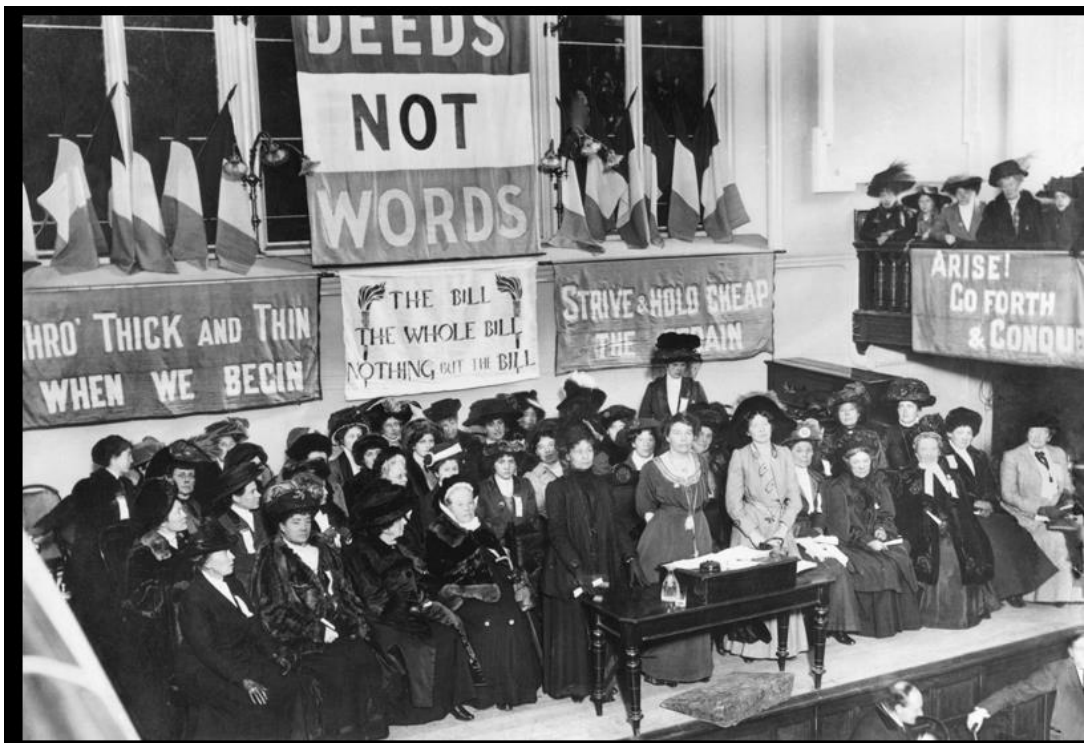
6.22 Emmeline Pankhurst and the Campaign for Women's Suffrage in Britain

Sources: https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1914Pankhurst.asp; https://spartacus-educational.com/women.htm; https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34856/34856-h/34856-h.htm

Background: Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) and her daughters Adela, Sylvia, and Christabel were important leaders of the British Women's Suffrage Movement. In 1903 the Pankhursts founded the Women's Social and Political Union WSPU) that organized highly visible public actions including mass parades that energized the suffrage movement. The Pankhursts and the "suffragettes" were willing to use confrontational tactics and repeatedly went to prison to advance their cause. Emmeline Pankhurst was arrested for the first time in February 1908, when she tried to enter Parliament to deliver a protest resolution to the British Prime Minister. She was sentenced to six weeks in prison. She was arrested at total of seven times before women's suffrage was finally approved. Starting in 1909 members of the WSPU went on prolonged hunger strikes while they were imprisoned and prison authorities painfully force-fed them with tubes inserted through their noses or mouths. Emmeline Pankhurst justified their strategy claiming "the condition of our sex is so deplorable that it is our duty to break the law in order to call attention to the reasons why we do." Alice Paul, who became a leading American suffragette, was a disciple of Emmeline Pankhurst and worked with the WSPU while in England from 1907-1910. In 1918, Britain became the first Western democracy to permit at least some women the right to vote. In 1928 British women finally achieved the right to vote on equal terms with men. In 1999, Time magazine named Emmeline Pankhurst one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century.



