No vote – no census: an account of some of the events of 1910–1911

Ian White

Office for National Statistics

Abstract

The 2011 Census on the 27 March will be the latest in a series spanning over two centuries and covering vast demographic changes in the British population. Although the underlying aim of each census since 1801 has been to obtain an accurate enumeration of the population, successive censuses have adapted to changing social and technological circumstances, asking appropriate questions and using the best available technology to compile results. A century ago, the 1911 Census represented a shift from earlier censuses in its use of machine tabulation. Despite this innovation, however, what is perhaps most interesting about 1911 is the social and political circumstances: the 1911 Census took place against the background of a threatened boycott by the suffragette movement. The article demonstrates how, though times change and technology moves on, a successful census was conducted despite the deeply sensitive political times.

Contents

No vote – no census: an account of some of the events of 1910–1911	33
Abstract.....	33
Introduction	35
Background.....	35
Mechanical data processing	35
The fertility enquiry.....	38
Reducing the enumerator's burden.....	40
Suffragette militancy reaches its peak	41
The Census boycott	46
References.....	50

Introduction

What the recent release of the 1911 Census records in England and Wales has now confirmed is that Emily Wilding Davison, the suffragette who threw herself under Anmer, King George V's horse in the 1913 Epsom Derby, was, indeed, enumerated as being resident at the Houses of Parliament, as had been commonly rumoured.

Davison had been very active in the suffragette movement, and as part of the protest against the Census to highlight the plight of women's rights she had hidden in the Palace of Westminster on Census night so that she could legitimately record that as her place of residence.

There had, in fact, been a vigorous campaign led by Emmeline Pankhurst to boycott the 1911 Census, and the protest provided the suffragettes with a good platform to oppose Asquith's fragile Liberal Government's persistent reluctance to give women the vote. But why was the census seen as such a good target? It just so happened that after several decades of relative stasis in terms of its conduct and content, the census was about to explode (statistically, at least) with a series of innovations which, alone, would make it memorable.

This article, taken from material to be published in a forthcoming ONS history of the census, 'Very near the truth'¹, sets out the circumstances that threatened to disrupt the census a hundred years ago. It sets the militancy of the suffragette movement against the general political background at the time and the particular innovations that the 1911 Census was about to introduce.

Background

The 1911 Census was a watershed in many ways: it was the first time that the householder's return was used as the master copy from which the census data was coded and processed; a new and extensive enquiry into fertility of married women was introduced at a time when there were concerns about the eugenicists' explanations for the causes of differential birth rates; and, to enable the much increased amount of information collected to be processed more quickly, it was the first time in which mechanised data tabulating methods replaced the clerical operations used since 1801. Furthermore, the census was conducted at a very politically sensitive time, just when the suffragette movement reached its peak of activity.

Mechanical data processing

The introduction of punched card and mechanical sorting provided a major technological advance in the handling of the data collected by enumerators, and offered the potential for speeding up the whole processing operation. The need to adopt technology that was new to the British census arose from the significant increase in the amount of data to be collected in 1911 compared with the previous four censuses and the demand from users for an expansion in the number of tabulations and in the detail of the analyses to be made.

Until 1911 all the tables in the census reports had been created using tabulation sheets and a clerical 'ticking' method. In the case of occupational abstracts, for example, the tabulation sheets were large pieces of paper with occupational headings down the vertical side and sex/age groups across the top. The headings were ruled across the sheet, creating boxes into which clerks put a

tick for an occurrence in the census enumerators' returns for a person of the relevant sex, age and occupation. By 1901 these sheets had grown in size to the almost unmanageable dimensions of 40 x 26½ inches, and in order to classify more than 15,000 different occupation titles into some 680 groups for the tabulations, each was subdivided into more than 5,000 separate boxes. The ticks in the columns were then added up, and the results placed in another series of columns on another sheet, giving the numbers of people under particular occupational headings within particular age groups.

Sheets were created in this manner for each registration sub-district and, in order to create tables by registration districts, the sheets for sub-districts had to be folded at the column to be totalled and then lined up so that they overlapped, and the figures then read off on to district sheets. Figures were then transferred from district to county sheets in a similar manner. This was all very cumbersome, to say the least, and was one of the reasons why Registrar General George Graham and his Superintendent of Statistics, William Farr, and later their respective successors, Sir Brydges Henniker and William Ogle, were so reluctant to increase the scope of the census questions during the second half of the 19th century, particularly those relating to occupation².

