

## *Nancy Astor, first woman to take her seat in the UK Parliament, 1919*

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## 5. First Woman to take her Seat in the UK Parliament, Nancy Astor, 1919

Jacqui Turner

On 1 December 1919 Nancy Astor became the first woman MP to take her seat in the House of Commons. Hers was the first female voice heard in the chamber as an MP; she was the first woman MP to ask a question, speak in a parliamentary debate and deliver a maiden speech; sit on a parliamentary committee and to introduce a private members bill that resulted in the enactment of the **Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons Under Eighteen) Bill 1923**. She was also instrumental in the passage of the **Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928** that granted equal voting rights to women and men at the age of 21 and a number of other legal landmarks mentioned in this book. However, her enduring significance was secured the moment she swore the oath.

### I. Life

Nancy Witcher Langhorne stated that in 1897 'I was born in Danville Virginia and had three brothers and four sisters, all of whom I adored.'<sup>1</sup> It was a secure and happy childhood, typically an American middle-class upbringing. She had a limited early education 'of a perfunctory kind'<sup>2</sup> and opportunities for more formal education were limited as her father "did not believe in education for women"<sup>3</sup> In 1897, she married Robert Gould Shaw II and the following year their son Bobby was born. However, after several difficult years, fuelled by Shaw's alcoholism, they were divorced in 1903 leaving Nancy with a long-standing aversion to alcohol. Nancy met Waldorf Astor on a transatlantic voyage to England for the hunting season of 1905. They married in 1906, settling at Cliveden, Buckinghamshire.<sup>4</sup>

In 1910 Waldorf was elected to parliament as MP for Plymouth Sutton. If the experience of her first marriage to Shaw was the foundation of her loathing for alcohol, her work in Plymouth supporting her husband, reinforced her conviction that the dire consequences of poverty and misery resulted from drink. It was also endorsed by her commitment to Christian Science and the belief in health through prayer; her faith had a profound impact on her personally and thus on her political life.

When her husband was elevated to the House of Lords on the death of his father, Nancy Astor was an unexpected replacement for him as the sitting Conservative and Unionist MP for Plymouth Sutton. For the Party, she was an acceptable candidate because of her proximity to her husband and her popularity in the constituency. On 28 November 1919, she was elected by a landslide securing more votes than the Liberal and Labour

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<sup>1</sup> MS 1416/1/6/86, Nancy Astor, Draft of Autobiography (unfinished) 1951.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The couple went on to have five children including three, Bill, (William) Michael and Jackie (John), who would follow her path into the House of Commons.

candidates combined. She subsequently, won seven elections between 1919 and 1945 before retiring from Parliament. The longevity of Astor's tenure was a huge achievement which far outstripped many of her contemporaries. She was replaced by a woman MP, Lucy Middleton (Labour 1945-1951).

She died at Grimsthorpe Castle, Lincolnshire on 2 May 1964.

## II. Context

The 1920's heralded the end of more than 60-years of campaigning for the women's vote and the arrival of the first women MPs. The Representation of the People Act 1918 had delivered the vote to some women over 30 with certain property qualifications and virtually all men aged 21.<sup>5</sup> Hot on its heels came one of the shortest Acts in British political history, the **Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918**, hurriedly passed and simply stating that women were 'not be disqualified by sex or marriage for being elected to or sitting or voting' as members of the House of Commons<sup>6</sup>. Despite the age restriction on women voting, there was no such restriction for women MPs, creating an interesting anomaly that women could be elected to parliament but unable to vote for themselves.<sup>7</sup>

The general election of 14<sup>th</sup> December 1918 was the first in which some women could vote and all women could stand for election. With just six weeks to campaign, seventeen women stood as candidates including the former suffragette leader Christabel Pankhurst.<sup>8</sup> Of these women, four were Liberal, four Labour and one Conservative, plus two Sinn Fein and six independent female candidates. Just one woman was successful. **Constance Markievicz** was the first and only woman elected to the Westminster parliament. She was in Holloway prison at the time and as a member of Sinn Fein refused to take the oath and did not take her seat. It was almost a year later that Nancy Astor was elected as a Coalition Conservative at a carefully controlled by-election in Plymouth Sutton.

