

## VOTES FOR WOMEN ©

Condensed for the *Women & Politics* website by Dr Helen Jones from her book *In her own name: a history of women in South Australia* revised edition (Adelaide, Wakefield Press, 1994).

On a hot December morning in 1894, a week before Christmas, the South Australian House of Assembly voted on the third reading of the Constitution Amendment Bill: 'The Ayes were sonorous and cheery, the Noes despondent like muffled bells'. When the result was announced, thirty-one in favour and fourteen against, the House resounded to loud cheering as South Australia's Parliament acknowledged its decision to give votes to women. The legislation made South Australia one of the first places in the world to admit women to the parliamentary suffrage; it was alone in giving them the right to stand for Parliament. Its passage caused elation, rejoicing and relief among those who had laboured to achieve it, for the Act opened the way for women's political equality and their fuller participation in public life.

Before this Act, one level of rights and responsibilities existed for men, another for women. These were determined under the Constitution of 1855-56, which allowed eligible men over twenty-one years to vote and to stand for election for the House of Assembly. Men over thirty years with further residential and property qualifications were eligible to vote and stand for election to the Legislative Council. The masculine gender only, or the word 'person', assumed to be male, was used in the Constitution. Women could neither vote nor stand for Parliament. For women to be enabled to vote the Constitution must be altered and any constitutional amendment required the vote of an absolute majority of both Houses. That meant the vote of at least one more than half the number of elected members of each House, and not simply a majority of members present.

The 1894 Act reflected a basic change of attitude by the legislators. It meant the end of the two-tier system of citizenship and it brought South Australia into the vanguard of social change internationally. Few governments anywhere had by then granted votes to women - two of the United States and New Zealand (1893) were the most important - and none had done so on such liberal terms as South Australia.

Moves for women's political equality were part of a wider movement for women's rights in western democracies in the later nineteenth century. In Britain John Stuart Mill wrote *The Enfranchisement of Women* in 1853 and introduced a Bill for women's suffrage in the House of Commons in 1867, arguing for natural justice. In the United States the campaigns for women's suffrage began as early as the 1840s, while in New Zealand and the Australian colonies from the 1860s similar themes were publicly discussed, especially in response to Mill's writings. It is not surprising, in view of South Australia's free origins that it acted early on suffrage reform. The voluntary, mainly Protestant settlers comprised nearly equal numbers of men and women and the colony's early political foundations provided fertile ground for further reform. Manhood suffrage, based on one man, one vote was written into the 1855-56 Constitution, as was the secret ballot. The only unenfranchised citizens, apart from those in gaol and of unsound mind, were women.

Women's suffrage stemmed from the nature of the society and of the people who worked for the reform. Many who sought a new life in South Australia after its foundation in 1836 were social idealists. The continuing shiploads of British immigrants brought fresh ideas and many hoped to build a new society, free from the ills of the old world they knew. Women's suffrage emerged among their egalitarian ideals.

South Australia's women's suffrage movement began with two distinct advantages. Firstly, the colony's female ratepayers were enfranchised in 1861, under the Municipal Corporations Act. Women had been lodging their votes as a matter of course since then in municipal and local government elections. Secondly, higher education for girls and women was officially encouraged. On the one hand, girls were viewed as wives and mothers of the future. All girls in the state primary schools were taught the domestically useful skill, needlework, and some learned cooking. But on the other hand, the state endorsed higher education for women. University of Adelaide classes were open to women from the first, in 1876 and Parliament insisted, against British reluctance, that they should be admitted to degrees. The relevant enabling legislation, the earliest in Australia, was passed in 1880. Again, South Australia's earliest state secondary school was the 1879 Advanced School for Girls, the first of its kind in Australia and academically successful.

Women's capability was considered in the suffrage debate. What *was* 'woman's sphere'? Notions emerged of female delicacy and inadequacy; of presumed female household competence and incompetence in non-domestic affairs; of male skill and supremacy in the public sphere, but also of male failure in legislation and administration concerning women and children. All these were mulled over in the great debate on women's rightful sphere: do women need the vote? do they want it? and if they get it what will they do with it? The dilemma was encapsulated when one member of Parliament agreed that women could make good doctors, but scoffed at the idea of a 'female brigade' in Parliament.

### **Parliamentary action**

What were the immediate reasons for change? These may be found partly in the colony's general political conditions. Before party lines were strongly drawn in the 1890s individual members could make their own choices in Parliament. Meanwhile, forces were at work influencing the general public and politicians; women and men individually and in organizations conducted a determined campaign for women's suffrage.

The earliest direct action was Dr Edward C. Stirling's resolution (not a concrete proposal or a bill) introduced in the House of Assembly on 22 July 1885. Stirling moved in favour of women's suffrage for both Houses of Parliament for property-owning widows and single women. His motion had an attentive hearing. It excluded married women, because Stirling thought that a restricted proposal would have a good chance of acceptance, whereas universal suffrage might not. He was testing the feeling of the House. He made a long speech touching philosophical and practical matters. He pointed out that while half of the population was excluded from voting, South Australia's boasted representative government was merely 'a hollow mockery of an ideal'. Women's influence, he claimed, should be open, and not 'the underhand influence of the boudoir or the backstairs'.

Stirling applied his scientific habit of thought in presenting two sides of the question: logical reasons for women to be given the vote, and objections which he foresaw and refuted. He based his case firmly on John Stuart Mill's arguments, buttressed by his own opinion that women were a responsible sex, some unfairly saddled with taxation while they had no voice in the disposal of these taxes, some managing farms or businesses and employing enfranchised male labourers even though such a female employer 'was not a capable citizen in the eyes of the law and could not vote'. He recognized that women's opinions would be valuable in certain questions of state such as:

... education, especially of the young; the condition and treatment of the poor and sick; the discipline and management of prisons and reformatories; the regulation of hours of labor for women and children in factories and other places; the efficient maintenance of charitable institutions and the distribution of charities; and the laws relative to the protection of females.

He added to this list questions regarding 'judicious economy', the domain of the good housekeeper. By what right, he asked, did one half of the community set itself up to judge what was the proper sphere for the other half? If women asked what was men's sphere, it would be considered 'a piece of arrogant assumption not to be tolerated for one moment'.

Citing the successful precedents of the Isle of Man, which had allowed female suffrage for unmarried women of property since 1880, and of Wyoming which had universal suffrage since 1869, he requested 'equity and justice'. He ended his speech amid cheers and watched the House vote in favour of the resolution without a division. This appeared to foreshadow support in the House of Assembly for an appropriate bill. But the Premier, John Downer, did not intend to make women's suffrage a government measure. He advised Stirling that he could present his own bill. In September 1885 he began the process but fell ill and had to await the next session to bring it forward.

