5 Women's Suffrage

Published by

Vogenauer, Stefan, et al.
Towards a Democratic Franchise: Suffrage Reform in the Twentieth-Century Bahamas.
1 ed. Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory, 2022.

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Chapter 5
Women’s Suffrage

As the last territory in the Caribbean to do so, the Bahamas did not make the decision to grant women the right to vote until 1961. The United Kingdom, the Bahamas’ colonial power, had introduced limited women’s suffrage in 1918 and had moved to universal women’s suffrage by 1928. As for the Bahamas’ direct neighbours, the United States introduced it in 1920, Cuba in 1934, the Dominican Republic in 1942, and Haiti in 1950. Other colonies of the British Caribbean were also far ahead: Jamaica, the largest one, introduced it in 1944, and Bermuda and Barbados, the other two islands in which the Old Representative System had survived, introduced it in 1944 and 1950 respectively. Gail Saunders attributes this “failure of women to organize” to the racially divided society that remained virtually un politicized until the 1950s. The upheavals during the 1930s in the British Caribbean which paved the way for political change had little impact on the Bahamas. Women (and most men) lacked the will and the necessary educational background and outside exposure to lead a labour or political movement.¹

Even though women’s suffrage came to the Bahamas as late as 1961, it was not the last step in the process of democratically reforming the Bahamian electoral system. However, the campaign for women’s suffrage attracted not only more popular attention at the time than the future electoral reform measures would, but it is also the one to feature most prominently in the nation’s collective memory today. Furthermore, and unlike the other electoral reforms of the twentieth-century Bahamas, women’s suffrage has received at least a modicum of scholarly attention making it, in a sense, the most studied aspect of electoral reform in Bahamian history. In commemoration of its fiftieth anniversary, the College of the Bahamas hosted a four-day symposium,² and Marion Bethel and Maria Govan released the

documentary Womanish Ways, Freedom, Human Rights and Democracy: The Women’s Suffrage Movement in the Bahamas 1948–1962. Yet the narrative that has developed portrays the Women’s Suffrage Movement merely as a building block of the larger project of so-called Majority Rule – and thus renders it subordinate to the achievement of the PLP and its all-male leadership, who in fact get much of the credit for getting the Votes for Women Act passed. Upon closer scrutiny, however, this is at odds with some of the crucial details of the chronology of events, which in turn raises questions about the origin and development of this narrative and both its role in today’s political discourse in general as well as its impact on gender issues in particular.

In this chapter, I trace the developments that ultimately led to the implementation of women’s suffrage. The analysis of archival sources also allows us to view the Bahamian women’s suffrage movement from a new perspective. It is different from the predominant one, because thus far the traditional narrative has been controlled primarily by the political actors of the 1960s and their successors. I will begin this chapter with an outline of the history of the women’s suffrage movement, which suffered a setback during the aforementioned visit to the Bahamas by Secretary of State for the Colonies Alan Lennox-Boyd. Subsequently it became more organised. Another aspect this chapter seeks to highlight is the roles of some of the leading personalities within the movement, in particular that of Doris Johnson, who was the only Bahamian suffragette to later enjoy a successful career in politics. I will also look at the legislation that finally enfranchised women in the Bahamas, before pondering how the legacy of the struggle for women’s suffrage impacted women’s roles in other selected fields.

5.1 The Beginning of the Women’s Suffrage Movement

At the conclusion of his visit to Nassau, Lennox-Boyd declared, “Representations have been made about votes for women. The Governor and I are, however, not convinced that at the moment there is a sufficiently widespread demand for this change.”³ This was the impression he felt confident to express not only after meeting with the leadership of a group calling itself Movement for Women Suffrage but after being presented with a petition for

women’s suffrage containing no less than 2,871 signatures. In following up on their meeting with Lennox-Boyd, the group sent him a letter stating for the record their arguments in support of women’s suffrage. That letter references a petition from 1952 by a “Movement for Female Suffrage” signed by 600 women and submitted to the House of Assembly and the Legislative Council, and it further speaks of “other movements […] made in this direction without any success.” In other words, it stresses that the explicit call for women’s suffrage predates the contemporary impetus for reform provided by the general strike.

It is in fact difficult to reconstruct the beginnings of a women’s suffrage movement in the Bahamas, for while the Colonial Office records are generally well preserved and easily accessible, and while this includes most communications between London and Government House, the records of most local actors of the period are, generally speaking, not available. I have not been able to find a 1952 petition signed by upwards of 600 individuals. There was, however, a petition that year, which was initiated by the Bahamian chapter of the Daughters of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World, the female auxiliary of an African-American fraternal order in the United States. It contained 444 signatures. The signatories persuaded Claudius R. Walker, one of the Members of the House of Assembly for New Providence’s southern district and husband of Mabel Walker, who would become one of the leading figures of the women’s suffrage movement when it became organised, to present it to the House of Assembly. However, nothing came of it.

The earliest reference to universal suffrage in the Bahamas, which may have implied women’s suffrage even though it did not explicitly spell it out, that I found in the Colonial Office records dates from 1946. It is part of the

4 Movement for Female Suffrage to Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd, 1 April 1958, TNA: CO 1031/2139/2–75.
5 Movement for Women Suffrage to Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd, 12 April 1958, TNA: CO 1031/2140/121.
6 Movement for Women Suffrage to Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd, 12 April 1958, TNA: CO 1031/2140/121.
7 Bethel/Govan (dirs.) (2012), Film, 0:22:34.
8 Bethel/Govan (dirs.) (2012), Film, 0:24:35.
9 Bethel/Govan (dirs.) (2012), Film, 0:24:47.
minutes of a meeting of Governor William Murphy at the Colonial Office in London, and merely states the absence of universal suffrage as a factor preventing the devolution of powers from London to the local legislature at that particular point in time. Furthermore, while the Bahamas’ Governor was present at the meeting, there were no actual Bahamians in attendance who could have made a case for franchise reform. The next mention in the records of the Colonial Office, and this is the first one that explicitly speaks of women’s suffrage, that I have traced in the archival record, is a question asked in 1953 of Secretary of State for the Colonies Oliver Lyttleton in the House of Commons by the Labour Party’s Member of Parliament for the Hartlepools, David T. Jones, who inquired to know “what proposals are being considered for a reform of the Constitution in the Bahamas; and what proposals for the enfranchisement of women are included in such proposed changes.” Lyttleton responded, “Proposals for the enfranchisement of women, put forward by Private Members of the House of Assembly last Session, have been referred to a Select Committee of the House. No other proposals are at present being considered.” Jones may have hoped for proposals by the Colonial Office, but the answer referred to a local proposal instead. This indicates that the Colonial Office did not yet find it necessary to nudge the Bahamian legislature towards granting the vote to women. The petition referenced by Lyttleton would in fact most likely have been the 1952 petition by the Elks.

Oral testimony points to an even earlier petition demanding women’s suffrage. It is said that Mary Ingraham, who later became president of the Bahamian women’s suffrage organisation, was converted to the cause in 1949, after her husband Rufus Ingraham, upon losing his seat for the district of Crooked Island, Long Cay and Acklins in that year’s general election, exclaimed that he would have won, if the women in his constituency had been allowed to vote. Two years later, Mary Ingraham approached the senior Member of the House of Assembly representing her constituency to present her personal petition to the House of Assembly. This he agreed to do, while simultaneously informing her directly that he was not in support of

10 Minutes of Meeting with Governor Murphy, 3 May 1946, TNA: CO 23/800/120.
11 Internal Note, Colonial Office, 19 November 1953, TNA: CO 1031/303/3.
13 Bethel/Govan (dirs.) (2012), Film, 0:17:12.
women’s suffrage in general, and therefore not in support of her petition either. The Member in question was Stafford Sands, who presented the petition in the House Assembly to then have it referred to the Constitution Committee, which he chaired. There, in the words of Marion Bethel, it “inevitably died.”