Suffrage campaigners were initially dismayed that the first woman MP was not a candidate from the women's movement. Astor's entry into politics had nothing to do with feminism or the suffrage movement. In fact, of the 36 women who became MPs between the Wars, none had a suffragette pedigree though some had been associated with the suffragist movement. Nonetheless, throughout the 1920s Astor made efforts to work with other women, regardless of party affiliation in particular on the equal franchise in the

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<sup>5</sup> Representation of the People Act, 1918, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1918/7&8G5c64. See Mari Takayanagi, 'Representation of the People Act 1918' in Erika Rackley and Rosemary Auchmuty (eds) *Women's Legal Landmarks: celebrating the history of women and law in the UK and Ireland* (Hart 2019) 113.

<sup>6</sup> Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act, 1918, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1918/8&9G5c47

<sup>7</sup> This indeed happened with Jennie Lee, a Labour MP elected at by-election in North Lanarkshire in 1929 at the age of 21 before the **Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928** came into force.

<sup>8</sup> Christabel Pankhurst was a candidate for the Women's Party (the post war incarnation of the Women's Social and Political Union) in the new constituency of Smethwick. She was allocated a 'coupon' endorsed by the Lloyd George coalition ensuring no coalition candidate stood against her.

1920s, women police and access to the professions and on woman power during the Second World War. She could have avoided women's issues as some among the first generation of women MPs did but chose not to. In her first contribution to Parliament, supporting an amendment from Major Jack Hills seeking to eliminate sex discrimination in the composition of the Governor's Legislative Councils, she noted that women's partial franchise in the UK had been granted 'only after enormous pressure from the ladies'.<sup>9</sup>

When reflecting on her career Astor claimed that she had been 'as good a feminist as anyone'<sup>10</sup> and had a special responsibility to women and children understanding their needs and ambitions in a way that men never could. She often expressed the view that women were more suited to public life, had 'moral courage' and were 'not so easily flattered'<sup>11</sup>. She had an active and vociferous commitment to achieving the equal franchise for women, acting as a conduit for suffrage organisations and was instrumental in holding her party and Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's government to account for promises made regarding the equal franchise.

### **III. What Happened Next**

As a Conservative MP, Astor was not an overwhelming success. She was consistently overlooked by her party and her political achievements have often since been overshadowed by the novelty of her sex and the circumstances of her election as the perceived 'proxy' or 'male-equivalent' to her husband.<sup>12</sup> In fact, while Astor had been active in supporting Waldorf Astor's political career, she did not have longstanding ambition to be a politician and openly declared that her 'husband put the idea in my head... and I should get out of it if he got rid of his peerage'.<sup>13</sup> However, despite some initial emphasis on continuity in her candidature, it was clear that she represented something new, even if the details of how that would unfold in practice were yet to be defined.

For Astor, on first entering parliament 'realized that I had ceased to be a person and had become a symbol.'<sup>14</sup> There was an expectation that Astor's election would provide a blueprint for women to follow. Letters sent to Astor at the time of her election made it clear that she was 'no ordinary MP. You are a precedent'<sup>15</sup> and 'the ice of prejudice has been broken.'<sup>16</sup> Other local Conservative parties informed her, 'We are today considering the question of adopting a woman as candidate...and your result will undoubtedly help

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<sup>9</sup> HC Deb 04 December 1919 vol 122 cc657.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Astor Interview by Mary Stocks, *Woman's Hour*, BBC, 1956.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Astor Interview (interviewer unknown), *Panorama*, BBC, 1959.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British feminists between the Wars* (Clarendon 1987) 79.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Astor interview (interviewer unknown) BBC, 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Astor, *My Two Countries* (Heinemann 1923) 3.

<sup>15</sup> MS 1416/1/1/1722 Letter from Mrs Gould, NW3, 28 Nov 1919.

