

# VOTES FOR WOMEN: A PLAY

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## CAST

*[In order of appearance]*

Narrator

Kate Sheppard

Woman 1

Politician 2

Henry Wright

Politician 1

Richard Seddon

Politician 3

## SCENE 1:

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*[Narrator is at the pulpit, Kate Sheppard and Woman 1 are off the side of the stage]*

**FEMALE NARRATOR:** The year is 1879, and colonial Aotearoa is a tough place to be a woman. There are only half as many of us as there are men. Alcohol is cheap and considered safer than water. 'Drunken disorderliness' is the most common crime, and alcohol abuse leaves families in dire poverty.

But we are about to meet a young, intelligent – not to mention beautiful – woman. Oh! Did you think I meant me – no I'm just the narrator!

But, you should remember her name, Kate Sheppard, she is the head of the Christian Women's Temperance Movement. You are about to hear the real words she spoke, that changed the course of history. Words passed down to us until this day.

*[Kate and Woman walk across stage chatting]*

**WOMAN 1:** How am I supposed to feed my children when my husband drinks away all his income. I work such long hours in the factory, but I can't earn anything like a man. Certainly not enough to keep a roof over our head.

**KATE SHEPPARD:** How manifestly unfair then to have two rates of pay for the same work, merely because one of the workers is a woman. Listen, I've gathered together a petition to ban the sale of alcohol to women. We must take the matter up!

**POLITICIAN 2:** *[Stands up in the audience]:* Not likely. Why should we stop the sale of alcohol – it's good for merriment and good for my pockets, if you know what I mean.

**NARRATOR:** When the petition was thrown out, Kate had a lightbulb moment.

**KATE:** *[speaking to audience]* These male politicians are never going to care about the concerns of women, unless they need the votes of women!

## SCENE 2:

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*[Narrator moves to the side. Kate stands at the pulpit and a small group of women gather around her, holding signs that say 'Votes for Women']*

**NARRATOR:** And so, the suffrage – or ‘votes for women’ - movement in New Zealand began. Kate often spoke from the Bible, when she was advocating for the right to vote:

**KATE:** Men and women are like members of one body. If one half of the body politic is artificially cramped and numbed, the other half must suffer. But when the restrictions are removed ... each part will benefit all the other parts.'

*[More women join in with the crowd and gather around Kate]*

**HENRY WRIGHT:** *[stands up in the audience, with disdain]:* I'm the well-known Wellington businessman Henry Wright. You Suffragettes know me well. Go home Suffragettes! Look after your children, cook for your husbands, empty the slops and attend to the domestic affairs nature designed you for!

**KATE:** We are tired of having a 'sphere' doled out to us, and of being told that anything outside that sphere is “unwomanly”. We want to be natural, just for a change ... We must be ourselves at all risks.'  
Women, take the matter up! We invite everyone here today to sign the petition for women's suffrage!

*[Scroll of paper is passed around the group of women, and then pass it around the audience, and each person can sign if they wish]*

## SCENE 3:

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*[Narrator to the side and Politician at pulpit]*

**NARRATOR:** It took over a decade, and three failed petitions to parliament but Suffrage became a mass movement.

**AUDIENCE:** Votes for women! Votes for women!

**NARRATOR:** In 1893 around a quarter of New Zealand women signed a petition to gain the right to vote, and it was finally presented at Parliament.

**POLITICIAN 1:** *[Addressing the Audience]* Prime Minister, Members of Parliament, I present to you the petition from the women of New Zealand, demanding the right to vote. It has been signed by almost 32,000 women, and is 270 metres long.

*[Stands at front in the aisle, and rolls a large roll of newspaper down the aisle to represent the petition]*

**AUDIENCE:** Votes for women! Votes for women!

## SCENE 4:

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*[PM Richard Seddon and a male politician huddle together Stage left, while 2 other male politicians listen on Stage Right]*

**NARRATOR:** Prime Minister Richard Seddon didn't want women to get the vote – but he feared that if he said so publicly, and women did win the vote, they would vote against him in the coming election.

**RICHARD SEDDON** *[to Politician 1, threatening tone]*: Listen, I know you are for votes for women, but I am determined that women will NOT get the vote. I demand you change your vote against suffrage. You will do this, or come election time, you will be sorry.

**POLITICIAN 1:** Prime Minister, no, I must vote with my conscience. And my conscience says that I must vote 'yes; to suffrage.

**RICHARD:** I demand you change your vote to 'no'! Your conscience won't do you any good when you're out on the street. You want to stay, you vote 'no'. I hope I make myself understood.

*[On the other side of the stage]*

**POLITICIAN 2** *[to politician 3]*: I am no supporter of votes for women, but I have just heard a conversation - well no, a threat - that has shaken me to my core. The Prime Minister is trying to force the hand of one of his MPs!.

**POLITICIAN 3:** I do not support votes for women either. But I really, truly, do not support such underhanded politics.

**POLITICIAN 2:** Richard Seddon cannot get away with this. A line must be drawn.

**POLITICIAN 3:** We must change our votes to 'yes', and show the Prime Minister that his MPs will not be threatened.

**NARRATOR:** Richard Seddon's dirty politics backfired. In protest of his actions, 2 politicians changed their votes to 'yes'. So, on 19 September 1893, the Electoral Act was passed by the narrowest of margins, making Aotearoa the first self-governing country in the world to give women the right to vote!

*[AUDIENCE CHEERS]*

**KATE:** The news is being flashed far and wide ... civic freedom has been granted to the women of New Zealand.'

**AUDIENCE:** Votes for Women! Votes for women!

**NARRATOR:** Less than two months later, 109,461 women enrolled in the 1893 elections -and lined up in their thousands to vote at the polling booths.  
It was said to be the most organised and civil elections the country had ever held.

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**THE END**