

AN ARMY WITHOUT DISCIPLINE? SUFFRAGETTE MILITANCY AND THE BUDGET CRISIS OF 1909*

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ABSTRACT. *This article analyses more than thirty demonstrations by suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) connected with the Budget crisis of 1909, and challenges many of the established orthodoxies about suffragette militancy. Demonstrations did not represent spontaneous activity by the rank and file, but were carried out or at least led by WSPU employees or 'professional' militants, with several visible changes in tactics which indicate an organized campaign directed by the leadership. Damage to property, and the political violence which culminated in the terrorist tactics of 1912–14, did not begin as a response to wrongs done to the suffragettes, but because the leaders decided it was necessary. But these tactics were a counter-productive mistake which caused an adverse public reaction and justified the government in the introduction of forcible feeding. The WSPU was obliged to retreat in a humiliating reversal.*

On 29 April 1909 David Lloyd George announced his proposals for the 'People's Budget', and it immediately became the dominant political issue. Its purpose was not only the raising of taxes. It was perceived as a challenge to the House of Lords and a rallying-cry to the natural supporters of the Liberal government, whose will was being frustrated by the ability and willingness of the Conservative-dominated Lords to block or wreck its legislation. They rejected ten Bills sent to them between 1906 and 1909, and amended more than 40 per cent of total legislation.¹ A trade depression helped to make the government unpopular and it was losing by-elections. Among some Conservatives, the idea of an unconstitutional challenge to a finance Bill was present from the first, and some Liberals welcomed the possibility while thinking it inconceivable that the Lords would be so foolish.² But as spring passed into summer and autumn, the inconceivable gradually became

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¹ For the Budget crisis generally and the loss of Liberal legislation, see B. K. Murray, *The people's Budget 1909/10: Lloyd George and Liberal politics* (Oxford, 1980); G. R. Searle, *A new England? Peace and war, 1886–1918* (Oxford, 2004), p. 409.

² For Conservative advocacy of a challenge, see editorial, *Observer*, 2 May 1909, p. 10, and Lord Ridley's comments, *Times*, 3 May, p. 9. For Liberal comment, editorials, *Manchester Guardian*, 1 May, p. 8; *Daily News* 3 May, p. 5; *Daily Chronicle*, 3 May, p. 4. All newspaper dates are 1909 unless otherwise stated.

reality: by the end of May it was being hinted that Conservative MPs might try to push the Lords into rejecting the Budget.³ In June, the Conservatives established the Budget Protest League to co-ordinate opposition and arrange a series of public meetings, and the Liberals countered with the Budget League.⁴ In July, cabinet ministers began to threaten a general election if the Lords interfered, and during August the leaders of both parties came round to the view that rejection and an appeal to the voters might actually be desirable. During September, it became certain that the Lords would opt for rejection.⁵

The leaders of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) anticipated an early election over the loss of government legislation, and the crisis provided a major challenge and a golden opportunity.⁶ When the 1905–6 campaign was fought, the WSPU was a small organization in Manchester and militancy had hardly begun. In 1909, it was London-based and its income was the envy of other pressure groups. As a militant body, committed to 'Deeds not Words' and having promised quick results, it had to be seen to influence the outcome. Because the ostensible issue was taxation – proposed Liberal taxes on wealth and land against the Conservative promise of Tariff Reform – it provided the handle of 'no taxation without representation'. The crisis meant a series of important public meetings addressed by cabinet ministers. The WSPU's main tactic was to disrupt meetings by mass organized heckling, with the bonus of bad publicity for the government if hecklers were violently ejected. For these reasons, the Liberals began to make important meetings all-ticket or actually close them to women, tactics which suffragettes countered by concealing themselves inside the venues or trying to force their way in.

Between May and December 1909, there were more than thirty incidents in which suffragettes attacked Liberal meetings, or threw stones on their occasion. These demonstrations offer an opportunity to examine the nature of militancy and explore some of the chief themes of suffragette historiography. With the tunnel vision common to accounts of pressure-group activity, the WSPU's actions are often represented as though occurring in a political vacuum, above and beyond party politics, but its policy in 1909 can only be understood in relation to the Budget crisis. After the WSPU abandoned internal democracy in the 'split' of 1907, the Pankhursts and Pethick-Lawrences excused their autocracy by comparing the WSPU to 'a suffrage army in the field', in which no one was obliged to remain.⁷ But, they maintained, it was an army without discipline, in which the generals could not control the foot soldiers. Militancy, they asserted, was a

³ 'Our London correspondence', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 May, p. 6.

⁴ The formation of the Budget Protest League was announced on 14 June: that of the Budget League on 23 June: Murray, *People's Budget*, pp. 178–82. ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 190–4, 209.

⁶ F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, 'The House of Lords campaign', *Votes for Women*, 17 Dec. 1908, p. 201; Christabel Pankhurst, 'Political notes', *ibid.*, 14 Jan., p. 265; M. Pugh, *The Pankhursts* (London, 2001), p. 188.

⁷ For 'a suffrage army in the field', see E. Pankhurst, *My own story* (London, 1914), p. 59. For the 1907 'split', see Pugh, *Pankhursts*, pp. 165–7.

phenomenon which originated and was escalated ‘from below’, by the rank and file, in actions which they neither directed nor foresaw. So, for example, after a particularly violent demonstration outside the Bingley Hall, Birmingham, in September 1909, Emmeline Pankhurst replied to demands that she should control WSPU members by stating:

It is good of the editor [of the *Daily News*] to credit me with such power, but I want to say that the women in this movement are in it not at my behest or at my request, but because they feel a burning desire to promote this cause of votes for women ... and if I were so false to this movement as to turn coward now and ask them to stop, I believe and hope that they would refuse to stop because of my appeal.⁸

Contemporary society found such assertions difficult to believe, and suffragettes themselves contradicted them. The Pankhursts’ lieutenant Annie Kenney offered some evidence of her own role in organizing arson attempts and asserted that Christabel Pankhurst directed escalations in militant tactics.⁹ Sylvia Pankhurst’s memoir *The suffragette movement* (1931) claimed that the WSPU was run ‘with the rigid discipline of an army’ and that Christabel ‘when not actually the instigator, was, as a rule, aware of every intended militant act, down to the smallest detail’: she gives an account of the conference which planned the Bingley Hall demonstration.¹⁰ The question of whether or how WSPU militancy was directed is difficult to resolve because such information is rare and the WSPU’s archives have not survived. The dominant interpretation favours the ‘militancy from below’ thesis. A particular influence here has been Liz Stanley and Ann Morley’s *The life and death of Emily Wilding Davison* (1988) whose argument, summarized by June Purvis, is that the WSPU was a ‘loose coalition’ of women who might ‘try out new tactics ... without discussion or the approval of Emmeline Pankhurst’. Stanley and Morley go on to argue that militancy was always a ‘reactive’ phenomenon, asserting that ‘each shift in militant tactics was a reasoned response to a yet more repressive treatment of feminist women’, and that ‘reactive’ militancy produced a ‘reactive’ leadership obliged to endorse the actions of their followers or lose control.¹¹ Purvis is evidently following this analysis when she asserts of the Bingley Hall demonstration that: ‘Although the WSPU leadership had not advocated these spontaneous attacks on private property by the rank-and-file membership, which could undermine their authority to determine the direction of the militant policy, Emmeline [and] Christabel [Pankhurst] and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence had little choice but to endorse it.’¹² This interpretation is largely accepted by other historians, for example Martin Pugh who believes that stone-throwing in 1909 ‘had not been authorized by the WSPU’ and

⁸ Emmeline Pankhurst, letter to the *Daily News*, 25 Sept. 1909, quoted in J. Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst: a biography* (London, 2002), p. 134.

⁹ A. Kenney, *Memoirs of a militant* (London, 1924) p. 187.

¹⁰ E. S. Pankhurst, *The suffragette movement: an intimate account of persons and ideals* [1931] (London, 1977), p. 316.

¹¹ Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, p. 109; L. Stanley and A. Morley, *The life and death of Emily Wilding Davison* (London, 1988), p. 153.

¹² Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, p. 133.

that once militancy began in 1909 and 1911 ‘things quickly began to get out of control’.¹³ It is challenged by my article ‘An examination of suffragette violence’ which offers evidence that the WSPU centrally controlled and funded the arson and bombing campaign of 1913–14, and shows that a high proportion of incidents were the responsibility of WSPU employees or other paid agents.¹⁴

The purposes behind the ‘militancy from below’ and ‘reasoned response’ assertions are political rather than historical. By insisting that the membership forced the pace, the ‘militancy from below’ thesis distracts attention from the autocratic nature of the WSPU and presents it as an anarchic mass movement. It dissociates the leadership from political violence and transfers away from them the blame for political failure. The ‘reasoned response’ theory, that militancy was always a ‘reactive’ phenomenon to wrongs done to the suffragettes, is visibly based on that universal empirical justification for violence, ‘the other side started it’, and is descended from what a contemporary critic called the suffragette ‘double shuffle’ in which the WSPU engineered incidents intended to provoke a harsh response and then laid all the blame on the authorities.¹⁵ Sandra Stanley Holton elevates the ‘reactive’ and ‘reasoned response’ claims into a ‘moral philosophy’, and asserts that ‘militants refused to be provoked into using physical violence against the persons of their opponents, other than purely token acts’.¹⁶ An important part of these theories is the idea that suffragettes shunned crowds because of the violence that might be offered to them, and turned to the destruction of property for this reason.¹⁷ Specifically, the change in tactics is attributed to the violence which suffragettes allegedly suffered on ‘Black Friday’, 18 November 1910.

