

# 2005: a centenary of women voting in Queensland – celebrate the past, claim the future

Dateline 26 January 1905<sup>1</sup>

## Governor gives assent: women win vote



*Women's activism took them out of the home and onto the streets, seeking new rights.\* (Courtesy of the State Library of Queensland.)*

**QUEENSLAND** Governor Sir Hugh Nelson yesterday gave formal assent to legislative reforms granting women the right to vote in state elections.

The Electoral Franchise Bill and the Elections Act Amendment Bill had been the focus of heated debate in both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council since Sir Hugh's recall of the parliamentary houses from their summer recess on 4 January 1905.

It followed more than a decade of protest and lobbying by women activists, among them: ardent unionist Mrs Emma Miller, president of the Woman's Equal Franchise Association; journalist Mrs Leontine Cooper, president of the Queensland Women's Electoral League.

A pressure-cooker of public opinion had forced the King's representative to take such forthright action, advising parliamentarians: "The will of the people with regard to electoral reform...should be carried into effect without delay."

Yet a very small number of women ventured to witness the ensuing discussion, perhaps deterred by heatwave conditions; the thermometer has peaked repeatedly at 36C.

The legislative reforms now allow any person, male or female, over the age of 21, who has been resident of Queensland for six months, who is a natural born or naturalised subject of the King and who is on the electoral roll to have the right to vote in Queensland elections.

Such provisions exclude Aboriginal Natives, South Sea Islanders and Asian settlers from voting.

The women of Queensland will have to wait until the next state election in 1907 to exercise their newly acquired right.

At that time, all eligible voters will cast one vote and one vote only.

Yesterday's reforms have also abolished the plural voting system that has allowed a property holder to vote as many times as he has land holdings but has prevented the itinerant working class man from casting a single ballot.

Yesterday's decision will surely go down in the history books as a turning point in Queensland's democratic maturation.

It was achieved despite continued protest from some quarters. Patrick Leahy (Member for Warrego) argued some electorates would be disadvantaged if women voted:

"I find in the Albert electorate in 1902 there were 1900 male voters, and if women voters were counted, the number would be about double – 3800. In the Bowen electorate in 1902 there were 834 male voters; if you include the women's votes, the number would be 1200. Yet the Bowen and Albert electorates have the same representation, and where does the justice come in?"<sup>2</sup>

The Hon. Edward Forrest (Member for Brisbane North) voiced concern that women may not enrol if it meant disclosing their age on the roll<sup>3</sup>. It remains to be seen whether Queensland women will be so coy.

Yesterday's decision concluded a sustained push from a number of fronts, among them moral crusaders and trade unionists.

All had argued it was only fair and right that women, who paid taxes and abided by laws of the land, should have a say in the making of laws.

Numerous attempts to achieve this outcome, dating back to the 1890s, had been thwarted.

Preservation of the family unit was often suggested as cause not to extend the vote. The Hon David Dalrymple (Member for Mackay) prophesied: "The divorce courts will be more thronged with suitors."<sup>4</sup>

His fears were echoed in a debate in 1901, with William Story (Member for Balonne) claiming:

"No man with any sense at all, knowing that his wife or his daughter held different opinions from his own on a certain subject would make that subject a topic of conversation... Women, whose instincts are in many instances higher than men's reason, see this danger and are not going to risk their home happiness for the poor satisfaction of having a vote."<sup>5</sup>

Women's intellectual capacity and ability to think independently had also provided cause to defer the issue of woman's suffrage.

However, it was inevitable that opposition would wane, with women tasting the power of the ballot for the first time at the federal election in 1903.

(Footnotes)  
<sup>1</sup> As retold in 2005  
<sup>2</sup> Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 6 January 1905, p. 43.  
<sup>3</sup> Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 10 January 1905, p. 81  
<sup>4</sup> Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 1894, p. 1141  
<sup>5</sup> Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 1901, p. 1876  
<sup>6</sup> This march actually took place in 1912 but is indicative of women's growing political voice

## Centenary not for all

Up until December 1965, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's voting rights in Queensland were piecemeal, dependent on how government authorities interpreted individuals' racial classifications.