5.2 Political Allies

After these earliest efforts, the issue did not resurface for several years. However, carefully phrasing it so as to not make it even remotely a promise, campaign literature by the PLP for the general elections held in June 1956 lists a “written constitution based on universal suffrage and proportional representation” as one of “the dreams, hopes and aspirations of our people,” behind which the party stands “four square.” While there was no explicit indication in this or any other campaign literature that any candidate or party placed any emphasis on women’s suffrage in particular during that year’s election campaign, an unidentifiable newspaper clipping in a Colonial Office file on the 1956 general election explicitly mentions the enfranchisement of women as part of the PLP’s platform. Also, in October 1956, the PLP sent a delegation to the Colonial Office, demanding various measures of electoral reform including universal suffrage, because that “in itself would reduce alleged current bribery and corruption at elections […] by simple process of increasing numbers and therefore cost of bribery.” Universal suffrage thus was but a means to an end; the PLP delegation did not argue for women’s suffrage out of conviction based on a democratic principle such as gender equality, but rather because they expected that taking such a stance would improve their chances at the polls.

In the extract from the Bahamas Intelligence Report for December 1956, the unknown author speculates that the women within the PLP might “intend to press the cause of universal suffrage.” In October of the follow-

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14 Bethel/Govan (dirs.) (2012), Film, 0:21:38.
15 Fawkes (2013) 122.
16 Unknown newspaper clipping, ca. August/September 1956, TNA: CO 1031/1532/124.
17 Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd to Governor Ranfurly, 15 October 1956, TNA: CO 1031/1532/54.
18 Bahamas Intelligence Report, December 1956, TNA: CO 1031/1532/56.
ing year, in a submission to the Governor in preparation for his upcoming conferences with the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the PLP again urges “universal adult suffrage” based on “the principle of ‘one man, one vote’.”

While the use of gendered language in the 1950s, especially in a society where women had not yet obtained the right to vote, did not necessarily mean that women were excluded from this demand, we cannot conclude that women were meant to be included either. We should bear in mind that the PLP’s support for the cause of women’s suffrage had not always been steadfast, nor free from ulterior motives – and universal manhood suffrage had not yet been achieved either. As we have seen, the latter did in fact represent the next step in the process of electoral reform that the PLP agreed to shortly afterwards whilst allowing Lennox-Boyd during his 1958 visit to Nassau to gain the impression that there was no widespread support for women’s suffrage.

Similarly, the draft minutes of a November 1957 meeting in London between Lennox-Boyd and a delegation of the Bahamian House of Assembly read, “that there was no popular demand whatsoever for female franchise.” For the adopted minutes, this was then modified to “no real popular demand.” It is important to note, however, that this delegation consisted of Stafford Sands, Robert Symonette, Roy Solomon, Godfrey Kelly, Foster Clarke, and C. W. F. Bethell, all of whom represented Bay Street. It is even possible that they were members of the then so-called Christian Democratic Party, but, since they ran as independents in the 1956 general election, the Colonial Office also treated them as such. The Bay Street Boys’ lack of enthusiasm for women’s suffrage as evident in the meeting minutes is not surprising. If there was any merit to the PLP’s speculation that an extended franchise would make election bribery prohibitively expensive – and the inference from this speculation that election bribery was what gave the Bay Street Boys their parliamentary majority – then they would have to be opposed to an extended franchise for that reason alone. However, they

20 Minutes of Meeting with Bahamian Delegation, 11–12 November 1957, TNA: CO 1031/2232/299.
21 Minutes of Meeting with Bahamian Delegation, 11–12 November 1957, TNA: CO 1031/2232/245.
would also be unable to admit to this, and would therefore need to find other justifications for keeping the status quo of the franchise.

5.3 Getting London’s Attention

Despite first stirrings nearly ten years earlier, the cause of women’s suffrage had not made sufficient progress to prevent the majority party from, by and large, ignoring the calls as late as 1957/58. It is then perhaps not surprising, although still noteworthy, that in its letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, a representative of the metropolis, where women had gained the vote decades ago, the Movement for Women Suffrage still felt that it was necessary to outline arguments for why women should be granted the right to vote in the first place. The first of these arguments pointed to the demographics of the Bahamas, where women constituted the majority of the population. It also stressed that, especially among the younger generation of Bahamians, women outperformed men in terms of educational attainment, as if anticipating, and trying to alleviate, concerns that women would not be capable of using their vote in an informed manner. Generally, in the 1950s and 1960s, Bahamian society still treated women as subordinate to men. Their participation in the workforce was significant. It had grown in importance for decades, especially in the rapidly developing tourism sector. However, their role in the labour force depended largely on their socioeconomic roots, and was limited to either clerical or menial labour, although women also constituted the majority of public-school teachers. Regardless of that, there remained “an unwritten rule that [...] women should not have authority over men.”  

Nonetheless, especially women of the poorer classes had developed a level of independence since World War II, when the Bahamian government entered into a migrant labour agreement with the United States government, locally known as the Contract, that would ultimately last until 1963. At its height, one in six adult Bahamian men was working overseas. In the past, Bahamian historiography has interpreted the Contract’s impact on gender relations from a traditional, patriarchal point-of-view, where women bearing responsibility were deemed a negative factor contributing

towards a number of social ills, such as the breakdown of family structures.\textsuperscript{25}
There has not been any recent re-evaluation of this aspect in the literature.

Apart from the demographic arguments, the suffragettes’ central point in the letter to Lennox-Boyd revolved around the catchphrase of no “taxation without representation.”\textsuperscript{26} The utilisation of this battle cry of the American War of Independence demonstrates how strong the United States’ cultural influence on the Bahamas was, even in the decades before satellite television, due to sheer proximity and resulting frequent exchanges. It also demonstrates how deep the cultural chasm between the Bahamas and the United Kingdom was, because otherwise the authors of the letter would have realised that, regardless of whether or not the historical comparison is accurate, an American revolutionary slogan, while undoubtedly carrying a positive connotation in the United States, may have an opposite effect in the United Kingdom. However, the Bahamian women even went one step further in appropriating not just a rallying cry of the American Revolution but also an actual phrase of the Declaration of Independence by declaring to Lennox-Boyd that they “hold” the points of their communiqué “to be self-evident.”\textsuperscript{27}

Juliana Tutt has examined the utilisation of the slogan “no taxation without representation” in the United States’ women’s suffrage movement. Unlike their Bahamian counterparts, suffragettes in the United States did not place this slogan at the centre of their campaign, nor did they use its underlying rationale as a main argument in support of women’s suffrage. In the United States, women’s suffrage came after universal manhood suffrage had been achieved, and therefore being a taxpayer had already been removed as a \textit{conditio sine qua non} for the male franchise. Furthermore, arguing in favour of women’s suffrage based on the fact that women paid taxes and therefore deserved the vote, would have implicitly argued against universal suffrage and would have ultimately made the case for the disenfranchisement of non-taxpayers. Where the tax argument was used regardless, it was seen as a wedge argument, i.e., the enfranchisement of taxpaying women