This article argues that the events of 1909 did not represent spontaneous, rank-and-file activity, but a carefully organized and orchestrated campaign with several visible changes in tactics, carried out or at least led by WSPU employees and ‘professional’ militants. It challenges the ‘reasoned response’ theory by showing that suffragettes positively encouraged and incited crowds to assist them, and that political violence began and was escalated on the suffragette side, not as a response to any particular action on the part of the authorities, but because the leadership decided that it was necessary. It was in 1909, and not after ‘Black Friday’, that the WSPU made the decisive step from political protest into the

¹³ Pugh, *Pankhursts*, pp. 192, 232.

¹⁴ C. J. Bearman, ‘An examination of suffragette violence’, *English Historical Review*, 120 (2005), pp. 365–97.

¹⁵ T. Billington-Greig, ‘The militant suffrage movement: emancipation in a hurry’ [1911], in C. McPhee and A. FitzGerald, eds., *The non-violent militant: selected writings of Theresa Billington-Greig* (London, 1987). ‘For ‘double shuffle’, p. 187; more generally, pp. 185–93.

¹⁶ S. S. Holton, ‘In sorrowful wrath: suffrage militancy and the romantic feminism of Emmeline Pankhurst’, in Harold L. Smith, ed., *British feminism in the twentieth century* (Aldershot, 1990), pp. 7–24 at pp. 10, 19.

¹⁷ B. Harrison, ‘The act of militancy: violence and the suffragettes, 1904–1914’, in his *Peaceable kingdom: stability and change in modern Britain* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 24–81, at p. 63; Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, p. 109; Pugh, *Pankhursts*, p. 219.

violence which culminated in the terrorist tactics of 1912–14.¹⁸ But the violence was a mistake, and, having originated and escalated it, the WSPU was obliged to retreat in a humiliating reversal.

I

In the second half of 1908, militancy became markedly more aggressive. The first stone-throwing happened in June. In October, the WSPU invited public participation in its attempt to ‘Rush’ the House of Commons, and in the same month Jennie Baines, one of its staff, tried to exploit an unemployment demonstration in Leeds to force a way into a meeting addressed by the prime minister.¹⁹ These escalations raised the WSPU’s public profile and vastly increased its revenue. In the fiscal year 1908–9 its income almost tripled, from £7,546 to £21,214. In the following year, it increased by another 50 per cent to £33,027. This allowed a great increase in organizational staff: the number of paid workers at the London headquarters rose from eighteen to forty-five, and the number of paid organizers (most of whom were based in the provinces) from fourteen to thirty.²⁰

The 1909 campaign represented a development of the ‘Rush the Commons’ invitation and the crowd incitement at Leeds. Such invitations were addressed to the ‘general public’, but were understood to mean appeals to the voteless underclass in Edwardian society, over the heads of the politicians and the political process, with the intention of creating a public order crisis which would intimidate the government into giving women the vote. As such, they were universally condemned, even in friendly newspapers like the *Manchester Guardian*, and the authorities responded with severity. Jennie Baines was charged with incitement to riot and became the first suffragette to be tried by jury: she was imprisoned for three months. In London, the WSPU leadership were denied jury trial but imprisoned for similar terms.

The tactics were tested at an important meeting addressed by H. H. Asquith at Sheffield on 21 May.²¹ WSPU employees and ‘professional’ militants succeeded in mobilizing a large crowd – press estimates ranged up to 10,000 – which attempted to storm Sheffield’s Drill Hall and threatened to cause a major riot.²² Although the crowd did not get into the meeting, the action seemed to have its effect in that the prime minister was off form and made a worse speech than usual – though this may have been because it was an unusually warm night and

¹⁸ To the best of my knowledge, ‘terrorism’ was first applied to suffragette activity by H. W. Massingham: see ‘The new terrorism’, *Daily News*, 22 July 1912, p. 6.

¹⁹ Pugh, *Pankhursts*, p. 180; I. C. Fletcher, ‘“A Star Chamber of the twentieth century”: suffragettes, Liberals, and the 1908 “Rush the Commons” case’, *Journal of British Studies*, 35 (1996), pp. 504–30, at p. 514.

²⁰ A. Rosen, *Rise up women! The militant campaign of the Women’s Social and Political Union, 1903–1914* (London, 1974), p. 114.

²¹ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 22 May, p. 9.

²² *Ibid.* Its reporter estimated the crowd at several thousand. The *Manchester Guardian*, 22 May, p. 10, estimated 10,000.

the hall was swelteringly hot. Christabel Pankhurst hailed this event as a triumph, writing that ‘the women who were barred out from the Prime Minister’s meeting called upon the general public ... and to this appeal there was a wonderful response’.²³ Sheffield provided a template for what was to follow between July and December, but it was first necessary to establish a fresh pretext for political disorder. In addition (and despite its wealth) the WSPU was never a mass organization and needed to conserve its human resources. Any major campaign in one place or area of operations meant the suspension of activities elsewhere. In the early summer of 1909 the WSPU’s plans were dominated by its own ‘Women’s Exhibition’ at the Princess Skating Rink, Knightsbridge, between 13 and 26 May, and by the thirteenth mass ‘deputation’ to parliament, scheduled for 29 June.

The deputation’s theme was the right of petition, guaranteed by the Bill of Rights of 1689. Leaflets were distributed which quoted the Bill and presented the WSPU’s interpretation of its provision:

‘It is the right of the subjects to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal.’ Mr. Asquith, as the King’s representative, is bound, therefore, to receive the deputation and hear their petition. If he refuses to do so, and calls out the police to prevent women from using their right to present a petition, he will be guilty of illegal and unconstitutional action.²⁴

The suffragette gloss justified the ‘rushes’ on parliament, the attempts to achieve interviews with ministers by force, and the appeal above the government to the general public. To argue that the government itself is breaking the law and abusing the constitution has always been the justification for such tactics. On 29 June, events proceeded in what had become the usual way. When Asquith refused to meet Emmeline Pankhurst, the pretence of an orderly, peaceful deputation was abandoned and about 300 women tried to force their way through to the House of Commons. One hundred and twenty two people were arrested – the largest ever number. While the struggles were going on in Parliament Square, fifteen or sixteen people began to break windows in the government offices along Whitehall. In court next day, the WSPU’s leaders announced their intention of testing in law the right of petition. Given the weight of precedent against them, they cannot have hoped to succeed, but it kept the issue alive for several months until the courts could decide. As a result, action against those arrested for public order offences was suspended, but the window-breakers were tried on 12 July, and imprisoned when they refused to pay fines.

At this point a new weapon was introduced: the hunger-strike, pioneered by Marion Wallace Dunlop between 2 and 5 July. Since the autumn of 1908, the WSPU had declared that suffragettes would not tolerate ‘second division’ conditions in prison but would demand ‘first division’ treatment as political

²³ ‘Suffragettes and cabinet ministers’, *Votes for Women*, 4 June, p. 752.

²⁴ ‘The deputation of June 29’, *ibid.*, 25 June, p. 841.

prisoners.²⁵ Mock-ups of 'first division' and 'second division' cells had been features of the Women's Exhibition. But little was done until the deputation provided 'proof' that the government was acting illegally, and that consequently suffragettes were political prisoners rather than lawbreakers.²⁶ The WSPU announced its intention of enforcing the political prisoner demand before the window-breakers were tried, and when committed to Holloway they refused to put on prison dress and broke their cell windows. During these processes two were accused of biting and kicking the wardresses, actions which the WSPU leadership hailed as the beginning of a 'Prison Mutiny' intended to spread to other prisoners and other gaols. As Christabel Pankhurst said on 19 July, 'If the suffragists broke down the awe of prison rules and regulations it would work through the prison population like a fever, and that would be a very serious matter indeed.'²⁷ Then all the window-breakers hunger-struck and were released at various dates to 27 July.

II

The idea of a general prison mutiny was no more than a hope, and perhaps one not taken too seriously, but the hunger-strike was the most potent weapon the WSPU ever used. It greatly increased the psychological pressure on all sides, and threatened to discredit the government by allowing suffragettes to evade the penalties of the law. The possibility that hunger-strikers might be forcibly fed was known, but the WSPU preferred not to discuss the subject: in mid-July, all was jubilation as the leadership claimed it had 'destroyed the Government's weapon of coercion'.²⁸ At this moment, attacks on Liberal meetings were renewed. The Budget League's calendar was announced on 11 July, with some forty meetings addressed by cabinet ministers. Suffragettes attacked the meetings at Blackburn on 14 July, and Leigh, Lancashire, next day. In a series of demonstrations continuing until December, there were three distinct phases, beginning in May with the Sheffield incident, resumed in July, and continuing until 20 August. During this time, suffragettes tried to get crowd assistance to break into Liberal meetings. Then, from 20 August to 17 September, attempts at crowd incitement were combined with stone-throwing directed at meeting venues. This phase ended when forcible feeding was introduced, and there was a brief hiatus before a third phase from 9 October until December in which crowd incitement was largely

²⁵ The divisional system was introduced by the Prisons Act of 1898. For some explanation, S. Hobhouse and A. Fenner Brockway, eds., *English prisons to-day: being the report of the Prison System Enquiry Committee* (London, 1922), pp. 214–21.

²⁶ For developments in the 'political prisoners' claim between October 1908 and July 1909, L. Radzinowicz and R. Hood, *A history of English criminal law*, v (London, 1986), pp. 447–8.

²⁷ The intention of enforcing the political prisoner demand was announced on 9 July; the first notice of a prison 'revolt' issued on 13 July, and the 'Prison mutiny' speech was made on 19 July: see *Manchester Guardian*, 14 July, p. 8., *Glasgow Herald*, 20 July, p. 2.

²⁸ Christabel Pankhurst to A. J. Ballfour, 22 July 1909, quoted in Rosen, *Rise up women!*, p. 121.