<sup>16</sup> MS 1416/1/1/1723 Letter from S Helen Wigg-Gilbert, 5 Dec 1919.

us to overcome any prejudice on the part of the men.'<sup>17</sup> Likewise, women's groups recorded that there was a confidence that "your success will give a great impetus to the nomination of other women candidates...and will encourage the electorate to vote for them."<sup>18</sup> Such interpretations are in-keeping with how Astor perceived herself. Speaking at the time she stated that 'my hope is that I may pave the way for other women who aspire to enter the House of Commons.'<sup>19</sup>

Letters of congratulation following her by-election success and maiden speech suggest that those who saw her as a continuity candidate or proxy for the 'tried old firm of Astor and co.'<sup>20</sup> were heavily outweighed by those urging her to be a champion for women and children, encouraging her to follow an independent philosophy that positioned her beyond Party politics. In 1919, Millicent Fawcett<sup>21</sup> credited Astor with reforming credentials 'before she ever had the idea of entering Parliament, she took an active interest in improving the conditions of working people'<sup>22</sup> The hope and expectation that she would represent all women propelled her towards often underestimated causes including social reform and temperance. This proved a natural space for Astor's reforming instinct although her commitment to other issues such as the equal franchise and the concerns of her naval constituency should not be overlooked.

Whether she was forced into a female space by her party or chose it through her own commitment to the loyalty of the women of England who she believed supported her, Astor instinctively chose to champion the causes of women and children. With no political pedigree she might never have been expected to find a place in the upper echelons of the Conservative party or gain high office anyway.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, as Clement Attlee noted, 'she made things hum'.<sup>24</sup> She supported legislation concerning women in the workplace and the safety of women out on the streets, she campaigned for nursery school provision, school nurses and women's access to the civil service and judiciary alongside women police. By 1928, in the words of Ray Strachey, 'every bill had a women's side and the party Whips began eagerly to ask what the women thought'.<sup>25</sup> For Astor however, her position as a sex-candidate and the first female MP ultimately transcended any political allegiances.

Astor's parliamentary career was not without controversy though she overcame many hurdles. She was strongly anti-Communist and initially supported appeasement although her support for Churchill was unwavering by the outbreak of war. She was anti-Catholic

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<sup>17</sup> MS 1416/1/1/1724 Letter from Deptford United Conservative and Unionist Association, 28 Nov 1919.

<sup>18</sup> MS 1416/1/1/1724 Letter from the Scottish Federation of Societies for Equal Citizenship, 11 Dec 1919.

<sup>19</sup> MS 1416/1/6/31 Press cuttings, *Birmingham Post*, 10 November 1919.

<sup>20</sup> Mabel Philipson, election address, 1923.

<sup>21</sup> Suffragist and leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

<sup>22</sup> MS 1416/1/7/33, 'AN HISTORIC EVENT – MRS HENRY FAWCETT ON THE ADVENT OF A WOMAN MP.' Daily Graphic 29/11/1919.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Astor Interview by Mary Stocks, *Woman's Hour*, BBC, 1956.

<sup>24</sup> Clement Atlee, *The Observer*, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1964, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movements in Great Britain* (Kennikat 1969) 367. Ray Strachey became Astor's parliamentary secretary in 1931.

and made anti-Semitic statements though she called the accusation of antisemitism against her a 'terrible lie'.<sup>26</sup> She firmly believed that such criticisms were amplified in response to her sex.<sup>27</sup>

The second woman, Liberal MP Margaret Wintringham, was elected at a by-election in 1921. Like Astor, she succeeded her husband, in her case after his death as sitting MP for Louth, Lincolnshire. Astor and Wintringham, who got on well and were mutually supportive working together on many issues, both offer an ironic counterpoint to the pre-voting arguments of the anti-suffrage movement that women were adequately represented by their husbands. Candidates who were selected faced a 'political baptism of fire' and a maelstrom of press and public attention.<sup>28</sup> Public scrutiny of women's dress, deportment and conduct were often of far greater interest to the electorate and the press than their policies. All aspects of their lives were fair game.<sup>29</sup>