Subsequently, women's suffrage was raised in seven separate bills in the South Australian Parliament between 1886 and 1894. The introduction of women's suffrage measures was as follows:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Introduced by</b>	<b>Premier</b>	<b>Result</b>
1885 22 July	E C Stirling (MHA)	J W Downer (as a resolution)	Passed
1886 16 June	E C Stirling (MHA)	J W Downer	Failed
1888 12 July	R Caldwell (MHA)	T Playford	Failed
1889 30 October	R Caldwell (MHA)	J A Cockburn	Failed
1890 2 July	R Caldwell (MHA)	T Playford	Failed
1891 14 July	J Warren (MLC)	T Playford	Failed
1893 6 July	J A Cockburn (MHA)	C C Kingston	Failed
1894 4 July	J H Gordon (MLC)	C C Kingston	Passed

Perhaps coincidentally, all five men who introduced women's suffrage bills were of Scottish ancestry: four were Scottish-born while Stirling, born in South Australia, was the son of

Scots. Of the seven Bills, all but the last had encumbrances: Stirling's omitted single women, Caldwell's and Warren's were confined to women of property, while the 1893 Bill which Cockburn introduced on behalf of the new Premier, Kingston, had a complex referendum provision. Finally, the 1894 Bill was drafted in the terms of the Women's Suffrage League constitution, without qualifications and on equal terms with the suffrage provisions men enjoyed.

In 1886 Stirling again presented his 1885 measure practically unchanged as a Bill. It was debated between July and October, but failed to reach the required absolute majority. Members had swung away from the unanimous support of the previous year, some arguing that the vote should be extended to all women, not just those who owned property and were not married. Others had begun to fear for their own political future if they voted in favour. The development of the Labor movement played a part too, for some members were reluctant to see the vote of property owners strengthened. Again, it is likely that the innovation which Stirling proposed was so startling that as suffrage campaigner Serena Lake said later, 'many hon. members were undecided whether to treat the whole thing as a burlesque or to wax righteously indignant'. They erred on the side of caution.

The parliamentary history of women's suffrage legislation reflected the public's changing views which moved from relative indifference to more general interest and, for some, to deep commitment. Some remained apathetic or hostile, but quickening interest was evident in newspaper correspondence and editorial columns, parliamentary debates and the activities of various organizations. Attitudes ranged from conservative and patriarchal to sympathetic and enthusiastic. In Parliament members spoke proudly of their own ideal family situations. Women were idealised, both outside and within Parliament.

Perhaps the archetypal traditional view was put by Martin Basedow MLC, who represented mainly German electors in Barossa. The father of eleven children through his two successive wives he eulogised home, hearth and 'genuine womanhood with all its fascinating and captivating charms'. But another Councillor, city medical practitioner Dr Sylvanus Magarey refuted such romanticism as thralldom for women. By placing woman on a pedestal, he said that Basedow had 'stood her on a camp-oven, and armed her with a rolling-pin and a frying-pan for a shield'. Yet another conservative, Ebenezer Ward, asked 'Should the ministering angel be dragged down to the level of a politician?'

Other Parliamentarians linked their demand for the suffrage to the need for improved conditions for those exploited women working in factories, schools and in domestic service, and to the ills of a colony in economic depression. Still others sought a different ideal, not of women's perfection, but of fulfilment of their potential and their benign influence on both families and society. The harnessing of idealism and reality guided the policies and direction of the Women's Suffrage League.

### **The Women's Suffrage League**

The League's origins were in the Social Purity Society, formed by the Congregational clergyman J.C. Kirby, which had worked successfully to have the age of consent raised from thirteen to sixteen years in 1885. The 'Ladies Branch' of the society continued meeting monthly, under Mary Colton's presidency. As the secretary Mary Lee explained, they 'began

to realize that a propelling motor on the down grade of womanhood was that they had no recognition as citizens'. Mary Lee stated the case for women's suffrage to a meeting on 6 June 1888. She then put these three resolutions to the meeting:

1. That the moral, social, and industrial interests of women would be advanced by women's political enfranchisement.
2. That, as the ultimate aim of this Society is the moral elevation of women, the Social Purity Society stands pledged to support all efforts likely to assist this aim.' Hence it is resolved
3. That this committee, in the name of the Society, pledges itself to advance and support the cause of woman suffrage in this colony.

Out of these resolutions the Women's Suffrage League emerged.

The Social Purity Society Ladies branch carried the resolutions unanimously, then consulted with the Revd J C Kirby. With other 'friends of this cause' he arranged a meeting which decided 'to urge by every legitimate means the course of woman's suffrage in this colony', in the belief that woman's political enfranchisement was absolutely necessary 'to the right fulfilment of her duties as a citizen, and to her moral, social and industrial interests'. Kirby's committee organized a public meeting on 20 July 1888 at the YMCA rooms in Adelaide. There, the South Australian Women's Suffrage League was formed at a meeting of 'about eighty ladies, several members of Parliament, ministers of religion and others'. Dr Edward Stirling, no longer in Parliament, took the chair.

Mary Lee's speech was filled with 'heart-stirring appeals and thrilling oratory'. Stirling spoke in his usual interesting, informative way and referred to the new women's suffrage Bill which had been tabled by Robert Caldwell MHA. He observed with some amusement that one of the chief hindrances to achieving the suffrage was because:

. . . not only male but female opponents seemed to rely on the sentiment which . . . was provoked by a terrible fear that the act of going to the polling booth . . . would in some mysterious way effect a radical change in their characters . . . and constitution.

The meeting elected a council of twenty-four. Stirling became president, and Mary Lee and Hector McLennan, from Kirby's Port Adelaide Congregational church, were co-secretaries. Mary Colton was absent abroad. The meeting drew up a constitution and planned to form branches. Within a week a second meeting increased the council to twenty-eight members and made Rosetta Birks treasurer. Both she and Mary Lee were to remain in their positions until the suffrage was won.

This meeting revised the Constitution by unanimously removing a provision on age of voting. It then remained unaltered for the entire suffrage campaign and read:

1. That the women of the country should have a voice in the choice of representatives to the House of Legislature.
2. That the qualifications entitling women to vote should be the same as those which apply to men.
3. That while woman's suffrage is desired no claim is put forward for the right to sit as representatives.

These straightforward principles underpinned the entire campaign. The third provision did not preclude women's representation as members of Parliament but it placed the first two firmly in the forefront. It was neither through lack of desire nor will that the suffragists did not directly seek representation: it was rather with the shrewd understanding that a single aim based on equality might well succeed. Concentration on one issue avoided distraction from the central principle of votes for women on equal terms with men.