\textsuperscript{25} Craton/Saunders (1998) 294.
\textsuperscript{26} Movement for Women Suffrage to Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd, 12 April 1958, TNA: CO 1031/2140/121.
\textsuperscript{27} Movement for Women Suffrage to Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd, 12 April 1958, TNA: CO 1031/2140/121.
would be an intermediary step towards the enfranchisement of all women and the ultimate goal of universal suffrage.²⁸

Despite the difficulty of comparing the United States to the Bahamas, the core argument against using the slogan to support the demand for women’s suffrage can be applied in this instance, too. Without examining the contemporary and historical differences between the United States’ and the Bahamas’ electoral systems, the most striking difference that bears an effect on this argument is the tax system. In the United States, the federal income tax predates women’s suffrage. Income tax is the tax that most obviously applies to some women but does not apply to others, though the same is true for other taxes that could be cited in a debate that links taxation and representation. In other words, when women’s suffrage was debated in the US, some – not all – women paid taxes. Basing the argument for women’s suffrage on taxation would therefore have meant campaigning for a limited women’s suffrage, at a time when universal manhood suffrage had already been achieved; it would have meant potentially alienating many, especially poorer women, who would otherwise support the cause. In contrast in the Bahamas, to this day, the most important source of government revenue is customs duties – since 2015 supplemented by a value added tax. This regressive taxation, unlike a more progressive income tax, means that every consumer contributes to the treasury’s main revenue base. It means that in the Bahamian case, all women are taxpayers, and if the suffragettes had based their argument on this fact alone, then theirs would indeed have been an argument for universal suffrage.

However, in their 1958 letter to Lennox-Boyd, the Bahamian suffragettes specifically referenced female ownership of real property, which has historically been the main qualification for the male franchise in the Bahamas; they further pointed to female investors and business owners, given the recently introduced company vote in the Bahamas.²⁹ This, however, if strictly interpreted, could have been read as a call for, or support of, an extension of the franchise to some women only. It also could have been interpreted as undermining the demands for universal manhood suffrage – at the very moment in history when its forthcoming introduction had

²⁹ Movement for Women Suffrage to Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd, 12 April 1958, TNA: CO 1031/2140/122.
just been agreed upon. This may, however, have been done inadvertently. While the most active phase of the women’s suffrage movement was still to come, and thus post-dated the attainment of universal manhood suffrage, its beginnings certainly predated it. It is possible that the suffragettes based their 1958 letter to Lennox-Boyd on previous campaign literature from earlier stages of the Bahamian women’s suffrage movement. In that case, these may have been recycled ideas that had not yet been revisited. Additionally, the Bahamian suffragettes may have adopted this catchphrase without giving it as much thought as their counterparts in the United States had, merely remembering that it had once before been used to bolster the case for more citizen rights.

As discussed above, the 1958 letter mentioned a 1952 petition, but its authors did not deem it prudent to remind the Secretary of State for the Colonies of the petition that had been submitted to Lennox-Boyd at the beginning of his visit, which after all had been signed by 2,871 women, a number significantly higher than 444 to 600 signatures under the 1952 petition. Curiously, the petition submitted at the beginning of Lennox-Boyd’s visit justified the demand for women’s suffrage on principles of democracy and equality, and a duty to make a “definite and tangible contribution.”

Taxation is not mentioned. The first two signatories of the petition submitted to Lennox-Boyd are identical with two of the three signatories of the letter: Mary N. Ingraham as Leader, and Eugenia Lockhart as Secretary. However, the name of the organisation differs. While on the petition it is called the Movement for Female Suffrage, on the letter it is called the Movement for Women Suffrage. All of these discrepancies highlight a lack of professionalism in the organisation of the Bahamian women’s suffrage movement at the time. This could also explain the inconsistent lines of argument.

As the archival record has shown, there had, since the first petition in 1951, been a constant albeit irregular stream of petitions or proposals or other efforts towards the enfranchisement of women; Saunders has likened their frequency to a “bombardment.” The earliest attempts to extend the

30 Movement for Female Suffrage to Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd, 1 April 1958, TNA: CO 1031/2139/2.
suffrage to women were quietly referred to, i.e., buried in, a committee of the House of Assembly, and did not garner much public attention. Nonetheless, by 1956 universal suffrage was listed as a plank of the PLP’s platform, although their attention focussed more on the removal of property qualifications and the abolition of the company vote. By the end of 1956, however, while the main party was quiet, the female members of the PLP began to press the issue.\footnote{Bahamas Intelligence Report, December 1956, TNA: CO 1031/1532/56.} In 1957, the Bahamas Democratic League (BDL), a party in opposition to Bay Street, albeit smaller and more moderate than the PLP, submitted a petition to Queen Elizabeth II, one point of which requested that universal adult suffrage in the colony precede any other constitutional reform.\footnote{Petition by Bahamas Democratic League to Queen Elizabeth II, 19 July 1957, TNA: CO 1031/2322/289.} It was in the face of this history and despite a renewed petition signed by nearly 3,000 Bahamian women, approximately 3\% of the colony’s population, which had been submitted to Lennox-Boyd upon his arrival in the Bahamas,\footnote{Movement for Female Suffrage to Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd, 1 April 1958, TNA: CO 1031/2139/2–75.} that the Secretary of State for the Colonies felt justified in saying that sufficiently widespread demand had not been demonstrated.

Regardless of whether or not Lennox-Boyd’s assessment was accurate, the emphasis he put on “sufficiently widespread demand”\footnote{Public Statement by Secretary of State for the Colonies Lennox-Boyd, 13 April 1958, TNA: CO 1031/2233/128.} – or rather the lack thereof – reconfirms the Colonial Office’s general approach to reform in the Bahamas. It would apply pressure on the Bahamian House of Assembly and the oligarchy controlling it to implement reforms, but only if and when Bahamians themselves – in this case Bahamian women themselves – were willing to agitate for such reforms, too. Furthermore, and given the history of electoral reform thus far in both the United Kingdom and the Bahamas, perhaps Lennox-Boyd also believed that a conservative, incremental reform process addressing issues of electoral reform one step at a time was preferable to a sweeping reform that would address multiple issues in a single legislative measure. In the wake of the recent general strike, and in light of the fact that both the political discourse in the Bahamas in general as well as the colony’s political opposition in particular at the time were without a doubt male dominated, extending the suffrage to include all adult males and limit-
ing the plural vote, were more important to the Colonial Office. The women’s cause, at this particular juncture of history, would not have been seen as a potential source of unrest and therefore was not being considered amongst what the Colonial Office deemed emergency measures, which are what Lennox-Boyd’s visit was about.

5.4 Setback and Comeback

In the wake of this dismissal, the women’s suffrage movement became increasingly organised and began to network with international women’s rights organisations. Domestically, despite the support, at least on paper, by the PLP, the movement’s original leaders attempted to retain their independence from Bahamian party politics. The suffragettes had asked Stafford Sands and Claudius Walker respectively to present the first two petitions, but that had been before the formation of political parties in the Bahamas, particularly amongst the members of the House of Assembly. While in 1951/52 they sat as independents, by 1958 the former was affiliated with a political party and the latter was no longer a member of the House of Assembly. Moreover, while the leaders of the women’s suffrage movement may have been united in that cause, they were not united in a preference for one party over another. When choosing which Member of the House of Assembly to ask to present the next petition on their behalf, they therefore made the conscious decision to approach one of the few remaining independent Members, Gerald Cash, one of the representatives for New Providence’s western district.