As had been noted by Charles Booth during an exhaustive Treasury Committee review of the census in 1890³, this clerical methodology was coming under increased strain, and, as more questions were being proposed for the 1911 Census (in particular the new enquiry into fertility), and many more occupation groups had been created from a dictionary now containing more than 30,000 different occupation titles, it became clear that the 19th century technology would no longer be able to cope. As the new Registrar General for England and Wales, Bernard Mallet, was to write later in the General Report of the 1911 Census⁴:

The limitations of the old system of 'ticking' were nowhere more severely felt than in dealing with occupations. The number of classified headings to be tabulated in relation to age and occupation status necessitated the use of an unusually large abstract sheet, which rendered the work of abstraction very laborious and increased the liability to error. It was considered, indeed, that no further extension of the particulars to be tabulated could be made with safety under the ticking system, and that the demands for additional details could only be met by the adoption of improved methods of tabulation.

And so, some time after they had been employed in censuses internationally, the General Register Office (GRO) finally introduced Hollerith machine tabulators of the kind that had first been used in the US censuses of 1890 and 1900. The system consisted of two stages. First, the information about individuals taken from the returns was punched on to cards, and secondly, the information on the cards was read electronically. Pads with spring-loaded pins were brought down on individual cards and, if the pins passed through a punched hole they completed an electric circuit which moved the dial of a counter.

Figure 1 shows one of the three different types of punch card that were used: the 'population' card that contained the information on rooms, occupation, industry, and birthplace; the 'personal' card showing the details on inhabited dwellings, sex, and the population in institutions'; and the 'fertility' card, which recorded the information collected from the new and extensive enquiry into the fertility of married women (see below).

Figure 1 **Punch card used in the 1911 Census**

Some 170 punching operators, recruited in the main from young girls just out of school, were deployed in two six-hour shifts over the period 5 August 1911 to 21 September 1912 to record the census information.

This process separated data capture from data analysis, since the cards could be analysed in different ways, and as many times as required. In particular, it enabled the data to be re-sorted (using up to 15 different sorting machines) to overcome the problems associated with the subsequent (and frequent) realignment of the local government boundaries. Even as early as the 1891 Census, boundary changes were becoming a serious problem, and Henniker had reported that the task of processing the returns was being made particularly arduous because of the numerous changes in areas since the previous census, brought about by the Divided Parishes Acts of 1876, 1879 and 1882, the Redistribution of Seats Act 1885, and the Local Government Act of 1888. Furthermore, the Local Government Board had instructed Henniker that, in those cases where there had had been changes, the populations of the new areas as they would have been in 1881 should also be calculated. This had irritated Henniker (or, more likely, William Ogle) because of the:

*.... laborious re-examination of very many of the Enumeration books of the census of that earlier date, and the transference, after prolonged correspondence with the local authorities, of houses and persons from one area to another.*⁵

But the introduction of the Hollerith technology made such re-organisation of data far more manageable, and opened up whole new possibilities for statistical analyses. As Mallet (then Sir Bernard) later explained to the RSS in his Presidential Address delivered in November 1916:

*Once the labour of preparing the cards required for the routine tabulation as previously carried out has been accomplished, it becomes a very simple matter to obtain records of additional combinations of the facts recorded, whereas under the system previously employed each additional tabulation had to be undertaken independently, the record of one combination of facts not contributing in any way to the preparation of that of another.*⁶

The fertility enquiry

The application of such mechanical data capture devices also enabled the second major innovation of the 1911 Census - a new enquiry into the fertility of married women - to be analysed in depth in ways that would not have been possible with the traditional Victorian methods of clerical data processing. It also enabled more detailed information on occupation, in particular the industry of occupation, to be collected and analysed.

From 1861 onwards it had been usual to find, in those parts of the census reports that commented on the analyses of marital status, reference to the average fertility rate based on a comparison of the number of enumerated married women aged under 45 with the average annual number of legitimate births registered in specific years. The 1871 Census *General Report*, for example, even contains an interesting comparison with comparative fertility rates in France at that time.

The special enquiry into marriage and fertility in 1911, however, resulted primarily from the concern at the time about the need to provide evidence on whether or not the poorer classes were having more children than those higher up the social scale. This reflected the concerns among Darwinists such as the polymath Francis Galton and mathematician Karl Pearson, who believed that this was leading to the genetic decline of the British 'imperial race' at a time of economic crisis.