### **Who were the suffragists?**

The people who worked for women's suffrage in South Australia were known as suffragists (the word 'suffragette' was not coined until 1906). They included both women and men from all walks of life who lived mainly in or near the capital city, Adelaide, though many were country people. Many too were church members, mainly of Nonconformist denominations. Brief profiles of leading suffragists follow. (Note: EC Stirling has been discussed earlier.)

#### ***Mary Lee***

Among the suffragists several of the most influential set the tempo of the campaign. At its heart was Mrs Mary Lee. An Irish widow, well read and at home in any social group, she arrived in South Australia in 1879 aged fifty-eight to nurse her sick son and remained after he died. She had spent the years of the Irish famine in Armagh; she and her husband had seven children. The famine may well have helped shape her social values. In her North Adelaide home she took in boarders for income and devoted herself to social causes. She helped the sick and needy, joined the Female Refuge committee, and then the Ladies Social Purity Society which worked successfully with its male counterpart. She helped poor working women in the clothing trades and in 1889 publicly proposed the formation a women's trades union, helped plan its foundation and was its secretary for two years. With clarity of purpose, determination and compassion she sought practical solutions. She spoke out fearlessly against injustices and held to a strong Christian faith. Formerly Church of England, in South Australia she moved towards Nonconformist beliefs. She proposed the Women Suffrage League's establishment and became its secretary, chief advocate and publicist.

#### ***Mary Colton***

Mary Colton was beloved in South Australia. She was serene, self-effacing and yet well known for her practical good works in a wide range of charities. Born in London in 1822 she came to Adelaide as a girl, married and had nine children. Her husband John Colton, a merchant who became mayor of Adelaide, later entered Parliament and was twice Premier. Mary took up numerous causes including the Female Refuge and the Social Purity Society where she worked alongside her husband. Wesleyan Methodist; she taught Sunday school for many years. She was a founder of the Adelaide Children's Hospital and foundation president from 1884 of the Young Women's Christian Association. Her husband was knighted in 1891 and in 1892 she became president of the Women's Suffrage League, a calm and efficient leader. To Mary Lee she was a 'most dearly loved friend'.

#### ***Elizabeth Nicholls***

Born in South Australia in 1850, Elizabeth Nicholls had lived for several years in England, then returned to Adelaide and became a Wesleyan Methodist Sunday school teacher. She married and had a family before devoting much time from 1888 to the Woman's Christian

Temperance Union, becoming Colonial president from 1889. That year she joined the Women's Suffrage League and from 1892 was on the Council. In September 1894 she became president of the Union's suffrage department. A cheerful, enthusiastic worker, she rallied her members with down to earth practical advice.

### ***Catherine Helen Spence***

Born in Scotland in 1825, Catherine Helen Spence came with her family to Adelaide in 1837. She had outstanding abilities, during her long life becoming a teacher, journalist, novelist, social and political reformer. All of these enterprises she had entered before South Australia's suffrage campaign began; she was widely esteemed. Through her work for child wards of the state she knew at first-hand some of the least fortunate in society. She also had wealthy friends and travelled though she lived simply. Her Unitarian faith underpinned her Christian beliefs. Her intellectual attainments were clear in her incisive articles and lectures. She especially promoted proportional representation to achieve what she called 'effective voting'. Her slowness in taking up the call for women's suffrage was because she hoped effective voting would come first. By joining the Women's Suffrage League and becoming vice-president in 1891 she added lustre to the cause.

### ***Rosetta Birks***

Daughter of South Australian pioneers, Rosetta Birks was born in 1856. She grew up in comfortable circumstances, was a devoted Baptist, and married her sister's widower. She became stepmother to his six children and took up public causes including the Social Purity Society and then the Women's Suffrage League. She remained its treasurer throughout the campaign, travelled to other colonies and to England and kept in touch with suffragists in those places. She held drawing room suffrage meetings in her home. Kindly and firm she was generous to the League and a capable financial organiser.

### ***Serena Lake***

Born in Devon in 1842, Serena Thorne came from an evangelical Bible Christian Methodist family and became a preacher. The church sent her to Australia and in 1870 she arrived in Adelaide, filling the Adelaide Town hall for her first meeting. The next year she married a Bible Christian minister, lived in the country and had seven children of whom only one survived. She joined the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and from 1889-92 was its suffrage superintendant, gaining numerous adherents to the cause of votes for women through her powerful rhetoric. She travelled extensively in the country on this work. Her abhorrence of alcohol fired her persistence; she believed the women's vote would wipe out the liquor trade. For unknown reasons she ceased this work in 1892.

### ***Augusta Zadow***

Born in Germany in 1846, Augusta Zadow was well educated, then travelled as a governess and lady's companion in Europe where she saw women working as beasts of burden. In London's East End she became a tailoress and helped sweated sewing workers. She married a German tailor, and with their son they sought a new life in Adelaide. There she found some similar poor conditions and laboured to help working women. When she and others planned a trade union they had Mary Lee's help; Augusta Zadow strongly encouraged the Working Women's Trades Union, of which she was treasurer, to support the Women's Suffrage

League. Very short in stature, she made heartfelt speeches at League meetings and believed that women's suffrage could transform industrial conditions.

### ***Joseph Coles Kirby***

Born in England in 1837, Kirby became a Congregational minister in 1864 in Sydney, married and came to the Port Adelaide district where there was much poverty. He and his wife had five children. He preached thoughtfully on social questions to large audiences. His main themes were social purity, temperance, and for some years, women's suffrage. He worked hard on committees and initiated the Social Purity Society which helped have the age of consent raised in 1885. When requested by the Society's Ladies Branch he organised the meeting to arrange the launch of the Women's Suffrage League, then consistently supported the League's work as active councillor until the suffrage was won.

### ***Robert Caldwell***

Born in 1843 in Scotland, Caldwell came to South Australia as a child. He read widely and became a farmer. An earnest Methodist member of the Temperance Alliance, he and his wife had nine sons. He entered Parliament's House of Assembly in 1884 and presented three Bills for women's enfranchisement, all only for women of property. He furthered the suffrage cause by keeping the issue before Parliament, but not on the League's terms.

### ***Sylvanus Magarey***

Born in Adelaide in 1850, Magarey gained his medical degree in Melbourne and practised in Adelaide with special interest in babies and children's health. He and his wife had seven children; they belonged to the Church of Christ. He founded the Temperance Alliance and was a foundation Councillor of the Women's Suffrage League. In the Legislative Council from 1888, he contributed to gaining women's suffrage legislation.

### ***John Alexander Cockburn***

Cockburn was born in Scotland in 1850, studied medicine in London and emigrated with his wife Sarah in 1875 to practise in Jamestown, north of Adelaide, where he became the town's mayor, and was elected member for the district of Burra in the House of Assembly in 1884. With their two children the Cockburns moved nearer Adelaide. He became Minister of Education, then Premier in 1888-89. Forceful and perceptive, with an attractive manner, he supported votes for women both within Parliament and on public platforms. Again Minister of Education, he was influential in the Bill's final success.

