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WOMEN'S HISTORY**



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**THE SUFFRAGIST: VIDA GOLDSTEIN**

## **The Suffragist: Vida Goldstein**

**By Leah Murray**

Vida Goldstein was an Australian Suffragist, whose dedication and commitment to social reform resulted in many significant events; including Australian women gaining the vote and women being recognised as able to stand as candidates for parliament. Though she fought hard for women's suffrage, she also had opinions and goals in many other areas. Goldstein campaigned strongly for women's equality, and fought for equal pay for equal work, and represented poor women and children in court. Through her hard work, and tireless campaigning, she brought about change in a male dominated society, a significant achievement for a woman in that time. She was the first ever woman in the British Empire to stand for election, and though she never won a seat, she still succeeded in altering male societies perception of women in politics. The consequences of her actions remain integral to women today, but it was only through the endless support she received from her friends, family and fellow supporters of the cause and her background and upbringing, that made it possible for her to achieve so much.

Vida Goldstein's upbringing, and the views and ideas of her friends and family, evoked her passion for campaigning, and had a huge impact on her decision to become involved in the world of women's suffrage. Growing up in a household with opinionated, hardworking parents, Goldstein was no stranger to the upheavals and happenings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her father, Jacob Goldstein, was a social reformer, and though an anti-suffragist, encouraged his four daughters to be both economically and intellectually independent, when during that time women were not usually encouraged to be so. Jacob Goldstein put aside his views against suffrage in this instance, and encouraged his daughters to do this to ensure that they were capable of looking after themselves. Her mother however, Isabella Goldstein, *was* a confirmed suffragist, and worked zealously for social reform. It was her mother who began Vida's 'public career', when the twenty-two year old assisted her mother in collecting signatures for an important Woman's Suffrage Petition. Despite this being the beginning of her career, Goldstein had already become very passionate and deeply immersed in women's suffrage, and commented, during the signing of the petition, somewhat unfairly, that women who refused to sign were: "...almost without exception those whose interest ended at the garden gate." (Vida Goldstein, 1890, [Online]) Through her mother, and many friends, Goldstein became acutely aware of the injustices women faced, which spurred her on to become a suffragist. Her close friend, Annette Bear-Crawford, also played a major role in mentoring and guiding Goldstein in her pursuit of women's equality. Her friend urged her to become involved in social welfare activities, and join the fight for women's suffrage. Without the urgings and encouragement of her friends and family, Vida Goldstein may never have become a suffragist, and consequently, women might not have the rights they have today.

The various movements, women's suffrage organizations and conferences that Vida Goldstein was a part of, assisted her in getting her opinions and ideas out into society, as well as providing her with information that would help her in her battle for women's suffrage. Initially, Goldstein

focused her efforts on the small school that she and her sister ran near their home in Victoria, but, very aware of the injustices of being unable to vote, Goldstein soon joined the Prahran Women's Franchise League and became a member of the woman's suffrage movement, that was moving through Victoria during the late eighteen hundred's, in order to gain a leg up into the world of woman's suffrage. However, after the death of her close friend, Annette Bear-Crawford, in 1899, she was thrown into the deep end and became the undisputed leader of the movement, and that same year she made her very first public speaking appearance to advocate the vote for women. Goldstein believed women needed the vote in order to have a say in the goings on in Australia, and consequently, this drove her to campaign hard and work tirelessly. Her lectures drew colossal crowds from all around the country, and she into was described as: "The biggest thing that has happened in the women movement for some time." (Alice Henry, 1901, [Online]) This allowed Goldstein to speak out, and voice her opinions about the need for women's suffrage, but she didn't stop there and in 1902 she travelled to the United States of America, in order to speak at the International Woman Suffrage Conference. While there she was elected as the secretary, presented evidence and ideas in favour of women's suffrage to a committee of the US Congress, and also attended the International Council of Women Conference. The time that she spent in America would help prepare her when standing for election in Australia, and allowed her to present her ideas not just in Australia, but to an international audience. Without being able to voice her opinions, and listen to those of others around the world, she may have been unable to campaign so strongly and consequently, she may never have achieved the success that she did with regards to women's suffrage.