By 1923 the election of Astor, Wintringham and Mabel Philipson (Conservative) was having a profound effect on the Labour party.<sup>30</sup> Women had been able to join the party on equal terms to men since its inception and in 1918 the Labour General Election manifesto announced 'The Labour party is the woman's party'.<sup>31</sup> However, Labour had not succeeded in establishing a woman in parliament and were pushed into reconsidering their constituencies and providing women with safe seats with strong grassroots avoiding marginal constituencies. Eight more female MPs including the first Labour women MPs, Margaret Bondfield, Susan Lawrence and Dorothy Jewson were elected in 1923. But the number of women candidates remained tiny and the successes even fewer throughout the interwar period. At the 1931 General Election, the number of women MPs peaked at 15<sup>32</sup> supporting Edith Summerskill MP's recollection that "Parliament, with its conventions and protocol, seemed a little like a boys' school which had decided to take a few girls."<sup>33</sup>

## IV Significance

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<sup>26</sup> *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, 24 March 1938.

<sup>27</sup> MS 1416/1/1/1573 Lady Astor: propaganda against her 1942-1943.

<sup>28</sup> Cheryl Law, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement 1918-1928* (Bloomsbury, 1997) 150.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Mabel Philipson (Conservative) was also elected to her husband's seat of Berwick upon Tweed at a by election on 13 May 1922.

<sup>31</sup> Labour Party General Election Manifesto 1918.

<sup>32</sup> The election of women fell to nine in 1935. It rose once more to 24 in 1945, where it more or less remained until the 1980s (Richard Cracknell, 'The history and geography of women MPs since 1918 in numbers' *House of Commons Library* 18 November 2013: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/the-history-and-geography-of-women-mps-since-1918-in-numbers/>).

<sup>33</sup> Edith Summerskill, *A Woman's World: Memoirs*, (Heinemann, 1967) quoted in 'Women MPs 1931-1945', UK Vote100: Looking forward to the centenary of the equal franchise in 2023 in the UK Parliament, 1 August 2020: [www.ukvote100.org/2020/08/31/women-mps-1931-1945/](http://www.ukvote100.org/2020/08/31/women-mps-1931-1945/).

Nancy Astor's election to the British Parliament thus becoming the first woman to take her seat changed British democracy forever. For the first time, a woman was able to be heard in the chamber of the House of Commons, directly influencing the parliamentary debate and the writing of the laws of her own country. She won seven elections between 1919 and 1945 before retiring from Parliament. Her subsequent electoral successes and longevity as an MP ran counter to the narrative that women MPs were merely a novelty.

Astor's appeal as 'a threefold representative: as woman, wife, mother' and her ability to embody ordinary 'feminine virtues' associated with mothers and caregivers made her seem the 'right woman'.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the hope that she would represent all women meant that her election came with a weight of expectation that had no parallel for any male MP.

Astor remained a conviction politician motivated more by her mailbag than her party's political principles. She had a determination to prove that women were as physically capable of being full participants in the rigours of political life as men. Her political character was instinctive and her personal inclinations increasingly focused on the solution to women's social and political oppression and how to reform it, which ultimately placed her feminism above her Conservatism and inevitably hampered her relationship with the party, squeezing her out of broader, traditional Right of centre politics. To some extent it also helps better understand what had been judged the decline of her later parliamentary career.<sup>35</sup> Astor was an unconventional MP and charted a path through previously unnavigated parliamentary politics and the gendered culture of the early 20th century in which she operated.

### Further Reading

Nancy Astor, *My Two Countries* (Heinemann 1923)  
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/50275> .

Krista Cowman, *Women in British Politics, c. 1689-1979* (Palgrave 2010).

Daniel Grey and Jacqui Turner (eds), 'An Unconventional MP: Nancy Astor, Public Women and Gendered Political Culture', *Open Library of Humanities*, (2020).

Cheryl Law, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement 1918-1928* (Bloomsbury 1997).

Christopher Sykes, *The Life of Lady Astor* (Academy 1972).

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<sup>34</sup> MS 1416/1/6/31 Press cuttings, *Birmingham Post*, 10 November 1919.

<sup>35</sup> MS 1416/1/3 Letters from Waldorf to Nancy Astor. Astor stood down under pressure from her husband and family who, along with the aging local Plymouth Conservative party, did not feel they had another election left in them. She believed that the electorate in Plymouth would have voted for her again and this difference of opinion caused a personal estrangement.



