

## Background to the news



# Women's *Suffrage* Day NZ \*\*\*

### **The place of women in the 19th century**

In early colonial New Zealand, most people believed that the natural place for women was in the home, looking after the house and children. In the late 19th century, some women began to *challenge* this view of women's role in society. They also began to challenge the idea that they were not allowed to vote. At the time, only men who were over 21 could vote — women, criminals and the *insane* could not.

### **The suffrage movement**

In the 1880s women began to organise themselves to fight for equal political rights. Kate Sheppard, an intelligent, religious and well educated woman, became the main leader in the suffrage movement in New Zealand. She organised a series of huge *petitions* to Parliament seeking the right for women to vote. In 1893 nearly 32,000 women, almost a quarter of the adult European female population in New Zealand, signed the petition. They believed that once they were able to vote, they would be able to use their votes to make life better for families.

### **Political battles**

But not everyone supported the idea of women's suffrage. At the time, many women were against drinking, and the alcohol industry was afraid that women would vote for the *prohibition* of alcohol. So the alcohol industry *lobbied* sympathetic Members of Parliament (MPs) and organised their own *counter-petitions*.

In 1893 a bill to give women the vote was presented in Parliament. Suffragists organised huge meet-

ings and gave their supporters in Parliament white *camellias* to wear in their *buttonholes*. On 8 September 1893 the bill was passed by 20 votes to 18. However, to become law the bill still needed to be signed by the Governor of New Zealand. Some MPs who were against the bill then petitioned the Governor not to sign. And anti-suffragists gave these MPs red *camellias* to wear in their *buttonholes*!

### **Victory**

Finally, on 19 September 1893 the Governor, Lord Glasgow, signed the bill and the new Electoral Act became law. New Zealand became the first self-governing country in the world to give all women the right to vote in parliamentary elections. The New Zealand suffragists held great celebrations, and suffragists in Britain, Australia and the United States all sent messages of congratulations. The victory in New Zealand gave hope to those fighting for women's rights in other countries in the world.

### **NZ women and politics today**

Although New Zealand women won the right to vote in 1893, it took a long time for them to achieve political equality. Women were not allowed to become MPs until 1919, and the first female MP, Elizabeth McCombs, was not elected until 1933 — forty years after women's suffrage was won.

Today, women play a bigger part in political life than previously. Almost a third of the MPs elected to Parliament in 2005 were female. In the last few years, women have held top positions — as prime minister, governor-general, chief justice and speaker of the House of

Representatives. Helen Clark, the first elected female prime minister of New Zealand, now has the third highest position in the United Nations (UN) as Chair of the UN Development Group.

### **Suffrage Day**

Today we remember Kate Sheppard's role in the suffrage movement through her picture on the \$10 note. And on 19 September we celebrate Suffrage Day. At 12.30pm in Christchurch (where Kate Sheppard lived) all women are invited to bring white *camellias* to place on the Kate Sheppard Memorial to celebrate and remember the women who fought for their rights, and for the rights of women today.

Source: 'Brief history — women and the vote', [www.nzhistory.net.nz/politics/womens-suffrage/brief-history](http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/politics/womens-suffrage/brief-history), (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 13 Nov 2008.

### **Vocabulary**

- suffrage* — the right to vote in an election
- challenge* — question if an idea is true or has value
- insane* — people who behave strangely because their mind does not work in the normal way
- petition* — a written document that many people sign to show that they want an organisation to do something
- prohibition* — a law that stops something being done
- lobbied* — tried to influence the government to make decisions for or against something
- counter* — against
- camellia* — a type of flower
- buttonhole* — a hole in clothing through which a button is passed in order to fasten something