Table 1 *Suffragette crowd incitement and stone-throwing, 21 May–17 September 1909*

Place	Date	Speaker	Incident type	No. of suffragettes	Prosecutions
Sheffield	21 May	Asquith	CI	5	0
Blackburn	14 July	Birrell	CI	12	0
Leigh	15 July	Harcourt	CI	6	1
Edinburgh	19 July	Churchill	CI	3	0
Bedford	22 July	Samuel	CI	6	0
Nottingham	26 July	Samuel	CI	5	0
Northampton	27 July	Samuel	CI	8	0
Wolverhampton	27 July	Churchill	CI	4	0
Exeter	30 July	Carrington	CI	30	3
Hull	9 Aug.	Samuel	CI	9	0
Leeds	10 Aug.	Grey	CI	13	0
Bradford	13 Aug.	Haldane	CI	12	0
Glasgow	20 Aug.	Crewe	CI+ST	4	0*
Liverpool	20 Aug.	Haldane	ST	7	7
Leicester	4 Sept.	Churchill	CI	8	6
Manchester	4 Sept.	Birrell	ST	5	5
Dundee	13 Sept.	Samuel	CI	5	3
Birmingham	17 Sept.	Asquith	ST	20	9

Key: CI = crowd incitement; ST = stone-throwing.

* Charges brought but allowed to drop.

Source: *Votes for Women*, plus national and local newspapers identified in text.

abandoned in favour of stone-throwing, but the stones were usually thrown at public buildings rather than meeting venues. In the first two of these phases, there were some eighteen incidents, as shown in Table 1.

These incidents are selected from the large number of demonstrations reported in the weekly issues of *Votes for Women*. They are not easy to define. *Votes for Women* was a cheerleader rather than a sober journal that respected the distinction between fact and comment, and it claimed many more successful demonstrations than are tabulated here.²⁹ I have attempted to check all the reported incidents against national and local newspapers, and have tabulated only those at which a crowd was present, attempts at incitement were made, and attempts were made to enter the meeting. I have not tabulated ‘ordinary’ demonstrations that do not meet these criteria, though I have indicated the presence of suffragettes at Lloyd George’s ‘Limehouse Speech’ on 30 July to illustrate suffragette mobility and the

²⁹ For example, compare *Votes for Women*’s account of a demonstration in Bristol (15 Oct., p. 36) with that in the *Bristol Times and Mirror* (9 Oct., p. 10).

smallness of their numbers. The difficulties of this selection process are that full and accurate reports in local newspapers are sometimes difficult to find. In particular, Conservative newspapers were often theoretically in favour of women's suffrage but very reluctant to endorse militant activity, drawing a discreet veil over outbreaks in their locality.³⁰ In other instances, would-be inciters failed to motivate crowds, or the police kept crowd and demonstrators moving so that attacks on meetings never developed.³¹

Budget League meetings were held on weekday evenings or Saturday afternoons, and were genuinely popular events in which demand for tickets far outstripped supply. The venue was usually the largest public hall available: at Leigh, the Co-Operative Hall could seat about 1,000 people. The very largest, like Birmingham's Bingley Hall, could accommodate about 8,000. Even so, space was often inadequate and overflow meetings were common. Numbers inside were usually dwarfed by those outside. Visits by cabinet ministers provided entertainment for those otherwise excluded from the political process, particularly young men of the non-respectable working classes: the crowd outside Asquith's Sheffield meeting was described as 'largely composed of young hooligans out for mischief, with a considerable leaven of scum'. Suffragette crowd incitement was aimed specifically at men, but at Leigh the crowd consisted mainly of 'women and young fellows', and at other venues whole families were present and were caught up in the rioting which ensued.³² An important part of the context of these demonstrations is that most happened in twilight or darkness: meetings usually began around 7.30pm, with the main speaker's address between 8pm and 9pm.

In most instances, suffragettes arrived in town about midday, and spent the afternoon chalking messages on pavements and handing out leaflets announcing their intention of holding their own rival assembly close to where the Liberal meeting was taking place. Sometimes, however, employees and 'professionals' had been in the locality for several days: at Sheffield, Laura Ainsworth, Jennie Baines, Kathleen Brown, Ada Flatman, Charlotte Marsh, and Edith New had been holding meetings in the week before Asquith's arrival, and Emmeline Pankhurst herself gave a speech.³³ Only Marsh, as the WSPU's organizer for Yorkshire (based in Bradford) was in any way 'local' to the area: the others were based in Birmingham, the Manchester area, Liverpool, and Newcastle. A similar group was in Northampton for several days before the postmaster-general Herbert Samuel's meeting on 27 July, and a detachment went to Nottingham to support a demonstration there. Three or four employees were in Exeter for a week before the Agriculture and Fisheries minister Lord Carrington's meeting on

³⁰ For example, the *Nottingham Guardian*, 27 July, was strongly pro-suffrage in its editorial (p. 6) but condemned the disturbance of the previous evening and reported it (p. 8) much less thoroughly than the rival *Nottingham Daily Express*.

³¹ For example, at Norwich on 26 July (see below), Derby on 20 Aug. (see *Derby Daily Express*, 21 Aug., p. 2), and Rhyl on 28 Aug. (*Votes for Women*, 3 Sept., p. 1133).

³² *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 22 May, p. 9; *Leigh Chronicle*, 23 July, p. 2.

³³ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 18 May, p. 7, 22 May, p. 9.

30 July. Sometimes, as at Northampton, suffragettes solicited support through newspaper advertisements, or arranged stunts with a considerable degree of showmanship: at Leicester, two hired horses and rode through city streets, one wearing a cowboy outfit.³⁴ Such extrovert activities were left to the ‘professionals’: local suffragettes might be present to give moral support, but otherwise took little or no part: as the local newspaper commented of the Northampton incident: ‘There were several local sympathizers present, but they took no active part in the aggressive movement.’ At Exeter, ‘about 30’ suffragettes are said to have been present, but the three arrested were WSPU staff rather than locals.³⁵

Suffragettes usually waited for the crowd to assemble and the main speaker to begin his address, and then arrived by vehicle, usually a wagonette or landau, which often served as a platform. When they judged the crowd sufficiently warmed up, they descended and tried to lead rushes on the meeting venue. At Northampton, Mabel Capper and Lucy Burns tried to rush the Corn Exchange’s entrance and were pushed forward by youths, with Marie Brackenbury close behind shouting: ‘Come along, boys, one, two, three, shove!’ At Exeter, the suffragettes called out: ‘Now then, crowd, one more glorious rush, and rush us inside together. Don’t mind the police.’³⁶ The number of suffragettes was always small, but the crowds were sometimes very large and a force to be reckoned with: up to 10,000 at Sheffield, ‘several thousand’ at Bradford, and ‘thousands’ at Northampton, but numbers depended on rival attractions and the weather: at Wolverhampton on 27 July it had been raining all day and only a few hundred turned out.³⁷

Rushes were met by police cordons, sometimes supplemented by stewards, whose numbers naturally depended on the seriousness of the threat and the difficulties (or otherwise) of defending the hall. At Leigh, the Co-Operative Hall’s front door could be guarded by a few men, while the back door was behind gates, but at Leeds the Coliseum Theatre had to be cordoned off by 80–100 police, and buildings like the Bingley Hall, with roads on all sides, required hundreds of

³⁴ The *Northampton Daily Chronicle*, 26 July, p. 3, carried an advertisement reading:

All men sympathizers of
Votes for Women
Come to the Corn Exchange
On
Tuesday Night
and ask
Mr. Herbert Samuel
(Cabinet Minister)
Why not grant votes for women
Why are women not treated as political prisoners?

For the cowboy outfit, *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 6 Sept., p. 4.

³⁵ *Northampton Daily Chronicle*, 28 July, p. 3; *Western Daily Mercury*, 31 July, p. 8.

³⁶ For Northampton, *ibid.* Those arrested at Exeter were Elsie Howey, Mary Phillips, and Vera Wentworth: *Western Daily Mercury*, 2 Aug., p. 5.

³⁷ *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 28 July, p. 3; *Bradford Daily Telegraph*, 14 Aug., p. 3.

officers.³⁸ As attacks became more violent, it became common to surround the area with barricades, only allowing access to residents or those with tickets for the meeting. Suffragettes tried several ways of getting around these precautions: for example, to arrive by tram within the cordon, or to rent rooms near the venue. At Nottingham, one woman was allowed the use of a bedroom, from which she harangued the crowd through a megaphone, while at Liverpool and Birmingham suffragettes used rented premises for purposes other than those intended by their landlords.³⁹

Votes for Women invariably claimed that crowds were sympathetic. This was true to a limited extent in Scotland, but in England attitudes usually varied between indifference and outright hostility.⁴⁰ At Blackburn, the local newspaper commented that: 'The majority of the people seemed to be out "just for fun" and took no part in the demonstration for or against the suffragettes.' Some, indeed, just stood outside the back of the hall to catch what they could of the speeches. At Leigh, they listened attentively but seemed disappointed until the moment for action arrived.⁴¹ Even when crowds joined in, their 'support' usually represented their own amusement in pushing suffragettes against the cordons, or using the occasion to settle their own scores with the police. As the *Manchester Guardian* reported of the Birmingham demonstration:

An enormous crowd of men, many of whom were of the roughest class, possessed the street [Broad Street] ... Nothing but the hoofs of the policemen's horses could make them give an inch of ground, but whenever a woman came along and made for the gate into King Alfred's Place they parted before her, gave her a clear approach, and when she had got into her stride closed up around her and bore her forward into the arms of the police ... Each time the woman, who was acting the part of the football in this unseemly scrimmage, was driven back until she was lost in the crowd, but she would reappear in a few moments and the same process would go on again.⁴²

This was the kind of activity behind the romantic claims in *Votes for Women* that crowds 'rescued' suffragettes from the police. In the whole series of incidents from May to December, only two members of the public were arrested for their part in the disturbances.⁴³ Usually, crowds ran away at the first sign of police retaliation: at Sheffield, they ran when the police drew their truncheons and 'fainted' at their heads, and at the same time a mounted force appeared.⁴⁴

³⁸ For 80–100 police, *Leeds Mercury*, 11 Aug., p. 5.

