A CHANGING FRANCHISE

When property became the basis for political representation in nineteenth-century Britain, its role in the conferment of the franchise was already being challenged by a new concept of citizenship originated in the ‘enlightenment’ of the eighteenth century: that all people born and residing within the boundaries of a state are citizens of that state, with citizenship rights and duties. The scope, privileges and obligations of citizenship were endlessly debated. In particular, were women citizens\(^1\) and should the franchise be considered a right of citizenship? Philosophically, it was difficult (though not impossible) not to answer both questions affirmatively.

Thus such debates served to increase the pressures for female suffrage, and sharpened awareness among women of their second-class status when their demands were continually rejected, as in the Reform Bills of 1867 and 1884. Not all public women sought the vote. As late as 1889, in ‘An Appeal Against Female Suffrage’, published in *The Nineteenth Century*, women against women’s suffrage argued that ‘citizenship does not require the franchise’\(^2\). But the majority of women involved in public life supported the view expressed by such leaders as Lady Carlisle, a leading female radical, that the vote was indeed part of citizenship.\(^3\)

As the franchise expanded through the adult male population of English society, politics ceased to be the preserve of a small politically conscious minority operating through their individual families. New political organizations now had to be created out of the old alliances. Expediency created new types of associations as well as new ways of politicking, and laws had to be passed to control these innovations. These laws, in turn, led to further alterations in the political world. Changes begat more changes, in a way, and of a kind, that were unanticipated. Both Liberals and Conservatives in the mid-nineteenth century found themselves reaching out into the electorate to draw into the party as many voters as possible. Modern political parties, their organizations and their campaigns, were being born – out of the necessity of the times.

Party motives enfranchised new groups, just as party motives kept others out.\(^4\) Prominent among the excluded were the women, regarded by party
chiefs as an unknown quantity in politics. To be sure, individual women of the upper classes continued their traditional involvement in national politics, especially if the men in their families were in office. Both Lady Palmerston and Mrs. Gladstone were the ‘intimate political confidants’ of their husbands, and Mrs. Gladstone spent so much time in the House of Commons that she had her own seat in the Visitors’ Gallery. During election time wives, daughters, and mothers, often wearing the colours of their party, canvassed the districts for brothers, sons, fathers, and husbands. Lady Carlisle’s mother did it, and so did she. Lady Milbank, wife of Sir Frederick Milbank, a well-known Member of Parliament from Yorkshire, was another active worker in her husband’s campaigns. Women belonging to a political family often were expected to help their men get elected. There being no mass media to dispense political messages, wives and daughters worked the district, handing out leaflets and talking to the electorate, possibly the only personal contact the voter had with the candidate.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The first small success for the women suffragists came in the late 1860s when women were given the municipal franchise on the same basis as men. During the 1870s, women expanded their role on the local political scene. They not only voted in municipal elections but stood for office, were elected, and served on borough councils and the new school boards, set up by the 1870 Education Act.

But the work of the local government was of a different category from that of the national government. In nineteenth-century England there was a wide class difference between men who stood and served in national office and those in local positions, just as there was a great difference in the relationship of the elected to the electorate in local and national government. Members of Parliament seldom had prior connections to the areas they came to represent – they were Liberals or Conservatives in search of a seat. And they were often of the upper classes, separated from their constituencies by class differences as well.

In contrast, candidates for local office were usually well-known citizens in their constituencies, supported because of their individual worth rather than party affiliation or social class. Many ran as ‘independents’, and much of their political work was done by local organizations; the national parties were unconcerned with these parochial contests, there being little national influence to be gained in serving on provincial boards. Although the work