### **Campaigning**

The campaign itself ran for nearly six and a half years, from July 1888 when the Women's Suffrage League was founded, although votes for women had been discussed for years before then. The League's meetings in Adelaide were reported by the daily newspapers, and leading members became publicly known, sometimes caricatured and criticised, sometimes praised. As League records have apparently been destroyed press accounts of meetings and of individual members' comments and speeches have proved invaluable.

Other organisations assisted the Women's Suffrage League. The three main groups were temperance societies, trade unions and churches. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union gave strong backing from 1889, and in turn had support from the men's Temperance Alliance



on suffrage affairs. The Working Women's Trades Union and the United Trades and Labor Council committed themselves to women's suffrage and supported the League. The United Labor Party, formed in 1890 had a loose working relationship with the League. Some influential Nonconformist denominations - Methodists, Baptists and Congregationalists - supported the League's principles. Youth groups such as church, literary and young men's societies ardently discussed and debated the issues. Some well known clergymen and certain members of Parliament lent their support.

Opponents of women's suffrage cannot be so readily identified, although they included some prominent defenders of the status quo. Opposed were men with an interest in the liquor trade who feared that the women's vote would lead to restricted liquor sales. Traditionalists who opposed in the churches included some Church of England clergy, and influential Roman Catholic and Lutheran clergy. All of these formed potentially powerful but unorganised opposition. Anti-suffragists too included individuals whose vehement opposition emerged publicly in newspaper letters and articles, in some adverse Parliamentary petitions and most powerfully in Parliamentary debates.

The Women's Suffrage League was the vehicle for those already committed to its principles and for later converts. The newspapers had earlier commented editorially and published news of the issue. Although the daily *Register* gave wide and usually sympathetic coverage, the *Advertiser* did not support women's suffrage until near the close of the campaign. After the League's establishment, the number of suffrage letters to newspapers increased. A frequent correspondent under the pseudonym Zenobia argued,

. . . What women want is to assist in procuring a proper set of men for the Parliament. We . . . want the sort of men that will pay more attention to the rights and needs of women, . . . and the rights and needs and defence of the home than the men hitherto found in our . . . Legislature. All those a woman loves are injured or benefited by the laws of the land . . . and by the administration of the laws. Without a vote the woman is powerless to . . . mould or amend these laws.

Mary Lee too relied on reasoned argument and enlivened her writing and speeches by passionate conviction. Her leadership, combined with the steady support and work of other women, and of many men, increased the tempo of the League's educational campaign.

In 1885 an Adelaide journal, the *Lantern*, claimed that women did not want the vote, for 'This is not the country of the strong-minded, or even of the unprotected, female'. But within two years the journalistic temper was different. In 1890, *Quiz* reported Mary Lee's after-dinner speech at a farewell banquet for single tax crusader Henry George and wrote, 'Most women would have said Mr. Chairman and gentlemen - he-he-he - thank you very much - he-he-he, and would then have sat down. But Mary stood up to the extent . . . of five feet nothing, and spoke . . . 'She seized the opportunity to regret that women had no place in the 'body politic' and to advocate the cause of the Women's Suffrage League. No more was heard of her lacking fire; instead there were complaints to the contrary. A newspaper correspondent urged her to follow the noble example of those women 'too modest and refined to wrangle publicly in the Press and on the platform on questions of political expediency'.

The League's Council remained relatively stable except for members leaving the colony or their circumstances changing. In July 1890 McLennan, though remaining on the Council, resigned as the League co-secretary. Mary Lee continued as sole secretary. Stirling 'deemed it fitting that a woman should preside' over a women's movement and welcomed Lady Colton as president at the May 1892 annual meeting. He became a vice-president. The Council was increased to thirty-two, with equal numbers of each sex.

While the League alone campaigned specifically and actively on the single issue of women's suffrage, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union adopted women's suffrage as one of its general aims at its first colonial convention in August 1889. An American missionary, Miss Jessie Ackermann, had recently established new unions in South Australia through evangelist-style meetings in city and country, increasing membership to over 1,000. A number of the new unions formed suffrage 'departments'; the convention appointed a suffrage superintendant, Serena Lake. Her energy and experience as a Bible Christian preacher galvanized the Woman's Christian Temperance Union into action on the suffrage. For a time she and Elizabeth Nicholls who was president of both the Adelaide Union and the Colonial Union formed an effective partnership.

However, it was the League which directed the campaign and its heart stood Mary Lee whose pen, as Serena Lake said, 'had flashed throughout the land'. Her suffrage writings were circulated within South Australia and to interested women in all the Australian colonies. As secretary she dealt with membership applications, collected annual subscriptions of one shilling, organized petitions and deputations, willingly addressed meetings in city and country and wrote many letters to individuals and newspapers.

### **Mary Lee's letters to women**

Her three persuasive 'Letters to Women', first published in the *Register* in March, April and May 1890, were reprinted and circulated. The first letter linked the recent formation of the Working Women's Trades Union with the need for fundamental change in women's status through the suffrage. Mary Lee recognized the indifference of many working women to the suffrage; she attributed this to their 'long subjection' or to 'grinding poverty and habitual humiliation'. She saw hope in the way some had nerved themselves to endurance. The second letter was a cry from the heart refuting the old so-called argument 'she does not ask for it'. She regarded the popular question 'What is woman's sphere?' as a 'parrot cry'. Although she acknowledged that the home was woman's most privileged sphere she believed that 'however and wherever woman can be of best and widest usefulness to her fellow men and women, there, by God's providence, is her allotted sphere'. She urged every woman who could influence an elector to see that he gave his vote 'as a sledgehammer' to destroy the 'hoary injustice' to women. Do not let us, she urged, continue to deserve the taunt 'She does not ask for it'.

The third Letter to Women discussed 'agreeable arranged selfish interests' which impeded suffrage legislation when Parliament put off suffrage consideration in favour of 'the Dog Licence Bill, the Sparrows Destruction Bill, a road or a railway, a bridge or a well...' Keenly aware of the poor and oppressed, she maintained: 'We insist on liberty that all may share the blessings of liberty...Discontent is a dangerous element, discontent allied with a sense of injustice is a smouldering fire'. Mary Lee was no revolutionary, but from her wide

reading she drew lessons from the past and expressed them in rhetorical style. Her rousing words exposed her to criticism of being unwomanly. While she showed no public sign that criticism wounded her, she privately acknowledged her 'mortifications'.