³⁹ *Nottingham Guardian*, 27 July, p. 8.

⁴⁰ For example, compare the accounts of the Nottingham and Northampton demonstrations, *Votes for Women*, 30 July, pp. 1011–13, with those in the *Nottingham Daily Express*, 27 July, p. 7, and the *Northampton Daily Chronicle*.

⁴¹ *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 15 July, p. 3; *Leigh Chronicle*, 23 July, p. 2.

⁴² *Manchester Guardian*, 18 Sept., p. 9. The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 22 May, p. 9, remarked 'the Suffragettes were simply used by the mob as instruments wherewith to effect their lawless purpose'.

⁴³ For a 'rescue' claim, *Votes for Women*, 24 Sept., p. 1206. Two male 'ringleaders' were arrested at Exeter. A man arrested at Leicester was the husband of the local WSPU branch secretary.

⁴⁴ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 22 May, p. 9.

Hostility was more common. Jennie Baines was doused with water and pelted with soft but noxious missiles when she opened the proceedings at Northampton. At Nottingham and Leeds the crowds became so menacing that the police rescued suffragettes or arrested them for their own protection. After the Birmingham demonstration, Laura Ainsworth complained that the police drove her and others into a back street and left them at the mercy of a mob 'who threw at them everything they could get'.⁴⁵ Besides being a means of arrival, trams were used to escape from hostile crowds, whose attentions did not cease even when demonstrations were over: at Blackburn, a crowd of 'roughs' pursued the suffragettes to the Independent Labour Party rooms and besieged them. To escape, they changed hats with the ILP women, and the men repeatedly drew the crowd to one door while suffragettes slipped out of the other. Even then, another hostile crowd gathered at the railway station.⁴⁶

None of the demonstrations succeeded in getting into the meetings or caused any significant interruption. Violence was usually low-level, but this was more through luck than judgement. It was not safe to be among a pushing, shoving crowd making occasional 'rushes', and at Northampton and Exeter people were knocked over and trampled upon. At Dundee on 13 September crowd pressure threatened to collapse scaffolding erected against a building, and when a tramcar bore down on the throng 'it was only by a superhuman effort that the police, supported by many civilians, prevented a serious accident'. Serious injuries, such as the broken wrist suffered by a woman spectator at Bradford, were rare, though policemen might suffer much worse if brought down in the crowd: an officer died from kicks to the spine received during the riot at Leeds, and another constable was in hospital, paralysed, from the same cause.⁴⁷ Complaints about 'police brutality' were rare and it is evident that suffragettes gave as good as they got. At Bradford, Dorothy Bowker got a bloodied nose and claimed she had been punched by a policeman: she took his number, but the officer concerned was not on duty that evening, and the local newspaper commented: 'Had the police wished to make counter complaints, several might have complained of being smacked on the face or struck by the militant ladies.' When police rescued the suffragettes at Leeds, a newspaper reporter saw the women 'struggling, kicking, scratching, and biting at their protectors'.⁴⁸ Most arrests were 'takings into custody': suffragettes were allowed to go after crowds had dispersed or, if brought to court, were warned by magistrates to go away and not return. In the first five weeks of the campaign, from 14 July to 20 August, there were only four prosecutions – one at Leigh and three at Exeter. Given the 1908 prosecutions, it is

⁴⁵ *Northampton Daily Chronicle*, 28 July, p. 3; *Nottingham Guardian*, 27 July, p. 8; *Leeds Mercury*, 11 Aug., p. 5; *Manchester Guardian*, 23 Sept., p. 14.

⁴⁶ *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 15 July, p. 3.

⁴⁷ *Northampton Daily Chronicle*, 28 July, p. 3; *Western Daily Mercury*, 31 July, p. 8; *Dundee Courier*, 14 Sept., p. 5; *Manchester Guardian*, 7 Jan. 1910, p. 12.

⁴⁸ *Bradford Daily Telegraph*, 14 Aug., p. 3; *Leeds Mercury*, 11 Aug., p. 5.

curious that no charges of incitement to riot were laid, and the authorities were probably avoiding action when the offence could lead to jury trial.

The tests for the ‘militancy from below’ thesis are the number of incidents and the identity of the participants. Historians have only noticed a few of the 1909 demonstrations: for example, June Purvis only mentions the incidents in Liverpool and Glasgow on 20 August, and Birmingham on 17 September.⁴⁹ Had they been so isolated and sporadic, it would be plausible to suggest that they represented spontaneous action by local suffragettes, but more than thirty demonstrations, with visible changes in tactics, indicates an organized campaign. The proof that this was the case is supplied by the identities of those known to have participated, as given in Tables 2 and 3.

Among these sixty or so women are two sizeable minorities largely composed of the same people. Nearly half (twenty-seven) were WSPU employees (organizers, their assistants, or other staff), and the same number took part in more than one incident.⁵⁰ As Table 2 shows, most of the serial participants were employees, and many took part over and over again. Charlotte Marsh was present eight times, Jennie Baines seven, and several women participated five times. If the demonstrations really happened without the permission or foreknowledge of the WSPU leadership, they must have been remarkably ignorant about what their staff were doing for much of 1909. Besides those it acknowledged as employees, the WSPU could draw on a further range of people like Emily Davison, Mary Leigh, and Selina Martin, who clearly gave all their time to the organization and were effectively ‘professionals’. Davison is sometimes called a ‘freelance’ militant, as though disapproved of by the leaders; others, such as Mary Leigh and Selina Martin, have been described as ‘working women’, in order to argue that the WSPU’s membership, and militancy, crossed class divides. But if that was the case, it remains to be shown how women without independent means managed to keep themselves and travel widely in pursuit of their political activities.⁵¹ Leigh spent six months of 1908 in prison, and in 1909 she was demonstrating, in prison, or recovering from hunger-strikes almost continuously from mid-July until the end of October.⁵² Selina Martin had a similar record.

The WSPU is known to have been paying expenses to activists from 1907, and ‘retainer’ payments from 1910–11. Mary Leigh was receiving both a retainer and

⁴⁹ Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, pp. 132–3. Pugh, *Pankhursts*, pp. 194–8, mentions Edinburgh, Glasgow (wrongly given as St Andrew’s), Birmingham, and Dundee on 19 Oct.

⁵⁰ For example, WSPU staff in the West Midlands included the organizer, Gladice Keevil, her assistant Laura Ainsworth, and the director of publicity, Hilda Burkitt. This article classifies as an employee anyone identified among the organizational staff in *Votes for Women* during 1909, plus others so identified in E. Crawford, *The suffragette movement, 1866–1928: a reference guide* (London, 1999).

⁵¹ See Crawford’s comments about Davison’s occupation in *Reference guide*, p. 160; for a ‘working woman’ claim, M. Myall, “‘No surrender!’” The militancy of Mary Leigh, a working-class suffragette’, in M. Joannu and J. Purvis, eds., *The women’s suffrage movement: new feminist perspectives* (Manchester, 1998) pp. 173–89.

⁵² For Leigh spending more than six months of 1908 in prison, Crawford, *Reference guide*, p. 338.

Table 2 *Suffragettes taking part in more than one demonstration, 21 May–17 September 1909*

Name	WSPU status	Incidents
Ainsworth, Laura	Employee	Sheffield, 21 May; Bedford, 22 July; Nottingham, 26 July; Wolverhampton, 27 July; Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Baines, Jennie	Employee	Sheffield, 21 May; Blackburn, 14 July; Leigh, 16 July; Bedford, 22 July; Nottingham, 26 July; Northampton, 27 July; Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Bowker, Dorothy	Employee	Hull, 9 Aug.; Leeds, 10 Aug.; Bradford, 13 Aug.
Burkitt, Hilda	Employee	Hull, 9 Aug.; Leeds, 10 Aug.; Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Burns, Lucy	Employee	Northampton, 27 July; [Limehouse, 30 July]; Glasgow, 20 Aug.; Dundee, 13 Sept.
Capper, Mabel	Employee	Blackburn, 14 July; Leigh, 16 July; Bedford, 22 July; Northampton, 27 July; [Limehouse, 30 July]; Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Clarkson, Florence	Activist	Blackburn, 14 July; Leigh, 16 July; Liverpool, 20 Aug.
Crocker, Nellie	Employee	Nottingham, 26 July; Northampton, 27 July; Leicester, 4 Sept.
Flatman, Ada	Employee	Sheffield, 21 May; Blackburn, 14 July
Floyd, Lettice	Employee	Hull, 9 Aug.; Leeds, 10 Aug.; Bradford, 13 Aug.
Garnett, Theresa (alias 'Annie O'Sullivan')	Activist	Liverpool, 20 Aug.; Dundee, 13 Sept.
Helliwell, Fanny	Branch secretary	Blackburn, 14 July; Manchester, 4 Sept.
Leigh, Mary	Activist	Bedford, 22 July; Nottingham, 26 July; Northampton, 27 July; [Limehouse, 30 July]; Liverpool, 20 Aug.; Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Marsh, Charlotte	Employee	Sheffield, 21 May; Blackburn, 14 July; Leigh, 16 July; Nottingham, 26 July; Wolverhampton, 27 July; Hull, 9 Aug.; Leeds, 10 Aug.; Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Martin, Selina (aliases 'Mary Richards' and 'Mary Edwards')	Activist	Blackburn, 14 July; Bedford, 22 July; Northampton, 27 July; Liverpool, 20 Aug.; Birmingham, 17 Sept.
New, Edith	Employee	Sheffield, 21 May; Dundee, 13 Sept.
Pankhurst, Adela	Employee	Edinburgh, 19 July; Glasgow, 20 Aug.

Table 2 (Cont.)