On January 19th, 1959, Cash was going to present the women’s petition in the House of Assembly. The suffragettes, who had held several rallies in the week leading up to this occasion, had organised a mass demonstration to make their demands heard inside as well as outside of Parliament. In addition, one leading suffragette, Doris Johnson, who had only recently returned from university studies overseas to immediately become involved with the movement, through Cash requested permission to address the House of Assembly in person. After debate and a vote by the House, this request

was denied. Johnson was not a Member of the House, and therefore a “stranger” to said House; the Members did not want to create a precedent. However, Roland Symonette

determined that the women would be heard and that all members of the House would be present to hear Dr Johnson’s speech [...] walked across to the magistrate’s court and arranged for the court room to be vacated. He then returned to the House and paraded all members across to the court where Dr Johnson delivered her speech. This allowed Johnson to address the members of the House of Assembly without technically speaking to them in the House of Assembly.

At the time, Roland Symonette was one of the leading figures of the Bay Street Boys, most of whom had now organised themselves as the so-called United Bahamian Party (UBP). He represented the party’s moderate wing, and he was also the so-called Government Leader in the House. Because no government official, e.g., no member of the Executive Council, was an _ex officio_ member of the House of Assembly, it had become practice that the governor appoint one or more members of the House to his Executive Council, and bestow upon one of them the unofficial title of Government Leader. Former Governor Murphy had once elaborated on this arrangement that “the latter must be a person of recognised status in the House of Assembly otherwise Government measures fail through weak presentation.” It is doubtful that Roland Symonette used his weight as Government Leader to pave the way for Johnson to speak, though, as the Governor and Executive Council would not want to be suspected of interfering with the House of Assembly’s affairs in such a manner. Rather, him using his influence to circumvent the presiding Deputy Speaker’s, Robert Symonette, decision, who was, after all, his son, is an indication that by 1959, at least the moderate elements within the UBP had given up their opposition to women’s suffrage. By the end of 1960, an overwhelming majority of its members supported

38 “Monday is Mary Ingraham’s Day,” The Tribune, 22 November 2012.
39 Governor Murphy to Secretary of State for the Colonies Hall, 28 November 1945, TNA: CO 23/799/32.
women’s suffrage, voting 63–2 in favour during a party meeting. This effort by Roland Symonette to enable Johnson to make her speech was the first public stance he took in support of women’s suffrage.

The speech itself contained no new ideas. Johnson satisfied herself with rehashing the same arguments that the suffrage movement had been asserting for years, i.e., that women represented the majority of the Bahamian population, that women had long been carrying responsibilities beyond the traditional home, and above all that taxation without representation was tantamount to tyranny. Despite the usual formalities at the beginning and the end of her speech, the other arguments in support of women’s suffrage, as well as additional demands about women serving on juries and government boards as well as in local government, Johnson’s drawing of parallels between the plight of Bahamian women fighting for the suffrage and the eighteenth-century North American colonists in rebellion against King George III constituted nearly 30% of her speech.

An interesting aside to the history of the Bahamas’ women’s suffrage movement, is the way in which Johnson’s role in it is being remembered. Of the various suffragettes, Johnson was the only one who succeeded in using the movement as a launch pad for a political career; in fact she may well have been the only one who tried. As such, she and her party, the PLP, which after 1967 governed uninterrupted for twenty-five years, created a narrative whereby Johnson, younger and better educated than the other women leading the movement, upon her return from university immediately “joined the Movement as spokesperson and mobilized the movement into a fighting force.” In the latter half of 1958, she founded the National Women’s Council, a self-appointed umbrella organisation for the colony’s civil society organisations promoting women’s causes. Critical voices say, “She saw a political opportunity and grabbed it,” or that “she elbowed the

41 Fawkes (2013) 257.
44 “Monday is Mary Ingraham’s Day,” The Tribune, 22 November 2012.
founders [of the women’s suffrage movement] to the sidelines.”

Mary Ingraham later claimed that the week before her speech, Johnson attended a women’s suffrage meeting for the first time, and that making the speech was “the only part Dr Johnson played in the vote for the women.” In fact, the exaggeration of the contributions of that generation of PLP leaders, to the point of their idolisation, is a frequently observed phenomenon in the Bahamas to this day, where some members of the generation that came to power in 1967 still held office in the late 2010s. Nonetheless, approximately two weeks before the speech, Johnson had been elected vice president of the Bahamian Women’s Suffrage Movement. Furthermore, only days before the speech, the newspaper reported a celebration at the headquarters of the Bahamian Federation of Labour at which “every speaker […] lavished praise on Mrs. Johnson, stressing her position as the leader of Bahamian women.”

Given her ties to the PLP, it is possible that Johnson becoming involved with the suffrage movement was not only Johnson seizing a political opportunity, but also the party using her as a means to gain control over the women’s suffrage movement, and perhaps even over the Bahamas Federation of Labour, whose leader, Randol Fawkes, had proven to be an unreliable ally to the PLP in the past.

The nation’s collective memory has amalgamated the numerous petitions into one, and in this, the imagined petition goes hand in hand with Johnson’s speech. Thus, the petition to represent all petitions would have occurred in January 1959. Remembered and celebrated are the women “who struggled against all odds to win for women their rightful place in society, those who walked the pavements in the heat of the day to secure 9,500 signatures for their petition.” This number, however, does not match the entry in the official records; the Votes of the House of Assembly acknowledges the petition to have had 2,538 signatures. Mary Ingraham herself claimed that that many women had signed the petition in a letter she wrote

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46 “Doris Johnson’s Role in the Suffrage Movement,” The Tribune, 6 November 2012.
49 “Monday is Mary Ingraham’s Day,” The Tribune, 22 November 2012.
to the newspaper in 1975. It must be questioned, however, if Ingraham’s recollections can be trusted, especially when it comes to details. She would have been around seventy-four years of age, and she got another significant detail wrong in the same letter, when she referred to Roland Symonette as “then being Premier.” That office, however, did not exist before the 1963 Constitution came into effect in January 1964. This then also begs the question whether Ingraham is a more reliable witness when it comes to the central argument of her letter: that Doris Johnson’s contribution to the cause was limited to nothing but that single speech delivered on a single day, that she could not have contributed in a more meaningful manner to the cause because she had only returned home from university earlier the same week. Other contemporaries speak of Johnson returning several months before and immediately becoming involved in a number of women’s causes.

As far as a petition with 9,000 or more signatures is concerned, it is possible that she confused it with another petition. Clement Maynard, who served as a cabinet minister from 1967 to 1992, claims that such a petition signed by over 9,500 women and dated January 10th, 1960, was presented to the House of Assembly by Lynden Pindling, leader of the PLP, on January 12th, 1961. The Votes of the House of Assembly, however, record no such event in January 1961, but they do list Pindling as having presented a petition for women’s suffrage dated January 11th, 1960 in January 1960.

