**‘The perfect equality of *all persons* before the law’: the Personal Rights Association and the discourse of civil rights, 1871-1886.[[1]](#endnote-1)**

**Introduction**

On 15 March 1881, at the tenth annual meeting of the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights (PRA), the Chairman, Liberal parliamentarian Jacob Bright, informed the audience that such was the perception of the honourableness of the British legislature that any group orchestrating campaigns for its ethical awakening was thought to be ‘scarcely needed’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Why, he asked, in a nation possessed of a ‘free press and a wide suffrage’ was it necessary for an organisation of reformers to keep watch over its elected representatives in defence of ‘individuality and liberty’?[[3]](#endnote-3) Would not democracy, Bright posed ironically, when combined with the power of the ballot box, be sufficient to ensure security against any ‘officious and meddling legislation’ which sought, even when framed ostensibly to confer socio-economic and civic benefits, to instead repress the concepts of self-improvement and personal freedom essential to liberal ideology?[[4]](#endnote-4) Sadly, neither Bright, nor his fellow speaker Charles Hopwood QC MP, believed this to be the case, and their misgivings were widely shared by the radical reformers seated before them.[[5]](#endnote-5) The PRA was founded on the premise of ‘watching, restraining and influencing legislation…in matters affecting the personal rights and liberties of the people’[[6]](#endnote-6) and remained determined to scrutinize vigilantly the work of Parliament by seeking out and challenging any undue personal interests or subjective moral influence in shaping late-nineteenth century legislation. Indeed, so efficient was the association’s first remunerated secretary, Elizabeth Wolstenholme (later Wolstenholme Elmy) at fulfilling the brief with which she was charged that she gained a reputation in the corridors of power as the ‘parliamentary watch-dog’.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The role and influence of Wolstenholme Elmy on the course of women’s emancipation in the Victorian and early-Edwardian era is becoming increasingly well recognised.[[8]](#endnote-8) Described by the suffragist Lydia Becker as the ‘moving spirit’ of the emancipation campaign during this period, Wolstenholme Elmy’s work with the PRA occurred only after she had found herself compelled, as an avowed secularist, to abandon the career at which she excelled - that of Headmistress of her own middle-class girls’ boarding school in 1871.[[9]](#endnote-9) Those who joined her in the PRA, including Katharine Thommasson (neé Lucas), Emilie Ashurst Venturi, Lucy Wilson and Josephine Butler, shared some of the most radical interpretations of women’s freedom – questing for equality in all aspects of social, political, economic and sexual elements of life.[[10]](#endnote-10) They also understood, however, that without support from ‘influential men’ (particularly among parliamentarians and the judiciary) their cause was doomed to failure. Wolstenholme Elmy’s unpublished autobiography, *Some Memories of a Happy Life* aimed in part to ‘do justice’ to the important role played by elite men in the feminist movement, particularly within its early history.[[11]](#endnote-11) The loss of this text, destroyed sometime before her death in March 1918, is therefore a serious one for historians investigating the depth and complexity of the links between Victorian feminists of both sexes. Wolstenholme Elmy kept exemplary records of every campaign she undertook, and the role of everyone within it. Taking up an entire room of her modest house, these personal papers and printed records chronicled in minute detail her dealings with members of both Houses of Parliament as well as an international correspondence network numbering thousands of female feminist sympathisers.[[12]](#endnote-12) The work of the PRA may well have been brought to public attention far sooner had these papers survived.

Wolstenholme Elmy, though obviously influential, was nonetheless only one cog in the wheel of the PRA, and this article seeks to demonstrate how a discourse of ‘civil’ rather than ‘individual’ rights developed throughout the first sixteen years of the association’s existence: a dialogue based on the egalitarian and humanistic tenets of “classic” liberalism over and above an evolving trend within Liberal ideology for social control of those assessed as poor, “un-deserving” or “deviant”.[[13]](#endnote-13) This shifted the focus of the PRA from its feminist base (challenging, for example, sexist legislation against prostitutes and infanticide) to an approach that was de-gendered and “humanitarian” - an obvious and key swing in perspective and one outside of the remit of historiography until very recently.[[14]](#endnote-14) Nina Attwood has lately argued that to assess cultural and discursive practices within strands of activism opens up ‘the complexity and sophistication’ of the Victorian response to calls for social reform’.[[15]](#endnote-15) This article adopts such an approach via an emphasis which draws upon the writings and activism of several leading PRA spokesmen including radical Manchester politician Jacob Bright, Prof Francis W. Newman, (the free-thinking brother of Cardinal John Henry Newman) and the original “muckraking” investigative journalist, William T. Stead. This paper then, is not only a recovery of the work of these important (but hitherto largely neglected) figures but an exploration of the fascinating development of the wider PRA discourse of civil rights.