Racial classifications were determined by 'degree of aboriginality' based on blood line (eg. Aboriginal or 'half caste'), lifestyle and associations. For example, a male, born of an Aboriginal woman and a 'white' man, was considered a 'half caste' and could legally vote. But if he married an Aborigine and lived on a mission settlement, he became 'Aboriginal' and lost his right to vote.

Such interpretations of the law, and changes to it, saw more and more Indigenous Queenslanders struck off the electoral roll.

The Indigenous rights movement became active in the 1950s, fighting for basic human rights, including the vote. Members were Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Many Australians recognised signs of South African apartheid and American racial tensions in Queensland's dealing with Indigenous people.

A parliamentary select committee investigated the need for change in 1963. Its report, tabled in late 1964, called for the vote to be extended 'as a matter of principle' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Elections Act Amendment Act 1965 (Qld) was passed on 17 December 1965.

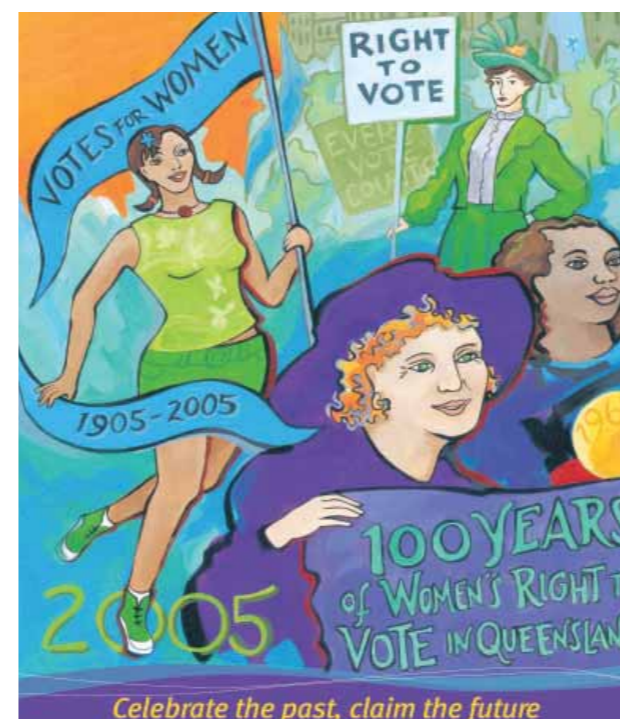
All Indigenous Queenslanders, regardless of racial classification, were able to vote at their first state election on 28 May 1966, well ahead of the 1967 federal referendum that granted them official citizenship.



Poet and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal fought for reconciliation. (Photo copyright The Courier-Mail)

## Classroom activities

- **Reflect:** what would life be like if women didn't have the vote today? How might society be different?
- **Participate:** re-enact the parliamentary debate for women's franchise – with arguments for and against.
- **Investigate:** survey your school population on what democracy means to them.
- **Explore:** what went on in your town during the suffrage and Indigenous franchise campaigns? Organise an historic walk to important sites.
- **Create:** design advertisements for the Women's Equal Franchise Association.
- **Involve yourself:** celebrate the diversity of women's achievements in the past 100 years.
- **Communicate:** write an essay or poem that captures the theme 'today's rights are yesterday's achievements'.



## Point to ponder

If you're 18, it's compulsory to vote. Should it be? Should younger Australians – say 16 year olds – have a say?

## Advocates' heyday



Emma Miller (above) – gentlemen's white shirt maker, unionist and president of Woman's Equal Franchise Association since 1894. Unwavering in her stand for 'one person, one vote', yesterday's decision was well worth the wait.

Leontine Cooper – prolific writer, particularly on the suffrage issue. Remains of the opinion that abolition of the property bias created an unnecessary delay in women gaining suffrage.

Elizabeth Brentnall – sees the way now clear to push for social reforms including raising the age of consent from 12 to 16, alcohol restrictions, and abolition of the Contagious Diseases Act 1868. Dinner table discussions with husband Fred (Member of the Legislative Council) are likely to avoid politics.