The eugenicists had argued that the lower classes were poor and sickly because they had bad genes, and that any provisions to improve public health would merely keep alive inferior physical specimens who would breed even more poor and sickly people. This was especially serious because the poorer levels of society were seen to be out-breeding the 'more intelligent' middle classes⁷. But the GRO had, since Farr's day, a long-standing commitment to test environmentalist theories of the causes of ill morbidity, which the eugenics argument seemed to undermine. In 1904, an Interdepartmental Enquiry on Physical Deterioration had been convened, calling on the evidence of many eminent members of the medical profession and the administrators within the public health sector, in response to the perceived threat to their policies emanating from the assertions of the eugenics movement who took as their creed the belief that society would be acting perilously if it interfered with the natural selection processes by protecting the inherently weak and inferior members of the species. The Inquiry took, as its text, the 1903 Huxley Lecture to the Anthropological Institute given by Pearson, in which he asserted:

The mentally better stock in the nation is not reproducing itself at the same rate as it did of old; the less able and the less energetic are more fertile than the better stocks. The only remedy, if one be possible at all, is to alter the relative fertility of the good and the bad stocks in the community. Let us have a census of the effective size of families among the intellectual classes now and a comparison with the effective size of families in the like classes in the first half of the century Compare in another such census the fertility of the more intelligent working man with that of the uneducated hard labourer. You will, I feel certain, find that grave changes have taken place in relative fertility during the last forty years. We stand, I venture to think, at the commencement of an epoch which will be marked by a great dearth of ability... intelligence can be trained, but no education can create it. You must breed it⁸

The 1911 fertility survey was thus seen as a result of the desire of T H C Stevenson, Mallet's superintendent of statistics, to test the Society's ideas about class-related fertility rates. And, in

order to undertake a class-based analysis of the fertility data, Stevenson developed a socio-economic classification that placed families into five classes according to the occupations of household heads⁹.

Incidentally, Sir Bernard Mallet himself had a keen interest in the eugenics movement (to an extent that eventually led him to join the Committee of the Eugenics Society while still Registrar General, and to become its president after he had retired from the post). His support for Stevenson's work might be seen, therefore, as an initiative generated from within the GRO itself to fuel the eugenicists' argument. Certainly, the eventual reports on the 1911 fertility enquiry did, indeed, show that the lower social classes had higher fertility than the middle classes^{10 11}. For the interested reader, Edward Higgs and Simon Szreter have more recently engaged in a discussion on this whole issue^{12 13}.

The enquiry into fertility was a significant departure from the previous practice of enquiring only about those persons who were actual residents of households on census night, in that it asked for information of each married woman on:

1. the total number of children born alive
2. the number of such children still then living and
3. the number of children who had died.

Information was also sought on the length of duration of the present marriage in completed number of years.

Figure 2 **Protagonists in the fertility debate**

T H C Stevenson

Bernard Mallet

Francis Galton

Karl Pearson

Reducing the enumerator's burden

Another key departure from practice in previous censuses, introduced in order to improve the collection of returns in the field, was the use made of specially constructed maps to ensure greater accuracy in the assignment of houses and people to enumeration districts. The lack of such maps had caused particular difficulties in England and Wales in previous censuses, and so, for 1911, sets of six-inch Ordnance Survey (OS) sheets (25 inch in towns) were prepared on which were marked the boundaries of the ecclesiastical areas, making use of a range of available sources, such as Orders in Council and local maps and records borrowed from local authorities. Special permission had to be sought from the Local Government Board to initiate such preparatory work on the census before the authorising legislation had been approved by Parliament.

This process proved especially difficult as the quality of existing maps seems to have improved little from those in John Rickman's day, and there was no set of such maps in existence on which the boundaries were defined, and much of the local information obtained was vague and/or conflicting. However, with assistance from the Ecclesiastical Commission and the Diocesan Registrars, these difficulties were largely overcome, and a record of boundaries was made that was as accurate as the information available permitted. The set of maps, so marked, was then returned to the OS who prepared a revised set with the boundaries of civil parishes, urban districts, municipal boroughs, wards and Parliamentary constituencies printed in different colours for use by the local registrars.

Geographic support for the field operation barely changed thereafter until the 1971 Census.