**The PRA in history and historiography**

Founded on 14 March 1871, the PRA’s *modus operandi* can be traced from its “parent” organisation, the Ladies’ National Association (LNA) for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDA), and women’s fierce and highly controversial engagement in speaking publicly before cross-class (and often mixed-sex) audiences on the sensitive topics of sexuality and prostitution.[[16]](#endnote-16) As is well known middle-class feminists had, during the 1860s, successfully campaigned for the opening up of university lectures to women and for improvements in wider educational and professional opportunities – one achievement being the establishment in 1869 of the accreditation of women as teachers via study for the Cambridge Higher certificate.[[17]](#endnote-17) Some within this circle of radical women swelled the ranks of the LNA (led from its inception by Josephine Butler, who was also the PRA’s inaugural, though short-term, secretary) and, in addition, were active suffragists.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Concerns regarding the consequences of sexual immorality in the post-industrial era, and related debates regarding public health and women’s ‘fitness’ for motherhood were linked directly with the concept of citizenship in PRA rhetoric. In 1877, for example, Peter A. Taylor MP told the audience at the PRA’s AGM that he felt he ‘need not do more than allude to the primary injustice that women were denied their right to Parliamentary representation.’ The denial of citizenship to which women were subject, he said, did not merely deny them ‘their rights’ but, more importantly, ‘opportunities [for] doing good’ – including the education of citizens in moral matters.[[19]](#endnote-19) There was caution in the organisation, though, about any obligatory coercion of the male sex-drive – thought to be innate by the majority of contemporary commentators.[[20]](#endnote-20) The *Birmingham Daily Post*, for instance, noted Butler’s comment to the PRA’s annual meeting of 1873 that if women had been ‘in a position to make laws for men…[the compulsion]…to check male unchastity’ would provoke only the type of coercion and compulsion that brought emotionless ‘obedience’ over the construction of an educated and honourable moral intellect – the cornerstone of “classic liberalism”.[[21]](#endnote-21) Butler’s statement also posed the view that ‘few abuses were as tenacious as official abuses, and that being so, they should be cut out root and branch’; in order to secure their objectives the PRA’s feminists were committed to what Laura Nym Mayhall has lately identified as the concept of active, ‘engaged citizenship’ which she credits with having provided in part the motivation for suffragette activism during the Edwardian era.[[22]](#endnote-22) While recent research has supported this argument[[23]](#endnote-23), the late Olive Banks pointed out that a mere 13% of the total number of feminists in the mid-nineteenth century were active in the CDA Repeal cause, so it is possible to show from what a narrow, ultra-radical base the PRA’s female membership was drawn.[[24]](#endnote-24) That they were few, however, did not negate the importance of their strident practical and rhetorical opposition to the subjection of women.

