Policy at the centre

As the democratic suffragists foresaw, the change in the nature of the NU after June 1915 had to play out painfully in the erosion of the Labour and working class connection. The change manifested itself in two areas: in the EFF policy and more subtly in attitudes to women’s work in wartime, which will be considered in Chapter 8.

Widespread as support had been, those who had initiated the EFF had had to steer a fine line between on one side significant minority opposition in the NU, and on the other the scepticism of some Labour Party leaders who feared that should one of the other parties declare its commitment to a women’s suffrage measure, the NU would leave Labour candidates in the lurch. Support from Labour had come most firmly from the ILP, the left wing of the party. Opposition within the NU had included most of those now in control of the NU executive, who came from London and from those regions most uneasy with the policy. Fawcett had been fully convinced of the value of the EFF policy, and would defend it strongly even in her later writings, but in mid-1915 her support was not to be counted on.¹

The Glasgow agreement of January 1914 now became the centre of controversy. The intent of the agreement had been to enable selected Labour candidates (mainstream and ILP) to accept help from the EFF in full confidence that the help would be continued through by-elections and the general election, whatever political change might take place. The NU also had promised not to work against Labour candidates anywhere. The Labour Party, on its side, was pledged to oppose any franchise reform that did not include women.
At the outset of the war, the NU’s decision to suspend political work had been made easily but without detailed definition. Despite the suspension, the EFF, the by-elections sub-committee, and the 1914 executive had been anxious to leave a crack open for suffrage work at any contested by-elections, or in the event of a general election or the end of the war. They had carried a resolution, against some opposition, at the February 1915 Council, allowing the NU ‘to take political action on the lines of the existing election policy ... should the Executive Committee deem it desirable’. Accordingly EFF work had continued in certain constituencies, keeping in touch with the plans of the Labour Party to run candidates, and making sure that EFF organizers were available where needed.

By the summer of 1915, the political landscape had changed. At the outbreak of war all parties except the ILP had offered a measure of support to the ruling Liberal government in its prosecution of the conflict. In May 1915, when Asquith formed the first coalition government, the lone standout was again the ILP. But the ILP included in its number many of the very men who had taken up the suffrage cause with energy and had helped the NU bring the Labour Party to the committed position it now held. Much argument now turned on whether the political changes brought about by the war should be regarded as covered by the Glasgow agreement, or whether indeed the war and the formation of the coalition government nullified the agreement altogether.

The relationship of Marshall to the NU executive had remained anomalous, and had to come to a final resolution after the débacle at the Special Council. Before their resignations she and Courtney had served on the executive ex officio, as parliamentary secretary and honorary secretary respectively. Marshall had also offered her resignation as EFF honorary secretary, though admitting to Fawcett, ‘I cannot tell you what a grief it is to give up this work. It is the hardest wrench of all’. At that time, however, Fawcett had moved that she be asked to stay on.2

The post of parliamentary secretary was left vacant until the June Special Council, when Ray Strachey took on the work. Telling her mother of her appointment, she wrote, ‘You will laugh, but there is as a matter of fact nothing to do, and I am just filling a breach and keeping out some poisonous pacifists’. Ironically, a very proper and exceedingly polite correspondence took place between Marshall and Strachey when the latter took over, in which Marshall offered every help and Strachey expressed the deepest gratitude and some humility