The enumerator's job was made even easier, however, by avoiding the need to copy the details of responses from household schedules into their record book. Hitherto it had been the Enumerator's Record Book (ERB) which had provided the master copy from which the data was tabulated at the Census Office's headquarters in London and Edinburgh. The additional process of copying the details in this way (which had not changed since 1841) had the advantage of presenting to the tabulating clerks the information in a much more legible, compact and consistent format than would otherwise have been the case. However, it was considered that the introduction of the additional

questions on the 1911 form would have made this operation far too laborious to be acceptable within the limits of field staff pay at that time. It was also feared that the number of errors created by the enumerator in the copying process would have affected the quality of the results.

It was therefore decided to omit the transcription into the ERBs, and to tabulate directly from the householders' schedules themselves. Mallet noted in the *General Report*:

The inconvenience of this course, though undeniable, has been found by no means prohibitive, and we have no doubt that it has tended to lessen both the cost, and to increase the accuracy, of the present census.

To us, a century later, what this means is that when researchers and genealogists access the records from the 1911 Census online from the National Archives, they are, for the first time, able to view their ancestors' actual handwriting.

Suffragette militancy reaches its peak

What the recent release of the 1911 Census records in England and Wales has now confirmed is that Emily Wilding Davison, the suffragette who threw herself under *Anmer*, King George V's horse in the 1913 Epsom Derby, was, indeed, enumerated as being resident at the Houses of Parliament, as had been commonly rumoured.

Davison, who had studied English literature at Holloway College in 1891 before going to on University College London to get her degree, was very active in the suffragette movement. As part of the protest against the census and to highlight the plight of women's rights she hid in the Palace of Westminster on census night so that she could legitimately record it as her place of residence.

There had been a vigorous campaign led by Emmeline Pankhurst to boycott the 1911 Census, and the protest provided the suffragettes with a good platform to oppose Asquith's fragile Liberal Government's persistent reluctance to give women the vote. The background to this is perhaps worth setting out in some detail.

As far back as 1887 an all-party Parliamentary Committee on women's suffrage had been established, but had, by 1906, for a variety of political reasons, been allowed to elapse, at which point Liberal supporters had formed a committee of their own. But as the suffrage movement gathered strength, a second Parliamentary Committee - the Conciliation Committee - was convened under the chairmanship of the Earl of Lytton. It comprised 25 Liberals, 17 Conservatives, 6 Irish Nationals and 6 members of the Labour Party, with the aim of bringing together the full strength of the suffragists within the House of Commons, regardless of party affiliation, in order to frame an acceptable draft bill.

In writing about this in her autobiography¹⁴, Emmeline Pankhurst records that:

The Conservatives insisted on a moderate bill, whilst the Liberals were concerned lest the terms of the bill should add to the power of the propertied classes. The original suffrage bill, drafted by my husband, Dr Pankhurst, giving the vote to women on equal terms with men, was abandoned, and a bill drawn up along the lines of the existing municipal franchise law, the basis of which is occupation ...and proposed to extend the Parliamentary vote to

women householders, and women occupiers of business premises paying ten pounds rental and upwards. It was estimated that ninety-five per cent of the women who would be enfranchised under the bill were householders.

The text of the proposed bill was submitted to the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) (who had been fighting, peacefully, for women's suffrage since being formed by Emmeline, her sister Christabel, and four other activists in 1903), and other women's organisations, and was generally accepted by them. The WSPU's own weekly newspaper, *Votes for Women*, ran an editorial which proclaimed:

We of the Women's Social and Political Union are prepared to share in this united and peaceful action. The new bill does not give us all that we want, but we are for it if others are also for it.

The resulting Conciliation Bill, aimed at extending the right to vote to more than a million women throughout the UK, was introduced in the House of Commons on 14 July by Mr D J Shackleton MP and was enthusiastically received. Pankhurst wrote:

The newspapers remarked on the feeling of reality which marked the attitude of the House towards the bill. It was plain that the members realised that here was no academic question upon which they were merely to debate and to register their opinions, but a measure which was intended to be carried through all its stages and to be written into English law.