Mary Lee held few illusions about human nature, male or female. She commented in a private letter that 'in every attempt at organization among women there always arises the shabby jangle and scramble for *everybody to be first*'. She deplored the 'friperies and frivolities' which women enjoyed. She also recognized the League's obstacles. In 1891 she observed:

It has been so much the custom (I think I might venture to quote Carlyle and say 'Damned Custom') to denounce every proposal emanating from women in the interests of women as 'a woman's fad' that it is difficult to obtain a fair hearing even from the most well-disposed of men on any subject: I felt this painfully at the beginning of this campaign but 'Prayer moves the hand that moves the world' and we must not waste time in looking backwards.

She understood political realities better as the campaign progressed. Doubtless the politicians, past and in office, on the League's Council provided insights into the political implications and parliamentary handling of the suffrage.

### **The League's strategies**

The League maintained public pressure on politicians. Its Council met regularly and arranged public meetings in the city, suburbs and the country which were usually reported in some detail, especially in the *Register*. Years after the suffrage was won, Elizabeth Nicholls recorded its varied, comprehensive methods. They were:

- Addresses from Public Platforms.
- Drawingroom meetings.
- Tactful suggestions to Debating Societies that they should discuss the question and send a reply giving the result.
- Literature on the subject widely recommended and sold, booklets and leaflets written and distributed in thousands and especially sent to Members of, and Candidates for ..Parliament, also to all kinds of societies and churches.
- Petitions to both Houses of Parliament.
- Good use made of the Press which was favourable, publishing generous reports of meetings, also articles on the subject and opening its columns now and then to vigorous correspondence.
- Strenuous work in opposing objectionable measures in the House and supporting those approved.
- Full attendance of women in the Galleries when the question was being debated in the House.
- Co-operation with advocates of all political and religious creeds and all social levels so long as they kept to the one subject.

There is no doubt that by constant discussions among members the League maintained what amounted to a skilful public relations campaign to reach many people and draw disparate groups together for the same end. From 1891, it had support from the Working Women's

Trades Union, the United Trades and Labor Council and the United Labor Party which had included 'Adult Suffrage' in its platform. None of these organizations wished to see extension of the vote to women property-holders which was being proposed in Parliament at that stage. In 1889 several of the major Nonconformist churches had pledged their support: many of the large body of Wesleyan Methodists, Baptists and Congregationalists swung in principle behind the League. These churches played an important role in the suffrage campaign. The Church of England in South Australia appeared content to remain quiet on the issue, whereas Lutheran pastors opposed it and the Roman Catholic journal *Southern Cross* disapproved. While some church members of all denominations remained opposed to women voting on traditional grounds, others were foremost in the Suffrage League and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

Petitions had significant influence. The earliest petition to Parliament in favour of women's suffrage, in July 1886, had come from the United Trades and Labor Council. It asked for the vote for women without a property qualification which Caldwell's Bill included. Later, the League organised numerous petitions and at least 20,000 signatures appeared on these. Some came from women only, for example one in 1889 from about 1700 women, most from various rural districts. Two years later 219 women based their petition on the grounds of 'no taxation without representation', noting that they were taxpayers under the 1884 Taxation Act 'irrespective of sex' but were denied the Parliamentary franchise to record their votes in the election of their 'taxmasters'. They had no such disability in municipal elections and asked for the privileges of voting or alternatively for exemption from the Taxation Act. No change occurred. Mary Lee sent out petition forms 'in all directions' couched in the words of the League's constitution.

Catherine Helen Spence's commitment to the League from 1891 was newsworthy. Her reasons for the change can be seen as going beyond her wish to wait for 'effective voting' to be implemented. It might have been linked with her interest in the women's rights campaigns in the United States, together with the increasing pressure for women's franchise in South Australia. Also she was very close to her brother John Brodie Spence, a member of the Women's Suffrage League Council, and to his daughter Lucy Spence Morice who knew the leaders of various reform movements, partly through her membership of the newly-founded Fabian society of which her husband James was secretary. Possibly too Catherine Helen Spence had been influenced by the Primitive Methodist Revd Hugh Gilmore who advocated all 'Forward' movements, particularly single tax and land reform which were among Spence's favourite causes. After she presided over the League's March 1891 public meeting, in June she joined a deputation led by House of Assembly member Robert Caldwell to the Premier, Thomas Playford where she, Lee, Gilmore and others spoke. Here she told of her own experience as a colonist of fifty-one years and a taxpayer who was now 'in her seventh decade and still had no more vote than a child of three years'. It was, she submitted to Playford, 'perfectly absurd to condemn half the human race to silence upon public questions'.

The Premier was non-committal, but signified only qualified support for Caldwell's property qualification proposal, which indeed the League did not endorse. A year later Caldwell's Bill was taken up again, unsuccessfully, by John Warren in the Legislative Council. Later deputations, in 1892 to Premier Holder and in 1893 to Premier Downer, gained support in principle though not in fact, but all had the advantage of publicity through the press.

Following the 1891 deputation, Mary Lee was well received when she addressed the United Trades and Labor Council to explain the League's views on Caldwell's property qualifications. She had written privately to a friend that the League should not support any property qualification which would 'alienate the great mass of labourers both mental and manual, "The Disinherited". Those who really need the vote'. Mary Lee's involvement with the women's trade union, her practical knowledge of working women, and her co-operation with Augusta Zadow all strengthened the League's case. Augusta Zadow spoke at both League and Temperance Union meetings, firmly committing the Working Women's Trades Union to women's suffrage. She told a public suffrage meeting in March 1893 that it was the unanimous opinion of her union that the suffrage should be granted to 'one and all'. She optimistically expected that women, when voters, would insist on labour and capital meeting in an early conference.

South Australian Women's Suffrage League members kept in close touch with suffrage moves elsewhere. Campaigning had begun in 1884 in Victoria, where an unsuccessful bill was introduced in 1889. In September 1891 Mary Lee wrote, 'I see that New Zealand is moving on bravely. We are racing each other! How grand it is'. No bill was presented in 1892. In that year there were two changes of government, each pre-occupied with bad economic conditions. Playford fell to Holder, who in turn gave way to Downer. The League recognized the force of external factors, both political and economic, in delaying their cause. Mary Lee lamented the Broken Hill miners' strike (which was affecting South Australia's economy adversely) in broad human terms, and visited the distant centre to assess the serious suffering of families for the Adelaide Poor Relief committee. She seized opportunities in Broken Hill to connect women's suffrage with wide public issues.

In 1891, the University of Adelaide's first woman graduate in medicine, Laura Fowler, was hailed by suffragists as a splendid example of women's intellectual and practical skills; she soon became House Surgeon at the Adelaide Children's Hospital. In much the same way the University's earliest science graduate, Edith Dornwell, who was also the first woman to graduate, had been acclaimed in 1885. She had received a state education at both primary school and the Advanced School for Girls. In the deputation to Playford in June 1891 Mary Lee linked state provision of education with women's advancement, saying that the government 'might as well attempt to fling a lasso over the neck of a whirlwind as to attempt to arrest the forces in this colony; the education of the people ha(s) been set in motion'.

