

Exercise your hard-won right to vote



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I've often thought, wouldn't it be an interesting exercise to survey women in New Zealand about what they know about their hard-won right to vote? How many do you think would actually know what the woman on our \$10 did, or what year New Zealand women achieved suffrage? Unfortunately, I think the results would be depressingly low.

This is a real shame because the women's suffrage movement should be a major source of pride for New Zealand. Barely 50 years after the signing of our founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, we became the first country in the world to give women the right to vote when a new Electoral Act was signed into law on 19 September 1893. To put this into context, it wasn't until after the First World War that women in countries such as Britain and the US achieved the same status.

The journey that Kate Sheppard and others took to achieve suffrage is extremely interesting and something I'd love for more New Zealand women to become familiar with.

Born out of the temperance movement, where women were big supporters of the prohibition of alcohol, the drive for women's suffrage gathered momentum in the mid-1880s and saw Kate and other leaders of the Women's Christian Temperance Union present three separate petitions to Parliament.

These petitions were huge for the times. In 1891, more than 9000 signatures were gathered, in 1892, almost 20,000, and finally, in 1893, the number of signatures



rose to nearly 32,000. Remember that this was at a time well before the ease of online petitions and when New Zealand had a population of only around three-quarters of a million people. Each signature was gathered by hand and the number obtained in 1893 represented one-quarter of the adult European female population. It was a significant achievement.

Of course, the movement was not without its detractors, not in the least the liquor industry that obviously sought to prevent prohibition and considered women's suffrage a major threat. The nature of alcohol and drunkenness in New Zealand in the late 19th Century was largely a male problem and women had long-suffered as a result. Ads were taken out in newspapers discrediting the suffragettes and misinformation and fear of how women would exercise their vote was spread across our towns and cities.

Following the third petition, though, Parliament couldn't stem the tide any

longer and passed the legislation granting women the vote.

However, the fight was not over because back then, New Zealand also had a Legislative Council that sat above the House of Representatives. Members of this Council were heavily lobbied by both sides in what was quite a divisive debate. Eventually though, and in part out of a desire to embarrass Premier Richard Seddon, the Council eventually voted the Bill through 20 to 18.

All women who were 'British subjects' and aged 21 and over, including M ori, were now eligible to vote. Even so, there was still a long way to go to achieve political equality. Women were not given the right to stand for Parliament until 1919 and the first female MP, Elizabeth McCombs, was not elected until 1933.

We've definitely come a long way. We have had three female prime ministers, two female governors-general as well as female chief justices and many other

women in senior public positions. However, we shouldn't take this progress for granted. We need to keep up our end of the bargain and that means making sure we get out and exercise our hard-won right to vote on 17 October!

"Do not think your single vote does not matter much. The rain that refreshes the parched ground is made up of single drops." ~ Kate Sheppard

Final Call: Last Chance to Register for Leadership Development Scholarships

Women currently working in the transport and logistics sector have a final opportunity to register their interest in a Women & Leadership New Zealand scholarship worth up to \$5000. The scholarships are available to women working in the transport and logistics sector and are intended to support participation in an accredited leadership development programme. The courses are specifically designed for women to form connections, collaborate, and explore exceptional performance, behaviours, and mindsets.

The initiative is providing junior through to executive women managers with scholarships to support their growth and development via participation in one of three flagship courses. Participants will benefit from course content such as Emotional Intelligence and Conflict, Career and Professional Growth, Team Dynamics, Leading Innovation and Change, and Empowering Teams.

Funding must be apportioned by the end of September and we're unsure when these grants will be available again. Find out more and register your interest by completing the Expression of Interest form prior to 5pm, 25 September: womenandleadership.co.nz/scholarships. ■



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