Name	WSPU status	Incidents
Paul, Alice	Employee	[Limehouse, 30 July]; Glasgow, 20 Aug.; Dundee, 13 Sept.
Pethick, Dorothy	Employee	Hull, 9 Aug.; Leeds, 10 Aug.
Pitfield, Ellen	Activist	Bedford, 22 July; Northampton, 27 July
Quinn, Bertha	Activist	Blackburn, 14 July; Leeds, 10 Aug.
Tolson, Catherine	Activist	Bradford, 13 Aug.; Manchester, 4 Sept.
Tolson, Helen	Activist	Bradford, 13 Aug.; Manchester, 4 Sept.
Watts, Helen	Employee	Nottingham, 26 July; Leicester, 4 Sept.
Williams, Annie	Employee	Blackburn, 14 July; Hull, 9 Aug.; Leeds, 10 Aug.
Woodlock, Patricia	Employee	Blackburn, 14 July; Leigh, 16 July; Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Wurrie, Evelyn	Activist	Northampton, 27 July; [Limehouse, 30 July]; Birmingham, 17 Sept.

Source: As Table 1.

expenses in 1912–13.⁵³ Although the direct evidence for 1909 is lacking, her record of full-time militancy suggests that she was being supported by the WSPU from an earlier date: probably, she received a salary for leading the organization's fife and drum band. This should not be construed as an allegation that suffragettes 'were only in it for the money'. The commitment of people like Davison, Leigh, and Martin far exceeded what might be expected for a small wage. The point is that the lives they were leading in 1909 would have been impossible if they had indeed been 'working women' in the usually accepted sense of having an occupation outside their political commitment.

Until mid-September the campaign was overwhelmingly a professional affair with local, rank and file suffragettes reduced to a very limited role. The smallness of the numbers willing to engage in this activity meant that any other major demonstration affected operations elsewhere. On 30 July, five of the serial participants were among thirteen women arrested outside the 'Limehouse Speech', and the campaign was deprived of their services while they were in prison or recovering from hunger-strikes. In the first nineteen days of August, there were

⁵³ 'A married woman from Wales ... cross-examined ... said that Mrs. Pankhurst paid all the expenses of the women brought from various parts of the country - of course out of the funds of the association.' *Times*, 22 Mar. 1907, p. 4. For retainer payments in 1910–11, *Manchester Guardian*, 29 July 1913, p. 5. For retainer and expenses payments to Mary Leigh, The National Archives (TNA) CRIM 1/140/1, pp. 49, 180, 190–1.

Table 3 *Suffragettes taking part in one demonstration, 21 May–17 September 1909*

Name	WSPU status	Incident
Barnwell, Ellen Baker	Activist	Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Brackenbury, Marie	Activist	Northampton, 27 July
Brand, Bessie	Activist	Edinburgh, 17 July
Brewster, Bertha	Activist	Liverpool, 20 Aug.
Brown, Kathleen	Activist	Sheffield, 21 May
Chappelow, Grace	Activist	[Limehouse, 30 July]; Leicester, 4 Sept.
Davison, Emily	Activist	[Limehouse, 30 July]; Manchester, 4 Sept.
Earl, Rhoda	Activist	Wolverhampton, 27 July
Eckford, Miss	Activist	Edinburgh, 19 July
Hall, Leslie	Activist	Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Hawkins, Alice	Branch secretary	Leicester, 4 Sept.
Healiss, Georgina	Activist	Liverpool, 20 Aug.
Hetherington, Amy	Activist	Hull, 9 Aug.
Hewitt, Margaret	Employee	Leicester, 4 Sept.
Howey, Elsie	Employee	Exeter, 30 July
Joachim, Maud	Employee	Leicester, 4 Sept.
Jones, Violet	Activist	Leicester, 4 Sept.
Keevil, Gladice	Employee	Birmingham, 17 Sept.
Kelley, Isabella	Activist	[Limehouse, 30 July]; Dundee, 13 Sept.
Macaulay, Miss	Employee	Edinburgh, 17 July
Marsden, Dora	Employee	Manchester, 4 Sept.
Midgeley, Esther	Activist	Hull, 9 Aug.
Mitchell, Miss	Activist	Bradford, 14 July
Phillips, Mary	Employee	Exeter, 30 July
Rawson, Mary	Activist	Leicester, 4 Sept.
Robinson, Rona	Employee	Liverpool, 20 Aug.
Scorah, Sarah	Activist	Hull, 9 Aug.
Shaw, Miss	Activist	Blackburn, 14 July
Smith, Miss Fraser	Activist	Dundee, 13 Sept.
Smith, Margaret	Employee	Glasgow, 20 Aug.
Wentworth, Vera	Employee	Exeter, 30 July
Young, Naomi	Activist	Wolverhampton, 27 July

Source: As Table 1.

only three demonstrations, at Hull, Leeds, and Bradford. The WSPU's resources were spread thinly – sometimes, too thinly. In the week beginning 25 July, with one group active at Northampton and Nottingham, another at Wolverhampton, and a third at Exeter, the only personnel available for Winston Churchill's

important meeting at Norwich on 26 July were two or three inexperienced activists who failed to incite the large crowd to attack the hall.⁵⁴ Very little is known about the overall organization of the campaign, but Sylvia Pankhurst's account of the Birmingham demonstration describes Christabel in conference with Jennie Baines, and Baines appears to have co-ordinated events 'on the ground', in the north of England, at least.⁵⁵

III

The tactics changed on 20 August. When Richard Haldane (war minister) spoke at the Sun Hall, Liverpool, some suffragettes paraded up and down the street outside, but no attempt was made to rush the entrances or cause any disturbance until about 8.30pm, just after Haldane's speech began. Seven suffragettes, who had rented a house overlooking the back of the Hall, threw slates and bricks which smashed some windows and roof lights. When a policeman appeared, a brick was thrown at him.⁵⁶ In Glasgow, the same day, Adela Pankhurst led a demonstration outside the colonial minister Lord Crewe's meeting during which she threw stones, breaking windows in St Andrew's Hall, and more stones were thrown by the crowd, one of which hit a Hall attendant on the head.⁵⁷ On 4 September there were two further incidents. At Leicester, where Churchill was speaking at the Palace Theatre, local suffragettes were reinforced by at least four WSPU employees and incited the crowd to storm the theatre in an unusually determined way which caused six arrests. Augustine Birrell's Manchester meeting was held in the 'White City' complex, in a hall whose upper walls and roof were plate glass. Five suffragettes threw missiles heavy enough to shatter panes a quarter-inch thick, and a shower of glass fell into the hall. Fortunately, the affected area was near the entrance, where a space had been left, and only one man was injured, with a bad cut to his hand.⁵⁸ These incidents culminated in the attack on Asquith's meeting at the Bingley Hall, Birmingham, on 17 September. When the attempted disruptions failed, Mary Leigh and Charlotte Marsh climbed on to a roof overlooking the Hall, and from there threw slates and bricks into a crowded street, hitting Asquith's car and causing injuries to policemen who were climbing the roof to get them down. Later, when Asquith's train was leaving, metal objects were thrown at it, showering the occupants of one carriage with glass.⁵⁹ The violence caused a sensation, but a sensation of the wrong kind for the WSPU.

⁵⁴ *Eastern Evening News*, 27 July, p. 4.

⁵⁵ Pankhurst, *Suffragette movement*, p. 316. *Votes for Women*, 12 Nov., p. 108, announced that Baines would be responsible for co-ordinating the Lanchashire campaign in December.

⁵⁶ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 21 Aug., p. 7.

⁵⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 21 Aug., p. 8.

⁵⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 6 Sept., p. 8: the injured man sued for damages: for the outcome, *ibid.*, 9 Nov., p. 9.

⁵⁹ The Bingley Hall demonstration was copiously reported in the daily Birmingham press, for example *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 18 Sept., p. 6.

The new tactics represented a sea-change in WSPU philosophy. Crowd incitement was aimed at government ministers, and (theoretically, at least) represented no threat to the general public. The stone-throwing was openly intended to intimidate ordinary Liberals who attended meetings, and wound or kill them if they disregarded the suffragette threats. Such threats were made against those who attended Birrell's Manchester meeting, and repeated in a letter Emily Davison sent to the *Manchester Guardian*. She stated that 'our act ... was meant as a warning to the general public of the risks they run if they go to cabinet ministers' meetings anywhere'.⁶⁰ Dora Marsden enunciated the philosophy in open court when she told the magistrates: 'Because there were no other means of reaching the men in that room we deliberately counted up the cost, even the cost of human life; and came to the conclusion that it was worth while.'⁶¹ She was not alone among WSPU employees. At Birmingham on 15 September, Jennie Baines told an open-air meeting that: 'We warn every citizen attending the meeting in Bingley Hall to beware. He may not only get crippled, he may lose his life eventually.' The suffragettes went to the extent of getting threatening placards printed and posted in the city centre.⁶²

The general public were not the only ones threatened. On 4 September three WSPU employees assaulted Asquith and Herbert Gladstone (home secretary) on the golf course at Lympne, Kent, and afterwards threw stones through the windows of the house where they were staying. In mid-September Gladstone was tipped off about women practising with revolvers and a plot to shoot Asquith, though those concerned were said to be members of the Women's Freedom League rather than the WSPU. These incidents were taken seriously because England had just experienced its first political assassination for many years when Madan Lal Dinghra, an Indian student, shot an Indian government official. Gladstone advised ministers to heed their security and established the Suffragette Department of the Special Branch.⁶³

The change in WSPU tactics exposes the falsity of arguments that suffragette violence was always a 'reactive' phenomenon. Stone-throwing did not happen in response to any change in the government's attitude, nor any ill-treatment of suffragettes. There had been few prosecutions; those imprisoned had been swiftly released after hunger-strikes, and no suffragettes were in prison on 20 August. No editorials in *Votes for Women* explained why the escalation was necessary or even referred to it. It can only be explained in terms of a conscious decision by the WSPU leadership. These activities were dominated by their employees and 'professional' militants, plus branch officials. The 'Liverpool seven' included the

⁶⁰ Letter from 'A suffragist', *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Sept., p. 4. For Davison's threatening letter, *ibid.*, 11 Sept.: press cutting in TNA HO 144/1041/183189, item 11.