The society’s male associates also comprised some amongst the most Radical thinkers and parliamentarians of the day. They included, amongst others, Auberon Herbert, anti-vaccination campaigner William Tebb, anti-Corn Law campaigner Thomas Thommasson, jurist Sheldon Amos, Peter A. Taylor MP, academic James Stuart MP, Charles McLaren MP and Jacob Bright MP – who in 1870 had introduced a radically-drawn, though doomed, women’s suffrage bill framed in order to enfranchise married women as well as property-owning spinsters and widows.[[25]](#endnote-25) Although the total number of PRA subscribers during the years 1870-1886 (the date of the Repeal of the CDAs) never exceeded *c.*180, therefore, it can be reasonably speculated that the group possessed, via these active members and associates, the potential to make its views known in influential circles. The wide, anti-statist position they took, in Wolstenholme Elmy’s words, was that state ‘inroads on personal rights introduce dangers…of the most palpable kind. Less palpable, but no less real [however, was] the injury to the moral sense of the people caused by legislation that aim[ed] only at attacking evil results [while] leaving evil causes unchecked.’[[26]](#endnote-26) P.A. Taylor, for example, also commented that too great an ease in accepting liberties which it was thought ‘had been won for us, once for all, by our forefathers’ had inured many against appreciating where these had resulted in ‘oppressive legal restrictions [in] class and women’s issues’.[[27]](#endnote-27) In committees, speeches and meetings in the House of Commons, the PRA’s male leadership took these arguments to the heart of government – such as in 1874 over the issue of the ‘free disposition’ of women’s labour.[[28]](#endnote-28) That the PRA remained committed to these ideals (despite accommodating various changes of name) until its demise in 1977, supports the view that the group was more tenacious in their protests against state intervention in citizens lives than its current historiographical treatment suggests.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Historiographically, scholars who considered the work of the PRA have principally done so through a ‘feminist-focused’ lens; and the group’s first title, the Campaign for Amending the Law in Points Wherein it is Injurious to Women, (CALPIW) takes researchers rather obviously in that direction.[[30]](#endnote-30) Mary Lyndon Shanley’s consideration of the significance of CALPIW in 1989 correctly stated that the organisation’s importance had not simply been in its condemnation of the sexual “double standard” which excused immorality in men (a “bandwagon” many reformers joined), but rather in its insistence on the ‘close interrelationship between systems of sexual and political domination.’[[31]](#endnote-31) Shanley’s brief summary of the movement, however, fails to do justice to the consequences of considering discourses of power on the adoption of a de-gendered, egalitarian pursuit of socio/political justice. She thus demotes by omission the actions pursued by male PRA sympathisers who publicly raised such matters - and withstood public controversy, hostility and risks to their careers as a result. Likewise, the one significant article-length appraisal of the society’s work published by Michael Roberts in 1995 highlighted feminist disunity amongst the women members and their abhorrence of state intervention in the lives of individuals, neglecting the positions taken by male colleagues.[[32]](#endnote-32) To date, therefore, the dominant historical reading of the PRA as a middle-class ‘ginger-group’ of the LNA and thus purely motivated by feminist concerns, is erroneous. The male and female membership were equally keen to explore the ‘moral consequences’ of capitalist advance upon civil society and to promote the liberal values of ‘self-control and self-reliance among other social groups’ – principally the labouring classes - as they were to campaign against sexual morality *per se*.[[33]](#endnote-33) The PRA’s commitment to a diverse range of issues including the institution of laws again women’s labour, the principles of equal parenthood, the laws regarding the ‘Habitual Drunkard’ and the compulsory medical examination of women in cases of infanticide reinforces this point.

At its inception the PRA’s manifesto included a comprehensive and wide-ranging commitment to seek to institute ‘the principle of the perfect equality of *all persons* before the law, irrespective of sex or class’.[[34]](#endnote-34) A similarly broad narrative is sought in this article; namely a consideration of the organisation’s assessment of the Victorian parliamentary system as both a feminist critique and a commentary by some male parliamentarians on the institutions of government of which they were a part. This offers a perspective on Victorian ‘progressive’ political culture not previously considered.[[35]](#endnote-35) Given that many male intellectuals and legislators were far from wholeheartedly supportive of self-improvement and personal autonomy for women (despite their claims to understanding and sympathy for female suffering), male sympathisers of the PRA were regarded as something of a rare and troublesome breed among their peers. They were classified by one acerbic critic in the *Manchester Courier*, for example, as ‘fussy busy-bodies [and] fourth-rate politicians’.[[36]](#endnote-36) By applying such language to the elite membership of the PRA the newspaper reveals a fascinating ‘feminisation’ of these men hardly considered in the rhetoric of the middle-class radical.

