University of Reading

Keeping up the legacy of Nancy Astor: 100 years since the first woman took her seat in parliament

Article

Accepted Version

Turner, J. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5089-4768 (2019) Keeping up the legacy of Nancy Astor: 100 years since the first woman took her seat in parliament. Conservative History Journal, 2 (7). ISSN 1479-8026 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/83218/

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.
Published version at: https://conservativehistory.wordpress.com/journal/

Publisher: The Conservative History Group

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the End User Agreement.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

University of Reading

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Keeping up the legacy of Nancy Astor: 100 years since the first woman took her seat on Parliament

As we approach momentous historic milestones, such as the centenary of the partial franchise in 2018 and this year the election of Nancy Astor in 1919, it is inevitable that we look to the past to find synergies and echoes of the challenges and achievements that are evidenced today. While the lines of continuity are not always clear they are there, our present and the future is inevitably shaped by the past and to some extent those who inhabited it. This has been evident through the Vote100 programme and now Astor100 which have engaged with those pathfinders whose contribution demanded recognition and whose paths begin with first steps we can trace in today's continuing demand for a more equal world. In this way, we respond to contemporary issues and as such, in this light, Nancy Astor, both as an individual and her legacy, are important. Being the first is never easy and as historical totems they rarely sit comfortably on the pedestal that we force them on to. As Nancy herself said 'Pioneers may be picturesque figures but they are often rather lonely ones'. But for better or worse they are important. They are our cornerstone and the yardstick by which we measure our progress as a society.

So, what was the world like for Nancy Astor in 1918/1919? Well, she could vote! She was over 30 and it can safely be agreed that she met the property qualification. But the Representation of the People Act was not the only momentous piece of legislation relating to women and political power passed in 1918. A small, seemingly innocuous piece of legislation that is of equal importance also passed through parliament that year. Hot on the heels of the Representation of the People Act (1918) came 26 words that changed British democracy forever. The Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act (1918) enabled women over the age of 21 to stand for election to parliament. It simply stated that "A woman shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage for being elected to or sitting or voting as a Member of the House of Commons".[i] No more and no less. It was ushered in quietly, three weeks after the franchise bill and arguably timed to avoid women reasonably organizing a campaign to stand in any great numbers at the 1918 General Election. The irony that a woman might now stand as an MP but remain unable to vote for herself was seemingly lost on Parliament.

In her 1926 pamphlet 'What the Vote has Done', Millicent Fawcett championed the importance of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act. Fawcett described the Act that "renders it possible for a constituency to choose a woman as its representative in the House of Commons".[ii] Very few chose women candidates and even fewer women succeeded when they stood. Yet despite their small number, the continued presence of women in the House was a reminder of the wider female electorate and the need for progressive legislation. Most significantly, the election of women legitimised their needs and politicised the culture of the home and family.

The achievements of the first cohort of female MPs have often been overshadowed by the pre-war suffrage campaigns. A more positive evaluation can be drawn from the contribution and significant achievements made by women both inside and outside of parliament which affirms the political influence of women despite competing loyalties of gender, class and party. Conflicting identities characterised the first tranches of female MPs who trickled into parliament and between 1919 and 1931 a period in which 21 women won seats. This early period spawned distinctly different types of female politician. The majority of Conservative and Liberal women were elected to their husband's seats or muscled into a constituency by aristocratic or well-connected families via carefully controlled by-elections. Largely unmarried Labour MPs with strong local government, feminist or trade union backgrounds were elected in greater numbers at general elections. Of the 21 female MPs elected between 1919 and 1931, 7 were elected to their husband's seats and a further 3 were heavily sponsored by their husbands or families.[iii]

Constance Markievicz of Sin Fein was the first woman elected at the 1918 General Election but, along with other Sin Fein members, did not and never intended to take her seat. The first female voice heard in the chamber of House of Commons had a slight American accent, a Virginia twang, she was Nancy Astor. Viscountess Astor was elected to Plymouth Sutton in 1919 with more votes than the Labour and Liberal candidates combined. She replaced her husband as the sitting Conservative and Unionist MP after he ascended to the House of Lords on the death of his father. Nancy's time in the seat was initially intended to be temporary as Waldorf worked to extricate himself from the Lords and return to his seat in the Commons or negotiate a means of sitting in both. He could not.

