

‘The WI has POWER’

IN THESE TURBULENT TIMES, SAYS **DR HELEN PANKHURST CBE**,
AUTHOR, ACTIVIST AND DESCENDANT OF SUFFRAGETTES,
WE SHOULD ALL BE ASKING ‘WHAT CAN I DO?’

Words ELEANOR WILSON Photography JANE MILES, THE BRENTWOOD BELLES, ESSEX FEDERATION

As a women’s rights campaigner, writer and academic, the great-granddaughter of suffragette icon Emmeline Pankhurst and granddaughter of Sylvia Pankhurst, Helen (right) was in high demand last year as Britain celebrated the centenary of the Act that granted some UK women the right to vote.

Speaking to *WI Life* at the Essex Federation Autumn County Event, Helen, newly appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 2019 New Year Honours, for services to Gender Equality, says: ‘It’s massive. The level of interest has been much higher than I think I expected.’

As well as having addressed the WI, Helen has spoken at men’s prisons, 10 Downing Street, corporate events and primary schools. She also convened the Centenary Action Group, a cross-party coalition of more than 100 activists, politicians and women’s rights organisations campaigning to end barriers to women’s political participation.

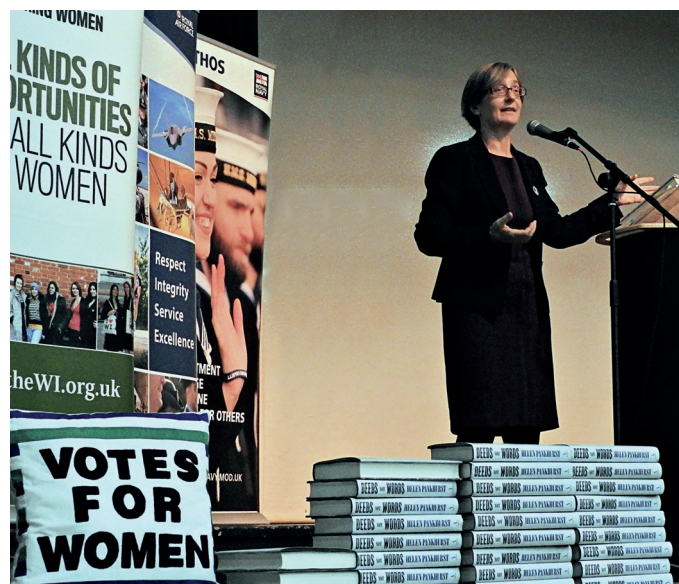
Throughout 2018’s celebrations, at every event she attended, Helen met switched-on women who were keen to ask her: ‘What do we still need to do?’

Violence against women and ongoing sexualisation of women by the media are two of the biggest areas where Helen feels not enough progress has been made. She also fears that instead of spurring women’s rights forward, the suffrage centenary could make people complacent.

‘Worry number one is that this is just a hiatus: that people will say, “OK, we’ve done the centenary and that’s it”. And my language for that is: We’ve got a centenary of partial franchise.’ Helen is referring to the fact that only women over 30 who owned property were granted the right to vote in 1918: every other woman had to wait another decade before gaining the vote.

‘We’ve got 10 years [before the next suffragism centenary]. We need to use it,’ she says. ‘There’s a lot to be concerned about, but there’s also a lot of positivity.’

In her speech to the Essex Federation, Helen emphasises that while the suffragettes are famous for headline-grabbing acts, such as burning down a Tunbridge Wells cricket pavilion that



wouldn’t allow women entry in 1913, the movement was also about ‘sisterhood, fun and coming together’. Remind you of anything...?

Helen has appeared at several WI events over the years and detailed its early campaign work in her book, *Deeds Not Words: The Story of Women’s Rights, Then and Now* (Sceptre), published in 2018.

‘I love the WI,’ she says. ‘It’s quirky. It’s women’s space with all the complexity of what other women are: political engagement, the domestic space, a lot of arguments about

how best to do all of this, and a lot of support.’

What does she hope to see from the WI in future? ‘I’d like to see them as more confident in their political voice. I think [the WI] has more power than it’s using,’ she says.

Helen believes women naturally understand the importance of working together collaboratively, and that together they have the potential to change the way politics functions. For her, women’s organisations such as the WI are especially important at a time when society seems deeply divided.

‘The problem with political language at the moment is that it is so crude and violent and dismissive of the other. I think women have to challenge that. What would be lovely is if, with the changing times, the WI maintains a space that is comfortable for all women.’

She praises the WI’s commitment to remaining neutral on party politics, on which ‘women are too often divided’. The WI’s apolitical stance also means it is not officially aligned with the feminist movement, but Helen has her own opinion on that.

‘For me, if you bring a group of women together, the reality is that *that* is creating a feminist space,’ she explains. ‘You create women’s space where you start to talk about women’s interests.’

Helen’s next move will be to take up the chancellorship of the recently established University of Suffolk. In 2028, she’s expecting another busy year as we mark 100 years since the vote was given to all women on the same terms as men. By then she hopes to have even more achievements in women’s rights to celebrate. ‘It’s *our* responsibility to make a difference,’ she says.

‘Not everybody else’s: individually, all of us.’