Given the dates, the most likely explanation is that the year 1961 in Maynard’s memoir is a mistake. However, the same Votes of the House of Assembly also state that the petition presented by Pindling contained no more than six signatures. However, there are more discrepancies between the Votes of the House of Assembly and Maynard’s memoir. The usual pattern of these petitions was that a letter laid out the request and the arguments in support of it, and that that letter was signed by the leadership of the organisation sponsoring the petition; the names and signatures of the ordinary supporters whose

51 “Doris Johnson’s Role in the Suffrage Movement,” The Tribune, 6 November 2012.
52 “Doris Johnson’s Role in the Suffrage Movement,” The Tribune, 6 November 2012.
The text of the two petitions differs in some points, and in one point where they cite demographic data the difference is significant;\textsuperscript{57} furthermore, according to Maynard’s memoir the letter is signed by three women on the first page and claims that there are more than 9,500 signatures in support of it;\textsuperscript{58} the petition contained in the \textit{Votes of the House of Assembly} is signed by six women and claims no additional signatures – and there is no overlap between Maynard’s three names and the \textit{Votes}’ six names.\textsuperscript{59}

The events of January 1959, from the renewed petition to the speech by Johnson, marked a turning point in the road towards women’s suffrage. For the UBP, Foster Clarke, a member for the Harbour Island constituency, declared, “that women should have the right to vote if they wanted it,” but as he did not seem convinced that they really did, he instead suggested a referendum on the matter.\textsuperscript{60} The PLP opposed this idea, arguing that because voting was not compulsory any woman who did not want the franchise did not have to exercise her right to vote. Nonetheless, House Speaker Asa H. Pritchard referred the matter to the Constitution Committee.\textsuperscript{61} The Bahamas did not have an history of referenda, and most other jurisdictions also introduced women’s suffrage without one. However, the idea was not without precedent, even in the British world. In 1916, William John Bowser, Premier of British Columbia and a long-time opponent of women’s suffrage, hoped to separate the question of women’s suffrage from party politics by passing it on to the electorate in a referendum, speculating that an all-male electorate would not pass the measure.\textsuperscript{62} Clarke’s proposal, however, appears to have been less perfidious. As he wanted to determine whether women really wanted the suffrage, his suggestion was that “the matter be put to the women in a referendum so the House could be sure that a majority of them wanted the franchise.”\textsuperscript{63} This would have created the

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\textsuperscript{57} \textsc{Maynard} (2007) 174; \textit{Votes of the House of Assembly}, 11 January 1960, TNA: CO 26/170/16.
\textsuperscript{58} \textsc{Maynard} (2007) 175.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Votes of the House of Assembly}, 11 January 1960, TNA: CO 26/170/16.
\textsuperscript{60} “Foster Clarke Asks Suffrage Referendum,” \textit{The Nassau Daily Tribune}, 26 January 1959, 1.
\textsuperscript{61} “Foster Clarke Asks Suffrage Referendum,” \textit{The Nassau Daily Tribune}, 26 January 1959, 1.
\textsuperscript{62} \textsc{Adams} (1958) 52–53.
\end{flushleft}
scenario of a referendum in which an otherwise disenfranchised group would have been allowed to vote on a single issue, would in fact be explicitly asked to do so. Yet even this idea was not without precedent. In 1911, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, wrote to Prime Minister Henry Herbert Asquith that the question had to be answered whether there was “a real desire on the part of great numbers of women to assume political responsibilities,” if “this addition to the electorate [would] be for the good of the country,” and whether the country had “been effectively consulted” on this question. Like Clarke, Churchill proposed to allow women to participate in such a referendum: “the adult suffrage register sh[oul]d be forthwith constructed, & as soon as this was complete the whole mass of the women to be enfranchised sh[oul]d, either by referendum or initiative, decide whether they w[oul]d take up their responsibilities or not.” In the end, neither Churchill’s nor Clarke’s proposal for such a referendum ever came to fruition.

5.5 Legislating Women’s Suffrage

From this point forward, the Bahamian discourse shifted away from whether women should be granted the right to vote and instead towards when exactly it would be implemented. The next general election was anticipated for 1963, so it would be a couple of years before the movement could reap the fruits of their labour. For now, the UBP stuck to its schedule, which was to implement the accord brokered by Lennox-Boyd the previous year on its own terms as far as possible. The Colonial Office considered these to be “first-aid measures” and as such a priority. In addition, not adding women’s suffrage to the current election bill allowed the more reactionary wing of the UBP, represented primarily by Sands, Chairman of the Constitution Committee, and Robert Symonette, Deputy Speaker of the House, to save face.

64 First Lord of the Admiralty Churchill to Prime Minister Asquith, 21 December 1911, reproduced in: CHURCHILL (1967) 405.
65 First Lord of the Admiralty Churchill to Prime Minister Asquith, 21 December 1911, reproduced in: CHURCHILL (1967) 406.
Despite elections being a couple of years in the future, the suffrage question was being politicised. While Mary Ingraham and several other suffragettes attempted to prevent the suffrage movement from becoming engulfed in party politics, by 1960, the PLP, fearing the emergence of a political rival, had “virtually taken over the W.S.M. in an effort to control them”\(^67\) to the point where the movement would no longer take action independent of the party.\(^68\) When the Suffrage Movement sought an audience at the Colonial Office in October 1960, they were chaperoned by the PLP’s Chairman, Henry M. Taylor.\(^69\) In addition, the two women chosen to be a part of this delegation were not only active in the women’s suffrage movement, but also both members of the PLP: Doris Johnson and Eugenia Lockhart. However, after the group’s arrival in London, the women proceeded to the Colonial Office without waiting for Taylor, much to his chagrin.\(^70\)

A British intelligence report arrived at the conclusion that, as far as the cause of women’s suffrage was concerned, the journey to London “was not really necessary” although “the mission was successful in keeping the P.L.P. in the public eye.”\(^71\) It further opined that

> [t]he P.L.P. continues to make much ado about votes for women but quite a number of party leaders are apprehensive of the result of extending the franchise before the 1963 General Election. They realise that female voters will probably outnumber male voters and unless they can secure the support of the women there is a danger of the women setting up a rival political organisation which could be disastrous to P.L.P. aspirations.\(^72\)

When meeting with the representatives of the Bahamian women’s suffrage movement, the Colonial Office’s official line was “mildly sympathetic but insistent that the matter is one for the consideration by the Bahamas Legislature in light of popular opinion.”\(^73\) Thus, the women were told “to await the Constitutional Committee’s report on women’s suffrage which is due to come before the House early in 1961.”\(^74\)

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\(^67\) Bahamas Intelligence Report, October 1960, TNA: CO 1031/3541/22.
\(^68\) Bahamas Intelligence Report, November 1960, TNA: CO 1031/3541/21.
\(^71\) Bahamas Intelligence Report, November 1960, TNA: CO 1031/3541/21.
\(^72\) Bahamas Intelligence Report, November 1960, TNA: CO 1031/3541/21.
\(^74\) Bahamas Intelligence Report, November 1960, TNA: CO 1031/3541/21.
The Tribune, despite its long support for women’s suffrage, expressed additional misgivings about this delegation’s trip to London. Its writers were concerned that the primary reason for the visit to the Colonial Office was to create positive publicity for the PLP rather than move along the cause of women’s suffrage. They warned “that a delegation to London on this subject might not get very far. If this happened, opposition here might stiffen. […] women might lose some of the gains they have made on the local front.” However, by 1960 the women’s suffrage movement enjoyed widespread support in the Bahamas. Before the end of the year, the UBP, in which a somewhat more moderate wing around Roland Symonette had taken over the lead from the more radical right wing around Stafford Sands and Robert Symonette, presented a draft bill extending the suffrage to women.