Thus, on 1st December 2019, Astor arrived in Parliament to take her seat. The impact of a woman's presence on parliamentary etiquette and procedure was reported in *The Times* the following day as a 'tremendous breach in parliamentary tradition'.[iv] The Speaker, William Lowther, wondered where she should sit, the Commons was constructed on the idea of one sex sharply divided into two, government and opposition. How he should now address the 'Gentlemen of the House', 'Gentlemen and Lady'? but Nancy was not just a woman she was a Viscountess. Should she be allowed to keep her hat on when speaking as men had to remove theirs?

Nancy Astor was born in in Virginia in 1879, the 8th of 11 children born into relative poverty. A divorcee with a small son, she married Waldorf Astor in 1906. She was an abstentionist and a Christian Scientist. She was a wife and a mother with 6 children, the youngest still a baby when she was elected.

In 1919, Nancy Astor was an unexpected and to many a disappointing first woman MP. Suffrage campaigners were initially dismayed that family connections or elitism had secured the first woman MP rather than the political idealism of a candidate from the women's movement. Astor was an American and divorced. She had a limited education and no feminist pedigree though she was not ignorant of politics as

has sometimes been suggested. She was a product of the Establishment and to many, including the national and local party, she was an acceptable candidate because of her proximity to her husband though arguably this negated the work that the 'Votes for Women' campaign had achieved. However, on 1st December 1919, three days after her election victory at Plymouth Sutton, Nancy Astor, stood at the Bar of the House of Commons, waiting to take the oath that would make her Britain's first woman MP. Astor was ushered in by Arthur Balfour and David Lloyd George, chosen to acknowledge the historic nature of the occasion. Astor sensed an undercurrent of nervousness and may have thought she understood why: 'I was deeply conscious of representing a Cause, whereas I think they were a little nervous of having let down the House of Commons by escorting the Cause into it'.[v] The extent to which Parliament was not just a male preserve but a bastion of upper class masculinity should not be underestimated, the notion of a woman had been 'almost inconceivable'.

For some, the perceived 'safety net', that the previous holder of the seat had been her husband Waldorf, was reassuring and a measure of proxy or male equivalence may have settled jangled nerves. Yet despite her class and social standing Astor had to cope with a constant and insidious sexism that undermined her attempts to be taken seriously. She avoided comments on her clothing, by adopting a uniform of dark coat and skirt, white blouse and tricorn hat but she was less successful in evading the patronizingly flirtatious and ribald comments of her male colleagues.

Astor's maiden speech in February 1920 was in opposition to a proposal to relax wartime restrictions on opening hours. Sir John Rees, who was aware of Astor's abstentionist politics, concluded his speech by looking directly at her, and archly remarking: 'I do not doubt that a rod is in pickle for me when I sit down, but I will accept the chastisement with resignation and am indeed ready to kiss the rod'.[vi] Astor wittily demurred, replying that Rees had gone 'a bit too far' however, I will consider his proposal if I can convert him'.[vii] No such witticism is recorded for the occasion on which an inebriated Jack Jones, Labour MP for Silvertown, interrupted Astor. Refusing to give way, Astor told Jones he was drinking too much and should think of his stomach, to which he answered to loud guffaws, he would push his stomach up against hers any time she liked.[viii] Churchill famously refused to speak to her in her early years in Parliament, despite knowing her privately and despite having partaken of the Astors' celebrated hospitality 'we hoped to freeze you out'. Possibly all of this may have been considered 'understandable' in the context of the interwar period and that the House should have been congratulated for restraint BUT the insidious sexism that Astor experienced remains, overlooked almost a century later.