The argument was one of which the public was becoming increasingly aware. When Fabian Mrs Clotilda Marson moved the adoption of the League's 1891 report she mentioned the 'evil' of the idea of separating brothers and sisters 'by educating the one in political life and the other away altogether from that sphere'. This was not entirely true as both girls and boys in South Australian schools studied Catherine Helen Spence's small but comprehensive civics book of 1880, *The Laws We Live Under*.

In June 1892, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union's offer to assist in collecting signatures for League petitions was accepted. The League gained willing workers and wider contacts, especially in the country. At this time the Union's membership was about 2000 and the president, Elizabeth Nicholls, had joined the League's Council. Serena Lake in her 1890

Union report had claimed: 'Womanhood Suffrage means the ultimate abolition of the drink traffic'. In the next year she declared:

Empty-headed men, vicious men, selfish and prejudiced men, above and beyond all others, the men interested in the awful and abominable liquor traffic, are in mortal fear of our possessing that sword the ballot; but the men who stand in the van of the world's progressive march today, the clear-headed, true-hearted far-seeing heroes, whose swords gleam wherever wrongs are to be righted, these men are working steadily for our enfranchisement.

Women suffragists were not generally anti-male. Elizabeth Nicholls, a more restrained but equally determined advocate, remarked in 1892 in a League deputation to the Premier, Frederick Holder, that the women of her organization wanted the suffrage in order that 'the moral sense of women might be felt in the laws and institutions of the country'. She debunked the claim that women's 'purity, delicacy and refinement' would be endangered by the franchise, observing 'surely if those qualities could stand the strain of ordinary life they could equally stand the strain of going to the polling booth'.

In July 1892 public opinion was tested when the *Evening Journal* conducted a reader survey, repeated in nine issues, asking nine questions on women's political status. The first was 'Should all women more than 21 years vote for the election of members of Parliament?' The Women's Suffrage League and the Wattle Blossom League (the women's section of the Australian Natives' Association) helped count and classify the results. The last question was, 'Should women limit themselves entirely to the home circle instead of occupying any official position outside?' There were 623 answers to the first question; 338 answered 'yes'; 615 answered the last question, of whom 314 answered 'no'. The total respondents comprised about 390 males and 230 females. The results indicated awakening public interest and some shift of opinion away towards reform.

Catherine Helen Spence reinforced her commitment to women's suffrage at a League meeting in March 1893, where Mary Lee, Elizabeth Nicholls and Augusta Zadow also spoke. Spence was about to travel to the Chicago World's Fair congresses and then to lecture on women's suffrage and 'effective voting' in the United States and elsewhere. She moved successfully that:

As no country can be justly considered free where one-half of the people are denied the right of self-government, it is the opinion of this meeting that this right as conferred on men should as a matter of justice be extended to women on the same conditions as apply to men, and hence the Parliament of South Australia should be respectfully urged to grant the full suffrage to women without delay.

Characteristically, she emphasised general political justice.

### **The Kingston legislation**

Following the 1893 election Charles Kingston had defeated Downer by mid-June and took charge of a reformist government, with Holder, Cockburn and Downer, three former premiers, in his ministry and eight Labor members on the cross-benches eager to support

social reform measures. Kingston himself had voted against Stirling's 1886 Bill. Aware of changing public opinion he gradually moved to qualified support, then to make women's suffrage one of his earliest measures after assuming office. He recognised that by enfranchising women the number of city voters would be increased at the expense of the country. Consequently Labor, which was strong in the city and generally pro-Kingston might gain further House of Assembly seats. Cockburn and Holder added persuasive moral reasons; Kingston was apparently convinced on grounds of equity as well as strategy that women should vote. In July 1893 in the Assembly, Cockburn, Minister of Education, introduced Kingston's women's suffrage Bill, one which made all women eligible for the vote. New Zealand's historic legislation to enfranchise women passed in September 1893, a move which might have given increased confidence to South Australian legislators. But the Bill was hampered by complex referendum conditions involving a question to all House of Assembly electors and all adult women in the colony. They were to be asked two questions relating to the desirability of women's franchise for each House. This roundabout method was designed to undermine the conservative Legislative Council, partly by excluding women from being elected to Parliament. The clause caused public indignation and on the third reading in October it failed.

Soon after, one of *Quiz*'s satirical features, 'Telephone Talks', reported that Mary Lee, volatile and outspoken, had called William Blacker, Member for Noarlunga, 'an idiot' and had labelled the Labor Party 'a lot of nincompoops' for supporting the Bill with its referendum provisions. She had become a reporter's target. Some of her opponents greatly exaggerated her aims, like the newspaper correspondent 'Young South Australian' who called her a 'turbulent anarchist', then pictured her as a Madame Defarge:

If Mrs Lee obtains the power she desires and is permitted unrestrained to stir the seething cauldron of class discord I may live to see her sit knitting, counting the while the bleeding heads of the thrifty and learned as they fall beneath the strokes of a guillotine.

This was perhaps was one of the 'mortifications' she suffered; no other woman was denigrated in such a way. Though widely admired she never gained affectionate respect accorded Catherine Helen Spence and Mary Colton. But she was so closely identified in the public mind with the suffrage that in 1893 *Quiz* claimed, with tongue in cheek, that she was so well known that mail from abroad addressed to 'Mary Australasia' would go direct to her Barnard Street, North Adelaide home.

### **The great petition**

The League's largest single effort was to circulate a new petition throughout the colony from April to August 1894. Its wording was brief and simple, being the first two clauses of the League's constitution. This enterprise started before the 1894 Bill was presented to Parliament. It was signed by 11,600 people, about two thirds women. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union proved extremely helpful, claiming to have collected 8,000 of the signatures. The petition finally comprised several thousand sheets and would be presented to Parliament at a strategic time.

While the petition was circulating, Mary Lee went campaigning. In May she travelled north, mainly by train, to address meetings in Gawler, Quorn, Port Augusta, Port Pirie and other towns. Country newspapers differed on the suffrage question. Some, like the *Kapunda Herald* were indifferent, whereas the *Narracoorte Herald* took a conservative view of women's place and argued the futility of women's suffrage. But when the reform was won the editor cheerfully admitted that women could be trusted to carry out their new duties. The *Port Pirie Advocate* and the *Yorke's Peninsula Advertiser*, on the other hand, argued throughout in its favour.