This piece of legislation would become a standalone act, which when finally passed by the House of Assembly stipulated that all “provisions of The General Assembly Elections Act 1959 […] shall apply to a woman as they apply to a man.” Like Bermuda in 1944, The Bahamas extended the suffrage to women by means of a special Votes for Women Act. Similarly, Barbados in 1950 had introduced women’s suffrage by passing an act to amend the substantive act, a semantic detail the PLP had also proposed for the Bahamas to adopt. It is interesting to note that all three of the Caribbean colonies in which the Old Representative System survived went down the path of special or amendment acts. Other jurisdictions whose example the Bahamas might have followed, such as Australia (1902), Canada (1917), the United Kingdom itself (1918 and 1928), or even Jamaica (1944), all implemented women’s suffrage as part of a larger revision of the substantive act. In the Bahamas, this occurred in 1965, when the language in the substantive act was changed to the word “person” instead of the previously used word “man.” However, apart from changing “man” to person, the 1965 Act retained the generic masculine, a practice that was continued in the Representation of the People Act of 1969 as well as the Parliamentary Elections Act of 1992, which continues to be in force.

76 Votes for Women Act 1961 (Bahamas), s 2.
77 “House to Vote on Woman’s Suffrage in Two Weeks,” The Nassau Daily Tribune, 10 February 1961, 2.
78 House of Assembly Elections Act 1965 (Bahamas), s 9(1).
When the bill was first introduced in the House of Assembly, it was not as far reaching. Sands commented on the draft bill, explaining why it made provision for women to cast their vote in an election, but not for them to stand for election as candidates themselves: “This is evolution, not revolution.” This is where things took an interesting turn. On February 23rd, 1961, when the bill came up for a vote in the House, Pindling moved an amendment to give women that right, too. The archival record suggests that the PLP calculated this would be unacceptable to the UBP and therefore derail the entire bill:

Several P.L.P. leaders have privately expressed misgivings on the subject of votes for women. They would really like a ‘men only’ election in 1963 so that they could subsequently reap kudos for extending the franchise after they acceded to power, but circumstances forced them to champion the cause of women contrary to their own inclinations. However, the UBP accepted the amendment, and the Votes for Women Act was passed by a 15–14 majority with the UBP voting in favour, whereas in this decisive moment the PLP and Independents voted against women’s suffrage.

The PLP justified their nay votes by the fact that the Act did not take effect immediately, but rather on June 30th, 1962. For the UBP, Sands justified the delay by constitutional precedent set in the United Kingdom. There, measures of electoral reform that increased the electorate were automatically followed by general elections to ensure that Parliament would indeed represent those who possessed the suffrage. The date proposed by the UBP would allow for all new and existing voters to register in the normal manner while not making early elections necessary. In the United Kingdom, full women’s suffrage had been delayed for this reason, when it was proposed immediately after the 1918 general election, prior to which partial women’s suffrage had been introduced. The reason for the partial introduction of a limited female suffrage in the United Kingdom in 1918 was misogynists’ fear that women would be “less capable of exercising rational

79 Governor Stapledon to Colonial Office, 3 January 1961, TNA: CO 1031/3082/57.
80 Bahamas Intelligence Report, February 1961, TNA: CO 1031/3082/23.
81 Bahamas Intelligence Report, February 1961, TNA: CO 1031/3082/23.
82 Butler (1963) 17.
choices as voters than their male counterparts” and must therefore be prevented from becoming the majority of the electorate. However, experience since had proven that when it came to voting “there was no evidence that women behaved very differently from men.” Because the Bahamas was able to draw on these decades of experience, partial or limited introduction of women’s right to vote was therefore not discussed there.

When full women’s suffrage was then granted in the United Kingdom, after further delay, in 1928, it was also followed by a general election. Based on this constitutional practice, Sands had a valid point. On the other hand, the General Assembly Elections Act of 1959 had just granted the suffrage to scores of men previously disenfranchised, and no general election had followed its passage. While it could be argued that the explicit mention of bye-elections for four newly created seats in the compromise brokered by Lennox-Boyd implied that no early general election was required in this situation, and that an explicit exception to this constitutional practice was thus established, this nonetheless resulted in the anomaly that the House of Assembly, for the most part, represented the electorate of 1956, whereas the new seats that had been created in two constituencies and for which bye-elections had been held in 1960, represented the differently defined electorate of 1959. If the Votes for Women Act had become effective immediately, it would have created yet another anomaly. However, just as Sands argued for its delay based on the precedent set in the United Kingdom, one could argue in favour of its immediate enactment and the toleration of an additional temporary anomaly as a result based on the precedent set by the compromise of 1959. The PLP, however, did not go to such lengths to defend their nay votes.

5.6 Technical Difficulties

Perhaps the events leading up to the next general election serve to illustrate how deep-rooted the PLP’s mistrust of the UBP was. When proroguing the House of Assembly in May 1962, Governor Arthur suggested that the next general election would probably be moved forward from its originally antici-

84 Butler (1963) 15–16.
85 Butler (1963) 16.
pated date in 1963 to November 1962, so as not to interfere with the tourist season. This had important implications for women’s ability to vote. Because of the archipelagic geography of the Bahamas but the Nassau-centric nature of its administration, the registration process in the Out Islands was cumbersome and protracted. Therefore, elections scheduled for the end of November 1962, in accordance with the provisions of the General Assembly Elections Act of 1959, meant that in the Out Islands the voters’ register that would be used for these elections would be that of June 30th, 1962 – the same day the Votes for Women Act came into effect. However, June 30th, 1962, was a Saturday. The first day on which women could register to vote was therefore July 2nd, 1962. Under these circumstances, an election date in November 1962 would have meant that no women in the Out Islands would be able to vote. In New Providence, where voter registration was less of an organisational challenge, the General Assembly Elections Act stipulated that the voters’ register to be used for November elections would be that of September 30th. Women would have had three months to register.

In hindsight, it is easy to imagine that one or more sinister actors were deliberately scheming to exclude Out Island women from the election. The decision to move the election forward would no doubt have involved leading UBP politicians such as Roland Symonette, Leader for the Government in the House of Assembly, and Sands, who was not just Chairman of the House of Assembly’s Constitution Committee but also Chairman of the Development Board, the predecessor of the Ministry of Tourism. However, and despite Michael Craton’s claim to the contrary, we must consider it unlikely that either of these men had anticipated such an election schedule when voting on the Votes for Women Act in February 1961. The deliberations in the House of Assembly before the passing of the Votes for Women Act do not support such an allegation, and a prospective election date for November 1962 first appears in the archival record in May 1962. Nonetheless, at least in Sands’ case it would have been out of character if he had not immediately realised the implications of this revised schedule for the female vote when the Governor made the announcement in May 1962. As the 1956 elections and the 1960 bye-elections in New Providence had shown, New Providence was a PLP stronghold, and it was unlikely that this would

86 Votes of the House of Assembly, 25 September 1962, TNA: CO 26/177/308.
change now, regardless of whether or not women voted. The Out Islands on the other hand were where the UBP’s power base was, and the Out Islands were overrepresented in the House of Assembly accounting for twenty-one out of the overall thirty-three seats. The Out Island electoral districts also had far fewer voters per Member. There were frequent allegations that the UBP’s success in the Out Islands depended, at least to an extent, on voter bribery. An increased electorate would have made this practice more, perhaps prohibitively, expensive.

The files of the Colonial Office suggest that both Government House as well as London considered this an unfortunate oversight. The situation only “came to the notice of the Acting Governor,” Kenneth Walmsley, in August 1962. However, while a specific election date may not have been on the UBP’s mind when passing the Votes for Women Act in 1961, the intention to hold the next general election in November 1962 was public knowledge in May 1962, when the House of Assembly passed several acts to amend the General Assembly Elections Act. In particular, it passed an amendment to section 24 of the Act, based on “a number of recommendations by the then Acting Parliamentary Registrar,” and section 24 happens to be the section that specifies which register is to be used depending on the date of the elections. While the applicable timeline did not change, it is harder to imagine that the implications of November elections on women’s right to vote did not occur to anybody. However, while it may have been in the interest of some to exclude Out Island women from the election, it is also undeniable that the PLP, who potentially stood to benefit from an increased electorate, did not comment on it when these bills were debated in the House of Assembly, presumably because they did not notice it themselves. Regardless, however, of whether the actors involved were genuinely oblivious or chose to remain silent for ulterior motives, the fact that a November election date would not allow women in the Out Islands to vote certainly was not something the public was aware of at this point.