So why was a divorced, American, abstentionist with no feminist or political pedigree elected? Written responses, to Nancy's election and early career describing her as something novel and different are far more numerous and compelling than anything

describing Nancy and Waldorf as a political pairing or Nancy as a proxy or an extension of her husband. However, despite some emphasis on continuity in her candidature, it was apparent to Nancy's supporters and well-wishers that she represented something new, even if the details of how that would unfold in the House were yet to be defined. Many letters addressed to Nancy illustrate that both the public and many women's organisations embraced her pioneering role and the blank canvas that stretched before her as the first woman MP, many of them taking the opportunity to set out the areas and facets of her role as an MP that they felt would be most worthy and deserving of her time and energy. Overwhelmingly, Nancy's early correspondents positively welcomed and celebrated her difference. Their letters make plain how any notion of her as a proxy or as someone who represented continuity was illusory.[ix]

Nancy consistently pursued a personal agenda supporting women and children. Women were at the centre of her politics: improved conditions in women's prisons, milk for the poor, widows' pensions, birth control, regulation and equal prosecution for prostitution and the elimination of sexually transmitted diseases. She was equally active on behalf of children, campaigning against unregulated child labour and calls for the protection children and young people from indecent assault, the raising of the school age, and the introduction of juvenile courts and prisons. She was a staunch supporter of Margaret Macmillan's nursery school programme. And as is the case with many women MPs, she spent a great deal of time and energy in her naval constituency, representing British mariners and improved conditions plus better schools for the wives and children of enlisted men.

Astor was also a pioneer of women in the professions lending her support to legislation surrounding women in the workplace and the safety of women when out on the streets. She also campaigned for nursery school provision, school nurses, and women's access to the professions, especially the women police and she had a vociferous commitment to the equal franchise. When reflecting on her career Astor always claimed that she had been 'as good a feminist as anyone'. She had never had any longstanding ambition to be a politician and openly expressed that her 'husband put the idea in my head… and I should get out of it if he got rid of his peerage'.[x] Astor was a 'difference feminist' though she was determined to prove that women were as physically capable of being full participants in the rigours of political life as men. She often expressed that, in many ways, women were more suited to public life as women had 'moral courage' and were 'not so easily flattered'.[xi] The concept of female moral courage was a constant theme throughout her speeches and in the many reflective interviews she gave after she retired. Astor considered that she had a special responsibility to women and children, that she understood their needs and ambitions in a way that men never could. That said, she had a hugely efficient support system that enabled her to work serve in public office and as such arguably had more in common with men that the women she claimed to represent.

Astor's maiden speech had emphasised the damage drink caused to women and children as well as the economic cost to the country. She was as good as her word and

in 1923 introduced the Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons under Eighteen) Bill, the first Private Member's Bill by a woman to be passed and become an Act of Parliament.[xii] Astor's commitment to temperance was not popular and the criticism that she received was triumvirate commenting on her American nationality and concerns that she would support Prohibition, but also her class and her gender with an emphasis on unnatural manliness, scolding and suggestions of cuckolding resonant of the height of the pre-war anti-suffrage movement.

Astor was also instrumental in pushing through the 1928 franchise. She held her party and Baldwin's government to account for promises made regarding the equal franchise, she congratulated 'the Prime Minister on keeping his pledges. I never for a moment doubted his word, and I rejoice to think he has proved once more that he is a man of his word. I want also to congratulate the Home Secretary [Sir William Joyson-Hicks] on the able way he brought forward the Bill'[xiii] She acknowledged the work of women across party making clear that the equal franchise 'cannot be a party question. There have been men and women of all parties who have fought, and women have even died for it.'[xiv] She worked with suffrage organisations facilitating meetings with senior politicians and acting as a conduit between them and the Conservative Party provided campaigning and lobbyist women with access to influences that they would otherwise have rarely reached. Astor's commitment to the franchise had been longstanding and inevitably she considered it a moral crusade. [xv]

But Nancy's parliamentary career was not without controversy although some claims against her have little basis in fact and have instead become the stuff of legend. I would also argue that many of the negatives are amplified because of her gender and her 'special' status as the first woman MP. Accusations of fascism and the organisation of meetings of influential supporters of the appeasement of Hitler at the Astor's country home and attempts to influence politics outside of the democratic process, led Communist journalist Claud Cockburn to coin the term 'Cliveden Set' in 1937, a claim which Nancy called a "terrible lie".[xvi] This did not prevent the press representing Astor as some type of titular head of the group or network; cartoons predict her giving the fascist salute while far more senior and influential men dance to her tune.

These representations of Nancy led Waldorf to write a very rare open letter to the press in defence of his wife. The notion of a 'Cliveden Set' has now largely been discredited. However, Nancy herself did hold some unpalatable views, and was anti-Catholic, strongly anti-Communist and though she denied it, on occasion, anti-Semitic.

