

Eleanor Rathbone

Brief life of a crusading M.P.: 1872-1946

by SUSAN G. PEDERSEN

SEVENTY YEARS AGO, on April 13, 1933, a debate took place in the House of Commons over how the British government should respond to the new Nazi regime. Leading political figures—from Winston Churchill on the Tory right to Labour leader (and future prime minister) Clement Attlee on the left—spoke up against revising the Treaty of Versailles under the threat of force. A Germany “afflicted by this narrow, exclusive, aggressive spirit, by which it is a crime to be in favour of peace and a crime to be a Jew,” former Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain warned, “is not a Germany to which we can afford to make concessions.”

One woman joined this chorus: Eleanor Rathbone, the Independent member for the Combined English Universities. She must have seemed an unlikely “anti-appeaser.” The middle-aged Rathbone had entered Parliament in 1929 as a social reformer and a feminist. Born into a progressive Liverpool merchant family, she had honed her political skills—and her feminism—on the streets of that fiercely partisan port city. From the 1890s to World War I, she helped establish a network of social services for women and children in Liverpool, won election as the first woman on the Liverpool City Council, and was the brains behind the constitutionalist women’s suffrage movement on Merseyside. She also gained a national reputation as a sophisticated and radical thinker on questions of poverty. Her studies of Liverpool’s labor market and her work with local women convinced her that families could not be supported by wages alone. “[T]he rearing of families is not a sort of masculine hobby, like tobacco smoking or pigeon flying,” she wrote. Why support it “by the clumsy device of paying men wage-earners more than women”? Mothers’ arduous work deserved remuneration; the support of children should be a collective charge.

By 1918, Rathbone was arguing for a system of family allowances paid directly to mothers; in 1924, in *The Disinherited Family*, she elaborated that case. The economic collapse of 1929 smashed such utopian ideas. Through the terrible early years of the Depression, Rathbone allied with medical experts, churchmen, and dissident M.P.s to win cheap milk and better benefits for the children of the unemployed. These were hard-fought battles for tiny improvements, but Rathbone, a “confirmed thin-end-of-the-wedger,” knew that they saved many children from hunger.


The Nazi seizure of power in 1933 pushed her poverty work to the sidelines. Between 1933 and 1939, Rathbone became one of the harshest parliamentary critics of appeasement. In the House, on public platforms, and in the press, she denounced the government’s indifference toward the Italian conquest of Abyssinia, its unwillingness to defend republican Spain, its betrayal of Czechoslovakia. The fate of minorities or dissidents in the fascist states

filled her with foreboding and horror. She felt as if she were standing outside bars behind which people were being tortured, she once wrote. “We scrape at the bars with little files. A few victims are dragged painfully one by one through the gaps.”

She scraped as hard as she could, setting up a “Parliamentary Committee for Refugees” to take up individual cases. Occasionally—as when she tried to hire a ship to run the blockade of Spain and remove Republicans at risk from reprisals—her activities skirted legality. Small wonder Foreign Office officials found dealing with their “daily bunch of letters from Miss Rathbone, M.P.” rather wearing, that undersecretaries would duck behind pillars when they saw her coming, that Neville Chamberlain detested her. But when Jan Karski reached Britain in late 1942, bringing his eyewitness account of the systematic murder of Jews in Poland, Rathbone was one of the people he contacted. A passionate if un-availing crusade for their “rescue” marked the last years of her life.

The only woman M.P. between the world wars to profess herself a “whole-hearted feminist,” Rathbone never saw a contradiction between women’s rights and anti-appeasement. In her mind, the causes were related. The 1930s saw a struggle less between states than between rival political systems—and in only one of those systems, she thought, could women have a stake. Unlike Virginia Woolf, who thought women could uphold peace by renouncing all loyalties to country, Rathbone insisted that women defend the democratic ideals on which their own liberties were based.

The campaign for family allowances, which had stalled in the ’30s, revived during World War II amid national concern over population decline and family poverty. The only major plank of the postwar welfare state to be passed during the war itself, family allowances—and the particular form they took—owed much to Rathbone’s ideas. In her last Commons battle, she mobilized M.P.s to insist that the new grants be paid by statute to the mother.

“Those who have the fortune, or misfortune, to have some cause at heart which goes a good way ahead of current public opinion and is poor in influential supporters and material resources,” Rathbone once wrote, “must be prepared to combine the qualities and methods of Sisyphus, Bruce’s spider, the Ancient Mariner, and the Importunate Widow.” Those who knew her well recognized the self-portrait. 

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Opposite: Rathbone in the 1930s, and examples of her campaign flyers.

THE FAMILY ENDOWMENT SOCIETY
UTOPIA CALLING!



Miss E. F. Rathbone, M.P.

A Plea for Family Allowances from
an Address Broadcast by Miss
Eleanor Rathbone, M.P., from
Northern Stations on February 11th,
1930

COMBINED ENGLISH UNIVERSITIES
Parliamentary Election, 1935



MISS ELEANOR RATHBONE'S ELECTION ADDRESS

FELLOW GRADUATES.

Since 1929, I have been one of the two representatives of this constituency. I now ask you to renew my mandate, if you think that I deserve your confidence.

At the time of writing, I do not yet know whether there will be a contest. In either case I should wish to communicate with you at this time. For the past three years I have adopted the device of sending to every constituent an annual letter recording my activities and views. Hence all but new graduates have had an opportunity of knowing where I stood on the larger political issues. I must now summarise and bring this record up to date.

THE ITALIAN-ABYSSINIAN DISPUTE

With the majority in all three political parties I hold that the supreme task of the moment is to vindicate the authority and honour of the League. If that succumbs to Italy, not only hopes of collective security and of future peace, but also the cause of liberty and democracy throughout the world will be immeasurably injured. Would-be aggressors and would-be dictators everywhere will be emboldened. Loyal members of the League, especially the smaller and the menaced States, will lose faith in collective security and rely increasingly on strengthened armaments. Hence I would support whatever sanctions are necessary to be effective, are agreed to by the League and are participated in by those nations whose participation is essential for success.

I recognise the difficulties and risks of this policy. But I believe the risks that it will lead to war, at least on any considerable scale, to be almost negligible compared with the