The enthusiasm for the proposal swept over the country; the medical profession submitted a petition in support for the bill, signed by more than 300 distinguished practitioners, as did many writers, clergymen, social workers, artists, actors, and musicians. The Women's Liberal Federation (WLF) resolved to seek commitment from the Prime Minister to give full facilities for the bill to progress, and Asquith reluctantly agreed to meet a joint deputation of the WLF and WSPU on 21 June. Lady Laura Elizabeth McLaren, as a representative of the federation, and aware of her party's leader's lack of enthusiasm for the bill, left him in no uncertainty as to their actions should he fail to give it a second reading¹⁴.

The Prime Minister replied warily that he himself could not give such a commitment and that he would have to consult the Cabinet. Their decision, he said, would be given in the House of Commons. Well aware, however, of the bill's uncertain future, the WSPU arranged a demonstration in support of the measure, including an international march and convention in which all the suffrage groups, including many from abroad, took part. So many people attended that Pankhurst recorded that:

... the massed ranks were so great that the procession required an hour and a half to pass a given point. At the head marched 617 women, white clad and holding silver staves tipped with the broad arrow. These were the women who had suffered imprisonment for the cause, and all along the line of march they received a tribute of cheers from the public. The immense Albert Hall, the largest hall in England, although it was packed from the orchestra to the highest gallery, was not large enough to hold the marchers.

Lord Lytton delivered a stirring address in which he confidently predicted the speedy advance of the bill, and assured the vast audience that they had every reason to believe that their

enfranchisement was at hand. However, when a few days later Asquith was asked in the Commons whether he would give Members an early chance for further discussion, his response was not encouraging. He was prepared to allow time for a full debate on the second reading but could not allow time for further progress before the close of the session. He openly admitted that he did not want the bill to pass, but conceded that the House should be given the opportunity, if that was their wish, "...for effectively dealing with the whole question".

The WSPU smelt treachery, and, indeed, though the bill was given a successful second reading on 12 July 1910 with a Commons majority of 299 to 190 in support, and was sent for further consideration by a Committee of the Whole House, Asquith stuck to his guns and announced that he would not give any further Government time for the bill, before Parliament would be dissolved for the second General Election that year. Leading a minority Government in a hung Parliament (the earlier General Election in January had given him just two seats more than Balfour's Tories), he was mindful that many of his backbenchers would not support the bill for fear that the million or more additional voters – being property owners – were likely to support the Conservatives. Thus the bill was dropped.

The WSPU, which had suspended its protest campaign when the bill had been first introduced, resumed its militant action by sending a delegation of 300 women to march to the Commons on 18 November to present a petition. When they attempted to evade the police, a fracas ensued and many were assaulted and manhandled, resulting in the death of two of the suffragettes and the arrest of more than a hundred others. Asquith's car was vandalised in a reaction to this, and the events of the whole affair, dubbed Black Friday, were a public relations disaster for the Government on the eve of another election, and caused serious embarrassment, in particular, to the new Home Secretary, a young Winston Churchill.

Pankhurst's own account of the event, subjective though it was, is worth recalling:

Orders were evidently given that the police were to be present in the streets, and that the women were to be thrown from one uniformed or un-uniformed policeman to another, and that they were to be so rudely treated that sheer terror would cause them to turn back. I say orders were given, and as one proof of this I can first point out that on all previous occasions the police had first tried to turn back the deputations, and when the women persisted in going forward, had arrested them. At times individual policemen had behaved with cruelty and malice towards us, but never anything like the unanimous and wholesale brutality that was shown on Black Friday.

The Government very likely hoped that the violence of the police towards the women would be emulated by the crowds, but instead they proved remarkably friendly. They pushed and struggled to make a clear pathway for us, and in spite of the efforts of the police my small deputation actually succeeded in reaching the door of the Strangers' Entrance. We mounted the steps to the enthusiastic cheers of the multitude that filled the streets, and we stood there for hours gazing down on a scene which I hope never to look upon again.

Figure 3 **The Liberal ‘no voters’**

H H Asquith – led a fragile Government

A young Winston Churchill - embarrassed

At intervals of two or three minutes, small groups of women appeared in the square trying to join us at the Strangers' Entrance. They carried little banners inscribed with various mottoes such as "Asquith has vetoed our bill" and "Where there's a Bill there's a way" and "Women's will beats Asquith's won't" and the like. These banners the police seized and tore them in pieces. Then they laid hands on the women and literally threw them from one man to another. Some of the police used their fists striking the women in their faces, their breasts, their shoulders. One woman I saw thrown down with violence three or four times in rapid succession, until at last she lay only half conscious against the curb, and, in a serious condition, was carried away by kindly strangers. Every moment the struggle grew fiercer as more and more women arrived on the scene. Women, many of them eminent in art, in medicine and science, women of European reputation, subjected to treatments that would not have been meted out to criminals, and all for the offence of insisting upon the right of peaceful petition.