On 14 May 1894 Mary Lee visited Port Pirie's huge smelting works, then in the evening faced an audience of more than 500 men and women in the Port Pirie Institute Hall. She held their attention by her understanding of their lives and by her colourful rhetoric which linked the ills of society with its inadequate and incomplete democracy. She thought that 'God had created machinery for this world in men and women, yet in our wisdom we only allowed half the machinery to exercise itself. And a pretty mess that half had made of it'. She urged her audience to read books and to read events, to reason and be resolved; patience, she said, was omnipotence. She believed that 'moral force will prove the master force of nineteenth-century revolutions - the pen its sword, the orator its Maxim gun'. Her logic and fervour doubtless encouraged many to sign the petition.

The earliest signatures and addresses on the petition show that the League's helpers had knocked on many doors in city lanes, streets, terraces and squares. Around the city perimeters signatures came from every direction, close by at Hackney, Bowden and Norwood, further afield at Glenelg. Rose Birks signed twice on separate sheets, possibly forgetting having signed earlier. Signatures of school teachers, hospital nurses, headmistresses of girls' private schools, of poor women, rich women and many men are on the petition. Mary Lee had sought a city map from the United Trades and Labor Council, and it is plain that considerable organization went into the project. Among the first names from the country are those of people in Willow Plains, Millicent, Honeysuckle Ford, Port Pirie and Solomontown; from the metropolitan area people signed in Mile End, Magill, Parkside, Goodwood and New Thebarton.

A perusal of the entire petition, now on microfilm, shows hundreds of names clumped together from particular areas such as Glenelg, Adelaide and Port Adelaide, from Mile End, Magill, Parkside, Goodwood and New Thebarton, and in the country from Moonta, Kadina, Jamestown, Port Augusta, Clare, Gawler, Strathalbyn and Mount Gambier. Moonta had a tradition of women's vigorous participation in social issues; as far back as 1874 Moonta's Cornish women had militantly supported the striking copper miners by using brooms to sweep recalcitrant workers from engine rooms and stables.

From the remote northern mining settlement of Andamooka came seventeen male signatures. At country Orroroo male signatories included their occupations: milk hand, carpenter, farmer, labourer, blacksmith, miller, bank manager, mason, engine driver and Baptist minister. At Willunga, both the Wesleyan and Bible Christian ministers signed. German Barossa Valley townships were scarcely represented, except for Lyndoch and Rowlands Flat, with scarcely a German name on the petition. Otherwise the range of townships and districts is extensive, including place names no longer found on the map.



### Final moves

Kingston and his ministers were determined to make another attempt. Often the question of women's suffrage had been treated flippantly, but the manner of its final consideration indicates its significance. During an economic depression and in an extremely busy session, with other major issues such as the Factories Bill and the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill before Parliament, the Constitution Amendment Bill occupied members of both Houses for a considerable time. The Bill was similar to the 1893 measure but without the referendum conditions. More than fifty members spoke on the issues, often at length, and frequently before galleries of women spectators. Newspaper reports referred coyly to 'attractive public galleries' where members addressed 'silk and muslin'.

The final suffrage measure was introduced in the Legislative Council, where the Government appeared secure, on 4 July 1894 by Chief Secretary John Gordon who asserted confidently that:

...the time had arrived in the social evolution of South Australia when it was sufficient to lay this Bill upon the table of the Council unaccompanied by any remark save to re-assert in the famous words of J.S. Mill - 'That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes - the legal subordination of one sex to the other - is wrong in itself, and is now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement'.

Gordon guided the straightforward Bill skilfully through debate and the committee stages. It provided for equal suffrage for women with men, but it had a clause excluding women from standing for Parliament. Members attempted to undermine the Bill by amendments. The Council rejected a move to allow women to have the right to postal votes on grounds of health or distance from a polling place. However, it voted to *remove* the clause which specifically stated that women were not to be entitled to sit in Parliament, except under future legislation, a startling reversal of former opinion. This amendment had been a ploy by misogynist Ebenezer Ward to test the nerve of the Councillors (and if necessary, of the Lower House) in order to wreck the Bill. Instead he strengthened it for the future.

Anti-suffragists in the Council underestimated Kingston's resolve. On 14 July, following the successful second reading, the *Observer* noted the Women's Suffrage League's elation at 'the rapidity and relative thoroughness of Mr Kingston's conversion' to women's suffrage. An editorial likened it to an 'acrobatic leaping over fences'. In fact, Kingston was reading signs of change in the electorate. It was not co-incidental that the Women's Suffrage League had canvassed in West Adelaide, Kingston's electorate, for early signatures to the great petition.

The debates continued to travel familiar paths, though one member of the Legislative Council, Henry Fuller, took time to postulate the situation where Mary Lee would become not only a member of the House but chief secretary and leader. He claimed sarcastically that she would not hesitate to take on the responsibility 'of cooking her husband's dinner and the controlling of the movements of the whole British navy'. He did not wish to see her as Premier. He did not want to see 'garrulous old women governing the country'.

Members swung from jocularly to sound reasoning, including economic arguments. Women's increasing participation in the work-force was a factor in the suffrage question. The 1891 Census had counted 153,530 South Australian females; of these a significant number, 24,253, were breadwinners. Although some politicians kept talking about the ideal 'lady on a pedestal', others drew attention to the needs of working women. In the Legislative Council Dr Magarey mentioned businesses he knew which were managed 'exceedingly well' by women. His physician colleague, Allan Campbell, stressed women's need to earn a living in their 'struggle for existence'. He had given first-hand evidence on women's exploited labour in 1889 at a public anti-sweating meeting and believed that the vote might open choices in employment for women.

Although Labor member David Charleston supported the ideal of women remaining at home, he recognized its impossibility. He knew that women went into factories or worked behind hotel bars not for preference, but to earn a living. Like Campbell, he argued for the suffrage to give women a voice in legislation which might affect their lives and work choices. Other members agreed that women had not been adequately represented, citing laws on divorce, contract and custody of children where men's interests were preserved at the expense of women's. The law's priorities placed women low, severely punishing crimes against property while wife-beaters were sentenced lightly.

Adversaries remained unmoved. A petition on traditional lines from forty-four women, presented in August, summarised popular opposing arguments:

- (1) Because the suffrage is to be regarded not as a privilege to be enjoyed. but a duty to be performed, which duty we do not want thrust upon us.
- (2) Because the household, not the individual is the unit of the State, and the vast majority of women are represented by household suffrage.
- (3) Because the duties and life of men and women are divinely ordered to be different both in the State and in the home.
- 4) Because the energies of women are engrossed by their present duties and interests, from which men cannot relieve them.
- (5) Because political equality will deprive women of special privileges hitherto enjoyed by the sex.
- (6) Because suffrage logically involves the holding of public office, which is inconsistent with the duties of most women.

