

Lord Robert Cecil Viscount of Chelwood 1864-1958

Frances Stenlake, November 2020

Before entering Parliament in 1906 as MP for East Marylebone, Lord Robert Cecil practised as a lawyer, and in 1909, as a member of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage, unsuccessfully defended Evelina Haverfield when she was arrested with Emmeline Pankhurst and other Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) members for trying to enter the House of Commons to petition Prime Minister Asquith.

Lord Robert Cecil took part in Conservative Women's Franchise Association (CWFA) meetings in London and the Home Counties, and in 1911 and early 1912 spoke across Sussex - at Horsted Keynes, at the Horsham Suffrage Society's first AGM, at a Central Sussex Women's Suffrage Society public meeting in Burgess Hill, and at Forest Row - to promote the Conciliation Bill. This would only give the vote to single women householders, who had been able to vote in local elections since 1869, but Lord Robert Cecil argued that the principle of votes for women could later be extended. He was against women MPs: they would be physically unable to endure the 'exhausting exertions' in the House of Commons!

When the Conciliation Bill was rejected by the House of Commons in March 1912, Lord Robert Cecil sympathised with women's anger, and expressed vehement objections to harsh prison sentences and forced feeding. He continued, however, to advise the avoidance of militancy and to advocate a 'moderate and conservative admission of women to the franchise'. In March 1913 the East Grinstead branch of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage (MLWS) was founded, with Lord Robert Cecil and Charles Corbett among its members. In 1916 and 1917, in answer to deputations asking about provision for women's suffrage in proposed electoral reform legislation, Lord Robert Cecil insisted that he would not assent to any substantial increase in the number of men voters unless this Bill included some measure of enfranchisement for women.

Following the enfranchisement in February 1918 of women over 30 who were already local electors or the wives of local electors, Lord Robert Cecil introduced a Bill to make women eligible to stand for Parliament. Passed in November 1918, in time for the General Election the following month, this created the anomaly that women Parliamentary candidates need only be 21. When the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Bill, to enable women to enter such professions as the law, was debated in the House of Commons in 1919, Lord Robert Cecil argued that it should include equal voting rights with men, enfranchising all women over 21, but the Government refused to grant this.

In 1922, therefore, Lord Robert Cecil introduced a Bill to extend the franchise to women on the same terms as men, but it would take until 1928 for this to be achieved. Meanwhile, in 1925, as the newly-installed Rector of Aberdeen University, Lord Robert Cecil's first official duty was, appropriately, to open the hall of the new University Women's Union. He told his cheering audience that he had always been in favour of the enfranchisement of women: women should take their full share of citizenship, as electors for Parliament and as members of the House of Commons.

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