

IDEAS FOR ASSEMBLIES...

Women in parliament

A fundamental part of British values is our democracy. The system theoretically gives people equal rights because everyone is entitled to one vote that has the same value when placed in the ballot box. The progress made with regards to equal suffrage is an important aspect of teaching about democracy and one that can be discussed during assemblies and then as part of follow-up work in class or PSHE lessons. Below are some events that could form part of such discussions and others that could form an interesting discussion or learning point.



October

10 October 1903

The Women's Social and Political Union founded by Emmeline Pankhurst in Manchester.

December

1 December 1919

Nancy Astor becomes the first female MP to take her seat in parliament. (elected 28 November).



John Frost Newspapers / Alamy Stock Photo

Nancy Astor – the first female MP to sit in the House of Commons: look how far we've come!

Modern MPs

An interesting way to stimulate thinking would be begin with images of significant MPs that the children should recognise such as Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Jeremy Corbyn *et al.* Then ask: just over 100 years ago, however, one of them wouldn't be able to serve as an MP or even vote. Who is that and why? Take suggestions and discuss reasoning. Point out the country's current prime minister couldn't have been elected or even voted. Discuss what the children think about that in terms of fairness and if that's the kind of country they think Britain should have be. Or, alternatively, make it more interactive by giving one class a voting card and only allow them to make decisions that affect school; this will cause some really strong reactions from the rest of the assembly audience – their reactions will certainly demonstrate why voting equality is important!

The Journey to voting equality?

The first national movement for women's suffrage began in 1872 when the National Society for Women's Suffrage was formed. Women wanted the vote and did some truly courageous acts to try and get their message across (you can choose which of their actions to discuss from peaceful protests to the more extreme actions such as smashing windows, damaging property and even jumping in front of the King's horse during Epsom Derby). Asking children of a mature enough age about which actions they think are appropriate would be an interesting way to discuss democracy as a British value. Women were granted the right to vote in national elections 1918, under the Representation of the People's Act and then equal right to vote in 1928.

Is our school a democracy?

Ask the children who they elect in school and link to equal voting rights in each class to reinforce the fairness of the democratic system. In addition, most schools have an elected governing body that represents a varied section of the local community – probably the parents of children that are sitting in the assembly. Ask how other views in our local community are represented. Mention the local MP and discuss their role.

Nancy Astor – the first female MP to sit in Parliament

Nancy Astor was born in America and moved to the UK at the age of 26. She replaced her husband, Waldorf Astor, in the constituency of Plymouth Sutton when he became a peer in the House of Lords. She represented the Conservative Party until 1945. Unfortunately, Nancy was never in a position of power but represented her constituency through four Conservative prime ministers.

Why is she worth discussing?

Nancy was an active campaigner for change outside parliament. She worked with another campaigner called Margaret Macmillan. A cause she supported was the development and expansion of nursery schools. Almost every child goes to nursery and it, in part, came as a result of Nancy Astor's work. She also ensured a law was passed to increase the legal age to drink alcohol.

Being the first female MP to sit in the House of Commons, I'm sure you'd agree that it's important to recognise this as an important step on the road towards equal political representation for men and women.

A thought to finish on

We have now had two female prime ministers and other heads of state. It's always important to remember how far we have come and that equality is a fundamental British value. One hundred years ago the percentage of female MPs was zero. In 2015 it was 29%. Now, in 2017, it is 32%. Looking towards the future, politicians in the UK House of Lords and the SNP have been discussing whether people should be able to vote aged younger than 18. This would be an interesting way to finish and could lead to some interesting follow-up discussions in class.

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Nancy Astor on her election campaign in 1919



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Keystone Pictures USA / Alamy Stock Photo

Nancy Astor arrives to take her seat in the House of Commons for the first time in 1920.