The strongest united public opposition was submitted in a later similar parliamentary petition of 2,060 names, in November 1894. It was reputedly backed by liquor interests which feared that the women's vote might adversely influence licensing and hotel trading hours. A politician who remained firm against women's suffrage, wealthy brewer Sir Edwin Smith held out to the last. In the Legislative Council, he claimed that 'There were many ways in which women could much better employ their time than by dabbling in politics'. Almost paradoxically, in the centre of Victoria Square and before a great crowd, two days later he unveiled his gift to the city of Adelaide, a bronze statue of the Queen. Neither Smith nor other suffrage opponents ever responded to the argument that Queen Victoria had carried out the highest duties of state and also been mother of a large family.

After the Bill had passed its second reading in the Legislative Council on 22 August Parliamentary processes had reached the appropriate point for presentation of the great petition. At the YMCA rooms in Gawler Place, Adelaide, Suffrage League helpers completed the massive task of glueing all the petition sheets together - some so hurriedly that they were affixed upside down - to total more than 400 feet.

The final petition, in a great roll, was tied up with wide ribbons in the Women's Suffrage League colour - which one newspaper report called gold and another yellow. It was carried to the House by Cornelius Proud, councillor of the League and associate member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. George Hawker, the 'father of the House', presented the petition to the House of Assembly on 23 August 1894 as the first item of business after 2PM, while women watched from the gallery. Simultaneously the third reading of the Constitution Amendment Bill was concluding in the Legislative Council. The Bill was scheduled for introduction in the Assembly same day. The *Advertiser* reported the petition's presentation in gently patronising words:

Mr G.C.Hawker presented a bulky petition, said to have been signed by 11,600 persons in favor of granting the franchise to women on the same terms as men. A cheer greeted the solid roll, neatly tied up in yellow ribbon as it was handed by the presenter to the clerk in the tender manner in which a baby is handed to the parson at the font.

A further press report described the petition as 'a huge roll tied in wide aesthetic ribbons'. It attracted wide publicity and wider support. It also stimulated several small anti-suffrage petitions.

The tide of public and parliamentary opinion was moving strongly. John Cockburn introduced the Constitution Amendment Bill in the Assembly on 23 August, his forty- fourth birthday, and subsequently guided it adroitly through the House. The Government delayed the second reading for some weeks until absent members returned and numbers were more assured. On 8 November, on moving the second reading, Cockburn had in his hand a Women's Suffrage League leaflet (which originated in New Zealand) titled 'Sixteen Reasons for Supporting Woman's Suffrage'. He quoted the first reason:

Because it is the foundation of all political liberty that those who obey the law, should be able to have a voice in choosing those who make the law.

This set the tone of his speech and of the remarks of many other members. It expressed the heart of the argument. However, even at a late stage opponents were still arguing that 'woman's place was at home', and the numbers remained uncertain. But public opinion was gathering force: one member referred to the change as not like a mushroom growth but one which had been growing quietly in strength. His constituents asked more about women's suffrage than any other question.

Many hours of debate included long speeches delivered in the hope of wearing the government down. But Kingston and his team were determined, and Cockburn did not falter in his experienced shepherding. The second reading vote was taken on the night of 11

December. Its success depended on the presence of James Howe, who would never stay beyond 11PM for night sessions. On this night he left about ten minutes before then, but was detained in the lobby - by chance or design - by the *Advertiser* newspaper's owner Langdon Bonython. New Zealander W Pember Reeves described the episode as a deliberate plot:

. . . The gentleman in question [Howe] had not gone away; he had meant to do so, . . . but was detained in a certain lobby by a Government emissary who beguiled him . . . with pleasant converse for the needful few minutes.

Meanwhile, Vaiben Solomon, member for the Northern Territory who opposed the Bill had been stonewalling. When he saw Howe leave he sat down. The Government acted at once; the division bells rang and all members in the building, including Howe, entered the chamber for the vote. The requisite absolute majority was obtained for the Bill's second reading, 'long after the last trams had gone'. For those few women still remaining it was a late walk home; Elizabeth Nicholls in her old age described walking at midnight with a companion to North Adelaide, and her further mile to Prospect.

On 17 December in committee opponents attempted to make amendments. Early that evening in the crowded Cafe de Paris Catherine Helen Spence was welcomed home from more than a year abroad by a gathering of optimistic suffragists, chiefly women, some of whom had spent nearly all the afternoon listening to the debate in Parliament. Many women had already written or sent telegrams to their representatives, men who were very conscious of the women in the galleries that day. The independence of most members from party discipline meant that they were particularly susceptible to individual lobbying. In response to her welcome at the cafe Catherine Helen Spence said she had identified herself with the suffrage wherever she travelled. Many of the women walked from the Rundle Street cafe to Parliament House.

There they crowded into the galleries hoping to see the third reading completed. Instead, the House was still in committee. Among those in the gallery was 'A Lady Member of the Adelaide Writing Circle' who was astonished at the effrontery of members who managed to get a clause 'tacked on' to permit women to use postal votes by arguing that 'the purity and modesty of women should not be shocked by what they might have to see if they had to go to the poll'. The 'Lady Member' observed that 'the strange thing was that some of those who spoke thus do not act as though they cared a rap for women's purity, in their ordinary daily life'. The women in the galleries watched the division; they were very jubilant 'when the ayes had it'. The Government was not to be deterred by the prospect of postal voting; had they voted against it they might well have jeopardised the Bill which was now so close to success. The third reading continued late without a vote.

But on the next morning, 18 December 1894, at 10.30AM the House met and soon after passed the Bill with its amendments. Very few women were present because they had expected an afternoon sitting, but the jubilant scene in the Lower House caused elation and relief which soon reverberated through the supporting organizations. It was the culmination of years of campaigning, discussion, argument and political shifts.

The South Australian Constitution Amendment Act of 1894 was brief. The franchise and the ability to stand for Parliament were extended to women in the following clauses.

1. The right to vote for persons to sit in Parliament as members of the Legislative Council, and the right to vote for persons to sit in Parliament as members of the House of Assembly, are hereby extended to women.
2. Women shall possess and may exercise the rights hereby granted, subject to the same qualifications and in the same manner as men.
3. All Constitution and Electoral Acts and all other laws are hereby amended, so far as may be necessary to give effect to this Act.

The fourth clause concerned absent voting for which a woman was eligible if she lived more than three miles from the nearest polling-place 'or that by reason of the state of her health she will probably be unable to vote at the polling-place on polling day'. The final clause stated: "This Act may be cited as "The Constitution Amendment, 1894".

It remained only for The Royal Assent to be granted, necessary for a change to the Constitution. The Queen's assent was received and gazetted on 21 March 1895. This was an historic piece of legislation which embodied a degree of political and social innovation to be found nowhere else. South Australia's pioneering Constitution Amendment Act established a precedent and an example both for the remaining Australian colonies, and for their forthcoming federal constitution.