Even in her own time she was highly controversial and often self-contradictory. At once she considered herself a representative of working women and mothers, while she was one of the richest women in the land. Astor aligned herself with women's peace organizations and regarded women as natural pacifists, while pursuing the aims of Anglo-German understanding by entertaining the Nazi top brass at her

Cliveden seat. The American-born Astor was xenophobic and anti-Semitic, and yet she could not imagine a fascist Britain as the Blackshirts were just too ridiculous and laughable.[xvii]

Astor was at times a problematic figure though it is inevitable that when we pursue the past for exemplary figures who will be made to represent their era or a major milestone, we will inevitably struggle with the huge gulf between their attitudes — especially in relation to race, sex, and class—and our present-day sensibilities. We rightly baulk at some of her problematic opinions and particularly her anti-Semitic statements. To put her into the context of the prevalence of anti-Semitism in the interwar period and within the society in which she lived is not to condone such views but it is to understand them.

Nancy Astor has almost become more synonymous with the prejudices of her time than the many men who held similar views but escaped similar censure. They have not been subject to the same level of scrutiny yet one of our biggest challenges is in evaluating Astor's personal paradoxes – her unguarded public statements that rarely reflected private actions and kindnesses to both Jewish people and Catholics. There is much less comment on the appalling misogyny of male contemporaries with anything but an understanding of 'it was just the times'. Many prominent men had a few good years for which they are remembered, whereas Astor's unpalatable statements were made in the heightened political climate in the run up to World War II. Nancy Astor is one of the most pilloried people in the appeasement debate, yet she was a back bench female MP with little or no power. She was surrounded by senior, influential men who escape similar scrutiny. It is her gender that belies so much of this comment and is why we judge her, and we continue to judge women by a higher standard.

The barrage of abuse faced by Astor is resonant of that faced by women today in how it is articulated. While platforms may differ the message are the still the same:

The 1920's heralded the end of a 60 years fight for women's enfranchisement but in 1919 it fell to Nancy Astor to be the first woman to take her seat in parliament. She endured abhorrent misogyny and sat alone for almost two years but she determinedly demonstrated that women were physically as well as intellectually capable of rising to the challenge of being an MP.

The election of Nancy Astor changed British democracy forever. The importance of her election is that, for the first time, a woman was able to directly influence the parliamentary debate and the writing of the laws of her own land – a responsibility she willingly and ostensibly shouldered for all women. Her arrival in Parliament ushered in a new type of politician, a public woman, a new perspective and a reminder that there was a female electorate who increasingly demanded to be satisfied. As an individual, her courage and resilience in standing alone for almost 2 years in a hostile House established a platform on which women continue to build today and in many ways, this is still as relevant today as it was for Astor in all her complexity and with all her contradictions. The 2019 centenary and Astor100 are not

only about Nancy Astor, the memorisation of the achievement of an individual that will facilitate a wider conversation about what she represented and the avenues she pioneered for women who followed. It also amplifies the demand for continued progress towards political equality.

The Commons, however, never grew to love Astor, who remained an MP until 1945. She was not, as her enemies dubbed her, 'Lady Dis-Astor'. She was unable, or unwilling, to cultivate a parliamentary manner, and while the many Astor anecdotes have an eccentric charm, her colleagues grew irritated by her constant interruptions, audible commentaries on others' speeches. Astor was 'an unconventional MP' and she admitted herself that she was more of a 'nuisance' than a 'force' in the Commons, in partly, as her great friend George Bernard Shaw attested, because she lacked any political philosophy. She was however, a vociferous supporter of equal voting rights and helped to spare the Women's Police Force from the 'Geddes Axe'. She supported welfare reforms and access to the professions for women. She was also supportive of other female MPs regardless of political party. She offered support to Margaret Wintringham, the second woman MP, when she took her seat in October 1921 and struck-up often unlikely friendships with each new intake of women, including 'Red' Ellen Wilkinson, elected in 1924. She won seven elections between 1919 and 1945, before retiring from Parliament. Ultimately, Astor was a greater success as a 'Cause' than as an individual MP. Her enduring significance was secured the moment she swore the oath. 'From the first moment of her appearance in that exclusive club a terrifying responsibility rested upon her. She carried the repute of future women MPs in elegant gloved hands'…Everybody waited to see what she would say or do; and those who resented female incursion into that sacred male preserve devoutly prayed that she might say or do the wrong thing' - she did not fail them.[xviii]

