between the drinking age for beer (age 14) and spirits (age 16). A distinction lingered after 1923 with this amendment, with 16 and 17 year olds being able to drink beer and weaker liquors, albeit only in the specific situation of being consumed with food. This demonstrates a strong feeling in Parliament and society that not all alcohol was equally bad, and beer in particular deserved some leeway.

From the first moment of the committee stage on 27 March, Greaves-Lord had introduced amendment after amendment designed to make the Bill cover stronger intoxicating liquors, spirits, and wine, which he agreed were bad for young people, but not weaker liquors such as beer and cider, which he claimed to be harmless and natural. He was supported by a number of Conservative MPs stubbornly resisting change, including Archer-Shee, Hamilton and Basil Peto. Astor and her supporters rightly saw these clearly as wrecking proposals, 'designed to emasculate and destroy the bill'.⁴⁸ They pointed out how harmful beer and cider could still be: that people started with weaker beverages and moved to the strong (William Chapple, Liberal); 'I have seen a full-grown labourer entirely overcome by one bottle of cider' (John Hope Simpson, Liberal); a miner's representative pointed out that no beer or intoxicating drink was allowed about the pits (John Cairns, Labour, Morpeth).⁴⁹

However, Greaves-Lord was undeterred. On 12 April he suggested he could support the age for wine and spirits being put up to 20, so long as beer and cider could be reduced to 16. At this point, Charles Roberts came in with the compromise that the weaker liquors could be served with meals only. This might seem a very retrograde step to come from Astor's side, but as Isaac Foot said:

⁴⁷ *Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons Under Eighteen) Act, 1923, c.28.*

⁴⁸ HC Deb Standing Committee C 1923, 27 March 1923, cc840–868, Oswald Mosley.

⁴⁹ HC Deb Standing Committee C 1923, 27 March 1923, cc840–868; 10 April 1923, cc901–926.

It has come to the point whether we are to have the bill with these words, or whether we are able to have the Bill at all... we have to balance the advantages which the Bill will give us in the amended form, which are worth fighting for.⁵⁰

Eventually the Chairman adjourned the committee to 17 April in order that the wording could be set out clearly as an amendment. Although some of the Bill's supporters regarded it as a sell-out, all in the end voted for it: Astor's final remark was, 'I am the last person to compromise when there is a question of the children but were we going to get something or nothing? Better something than nothing.'⁵¹ The amendment was passed on division with 38 votes to 5, the five being the most stubborn opponents, still seeking to kill the Bill. Although significantly amended from Astor's original vision, the Bill had finally passed Committee stage.

Scrymgeour's Bill: a Prohibitionist interlude

Before Astor's Bill returned to the Commons, the House had the chance to debate full Prohibition as Edwin Scrymgeour's Liquor Traffic Prohibition Bill had its second reading on 20 April 1923.⁵² Astor was conspicuously not present, the reason given being the illness of her son,⁵³ although being present would have put her in an impossible position. Scrymgeour mentioned her Bill as part of his long and rambling introduction:

... you had that magnificent victory in this House of which I was told when a Second reading was carried by an overwhelming majority, and now the "fairy godmother" then etherialised away, is feeling that there is nothing left... The hon. Member for the Sutton Division of Plymouth (Viscountess Astor) suggested that it was an absurdity for a Member of this House to introduce a measure which there was no hope of passing. That is just the kind of measure that I feel is required.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ HC Deb Standing Committee C 1923, 12 April 1923, cc953–976.

⁵¹ HC Deb Standing Committee C 1923, 17 April 1923, cc977–1006.

⁵² *Liquor Traffic Prohibition Bill*, HC Bill 12, 1923.

⁵³ HC Deb 20 April 1923, vol. 162, c2525, Major Thomas Paget.

⁵⁴ HC Deb 20 April 1923, vol. 162, c2454, Scrymgeour.

As William Walker remarked, 'Few things infuriated Scrymgeour more than advice to be practical, tolerant or moderate' (Walker, 1973: 365). Scrymgeour's Bill required an immediate ban on manufacture, importation or sale of alcohol as a beverage. There were exceptions only for scientific, industrial and medicinal purposes, and medicinal alcohol was to be supplied in bottles labelled 'Poison'. It was defeated on division with 14 votes to 236, with everybody from its seconder Dr Alfred Salter (a Liberal who supported local choice) onwards lining up to point out its impracticalities and inadequacies. However, the tone of the debate remained constructively critical, for the most part.

Report stage: Banbury the wicked uncle

Astor's bill returned to the Commons on 29 June 1923 but ran out of time, thanks partly to her old enemy Frederick Banbury who spoke at length on the Agricultural Credits Bill, then moved an amendment. The Parliamentary debate records confrontation:

Sir F Banbury: I am making this suggestion in a friendly spirit-

Viscountess Astor: Friendly!

Sir F Banbury: If the noble Lady will not accept the amendment-

Viscountess Astor: I will not accept it.