The two papers that Vida Goldstein edited allowed her to gain support from her female readers, and circulate her opinions to a wider audience. Her first publication was 'The Australian Women's Sphere', a monthly paper that was first printed in 1900. Goldstein described the paper as the: "Organ of communication amongst the, at one time few, but now many, still scattered, supporters of the cause". (Goldstein, Vida (1900) 'By way of Introduction' *Australian Women's Sphere*, Volume 1, no. 1 (September), p. 2) Not only did this feminist journal allow Goldstein to hone her writing skills, her ideas and opinions could be circulated further than the audiences who attended her speeches. Female readers could pick up the paper and read about the goings on in the world of women's suffrage, and learn of Goldstein's upcoming campaigns. However, in 1905, in order to concentrate more efforts on her parliamentary campaign, she closed the paper. In 1909, Vida Goldstein began another publication: a weekly newsletter entitled 'The Woman Voter', where she wrote up her campaigns. When the war began, and the War Precautions Act was passed, Goldstein found it hard to write what she wanted, having to submit her articles for a scrutinising censorship. But Goldstein, as was to be expected, had many opinions to publish in her weekly paper, and pushed on, quite determined to continue gaining support. It was after eight years of publication, in 1917, that the 'Woman Voter' ceased to be published, with Goldstein focusing her efforts elsewhere, away from suffrage. Without the publication of these two papers, she would not have had the amount of supporters she did, and her campaigning would have been much more difficult than it already was.

Being the first women to stand for election in the British Empire was the first step for Goldstein towards altering society's perception of woman in politics. After women in most states finally gained the Federal vote in 1901, Vida Goldstein turned her attention towards parliament, and standing as a candidate. At the 1903 Federal election, Vida decided to stand as a candidate in the Senate and with the backing of many prominent suffrage figures, including American Carrie Chapman Catt, a leading figure in the American suffrage movement, who said that: "We are so proud of you, and so happy that you have this honour, even if you are not elected," [Carrie Chapman Catt, 1904, [in Oldfield, A. 1992, p. 154] she battled through the constant ridicule she received. All her male opponents realised she was popular, and were forced to resort to putting cartoons in newspapers making fun of her in an attempt to win. Although when the votes were counted Goldstein didn't succeed in gaining a seat, she received 51 497 votes [Oldfield, A. 1992, p. 154] and proved to her male counterparts that women could stand for election by receiving enough support to stand and handling the pressure put upon her. It is said that: "Goldstein's admirable poll of 51 497 votes in her 1903 campaign had shown the potentiality of the women's vote. Her success, however, aroused fear in the opposite political camp." (Brownfoot, J, 1968 [Online])After her defeat though, the male members of Parliament were to discover that Goldstein's hope to enter Parliament herself was not a passing fad and in 1908 she returned to national politics, and made three more attempts to gain election into the Federal Parliament: in 1910 and 1917 for the Senate and 1914 for the House of Representatives. Each time she was always an Independent Women Candidate, because she mostly disagreed with the views and ideals of the major political parties, and polled well, except for in 1917 when because of her views of the war, she received less support. Despite the fact that the press either misrepresented her, ignored her or in many cases, focused more on her appearance than actual campaign: "Miss Goldstein presented a very pleasing appearance on the platform... She was graceful, prettily gowned, and wore a most becoming hat," (The Ararat Advertiser, (27 July, 1903) [Radio Broadcast, 2012]) she battled on, and it was clear she was both a candidate of sincerity and integrity. Goldstein refused to bend beneath the pressure that was put onto her shoulders and in each campaign she consistently supported equal rights, equal pay, and women's equality. She was unwavering in her passion for politics, and her ambition to enter into Parliament was simply to put her many ideals into practise. Though Vida Goldstein was never elected into Parliament, and didn't get to make changes in society that way, she altered societies perceptions of women in politics by showing she could aptly handle the pressure of candidature as well as any man, and wasn't afraid to stand up in Parliament because it was one of her rights as a woman.