Margaret Ogg – considered a latecomer in the debate, but truly a stalwart, having campaigned with the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, has indicated that her work has only just begun: now wants to see women in parliament too.

## Timeline

- 1859 – Queensland achieved statehood.
- 1869 – Unmarried women who owned property in England allowed to vote in council elections, but not national elections.
- 1870 – Queensland Premier Charles Lilley suggests women should vote.
- 1890 – Private member's Bill seeks reform of Queensland electoral legislation. Fails.
- 1891 – Woman's Christian Temperance Union in Queensland begins campaign for woman's suffrage.
- 1893 – New Zealand becomes first country to grant vote to women.
- 1894 – Queensland women form activist groups – Woman's Equal Franchise Association (WEFA) and Woman's Suffrage League. Another attempt to change electoral laws fails.
- 1901 – State Parliament debates giving women the vote – and fathers of two children an extra vote. The move is defeated.
- 1902 – Another private member's Bill fails.
- 1903 – Queensland Women's Electoral League forms; women vote for the first time in a federal election.
- 1904 – The Electoral Franchise Bill is introduced into Queensland Parliament in September. Parliamentarians are told in December that they have to be back on 4 January to finalise the legislation.
- 1905 – Governor Sir Hugh Nelson gives assent to the Elections Acts Amendment Act 1905 on 25 January. 'White' women win right to vote.
- 1907 – Women vote for the first time at a state election.
- 1915 – Women win right to run for parliament.
- 1920 – Women in the United States gain the vote.
- 1922 – Queensland's Upper House – the Legislative Council – is abolished.
- 1928 – Women in the United Kingdom gain equal voting rights.
- 1929 – Irene Longman becomes Queensland's first woman in State Parliament.
- 1947 – Dame Annabelle Rankin became Queensland's first female Senator.
- 1950s – Action groups form to fight for Indigenous rights – including the vote.
- 1963 – Queensland parliamentary select committee investigates need for electoral reform relating to Indigenous population.
- 1964 – Select committee report recommends the right to vote for all Indigenous people.
- 1965 – Amendment to Elections Act gives all Indigenous Queenslanders the right to vote in state elections.
- 1966 – Indigenous Queenslanders go to state polls.
- 1967 – National referendum recognises Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as citizens of Australia.
- 1969 – Second woman elected to State Parliament – Vi Jordan (Ipswich West).
- 1971 – Voting made compulsory for Indigenous Queenslanders.

- [www.women.qld.gov.au/womenvote](http://www.women.qld.gov.au/womenvote) – the Office for Women has information about the suffrage campaign, details of events throughout the state and for key themes and ideas for community commemorations. – you can also order free Centenary of Suffrage factsheets, posters, postcards, bookmarks and calendars from this website.
- <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/home/womensuffrage.asp> – Queensland Parliament's tribute to the centenary and history of women in Parliament.
- [www.education.qld.gov.au/tal/curriculum\\_exchange/teachers/sose/](http://www.education.qld.gov.au/tal/curriculum_exchange/teachers/sose/) – the Curriculum Exchange SOSE Gateway has a collection of resources to support the teaching of SOSE Years 1 to 10 syllabus, including teaching ideas, modules and webquests related to woman's suffrage

- [www.education.qld.gov.au/tal/federation/html/webquest.html](http://www.education.qld.gov.au/tal/federation/html/webquest.html) – "Federation WebQuests – How equal is equal?" includes student activities using web resources to examine the role of the federation of Australia in women's fight for political equality. Notions of fairness and justice, lives of some suffragists, and the future of women in government are explored. Levels 3,4,5.
- [www.curriculum.edu.au/democracy](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/democracy) and <http://education.qld.gov.au/tal/ddemo> – the Discovering Democracy website includes a range of teaching ideas and student activities for including civics and citizenship across curriculum.
- [www.ecq.qld.gov.au](http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au) – the Electoral Commission of Queensland has information on how voting works