The struggle lasted for about an hour with more and more women successfully pushing their way past the police and gaining the steps of the House. Then the mounted police were summoned to turn the women back. But, desperately determined, the women, fearing not the hoofs of the horses or the crushing violence of the police, did not swerve from their purpose. People began to demand why the women were being knocked about; why, if they were breaking the law, were they not arrested; why, if they were not breaking the law, were they not permitted to go on unmolested.

For a long time, nearly five hours, the police continued to hustle and beat the women, the crowds becoming more and more turbulent in their defence. Then, at last, the police were obliged to make arrests. One hundred and fifteen women and four men, most of them bruised and choked or otherwise injured, were arrested.

Figure 4 **Black Friday at Parliament Square**

While all this was going on, inside the chamber of the House of Commons Asquith was obstinately refusing to listen to the appeals of some of the Members. Keir Hardie, Sir Alfred Mond and others were urging him to receive Pankhurst's deputation, and Lord Castlereagh moved an amendment to a proposal then being discussed which would have forced the Government to consider the Conciliation Bill further – but because this would have meant censure of the Government it was not supported. On receiving word of what was going on in the House, Pankhurst exclaimed:

'Is there not a single man in the House of Commons who will stand up for us?'

If the Commons did not, then the press certainly did, and criticised the actions of the police and printed pictures of them assaulting the unarmed female protesters. The *Times* in particular reported a graphic, but more objective, account of the fracas the next morning. This was the first time that a suffragette demonstration had been met with such physical violence, and the (male) British public, who up until that time had been generally opposed to women getting the vote, for once had sympathy for the movement. However, the events of Black Friday were damaging to the suffragettes in the short term, as they caused many sympathetic MPs to distance themselves from their campaign.

Afterwards, realising the horror of what had happened, Asquith announced that if the Liberals were to be elected at the second Election the following month, they would include a Suffrage Bill that would include provisions to allow women to vote. The WSPU, not surprisingly, did not trust him for one moment, and rejected this believing that it was merely an attempt to further delay voting reform.

At the subsequent General Election, which took place over the period 3–19 December, Balfour's Conservatives, though they won the largest number of votes (46 per cent), failed by one seat to become the biggest party (271 against the Liberals' 272). Asquith once again, with the support of the Irish Nationalists, led a minority Government (incidentally this was both the last time a British election was held over several days and the last occasion when the Liberals were to have more

seats in the Commons than any other single party). A further Conciliation Bill was promised for May 1911, but before that the Census would be taken.

The Census boycott

In the knowledge that the forthcoming census would include, in particular, an extensive enquiry into women's fertility, Pankhurst devised a strategy to reduce the statistical value of the census. Women would be urged to either to refuse to complete the necessary return at their home address and brave the penalty of a £5 fine or a month's imprisonment, or to avoid having to do so by staying away from their home during the enumeration period. A rally at Trafalgar Square was also organised on census night.

The WSPU promoted the campaign through its mouthpiece *Votes For Women*, and received enthusiastic support from women. Many did indeed spend the night away from home, either at hotels or in uninhabited premises, and some others wrote across the census form such messages as:

'I am a woman and women do not count in the state'

or

'If I am intelligent enough to fill in this paper, I am intelligent enough to put a cross on a voting paper'

or, more simply, the words of the campaign slogan:

'No vote - no census'.

But there was a chorus of horrified disapproval from a more conservative press. The boycott of the census was critically reported in a now unsympathetic *Times* on 3 April, the day after Census day, under the headline 'A suffragist campaign of resistance' which claimed that almost all of those present at the Trafalgar Square protest had been men. And the day after that, the same newspaper published a letter from Michael Sadler, the noted historian and educationalist, who asserted that the boycott was a 'crime against science'.

Figure 5 **Suffragettes boycotting the census in Manchester**

Pankhurst responded with a letter in which she set out the reasons for the protest. She wrote:

'The Census is a numbering of the people. Until women count as people for the purpose of representation in the councils of the nation, we shall refuse to be numbered.'