Astor's difficult introduction was as an indication of the challenges for the political establishment in responding to the challenge of women in their respective parties. Early female politicians often operated cross party maintaining gender co-operation which frequently required them to put feminist before party ideology. Much of the legislative space in which women operated was issue-based, inherently liberal in character and dictated by their gender which begs the question of how far women were forced into a political space by their identity and an assumed femininity. At first sight, there is a vast gap between the classes, backgrounds and therefore motivations of the early cohort of female MPs. However, regardless of class or politics, society deemed that a woman's place was in the home and after World War One there were pressing domestic issues that needed to be addressed. Independent MP Eleanor Rathbone understood the issues women faced in the world of work and the home and 'wanted to reconcile women's distinctive role as wife and mother with the feminist ideal of equal opportunity' hence her commitment to family allowances. [xix]Rathbone and Astor accepted that most women aspired to marriage and therefore saw this legislation as necessary to protect women's freedom by aiding their becoming economically independent of their husbands, while not forcing them into the world of work, and away from their children.

After the success of the 1929 election, many women were forced into marginal seats; the 1931 general election was a disaster for women MPs as every woman lost her seat with the exception of Astor who again provided consistency and continuity. Astor believed the support of women was the reason she stayed in parliament but that entering it had been a different matter:

> Now I realise it was a jolly good thing that I was the first woman, for the first person, I knew nearly everybody in London, I knew many people in the House of Commons, I was connected with a priest, intimate friends with the editor of The Times, owning The Observer, and I really cared about social reform and I cared what I was there for and I had money enough to get good secretaries. It wasn't so much what I was but I had so much to keep me up.[xx]

Nancy Astor was strong, tenacious and brave, her legacy was sticking it out and speaking out. Had she failed she would have potentially set back the cause of women by years. She embodies the challenges of political women of the interwar era but also many of challenges for women in politics that remain. While great strides have been made, in our 24 hour a day, social media driven world they may take a different form but they are there. Nancy Astor may be an imperfect first step in a better-balanced political world, but regardless we also need to acknowledge and act on what she herself says here and provide all women in politics, regardless of party, with the support and protection that Nancy Astor needed to 'keep her up'.

My sincere thanks to my colleagues Professor Julie Gottlieb (Sheffield) and Professor David Stack (Reading) for their thoughts and inputs that are reflected here.

---

[i] Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1918/8&9G5c47

[ii] Fawcett, Millicent 'What Has the Vote Done? (1924), University of Reading Special Collections, Nancy Astor Papers, MS1416/1/1/263

[iii] Cowman, Krista, *Women in British Politics c. 1689-1979* (Basingstoke, 2010)

[iv] *The Times*, 2nd December 1919

[v] Nancy Astor, *BBC*, October 1943

[vi] HC Deb 24 February 1920, vol 125, col 1621

[vii] ibid

[viii] Stack, David, 'The First Lady' in *Total Politics* (December 2010). Huge thanks for agreeing to the expedient ransacking of his article.

[ix] Private letters to Nancy Astor (1919), University of Reading Special Collections, Nancy Astor Papers, MS1416/1/1/1739-1742

[x] Nancy Astor, *BBC*, 1945

[xi] Nancy Astor, *BBC*, 1956

[xii] Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons under Eighteen) Bill 1923, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1923/13&14G5c28

[xiii] HC Deb 29 March 1928 vol 215 c1449

[xiv] HC Deb 29 March 1928 vol 215 cc1449-1450

[xv] HC Deb 29 March 1928 vol 215 cc1449-1452

[xvi] Notes on the 'Cliveden Set' (1939), University of Reading Special Collections, Nancy Astor Papers, MS1416/1/1/1585-1591

[xvii] Gottleib, Julie*, 'Guilty Women', Foreign Policy and Appeasement in Inter-War Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

[xviii] Mary Stocks, quoted in Stack, *op cit.*

[xix] Eleanor Rathbone, The Disinherited Family: a plea for the endowment of the family (London, Edward Arnold, 1924), pp. xii, 324

[xx] Nancy Astor, BBC interview, 1956.