

Year 6 General Studies

Women's Suffrage

At the turn of the 20th century, Australia was considered one of the most progressive democratic nations in the world. In 1902, we became the second country to grant women the vote and the first to permit women to stand for parliament. Always one step ahead, women in New Zealand had been given the vote in 1893 but they had to wait until 1919 for the right to enter government themselves.



Calls for women's suffrage had become increasingly clamorous as the 19th century drew to a close. In 1894, women in South Australia won the vote following a campaign led by members of a group called the Women's Suffrage League, among them Mary Lee and Catherine Helen Spence. This meant that South Australia was the first electorate in the world to give equal political rights to both men and women.

When Federation passed in 1901, it was a push from these progressive states that resulted in female enfranchisement with the passage of the Commonwealth Franchise Act in 1902, which granted the right to vote to British subjects over the age of 21.

Notably, universal suffrage was not accorded to Indigenous women, who had to wait until 1962 for enfranchisement. Indigenous women who could vote in South Australia before Federation were effectively disenfranchised by the Commonwealth Franchise Act when it was passed in 1902 (as were Indigenous men, who had gained the right to vote with all other males in South Australia in 1856). Other non-white Australians, including people from Asian, African and Pacific Islander origin, were also denied the vote under the legislation. There were some exceptions, including granting the right to vote to Indigenous Australians enrolled to vote in state elections – though few could actually do so, and legislation introduced in 1949 extending the right to vote in federal elections to Indigenous people who had served in the armed forces.

Granting women the right to stand for election did not, as it turned out, result in a flood of female candidates taking over the halls of the nation's parliaments. Four women stood as independents in the 1903 federal election, and all were unsuccessful. It was Edith Cowan, a leader of the suffrage movement, who became the first female Member of Parliament when she was elected to Western Australia's Legislative Assembly in 1921.

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Questions

1. What year did South Australia give equal political rights to both men and women?

2. The Commonwealth Franchise Act in 1902, granted the right to vote to British subjects over the age of 21.

True / False

3. In 1902, Australia became the second country to grant women the vote and the first to permit women to stand for parliament. Which country was the first to allow women the right to vote?

4. Could all South Australian's vote in 1910?

5. Granting women the right to stand for election resulted in a flood of female candidates taking over the halls of the nation's parliaments.

True / False

6. Who became Australia's first female Member of Parliament?