⁶¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 7 Sept., p. 3.

⁶² *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 18 Sept., p. 6, reproduces an example of the threatening placards.

⁶³ For the Lympne incident, *Manchester Guardian*, 7 Sept., p. 8, 8 Sept., p. 8. For Dinghra, *ibid.*, 2 July, p. 6. For the 'revolver plot' and the establishment of a Special Branch department, Harrison, 'The act of militancy', pp. 56–7.

employee Rona Robinson and the ‘professionals’ Mary Leigh, Theresa Garnett, and Selina Martin (the last two under aliases). The ‘Manchester five’ included the employee Dora Marsden, Emily Davison, and Fanny Helliwell, the local branch secretary. Of the twelve women known to have taken part in the Birmingham demonstration, seven were employees, plus Leigh and Martin.⁶⁴ If the activities were ‘unauthorized’ or contrary to the leaders’ dictates, it was up to them to expel the offenders or at least restrain them. They did not do so. Instead, political violence was endorsed at the highest levels. Emmeline Pankhurst was in Scotland on 20 August and accompanied her daughter to the police court.⁶⁵ After the Liverpool stone-throwers were sentenced on 24 August, Mary Gawthorpe (organizer in Manchester and a member of the WSPU’s central committee) told an impromptu meeting that ‘the attack on Sun Hall was premeditated. Whether people liked it or not the stone-throwing epoch had been reached, and there would be a good many more stones thrown before the fight was over if the government did not give women what they wanted.’⁶⁶ Christabel Pankhurst’s article in *Votes for Women* on 17 September was both an enthusiastic endorsement of the new tactics and a classic statement of the ‘double shuffle’, asserting that the government decided the WSPU’s tactics, and ‘there will be no violence which they do not call forth, and only such violence will be used as they, by their policy in regard to Votes for Women, may render necessary’, before advising the government to yield quickly, for the WSPU never would.⁶⁷

It is not difficult to arrive at the reasons for this transformation of WSPU policy. By the end of August, the consensus view was that the Budget crisis made an early general election inevitable, whatever the Lords decided.⁶⁸ The primary purpose of WSPU violence was to force votes for women into the election debate and intimidate voters as well as government ministers. Its secondary purpose was to get suffragettes into prison. Exploitation of the hunger-strike had been frustrated by the authorities’ reluctance to prosecute for public order offences. Stone-throwing and assaults on the police guaranteed prosecution and imprisonment, and, as the level of violence increased, the hunger-strike presented the authorities with a dilemma. The government had been considering the use of forcible feeding since the ‘prison mutiny’, but was restrained by the possible effect on public opinion.⁶⁹ Now it had to choose between allowing suffragettes to practise political violence with impunity, and adopting a process as distasteful to Liberal politicians as it was to everyone else.

⁶⁴ *Votes for Women*, 24 Sept., p. 1206, claimed that ‘upwards of a score’ of suffragettes were present at the Bingley Hall demonstration. The seven employees were Laura Ainsworth, Jennie Baines, Hilda Burkitt, Mabel Capper, Gladice Keevil, Charlotte Marsh, and Patricia Woodlock.

⁶⁵ Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, pp. 132–3.

⁶⁶ *Morning Post*, 25 Aug. Press cutting in TNA, HO 144/1041/182749, item 4.

⁶⁷ ‘Militant tactics to date’, *Votes for Women*, 17 Sept., p. 1181.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; see selection of press rumours on 27 Aug. (p. 1099) and front-page cartoon (3 Sept.).

⁶⁹ For some information on consultations between the home secretary and prime minister, TNA HO 144/1038/180782, item 71, HO 144/1041/183189, item 3.

The Bingley Hall incident decided the issue and the imprisoned suffragettes were forcibly fed from 24 September. We are told that the WSPU's response was 'disbelief, shock, and deep anger'.⁷⁰ If so, it contained a considerable measure of hypocrisy. The organization knew that forcible feeding was being considered. It had obtained legal advice, and its employees and activists threatened legal action when the 'Manchester five' were threatened with the process.⁷¹ The evidence points inescapably to the conclusion that the subsidiary purpose of political violence was to force the issue. If the government continued to release demonstrators, no effective action could be taken against the WSPU. If it introduced forcible feeding, it could be condemned for 'methods of barbarism'. The leaders, therefore, risked the forcible feeding of their employees and activists in a deliberate, political act, believing that they could defeat or discredit the government whatever action it took, and they bore a heavy responsibility for what they represented as a brutal act of repression. There is no conclusive proof, but Christabel Pankhurst substantially endorsed this interpretation by commenting: 'Birmingham at least brought matters to a head. The government was obliged to act. Mayors and Councils, police and business interests, Liberal leaders in the constituencies could not and would not tolerate the repetition of such scenes.'⁷²

But the WSPU miscalculated the public mood. Forcible feeding is often seen as a blunder and public relations disaster on the part of the government, but that was not how it appeared in September 1909.⁷³ In July, the WSPU had been able to rely on considerable public sympathy, and influential Liberal newspapers and journals argued that suffragettes were indeed entitled to political prisoner status.⁷⁴ If the government had forcibly fed the prison mutineers, the reaction would probably have been the furore among its own supporters which the WSPU obviously expected. But, as knowledge of suffragette tactics sank into the public consciousness, the mood changed from tolerance to condemnation, and with it came a perception that the hunger-strike was not the political protest it purported to be but a cynical device for suffragettes to escape the consequences of their actions. This mood spread from local papers into the national press. After the Sun Hall incident, the *Liverpool Daily Post* commented: 'Seven viragoes have given a lesson to the country which it will not be slow to profit by, and we trust that the arm of outraged justice will administer to them a lesson which they shall not soon forget.' After the White City stone-throwing, the *Manchester Evening News*, reacting to the number of letters it had received 'arising from the victory of the suffragettes over the forces of law and order', strongly criticized Herbert Gladstone and asked

⁷⁰ Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, p. 134.

⁷¹ For the leadership's getting legal advice, *ibid.* For the Manchester hunger-strikers, TNA HO 144/1041/183189, item 4.

⁷² C. Pankhurst, *Unshackled: the story of how we won the vote*, ed. Lord Pethick-Lawrence (London, 1959), p. 139.

⁷³ For example, Martin Pugh asserts that forcible feeding 'presented a gift to WSPU propaganda': see *The march of the women: a revisionist analysis of the campaign for women's suffrage, 1866-1914* (Oxford, 2002), p. 196.

⁷⁴ See selection of press comment in *Votes for Women*, 30 July, p. 1006.

whether he would release hunger-striking murderers. In London, the *Pall Mall Gazette* took up the theme:

We shall wait to see whether the women secure their release from prison like some of their predecessors by the simple expedient of a two days' fast. If they do, it will be time to let the Home Secretary understand that his supine sentimental methods involve taking liberties with the public safety, which should not, and will not, be tolerated.⁷⁵

On this occasion, the government's timing and political judgement were faultless: Liberals were perfectly aware of how forcible feeding might work against them, and delayed its introduction until public opinion came round and called for sterner measures. When the process was actually applied, almost every national newspaper applauded the decision, or accepted it as a regrettable necessity made inevitable by the suffragettes' own actions. Only the *Manchester Guardian* stood apart: even pillars of the Liberal establishment such as the *Daily News* and the weekly *Nation* supported forcible feeding or refused to condemn it, and when this happened the WSPU had lost the argument.⁷⁶

IV

After the Birmingham demonstration, there was a hiatus of three weeks. When the campaign resumed, it took a different direction. Some attempts at crowd incitement were still made. Perhaps the most successful of all happened at Dundee on 19 October, when suffragettes were apparently able to exploit resentment that more people had not been allowed into Winston Churchill's meeting, and about 3,000 people caused a riot which required two baton charges from the police.⁷⁷ The last major operations, with 'professional' bodies in town for days before a meeting, were at Preston and Crewe in the first days of December.⁷⁸ But several factors now militated against such tactics. One was that police methods had become more effective, keeping crowds moving and preventing suffragettes from driving up and holding their own meetings. If they wanted to be present, they had to be among the crowd, which reduced their ability to direct events and even to make themselves heard, and in any case they were usually arrested as soon as they began to speak. Some organizers recognized that circumstances had changed. When Walter Runciman (education minister) spoke at Hull in November, only one suffragette (Mary Phillips) turned up and attempted a surprise incitement: she told the local newspaper 'as the organising of protest meetings had been somewhat disastrous in the past, and had led the police to make preparations, she thought she would try another dodge'.⁷⁹ As

⁷⁵ *Liverpool Daily Post*, quoted in *Votes for Women*, 27 Aug., p. 1111; *Manchester Evening News*, 11 Sept., press cutting in TNA HO 144/1041/183189, item 8; 'The shrinking secretary', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 7 Sept., p. 7.

⁷⁶ See for example *Daily News*, 25 Sept., p. 4; *Nation*, 2 Oct., p. 2; and the selection of press comment published in *Votes for Women*, 1 Oct., pp. 2-3.

⁷⁷ *Dundee Courier*, 20 Oct., p. 5.

⁷⁸ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 2 Dec., p. 4, 6 Dec., p. 8.