Walmsley informed both the UBP and the PLP of the situation, and both agreed to a special session “of the Legislature to enact the necessary legislation to enable voters in the Out Islands registered up to the 30th September to vote

in November polling, " in other words to use the same month’s register in the Out Islands as in New Providence. This part of the legislation was quickly agreed upon. However, whether it enabled women in the Out Islands to participate in the elections on the same terms as their counterparts in New Providence cannot be said with certainty. Bahamians have always tended to leave voter registration to the last minute, to only register when elections were seen as imminent. \(^91\) So when it became known that without amending legislation Out Island women would not be able to vote in the November election, this would have discouraged registration, even if there had been normal registration activity before. This the government attempted to counteract by issuing an official press release on August 28th, 1962: “The attention of persons who have not already registered is therefore drawn to the necessity of being registered before the 30th September, 1962, if it is desired to cast a vote at any General Election held in November 1962.” \(^92\) The special session of the Legislature, however, did not convene until September 25th; and by the time it had passed the necessary amendments and the Governor had enacted them, September 30th had come and gone, thus not allowing any additional time for voter registration under an amended timeline, only under the anticipation of such an amendment.

Apart from adjusting the deadline for the voters’ registers, both parties had other proposals that they wanted to see included in this act. In the case of the UBP majority in particular, this might seem surprising, as towards the end of the last session, the House of Assembly had passed no less than three General Assembly Election Amendment Acts. The amendments did not create controversy locally, but they were deemed “thoroughly objectionable” by the Colonial Office. \(^93\) It is possible that the UBP chose this particular opportunity to include them in a piece of legislation, because at its core, the question of which voters’ register to use for the November election was a matter the Colonial Office considered to be very important. It had to be enacted quickly. The passages in question placed severe limitations on the prosecu-

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\(^90\) Legal Report by Attorney General Orr, 8 October 1962, TNA: CO 1031/3079/110.


\(^92\) “Legislature to Deal with Out Island Registration,” The Nassau Daily Tribune, 27 August 1962, 1.

tion of election bribery. However, their existence in law threatened to jeopardize the upcoming election, because any action necessary to “be taken to prevent this obnoxious amendment from becoming law […] may mean that the amendment designed to enable women to vote will also fail.”

Perhaps the House of Assembly was hoping for a fait accompli. On the evening of September 24th, the UBP leadership informed the Governor of the amendment “as a matter of courtesy.” The House of Assembly, in a single sitting, then passed the bill including the amendment in question on September 26th, and it was on the agenda for the Legislative Council, where passage was expected, for September 29th. Despite the Colonial Office directing the Governor in a telegram to refuse assent to the bill if it contained the amendment in question, the Governor shied away from this measure, because he not only feared that it “would provoke constitutional and political crisis,” but he also realised that it was not going to have an impact on this particular election, of which it was “generally accepted that [it] will be as corrupt as possible.” In the end, the Colonial Office agreed to temporarily tolerate the Act for the purpose of facilitating the impending election and particularly the participation of Bahamian women in it. Ultimately, however, it agreed to apply pressure on the House of Assembly to repeal it: “If they are not prepared to act within the six months’ period of grace then the Secretary of State will have to consider very seriously advising The Queen to disallow the Act. Legal advice in this office confirms that disallowance would not invalidate the General Election.”

The election resulted in a comfortable parliamentary majority for the UBP despite polling fewer overall votes than the PLP, which had increased its share of votes since 1956. However, as the 1956 elections were held under

95 Acting Governor Walmsley to Secretary of State for the Colonies Sandys, 25 September 1962, TNA: CO 1031/3079/144.
96 Acting Governor Walmsley to Secretary of State for the Colonies Sandys, 28 September 1962, TNA: CO 1031/3079/140.
97 Secretary of State for the Colonies Sandys to Acting Governor Walmsley, 27 September 1962, TNA: CO 1031/3079/141.
98 Acting Governor Walmsley to Secretary of State for the Colonies Sandys, 28 September 1962, TNA: CO 1031/3079/140.
100 Colonial Office to Governor Stapledon, 9 January 1963, TNA: CO 1031/3079/73.
a different franchise, and the 1967 elections would be held under yet another franchise, ascertaining the effect of the female vote is nigh impossible. Despite the speculations of various actors who were involved with the women’s suffrage movement, it is not evident that women’s voting patterns differed significantly from those of men. Therefore, the PLP’s 1962 gain in the popular vote might be better explained by the fact that the plural vote was now limited to two and that the company vote had been abolished. Nonetheless, as Janet Bostwick, who in 1982 became the first woman to be elected to the House of Assembly, remembers, “A number of persons, including some in the leadership of the PLP […] said that the women were responsible for that”101 defeat.

These accusations held that women had not voted in a sufficiently grateful way, thus denying the PLP their earned reward for the gift of women’s suffrage, which they had ostensibly supported as a movement but failed to vote for in the House of Assembly. An indignant Fawkes remarked that women had “unleashed tremendous political power, but in the wrong direction. After the contest, the combined P.L.P.-Labour opposition coalition in the House dropped to nine.”102 At the time, however, Fawkes’ stance was not as clear. Over the years, his relationship with the PLP went through a series of vicissitudes.103 When defending the seat he had won on a PLP ticket in the 1956 elections, he ran as the leader of a so-called Labour Party, which, however, never was a viable party but more a vehicle for Fawkes to contest his seat, practically as an independent candidate.104 Furthermore, right before the 1962 elections, in his role as leader of a trade union Fawkes had endorsed the UBP for the thirty-one out of thirty-three seats that his Labour Party was not contesting.105

Modern scholars suggest that the UBP held on to its parliamentary majority until 1967 because of gerrymandering106 or the plural vote.107 However, both of these explanations are oversimplifications. The assertion of gerrymandering overlooks the minutiae of the delimitation process prior to the

101 Bethel/Govan (dirs.) (2012), Film, 0:55:45.
105 Governor Stapledon to Colonial Office, 6 December 1962, TNA: CO 1031/3079/83.
1963 Constitution. Ascribing the UBP’s victory to the plural vote, overlooks the new limits that had been placed on it. In fact, the PLP won the popular vote, and may have benefitted more from the limited plural vote than the UBP, e.g., as a result of mass migration from the Out Islands to New Providence. The fact that the popular vote did not translate into a parliamentary majority was caused by the overrepresentation of the Out Islands and by the distortions caused by first-past-the-post systems particularly in small jurisdictions, but no conclusions may be drawn from the available data about women’s voting behaviour in the Bahamas in 1962.

The partisan appropriation of the history of the women’s suffrage movement had begun even before the 1962 election. Days after the coming into effect of the Act, Mary Ingraham was scheduled to make a speech on ZNS, the government-owned radio station, which, despite having been pre-recorded, did not air. Ingraham accused a PLP operative “connected with arranging the programmes” for cancelling the broadcast, because he insisted she falsely “give the credit to the P.L.P. for getting the vote for women.”