Emily Davison had been very active in the suffragette movement, and her tragic death as the result of injuries sustained under the hooves of King George V's Derby runner Anmer in 1913 was mourned nationally. She had chosen to support the protest by spending census night in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft in the crypt of St Stephen's Hall. There she narrowly escaped the notice of an MP who was showing two visitors around the chapel by hiding in what was referred to as Guy Fawkes' cupboard – a tiny space barely room enough for two people to squeeze into (as the author has verified), and which is now, as then, used as a broom cupboard. But the crypt doors were locked before she could get out, and she was discovered by a cleaner the next morning. She was then promptly arrested and taken to Cannon Row Police Station (where she was not unknown), but after only two hours detention in the matron's room there, she was released without charge.

Figure 6 **Anmer falls and the nation mourns**

Figure 7 **Emily Davison**

Was she a resident in the Palace of Westminster?

Tony Benn thought so

More recently Tony Benn, with the aid of Helena Kennedy QC and MP Jeremy Corbyn, unofficially placed a plaque inside the cupboard recording: ‘...a modest reminder of a great woman with a great cause who never lived to see it prosper but played a significant part in making it possible’ (though it is difficult to imagine how they may have all got into the cupboard at the same time).

The 1911 Census return for the Palace of Westminster records Davison (misspelled as Davidson) as being aged 35, occupation school teacher, and with the address: ‘Found hiding in the Crypt of Westminster Hall, Westminster’. Ironically, however, Emily’s landlady at her rented accommodation at Coram Street was evidently more conscientious and included her on the census form anyway.

So, was the boycott successful?

The Rt Hon John Burns, President of the Local Government Board, announced to the House immediately after the census that the campaign was likely to have made little difference to the count of the population. But, beforehand, Burns must have found himself in a somewhat embarrassing position. As President of the Board (and therefore ministerially responsible for the census) he had, during the boycott campaign, been urging women to participate in the census, while at the same time, as a member of Asquith’s anti-suffragist Cabinet, he had been party to the Government’s adamant refusal to give them the vote. Votes for Women had no hesitancy in satirising his dilemma in the week before the census.

Figure 8 **John Burns’ dilemma**

The President of the Local
Government Board

Satirised by the WSPU

Burns was MP for Battersea, and his background suggested that he was one of, if not the only, proletarian member of Asquith’s Cabinet. He was born in 1858, the son of a Scottish engineer; had worked in a candle factory at the age of 10; was a student of John Stuart Mill, Thomas Paine, and William Cobbett; had worked as an active trades unionist having joined the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in 1879; had formed a local branch of Social Democratic Federation in Battersea in 1881; had disapproved of the treatment of Africans; had been arrested in 1878 on charges of

conspiracy and sedition (but later acquitted) for addressing a demonstration against unemployment, that had resulted in West End riots during which the windows of the Carlton Club were smashed, and in which he was accused of encouraging rioters to loot bakeries; and was arrested again in 1887 for resisting police attempts to break up an unlicensed demonstration against coercion in Ireland (the 'Bloody Sunday' clashes) for which he was imprisoned for six weeks.

He had first been elected as Battersea's MP in 1892 on an Independent Labour Party ticket, but had crossed the floor of the House to join Campbell-Bannerman's Liberals in 1905 when he refused to adopt the Labour Party's more extreme proposals. He remained, however, proud of his working class roots and once declared in a Commons speech in 1901

'I am not ashamed to say that I am the son of a washerwoman'.

It must have been particularly galling for him, therefore, not only to have to support the veto on women's rights to vote, but then to have to announce that the campaign had made no difference to the census.

In his *General Report* of the 1911 Census, Bernard Mallet presented – as was customary – a detailed analysis of the age and sex distributions of the country and administrative areas. As a summary indicator of the overall sex ratio, he showed the proportion of females per 1,000 males at each census since 1801 (**Table 1**).