⁷⁹ *Hull Daily Mail*, 18 Nov., p. 6.

autumn and winter came on, public halls had their windows boarded up and roof lights covered by tarpaulins at the first sign that suffragettes might be present. Another factor was crowd hostility. At Bristol, suffragettes distributed thousands of handbills before Churchill spoke at the Colston Hall on 13 November, and a huge crowd (estimated at 30,000 people) assembled. But after stone-throwing the night before, an assault on Churchill at the railway station, and stones thrown at the Hall from a passing tram, the suffragettes did not dare to appear, despite their promise to do so. When Lilian Dove-Willcox published a letter in the local newspaper, thanking the crowd for their 'support', a deluge of angry replies bluntly stated that if the suffragettes had shown themselves they would have been lynched or thrown into the harbour.⁸⁰ Crowd incitement fizzled out during December. At Liverpool on 21 December, Ada Flatman was reduced to impotent shouting and the suffragettes were pelted with snowballs.⁸¹

After the forcible feeding decision, the main activity became stone-throwing. Between 9 October and 21 December there were fourteen demonstrations, tabulated in Table 4. The identities of those known to have been present are given in Table 5.

The renewed campaign tacitly recognized that the tactics of August–September had been a mistake, and was aimed at regaining public sympathy through the issue of forcible feeding. The government's decision to forcibly feed had been justified in the public eye because suffragettes had practised open, life-threatening violence, and because the practitioners were not *bona fide* local people moved to spontaneous protest but professional militants who, if released, would go on to offend over and over again. But, once forcible feeding began, the government was obliged to be consistent and consider inflicting it on every suffragette who refused food, regardless of her individual character or the nature of her offence. A further refinement was that the ultimate decisions whether or not to forcibly feed were taken by doctors on medical grounds, so that one suffragette might be fit for the process and another not, even though their offences had been identical.

The resumed campaign aimed to exploit these circumstances from several angles. Stone-throwers' targets were usually untenanted buildings rather than meeting venues crowded with people. Although employees and 'professional' militants continued to lead demonstrations, they seldom participated. Table 5 shows that only nineteen of fifty-three women had taken part in the demonstrations between May and September, and only eight of these were employees. Magistrates and prison officials had to deal with 'ordinary', rank-and-file suffragettes who were often first offenders. This might appear to illustrate the 'militancy from below' thesis, but for two factors. Some stone-throwers were indeed local people, like Elizabeth Hesmondhalgh and Catherine Worthington who followed their WSPU branch secretary, Edith Rigby, into action at Preston. But

⁸⁰ For the Bristol disturbances and Dove-Willcox's letter, *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 15 Nov., p. 7. For the replies, *ibid.*, 16 Nov., p. 5, 17 Nov., p. 4.

⁸¹ *Liverpool Daily Post* 22 Dec., p. 10.

Table 4 *Suffragette crowd incitement and stone-throwing, 9 October–21 December 1909*

Place	Date	Speaker	Incident type	No. of suffragettes	Prosecutions
Newcastle	9 Oct.	Lloyd George	ST	12	12
Dundee	19 Oct.	Churchill	CI+ST	5	4
Radcliff	22 Oct.	Runciman	ST	4	4
Batley	22 Oct.	Runciman	ST	2	2
London	9 Nov.	Asquith	ST	2	2
Bristol	13 Nov.	Churchill	ST	5	4
Preston	3 Dec.	Churchill	CI+ST	4	4
Liverpool (‘Waterloo’)	4 Dec.	Churchill	ST	4	1
Rawtenstall/ Haslingden	4 Dec.	Harcourt	ST	6	2
Leith	4 Dec.	Grey	CI+ST	2	2
Bolton	7 Dec.	Churchill	ST	1	1
Liverpool	8 Dec.	Churchill	ST	2	2
Crewe	9 Dec.	Churchill	ST	4	1
Liverpool	21 Dec.	Asquith	ST	4	4

Key: CI = crowd incitement; ST = stone-throwing.

Source: As Table 1.

most were not. The pattern of itinerant militancy continued even though rank-and-file suffragettes were practising it. The other factor is the apparently deliberate mixing of serial offenders with novices, and the combination of elderly or physically frail people with fit young women. These look like tactics designed to exploit any difference in sentences awarded and decisions over forcible feeding. It was certainly believed at the time that the WSPU encouraged frail people to offend so as to embarrass the authorities.⁸²

The best evidence for these contentions is analysis of those militant groups which can be identified. The new tactics were first used at Newcastle on 9 October, when a group of twelve women used the occasion of Lloyd George’s meeting to throw stones.⁸³ Only one (Kathleen Brown) was in any way local to the area: the others came from London and Bristol. Their ages ranged from twenty-three to fifty-two, and the party mixed fit young women such as Violet Bryant and Dorothy Pethick with others like Lady Constance Lytton, middle-aged and in poor health, and mixed serial offenders like Emily Davison with novices like

⁸² See the comments of the prison doctor Herbert Smalley quoted in W. J. Forsythe, *Penal discipline, reformatory projects and the English Prison Commission, 1895–1939* (Exeter, 1990), p. 107, and the case of Ellen Godfrey cited below.

⁸³ *Times*, 11 Oct., p. 7.

Table 5 *Suffragettes present at demonstrations, 9 October–21 December 1909*

Name	Status	Arrests
Allen, Mary	Employee	Bristol, 13 Nov.
Archdale, Helen	Activist	Dundee, 19 Oct.
Asquith, Lily	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
Atheling, Lilgarde	Activist	Liverpool, 8 Dec.
Baines, Jennie	Employee	
Brailsford, Jane	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
Brown, Amelia	Activist	London, 9 Nov.
Brown, Kathleen	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
Bryant, Violet	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.; Rawtenstall/ Haslingden, 4 Dec.
Carwin, Sarah	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
Clarkson, Florence*	Activist	
Corbett, Catherine	Activist	Dundee, 19 Oct.
Davison, Emily	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct. ; Radcliff, 22 Oct.
Dunlop, Miss*	Activist	
Evans, Dorothy	Activist	Batley, 22 Oct.
Evans, Laura	Activist	Dundee, 19 Oct.
Flatman, Ada	Employee	
Garnett, Theresa	Activist	Bristol, 13 Nov.
Godfrey, Ellen*	Activist	Batley, 22 Oct.; Bolton, 7 Dec.
Hall, Leslie*	Activist	Liverpool, 21 Dec.
Hall, Mrs	Activist	
Helliwell, Fanny*	Branch Secretary	
Hesmondhalgh, Elizabeth	Activist	Preston, 3 Dec.
Hewitt, Margaret*	Employee	Preston, 3 Dec.
Hudson, Edith	Activist	Leith, 4 Dec.
Joachim, Maud	Employee	Dundee, 19 Oct.
Jones, Violet*	Activist	Liverpool, 8 Dec.
Jones, Winifred	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
Lawes, Jessie	Activist	Bristol, 13 Nov.
Liddle, Ellen Gordon	Activist	Radcliff, 22 Oct.
Lytton, Lady Constance	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
‘Marion, Kitty’	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
Martin, Selina	Activist	Liverpool, 21 Dec.
Massy, Rosamund	Activist	Preston, 3 Dec.
Norbury, Lily*	Activist	Liverpool, 21 Dec.
Pankhurst, Adela	Employee	Dundee, 19 Oct.
Paul, Alice	Employee	London, 9 Nov.

Table 5 (Cont.)

Name	Status	Arrests
Pethick, Dorothy	Employee	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
Pickford, Helen	Activist	Bristol, 13 Nov.
Pitfield, Ellen	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
Pitman, Ellen	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.; Bristol, 13 Nov.
Redhead, Miss	Activist	
Rigby, Edith	Branch Secretary	Preston, 3 Dec.; Liverpool, 4 Dec.
Roe-Brown, Elsie	Activist	Leith, 4 Dec.
Shallard, Dorothy	Activist	Newcastle, 9 Oct.
Sheppard, Hannah	Activist	Radcliff, 22 Oct.
Slade, Ethel Annie	Activist	Rawtenstall, 4 Dec.
Smith, Mrs Fraser	Activist	
Taylor, Ellen	Activist	Crewe, 9 Dec.
Tolson, Catherine	Activist	Radcliff, 22 Oct.
Wentworth, Vera	Employee	Bristol, 13 Nov.
Worthington, Catherine	Activist	Preston, 3 Dec.
Wurrie, Evelyn*	Activist	

* Members of Lancashire group co-ordinated by Jennie Baines as named in *Votes for Women*, 26 Nov. Persons with names in bold type also appear in Tables 2 and 3.

Source: As Table 1.

Jane Brailsford.⁸⁴ All except Davison were imprisoned, but Lytton and Brailsford were released on medical grounds. There were unimpeachable reasons for releasing Lytton, who was known to suffer from a heart murmur, but the WSPU alleged that her health problems had been exaggerated and that the government dare not feed the sister of a peer and the wife of a prominent Liberal journalist.⁸⁵ On 26 November, *Votes for Women* announced that Jennie Baines was co-ordinating a group to harass Churchill's whistle-stop tour of Lancashire in early December. Of these ten women, only three lived in the area. The rest came from London. One was Ellen Godfrey. She was first arrested at Batley (West Yorkshire) on 22 October in company with Dorothy Evans, gym mistress of a local girls' school, and took part in several other demonstrations before she was imprisoned for throwing a stone at Churchill's car in Bolton on 7 December. The Home Office noted that she was of 'poor physique and suffering from some internal disorder', and an anonymous hand noted on the file cover: 'I suppose that (as in Newcastle)

⁸⁴ By comparison, the ages of the Liverpool stone-throwers on 20 Aug. ranged from twenty-one to thirty.