Undue political influence has long been, and according to contemporary observers still is, a vexing issue at ZNS. In 1962, the PLP would have to rely on sympathisers who happened to be employed by ZNS for such purposes; after 1967, the party controlled the station and all appointees for an uninterrupted twenty-five years. In today’s Bahamas, the ambivalent role of the PLP and the contributions of non-PLP actors are largely forgotten.

It is true that Bay Street long opposed the extension of the franchise, ostensibly because a larger electorate jeopardised their electoral prospects. Common wisdom held that general, free and equal elections would inevitably result in the loss of the white minority’s parliamentary majority. This

108 Governor Paul to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 28 September 1972, TNA: FCO 63/1026.
110 Ms. Rodgers’ History BGCSE students.,” “The Women’s Suffrage Movement in the Bahamas 1948–1962,” Facebook, 3 December 2013, https://www.facebook.com/HistorybgcseStudents/posts/231994543627953, accessed 21 December 2022. N.B.: This is arguably the most influential Bahamian history page on Facebook; with 6,354 Likes it has almost as many as Julien Believe (6,371 Likes), currently the country’s commercially most successful domestic recording artist (20 June 2018).
primarily applied to property qualifications, as voting preferences were largely a race and class issue. Property qualifications for men’s first vote were only removed in the General Assembly Elections Act of 1959, but no general elections had been held since. However, if the assumption was that voting would be along race and class lines, then the UBP would have no vested interest either way in the question of women’s suffrage after the passage of the 1959 Act, and there is some circumstantial evidence that this was indeed the case, that by 1961 even a former hardliner such as Sands had lost his will to resist.

On the other hand, it is often purported that pressure to re-elect members of the Bay Street clique was rooted in many Bahamian men’s precarious employment conditions. Therefore, some activists believed the key to ending white minority rule in the Bahamas lay in women’s suffrage. In this context, the testimony of the children and grandchildren of the suffragettes is interesting. As mentioned above, one of the early leaders of the Women’s Suffrage Movement, Mary Ingraham, allegedly became a suffragette after her husband, a Bay Street politician, lost his seat in the 1949 general election and blamed this on the absence of the female vote. Her granddaughter, Hope Strachan, an active PLP politician herself, opined:

A lot of us may like to believe that […] there was some lofty reason why she may have done it, and the point about it is, it was to help her husband. […] Her thing was that she needed to ensure that Rufus was taken care of, and he was happy, and he was doing well, and his politics, and all the rest of it.”

For the other side of the aisle, Janet Bostwick says:

These women actually said that they were convinced that the PLP would not succeed until women were granted the right to vote. And so, their reason for being in the suffrage movement and their reason for being so active and pushing it, was to secure the victory of the Progressive Liberal Party.”

At least some leaders of the women’s suffrage movement seem to have been motivated to gain the female vote not because of principle but as a means to other men’s ends, suggesting that it is not only the memory of the suffrage movement that has been hijacked for political purposes.

As late as 1981, Caroline Butler, the widow of long-time MP and Governor-General Milo Butler, expressed her view that women ought not to

112 Bethel/Govan (dirs.) (2012), Film, 0:17:15.
113 Bethel/Govan (dirs.) (2012), Film, 0:33:15.
“become actively and directly involved in politics,” as the “woman’s family would be ‘shortchanged’.” Thus, while Bahamian women gained the right to vote – and the right to be elected – in 1962, it took until 1982 for the first woman to succeed in her bid for a seat in Parliament. Yet even in 1962 the PLP fielded Doris Johnson as a candidate, though she lost her race. To this day, women are decidedly underrepresented in Parliament, where currently only 12.8% of Members are women. Of the governing party’s candidates in the last election, only 10.3% were women, and the current cabinet has a sole female member for a ratio of 5.9%.

Historically, as the example of Johnson shows, there has been a tendency by the parties to assign female candidates to either unwinnable or at least hotly contested seats, but very rarely to presumably safe seats. This is symptomatic of the Bahamas’ leader-centric, male-dominated political parties, but whether or not this underrepresentation is also responsible for the continuing legal impediments Bahamian women face, cannot be answered as easily.

The most glaring example of these is the inequality enshrined in the Independence Constitution, particularly within the citizenship provisions. Yet that document was written not by Bahamians but by clerks at Whitehall, merely codifying United Kingdom practice at the time. This means that the gender inequality that is enshrined in the Constitution was not originally Bahamian. However, whereas the United Kingdom and many other Commonwealth Caribbean countries have addressed these matters over the past few decades, the Bahamas has proven reluctant to enact further progressive reforms. The greatest impediment to change are the protections enshrined in the Constitution itself: qualified majorities in both Houses as well as a simple majority in a mandatory referendum are needed to change the relevant articles of the Constitution. This, Whitehall as well as the Bahamians have known for decades. Yet it is still the case that women’s voices are not being heard in the political process.

115 As of 30 June 2021. N.B.: At the beginning of this government’s term in office, the percentage value was even lower, but the overall size of cabinet shrank due to a number of resignations. For a brief moment, after the resignation of Lanisha Rolle as Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture in February 2021 and before the appointment of Pakesia Parker-Edgecombe as Minister of State for Disaster Preparedness, Management and Reconstruction in March 2021, there was no female cabinet member at all.
117 Constitution 1973 (Bahamas), especially arts 3(2), 5, 8, 10, 14. For a detailed discussion, see: ARANHA (2015a) 7–21.
mian opposition hoped would protect the document’s democratic nature against autocracy or despotism. Pindling himself no doubt fuelled this suspicion. Leading up to the independence negotiations, his party discussed that Parliament ought to have the power to change the Constitution by simple parliamentary majority. At the independence conference, his delegation demanded that constitutional change should not require more than a three quarters majority in Parliament, which he had won both in 1968 as well as 1972, and which is in any case not an unlikely election result in small first-past-the-post jurisdictions. On the one hand, governments from both parties have presented their respective Constitutional Amendment Bills that went to referendum, and that were supposed to provide for more gender equality; in both instances – 2002 and 2016 – the electorate voted against these changes with overwhelming majorities, despite the fact that approximately 56% of registered voters are women. However, in both instances, the referenda came at a time when the respective governing parties’ popularity had waned, and the opposition, failing to endorse the cause, exploited the process for partisan purposes instead.

As previous reforms, too, that helped make the Bahamian electoral system more democratic, women’s suffrage, which by the early 1960s was hardly a contentious issue in the hemisphere any longer, was largely won by the citizens, against a ruling elite that demonstrated no desire to adopt this measure of its own volition. Even the involvement of seemingly progressive forces from the political arena appears to have been motivated by ulterior motives. Previously in matters of electoral reform, the pattern had been that once the public’s demands for reform had reached critical mass, the Colonial Office through the Governor would in turn exercise pressure on the Bahamian oligarchy; in this instance, the Colonial Office remained largely passive. While it must be assumed that the UBP knew that they could anticipate a repetition of this pattern, this knowledge had never stopped the oligarchy from stalling before. Therefore, when they voted for women’s suffrage in

119 Gerald Glover to Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Godber, 1 September 1972, TNA: FCO 63/1025.
120 Cabinet (United Kingdom) Minutes, 19 December 1972, TNA: CAB 148/121.
121 Aranha (2016) 25.
1961, this marked the beginning of shifting attitudes amongst the Bay Street Boys. Nonetheless, implemented reforms only ever bestowed the minimum possible measure of rights and freedoms on the people, so as to keep the electorate dependent on the by now well-established system of political patronage.