Sir F Banbury: Then I shall have to submit further arguments.

Viscountess Astor: Sit down, and give me a chance.⁵⁵

Astor is said to have grabbed Banbury's coattails to pull him down (Collis, 1960: 122), although another account suggests she took it in good part, merely remarking as she left, 'Oh you old villain, I'll get you next time!' (Langhorne, 1974: 101). Sykes suggests that Banbury was 'out for the blood of Parliamentary womanhood' as Mabel Philipson had been elected just a month before, the third woman MP to take her seat (Sykes, 1972: 305). Pamela Brooke remarks that if Astor was the fairy godmother, Banbury was 'certainly the wicked uncle' (Brooke, 1967: 35).

⁵⁵ HC Deb 29 June 1923, vol. 165, c2802.

Banbury continued to be the wicked uncle when the Bill returned for the report stage on 13 July. Maud Scott from the WTAU was again watching proceedings and wrote how Members tried almost every means in their power to block the bill: 'no words can adequately convey... the tense anxiety of those two hours.'⁵⁶ It was a rowdy sitting, with attempted wrecking amendments by Archer-Shee and Banbury refused at the start by the Speaker. They then moved on to a different wrecking tactic, to delete the section about alcohol with food, which would have removed the compromise that made the whole Bill possible.⁵⁷ In the end they did not press this to a division.

Third reading: Scrymgeour opposes

The House immediately went on to third reading, a chaotic debate with MPs constantly saying, 'Speak up!' Banbury again moved to delay the Bill, blaming Astor's womanly charms for influencing the Government. He also claimed that beer was a food, containing nourishment, whereas tea was only a drug.⁵⁸ This interesting argument harked back to a Victorian fear of tea as a stimulant, which Ian Miller has described. Working-class communities who drank excessive amounts of stewed tea, at the expense of anything more nutritional, contributed to fears in some quarters of national decline and decadence (Miller, 2013).

This time, Edwin Scrymgeour was allowed to speak. Despite being as far away from Banbury's position as possible, he opposed the Bill on the rather different grounds that 'Measures like this constitute a safety valve for the continued existence of the liquor traffic.'⁵⁹ This was proved by the fact that the Government supported 'this ridiculous piece of humbug'.⁶⁰ Such rhetoric could only have helped Astor, showing that her Bill was at the moderate end of the temperance spectrum. Greaves-Lord effectively said as much, calling it 'a bulwark against a large portion of moderate opinion in this country going over to the side of prohibition'.⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Wings*, Aug 1923: 149.

⁵⁷ HC Deb 13 July 1923, vol. 166, cc1763, Thomas.

⁵⁸ HC Deb 13 July 1923, vol. 166, cc1767; cc1766; cc1769–1770; cc1769, Banbury.

⁵⁹ HC Deb 13 July 1923, vol. 166, cc1774, Scrymgeour.

⁶⁰ HC Deb 13 July 1923, vol. 166, cc1776, Scrymgeour.

⁶¹ HC Deb 13 July 1923, vol. 166, cc1776–1777, Greaves-Lord.

The Bill overwhelmingly passed its third reading with a division of 257 votes to just 10. Scrymgeour did not vote – one can only assume he could not bear to walk through the lobby with the likes of Banbury, so abstained. The WTAU sent telegrams of congratulation to Astor, and to the Prime Minister for giving facilities for the Bill.⁶²

The Bill in the House of Lords

Astor's Bill then moved on to the House of Lords, with its supporters lobbying to ensure a smooth passage. A deputation was received by Lord Salisbury on 16 July 1923 of the Rev H. Costley White, headmaster of Westminster School; Charles Roberts MP; Lady Rhondda representing women's organisations; Morgan Jones for Labour, and Lord Astor. Waldorf had written to Salisbury ahead of the deputation to say he would like the Conservatives to get some credit for the Bill.⁶³ Salisbury promised the deputation facilities for the Bill in the Lords, but was at pains not to promise success, remarking that as Lord Astor knew, 'there is no means of directing the House of Lords – they will do exactly as they like.'⁶⁴

The Bill was introduced in the Lords on 16 July by Waldorf, who moved its second reading on 19 July. He was clear that the Standing Committee amendments were a compromise, particularly the introduction of 'knowingly', but explained, 'It was felt that it would make the Bill more water-tight and the administration better.'⁶⁵ He pointed to support from the Labour party as proof that the Bill was not aimed against the working-classes, and the opposition of Scrymgeour as proof that it was not a step towards Prohibition. He concluded:

This Bill was piloted through that House by a relative of mine by marriage. I commend it to your Lordships not mainly on account of my pride in its ancestry or parentage, but because of the real and overwhelming support which I have found all over the country among all sections of the community who are interested in the welfare of the young.⁶⁶

⁶² *Wings*, Aug 1923.

⁶³ University of Reading, Astor Archives, MS1416/2/7.