⁸⁵ *Votes for Women*, 26 Nov., p. 129. Lytton attributed her release at Newcastle to 'Liberal snobishness': see *Daily Telegraph*, 24 Jan. 1910, p. 17.

they are sending their “Crocks” to prison.’⁸⁶ *Votes for Women* took to publicizing the medical conditions of its stone-throwers. When Ellen Taylor was imprisoned, it told the world that her doctor said she was suffering from ‘rheumatism and asthma’.⁸⁷

Forcible feeding was certainly the one single factor which most exacerbated feeling between feminists and the government, but (so far as opinion can be measured through newspaper comment) there is little evidence that the general public shared the feminist concerns. Apart from the suffrage and Labour press, the only continuous debate about forcible feeding was carried on in the *British Medical Journal*.⁸⁸ In national newspapers, those letter-writers who made their feelings known tended to be WSPU members or prominent supporters such as H. N. Brailsford and Henry Nevinson rather than *bona fide* converts to the WSPU’s view of matters. Only the *Manchester Guardian* maintained a consistently hostile line and argued that, because the level of violence had diminished, the government should reconsider.⁸⁹

The Lords rejected the Budget on 30 November. The prorogation of parliament was announced on 3 December, to take effect twelve days later and be followed by a general election, with polling in the last two weeks of January 1910. Once electioneering began, suffragettes were driven out of the news altogether, while Liberal newspapers swallowed their doubts and closed ranks around Asquith and his ministers. During the campaign itself, the WSPU abandoned stone-throwing, with one significant exception. On 21 December, Selina Martin threw a bottle into Asquith’s car just after he got out. The purpose was not assault but to get her and Leslie Hall into prison so that the WSPU could manufacture a forcible feeding ‘incident’ for propaganda purposes. *Votes for Women* duly claimed that Martin and Hall had been ‘tortured’ and that their experiences amounted to ‘Atrocities in an English prison’.⁹⁰ The WSPU’s problem, however, was that few people took any notice. Newspapers seem to have regarded the ‘torture’ allegations as scurrilous: no London paper reported them, and the *Guardian* expressed scepticism when Nevinson drew them to its attention.⁹¹ It was probably in response to this lack of press concern that Lady Constance Lytton disguised herself as ‘Jane Warton’ and got herself arrested on 14 January, the day polling began.

Such tactics did the government little harm. The battle with the Lords polarized political opinion as had been intended. The Liberals lost seats, but did not

⁸⁶ *Votes for Women*, 26 Nov., p. 133. For biographical details about Godfrey and Evans, *Batley News*, 29 Oct., p. 6. For Godfrey’s state of health, TNA HO 144/1038/180782 (formerly HO 144/538/186626).
⁸⁷ *Votes for Women*, 24 Dec., p. 202.

⁸⁸ The *British Medical Journal*’s editorial policy supported forcible feeding, as did the majority of its correspondents. See particularly ‘Fasting prisoners and compulsory feeding’, 2 Oct., p. 997, and *ibid.*, 9 Oct., p. 1089.

⁸⁹ For examples of letters from Brailsford and Nevinson, *Times*, 22 Jan. 1910, p. 3; *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Jan., p. 12. For urging the government to reconsider, *ibid.*, 29 Oct., p. 6.

⁹⁰ *Votes for Women*, 31 Dec., p. 221, WSPU leaflet no. 64.

⁹¹ For Nevinson’s letter and editorial comment, *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Jan. 1910, p. 12; in *Times*, 22 Jan. 1910, p. 3, Brailsford complained that no London paper published the ‘torture’ allegations.

lose power. In parliament, many of the suffragettes' friends were among Labour and the Irish Nationalists, and the challenge to the Lords' veto brought them into effective coalition with the Liberals, offering the promise of reforming legislation impossible before 1909. The election result was the last of a series of blows the WSPU suffered at the turn of the year. On 1 December, it lost its legal action on the right of petition, and with it the pretext for political violence. Eight days later it lost its action against forcible feeding.⁹² The election result meant that it would have to resume negotiation with an unsympathetic Liberal government. On 31 January Emmeline Pankhurst announced the suspension of militancy in the 'truce' which was to last for most of the next two years.

This was a humiliating defeat, perceived as such by the WSPU's enemies and some of its candid friends. The home secretary minuted that the suffragettes had 'caved in': the *Daily News* congratulated itself on having always maintained the futility of political violence and hoped that the WSPU leadership had recognized the fact.⁹³ The excuse for the organization's volte-face was the promise of the 'Conciliation Bill' (an attempt to find common ground between the parties for a women's suffrage measure) brokered by Brailsford, which the WSPU accepted in late January.⁹⁴ But the germ of the idea can be seen in an article published in *The Nation* on 9 October, and it is probably not a coincidence that Brailsford was on its staff.⁹⁵ It suggested that Asquith receive a deputation of the non-militants and make a speech deprecating political violence but promising franchise reform in the next parliament. At the time, Christabel Pankhurst vehemently rejected this proposal, demanding a government-sponsored Women's Enfranchisement Bill forced into law with as much energy as was being devoted to the Budget.⁹⁶ It was the WSPU's defeat which, three months later, forced the organization into accepting an unsatisfactory compromise considerably less promising than what *The Nation* had suggested.

It is understandable that pressure groups should cultivate a heroic self-image and create around themselves a mythology in which every defeat is a moral victory and every moral victory leads to the inevitable triumph of the cause. But the suffragette mythology visibly fails to explain the events of 1909–10. Besides claiming that militants were independent free agents, feminist historiography has consistently argued that the events of 1909 – in particular, the introduction of forcible feeding – only stiffened resolve in the ranks.⁹⁷ If that was so, the obvious questions are why the WSPU declared the truce, and why its members obeyed, rather than fight the issue out there and then. There was no lack of aggressive

⁹² *Times*, 2 Dec., p. 3, 10 Dec., p. 3.

⁹³ For the home secretary's comments, TNA HO 144/1054/187986, item 9. 'The militants' truce', *Daily News*, 1 Feb. 1910, p. 5.

⁹⁴ For the development of the 'Conciliation Bill' idea, Rosen, *Rise up women!*, pp. 130–1.

⁹⁵ 'The suffragist deadlock: a suggestion', *Nation*, 9 Oct., pp. 37–8.

⁹⁶ 'The use of physical force', *Votes for Women*, 15 Oct., p. 40.

⁹⁷ E. Pethick-Lawrence, *My part in a changing world* (London, 1938), p. 240; S. S. Holton, *Suffrage days: stories from the women's suffrage movement* (London, 1996), p. 146.

language in the autumn of 1909. On being sentenced after the Bingley Hall demonstration, Mary Leigh shouted: 'We condemn the men who go to the next political meeting to death! To death!' On the same occasion, Selina Martin expressed her sorrow that she had failed to injure Asquith and declared that: 'As he will not listen to words I think it is time that blows should be struck.' After the Bristol stone-throwing, Ellen Pitman declared to a detective that 'the next time I shall go for the cabinet ministers and members of parliament'.⁹⁸ If they were free agents, why did they not carry out their bloodthirsty intentions? Instead, when Emmeline Pankhurst did indeed 'turn coward' and ask the women to stop, they obeyed.

What the suffragette army lacked was not discipline, but numbers, and a coherent strategy. Not enough people were prepared to be militant. If thousands of women had been willing to storm meetings and throw stones, the government might have been forced into concessions, but when the WSPU could never assemble more than about 300–400 on any militant occasion, and could only rely on about 100 for a sustained campaign – one third of whom were its own employees or 'professional' militants – its activities could be treated as a law-and-order problem rather than one requiring urgent political reform.⁹⁹ Given its lack of numbers, the WSPU had been obliged to rely on moral effect rather than force, and, in its early years, this strategy was highly effective. Political violence, however, threw away this advantage. The 'double shuffle', depending as it did upon presenting suffragettes as whiter-than-white idealists persecuted for demanding ordinary political rights, worked so long as they could be seen as victims, but public sympathy rapidly evaporated when they emerged as aggressors. WSPU strategy was inept in the party political as well as the general political sense. The organization only represented a threat to a Liberal government when it had the support of public opinion, because the majority of those who supported votes for women were Liberals or Labour voters. Violence directed against the Liberals – in particular, the threats to kill and injure ordinary voters who attended meetings – was a colossal mistake which alienated the natural supporters of women's suffrage, and by the time the WSPU realized its blunder, it was too late. The passions which might have been aroused by forcible feeding could not be mobilized on the suffragettes' side.

Historians have long recognized that WSPU political violence became a positive obstruction to the cause it claimed to champion, but have usually dated this development to 1912 and to a blind lashing-out in retaliation for public unconcern and violence directed against the suffragettes themselves.¹⁰⁰ Analysis of the events of 1908–9, however, presents a different picture. The evidence is that the WSPU

⁹⁸ *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 22 Sept., p. 4; *Times*, 23 Sept., p. 10; Forsythe, *Penal discipline*, p. 107.

⁹⁹ 300–400 is the number given in most accounts of suffragette demonstrations, e.g. 'Black Friday' in Nov. 1910. Bearman, 'Examination of suffragette violence', p. 394, argues that active bombers and arsonists in 1913–14 numbered 100 or less.

¹⁰⁰ For example, Harrison, 'The act of militancy', p. 47.

began to confuse success as an organization with success for the cause. Escalations in militancy brought newspaper headlines and large donations, so they became something pursued for their own sake, regardless of political effect.¹⁰¹ This policy led inevitably to political violence and then terrorist tactics, and it has to be blamed on the conscious decisions of the leadership rather than an over-enthusiastic rank and file or wrongs done to the suffragettes. The Pankhursts and Pethick-Lawrences were carried along by their promises of quick results and the needs of their organization, and perhaps by having come to believe their own propaganda. The leadership lost sight of the need to persuade and began to believe that it could intimidate its way to the vote. In 1910, the WSPU realized its mistake in time. From 1912, nothing would halt its march towards a disaster only averted by the greater disaster of the First World War.

¹⁰¹ For contemporary criticism on these lines, Billington-Greig, 'Militant suffrage movement', pp. 186–9; David Lloyd George, 'Votes for women and organised lunacy', *Fraser's Magazine*, July 1913, quoted in *Western Daily Mercury*, 21 June 1913, p. 7.