The beginning of the war in 1914 provided Goldstein with yet another reason to campaign, and during this time she made a significant impact on peace in Australia. During World War 1, Vida Goldstein was uncompromisingly pacifist and worked hard for both world peace and social reform. Goldstein formed the Woman's Peace Army, in 1915, became the chairman of the Peace Alliance and was involved in a lot of very valuable social work that included the organization of a women's unemployment bureau, in 1915 and 1916. She recruited suffragist's to assist her with the organisation of the Woman's Peace Army, which was an anti-war group, founded just after the

beginning of the Gallipoli campaign; that opposed military conscription and war in general. Vida Goldstein came out very early with a declaration against the war, and said that: "I believe that war is an economic futility and a crime against civilisation and humanity. I therefore pledge myself to active service in the cause of peace..." (Vida Goldstein, 1915, [Radio Broadcast, 2012]) The Women's Peace Army was a small group, of less than one hundred people, who would give talks about the peace movement and ending the war. The Peace Army also conducted a huge 'no-conscription' protest, after the Prime Minister announced in 1916, that a referendum would be held on implementing conscription. Goldstein's Army and many other peace groups around Australia achieved success when the referendum was not passed. Despite no credit ever being given to particular peace groups for this referendum not passing, it was through the campaigning of these groups that made citizens aware of the negatives of conscription. Though no significant decisions were made as a result of Goldstein's work during the war, she achieved success through educating people on the need for peace, and helping to stop conscription from being implemented in Australia.

Despite ending most of her involvement in Australian feminist and political work in 1917, Vida Goldstein continued to have an important impact on women's equality and rights. In 1917 Goldstein and fellow suffragist, Cecelia Johns, accepted an invitation to represent Australian women in Zurich, at a women's peace conference. Though this decision signalled the end of her involvement in public feminist and political work, with the closing of her second paper: 'The Women Voter', and the end of her career as a politician, Goldstein continued to make an impact in the world. She turned her attention increasingly towards more general issues, such as social reform and pacifism. She was no longer very prominent in the public domain, but continued to lobby for social reforms such as improved birth control for women and equal naturalization laws, as well as encouraging both men and women to oppose war. Goldstein also committed herself to internationalism and described herself as having a vision of society that would enable the complete equality of women and men, with decent standards of living for all. The work that Vida Goldstein did during this time was of importance because not only did she represent our country overseas, the issues which she was campaigning for were relevant and important in that time because world peace was a major issue and women needed to be represented because they were still being discriminated against by men.

Though Vida Goldstein's death in 1949 passed nearly unnoticed, her actions were significant in our history and the consequences of her hard work remain evident in our society today. Women today are recognised as able to stand for parliament, have the right to vote, and are recognised in most cases as equal to men. These are just some of the consequences of Goldstein's work that remain evident today. Despite Goldstein's death stirring very little remorse in society, and though some people may have considered her nothing more than a visionary idealist, she played an important role in our society. Through her pioneering efforts, Goldstein was a trail-blazer, who provided both inspiration and leadership to innumerable amounts of people. According to a testimonial of many of Goldstein's supporters, she "offered to the people the wit and eloquence of an orator, the knowledge and foresight of a statesman, and the devotion and courage of a brave

woman.” (Goldstein’s Supporters, N.D, [Online]) Not only did her campaigns help to bring about change in a then male dominated society, the results of the successes she helped women achieve, including women gaining the vote and being recognised as able to stand for parliament, remain in today’s society. The passion, tenacity and skill she showed when carving out a role for herself in Australian politics is still respected, especially when other women in that time had previously merely sat on the sidelines. One of Goldstein’s great contributions was leading by example. She showed that women could be innovative, and daring, and she also demonstrated that most goals could be achieved if, as she did, you stuck to your convictions. Vida Goldstein was a born social-reformer, whose dedication and hard-work resulted in many improvements in our society. The consequences of her many campaigns and actions are still evident today, and she deserves to be recognised as the pioneering suffragist that she was.