Table 1 **Number of females per 1,000 males, 1801–1911**

Year	Number of females per 1,000 males	Year	Number of females per 1,000 males
1801	1,057	1861	1,053
1811	1,054	1871	1,054
1821	1,036	1881	1,055
1831	1,040	1891	1,064
1841	1,046	1901	1,068
1851	1,042	1911	1,068

He explained the decrease in female preponderance between 1801 and 1821 as due to the number of males returning from military service abroad after the Napoleonic wars, after which date the female excess, on the whole, steadily increased. In noting the halt in this steady rise in 1911, Mallet felt that an allowance should be made again for the number of men in 1901 that had been absent on military service – this time in South Africa – and that a more comparable measure of change should be assessed by comparing 1911 with the 1891 Census. He made no reference to any statistical effect on the age/sex distributions that might have arisen from the suffragette boycott (which, in any case, would surely have been masked by the Boer War effect), and neither did Stevenson in his *Annual Report* to the Registrar General on population and vital statistics for 1911¹⁵. Indeed, if anything, the bald census statistics showed an excess of women over men greater than might have been expected in the ages 20–30 (the age range in which suffragist militancy would have been most active). Mallet explained this by the perennial tendency for women in their 30s and 40s to deliberately misreport their age as being younger than was really the case.

The actual extent of the boycott remained hidden from the public until the early release, in 2009, of part of the 1911 Census records by the National Archive showed just how many women avoided the count. There is no evidence that any prosecutions were taken out against those women who had refused to make a return, but then, in response to a question in the House as to whether or not the Government intended to take anybody to court over the matter, Burns had announced

‘In this hour of success, mercy and magnanimity must be shown’.

Jil Liddington’s recent research¹⁶ suggests that, despite the fervour of the events of Black Friday and the seeming enthusiasm for Pankhurst’s campaign, the numbers of absentees, apart from the known activists, were far fewer than had been imagined at the time. It might be supposed that this was mainly because many women were likely to have been recorded in the returns either by those husbands or fathers less sympathetic to the cause, or (as in Emily Davison’s case) by their landlady.

However, while the protest may have failed in its aim of affecting the statistical value of the census results, it undoubtedly brought once more to the public’s attention the injustices of the British voting system and the state of women’s rights. Eventually, in the aftermath of the First World War, Parliament compromised, through the 1918 Qualification of Women Act, by enfranchising women over the age of 30, providing they were householders or married to a householder, or held a university degree. It would not be until the 1928 Representation of the People Act, however, that women were granted the right to vote on the same terms as men. A century on, and in an era where women hold senior positions in all areas of public life, it is noteworthy that both the current ONS National Statistician and her immediate predecessor are female.

References

- 1 White, I S *Very near the truth: a concise history of the census in the UK*. Office for National Statistics (to be published in February 2011).
- 2 Higgs, E (1996). *A clearer sense of the census: the Victorian census and historical research*. HMSO.
- 3 House of Commons (1890). *Report of the Treasury Committee to inquire into certain questions connected with the taking of the Census*. HMSO.
- 4 General Register Office (1917). *Census of England and Wales 1911: General Report*. HMSO.
- 5 *The Census of England and Wales 1891 (1893). Vol. IV, General Report*. HMSO.
- 6 Mallet, Sir Bernard (1917). The organisation of registration in its bearing on vital statistics. *Journal of the Royal Statistics Society*.
- 7 Mazumdar, P M H (1992). *Eugenics, human genetics and human failings: the Eugenics Society, its sources and its critics in Britain*. Routledge
- 8 Szreter, S (1966). *Fertility, class and gender in Britain 1860–1940*. Cambridge University Press.

- 9 Higgs, E (2004). Life, death and statistics: civil registration, censuses and the work of the General Register Office, 1837–1952. *A Local Population Studies Supplement*. Hatfield.
- 10 General Register Office (1917). *Census of England and Wales 1911 Vol XIII, Fertility of marriage, Part I*, HMSO.
- 11 General Register Office (1923). *Census of England and Wales 1911 Vol XIII, Fertility of marriage, Part II*, HMSO.
- 12 Szreter, S (2005). Review by Simon Szreter of Edward Higgs, Life, death and statistics. *Local Population Studies*, 75, pp 75–81.
- 13 Higgs, E (2005). Life, death and statistics: a reply to Simon Szreter. *Local Population Studies*, 75, pp 81–84.
- 14 Pankhurst, E (1914). *My own story*. Virago reprint library, 1979.
- 15 General Register Office (1913). *74th Annual Report of the Registrar General for England and Wales*. HMSO.
- 16 Liddington, J and Crawford, E (to be published in 2011). Women do not count, neither shall they be counted: suffrage, citizenship and the battle for the 1911 Census. *History Workshop Journal*. (The author is grateful to Ms Liddington for permission to refer to this.)