A 1908 suffragette meeting in Manchester, England. Emmeline Pankhurst is one of the women standing behind the podium.

Instructions: In 1914, Emmeline Pankhurst published her autobiography. Read selections from the autobiography and answers questions 1-5.

Questions

1. How did Emmeline Pankhurst first become radicalized as a suffragette?
2. Why did the suffragettes demand to be treated as political prisoners?
3. How did the suffragettes continue their resistance while in prison?
4. Why did the suffragettes declare war on the British government?
5. In your opinion, are the type of militant and illegal tactics employed by the British suffragettes justified? Explain.

Emmeline Pankhurst: My Own Story (1914)

A. My childhood was protected by love and a comfortable home. Yet, while still a very young child, I began instinctively to feel that there was something lacking, even in my own home, some false conception of family relations, some incomplete ideal. This vague feeling of mine began to shape itself into conviction about the time my brothers and I were sent to school. The education of the English boy, then as now, was considered a much more serious matter than the education of the English boy's sister. My parents, especially my father, discussed the question of my brothers' education as a matter of real importance. My education and that of my sister were scarcely discussed at all.

B. I was fourteen years old when I went to my first suffrage meeting. Returning from school one day, I met my mother just setting out for the meeting, and I begged her to let me go along. She consented, and without stopping to lay my books down I scampered away in my mother's wake. The speeches interested and excited me, especially the address of the great Miss Lydia Becker, who was the Susan B. Anthony of the English movement, a splendid character and a truly eloquent speaker. She was the secretary of the Manchester committee, and I had learned to admire her as the editor of the Women's Suffrage Journal, which came to my mother every week. I left the meeting a conscious and confirmed suffragist.

C. The Suffragettes had resolved that they would no longer submit to being treated as ordinary law-breakers . . . I was removed to a hospital cell, suffering from the illness which prison life always inflicts on me. Here the Governor visited me with the unwelcome news that the Home Secretary had refused to allow me the privilege of speech with my fellow prisoners. I asked him if I might, when I was strong enough to walk, take exercise with my friends. To this he assented, and I soon had the joy of seeing my daughter and the other brave comrades, and walking with them in the dismal courtyard of the prison. Single file we walked, at a distance of three or four feet from one another, back and forth under the stony eyes of the wardresses. . . Of all our hardships the ceaseless silence of our lives was worst. I told our members that henceforth we should all insist on refusing to abide by ordinary prison rules. We did not propose to break laws and then shirk punishment. We simply meant to assert our right to be recognised as political prisoners.

D. The first hunger strike occurred in early July [1909]. In the two months that followed scores of women adopted the same form of protest against a Government who would not recognise the political character of their offences. In some cases the hunger strikers were treated with unexampled cruelty. Delicate women were sentenced, not only to solitary confinement, but to wear handcuffs for twenty-four hours at a stretch . . . We were horrified to read in the newspapers that these prisoners were being forcibly fed by means of a rubber tube thrust into the stomach.

E. We announced that either we must have a Government measure . . . or we would take up the sword again, never to lay it down until the enfranchisement of the women of England was won. It was at this time, February, 1913 . . . that militancy, as it is now generally understood by the public began - militancy in the sense of continued, destructive, guerilla warfare against the Government through injury to private property. Some property had been destroyed before this time, but the attacks were sporadic, and were meant to be in the nature of a warning as to what might become a settled policy. Now we indeed lighted the torch, and we did it with the absolute conviction that no other course was open to us. We had tried every other measure, as I am sure that 1 have demonstrated to my readers, and our years of work and suffering and sacrifice had taught us that the Government would not yield to right and justice.

F. We had to make England and every department of English life insecure and unsafe. W'e had to make English law a failure and the courts farce comedy theatres; we had to discredit the Government and Parliament in the eyes of the world; we had to spoil English sports, hurt business, destroy valuable property, demoralise the world of society, shame the churches, upset the whole orderly conduct of life. That is, we had to do as much of this guerilla warfare as the people of England would tolerate. When they came to the point of saying to the Government: "Stop this, in the only way it can be stopped, by giving the women of England representation," then we should extinguish our torch.