⁶⁴ University of Reading, Astor Archives, MS1416/2/6.

⁶⁵ HL Deb 19 July 1923, vol. 54, c1198, Viscount Astor.

⁶⁶ HL Deb 19 July 1923, vol. 54, c1201, Viscount Astor.

Various Lords spoke in support. Viscount Haldane saw the overwhelming majorities in the House of Commons as proof the Bill contained ‘nothing which is revolutionary, nothing which is in the nature of prohibition, but something which represents the standard of public opinion.’ Lord Dawson of Penn (doctor to the royal family) spoke of positive attributes of alcohol, but was also in favour of the Bill because of the need to protect the young.⁶⁷ The Earl of Onslow confirmed that the government was neutral, and the Bill passed its second reading without a division. This was followed by committee of the whole House on 24 July and third reading on 25 July, with no debate or amendments. The Bill received royal assent on 31 July 1923.

Conclusion

The only chance of getting a private Member’s Bill through the House of Commons is by taking it as an agreed Measure, and so we have had to get agreement as far as we could.⁶⁸

Astor’s Bill achieved its aim of restricting the supply of intoxicating liquors to people under 18, although as she fully acknowledged, compromises had been made. These compromises demonstrate the continuing strength of drinking culture in the UK after the First World War. Beer in particular was regarded sympathetically by many MPs, and even some MPs who were in full agreement with Astor about spirits. As a Labour politician observed in 1915, ‘While everyone considered drunkenness a bad thing, almost everyone considered beer a good thing’.⁶⁹ But Astor did not consider beer to be ‘a good thing’; the amendments to add the word ‘knowingly’, and to allow younger people to have some types of alcohol with food, were greatly disappointing to her.

Despite this, it must be recognised that all legislation is the result of compromise. A more radical bill, for example on the local option, would never have succeeded. This is demonstrated by the candidacy of Wanley Bayly in Plymouth Sutton in 1922, the failure of Bishop Burge’s bills, the situation in Scotland and the underlying

⁶⁷ HL Deb 19 July 1923, vol. 54, c1202, Haldane; cc1204–1209, Dawson of Penn.

⁶⁸ HC Deb 13 July 1923, vol. 166, cc1782, Astor.

⁶⁹ William Regan, who unsuccessfully stood as Labour candidate in Rutherglen in 1918. Quoted in Kemp (2000: 138).

suspicion that such reform would be a stepping-stone to Prohibition. Astor's Bill was realistically all that could be achieved in this environment.

One great irony is that the existence of an actual Prohibitionist MP saved Astor from being labelled 'the Prohibitionist MP'. The extremist position of Edwin Scrymgeour inadvertently enabled Astor to distance herself and take up a more moderate position in Parliament than might otherwise have been possible. Scrymgeour had a second chance at Prohibition eight years after Astor's Bill; on 13 February 1931 his Liquor Traffic Prohibition Bill was re-introduced. Astor was present, sympathetic in tone but still opposing Prohibition in favour of local option, although she abstained rather than go into the voting lobby with the drink trade. She said of Scrymgeour:

It is really a tribute both to him and to the House of Commons that he could introduce a Bill so controversial and so unpopular and yet, by the very force of his spiritual nature and his moral courage and earnestness, he could still the House of Commons.⁷⁰

By now Scrymgeour was no longer an eccentric new MP with a threatening policy, but an established Parliamentary character praised by the Government for his 'sincerity and consistency.'⁷¹ His second bill met the same fate as his first, lost by 18 votes to 137; further proof, if proof was needed, that Prohibition was not practical politics. Without compromise, Astor's Bill would have gone the way of Scrymgeour's bills. Analysis of the Parliamentary debates demonstrates that despite large majorities of MPs voting in favour, the passage of Astor's Bill was by no means smooth. Consideration of committee proceedings shows huge opposition from many Conservative MPs intent on trying to kill the whole Bill, who would never compromise. Its survival depended on compromise from others – Astor's supporters, and her less extreme opponents such as Greaves-Lord.

⁷⁰ HC Deb 13 Feb 1931, vol. 248, c821, Astor.

⁷¹ HC Deb 13 Feb 1931, vol. 248, c815, Under-Secretary for the Home Department (Alfred Short).

Astor's Bill was a great success for temperance campaigners after 1918, and shows the UK temperance movement alive long after its Victorian heyday and enjoying legislative success. Government and Parliament were willing and able to remove responsibility from individuals and place new state restrictions on alcohol consumption. The Teachers' Petition was crucial for Astor in framing the Bill as one with wide public support from a responsible and expert section of society. It passed thanks to her leading role in the House of Commons, her passion in debate, and perseverance in the face of die-hard opponents such as Frederick Banbury. The Bill's passage was a considerable success for Astor as a backbench MP. It should be regarded as one of the greatest achievements of her Parliamentary career for its long-lasting impact on British society.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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