PRA members’ bothersome rhetoric is one aspect of their activism highlighted by Brian Harrison in his multi-organisational exploration of Victorian reform movements which included the PRA. Harrison contended that the clamorous public ‘noise’ many campaigners made over the causes they supported ‘made up for their small numbers’, concluding that such groups ‘gained a disproportionate influence over Liberal party policy’ as a consequence.[[37]](#endnote-37) Whilst true to an extent the Liberal Party’s approach to social reform underwent some key shifts from the 1870s onwards which included an increasing adoption of coercive social policy methods, an approach unlikely to fulfil the aspirations of the liberty-loving PRA. The way in which legislators proposed to tackle social problems centred in part on new classifications of deviancy and criminality. As Ben Griffin has insightfully contended, ‘[w]henever they were confronted with demands for reform based on accusations that men were abusing their legal authority [British] politicians responded by claiming that such abuses were primarily a problem found among the poor.’[[38]](#endnote-38) There is certainly ample evidence for this view, yet a study of PRA texts highlights that *some* politicians undercut the dominant discursive construction of the poor’s disruption of social harmony, particularly in the case of the working-class prostitute Elizabeth Holt, discussed below.[[39]](#endnote-39) PRA members, then, adhered far more strongly to the ultimate Whig-liberal notion that virtue and integrity were present in the ‘ordinary citizen’ and that all centralised forms of authority had the propensity to be ‘prone to corruption’.[[40]](#endnote-40) One particular aspect of such egotism was ‘smuggling’, referred to by Professor F.W. Newman in a speech to PRA members in Birmingham – meaning the passing of bills through parliament in poorly attended, late-night sittings. Newman suggested that while few had yet contended that the nation’s executive be comprised of anyone other than by ‘men of the richer classes’, it was nonetheless clear that ‘no legislation should go on without the knowledge of all the people’. Further, in under-handedly sneaking laws in through the unguarded ‘back door’ of an almost deserted House meant that not only was the general populace ignorant of its terms, most MPs were too.[[41]](#endnote-41) Fair and equitable laws were impossible under such a system, Newman concluded, and he called for sweeping changes to a technique which lent itself so well to corruption and elite masculine egocentricity.

The PRA’s own organ, *The Journal for the Vigilance Association for Personal Rights* (first published in 1881 and under other titles from 1886) is the source from which its ideology and commentaries on the nature of late-Victorian British public life can best be assessed.[[42]](#endnote-42) Members’ views, however, were also sympathetically evaluated by contemporaries. For example, a periodical publication entitled *Judy* included an article on the work of the PRA in October 1872.[[43]](#endnote-43) The Editor wrote that “[t]he English character is what it is simply because of the freedom we have hitherto enjoyed. Some of the “Liberal” measures recently added to the Statute Book have, [however,] so curtailed th[at] independence, that an Association of this sort is [sorely] needed.’[[44]](#endnote-44) This reference to the formation of the English character being based on constitutional freedom was a strong message suggesting support for the ‘comfortable image’ of parliamentary democracy that Rohan McWilliam argues characterised popular perceptions of ‘British statecraft’ not only at home, but overseas.[[45]](#endnote-45) According to McWilliam, by the end of the Victorian age the relationship between the British people and the state had been challenged by numerous ‘fractious’ encounters and was subject to ‘dissolution and remaking’ on a regular basis.[[46]](#endnote-46) Few of these modifications, I would suggest, caused greater re-evaluation than the changing discourses of class, morality and sexual behaviour evident in British life in the 1870s and 1880s. These issues, perhaps more than any other, put parliament on the back-foot, causing it to re-examine cultural assumptions of the ‘naturalness’ of the male sex drive from a position ‘within itself’. In the 1880s, and particularly in the debates surrounding the Guardianship of Children Act (1886) and the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885) the assumption of ‘elite aristocratic sexuality’ as a condition apart from the barbarous appetites of the men of the labouring classes had to be examined head on and from within the legislature, particularly after it became apparent in the popular mind that the ‘virtue of such men could no longer be taken for granted.’[[47]](#endnote-47) The distinctiveness of the PRA, therefore, as a reform organisation established specifically to challenge the representatives of the state on critical issues of morality, is highly significant and offers intriguing insights into the complexities involved for those who upheld the ‘ultra’ radical concepts of individual autonomy (as framed by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment) yet who sought legislative solutions acceptable to the voting public – which of course excluded women. Their adoption of the methodology of melodrama to achieve their desires can be shown to form a powerful strand of the discourse of civil rights.

**The PRA and the melodramatic rhetoric of personal rights**

Personal Rights Association members left the public in little doubt as to the crux of their arguments. For example, in a piece published in 1872 in the *Freeman’s Journal*, an anonymous author directly linked the PRA’s agenda to the ideas of John Stuart Mill, leader of the liberal cause and close acquaintance of many within the group. ‘[W]e are too apt to forget,’ the journal recorded, ‘in the present age, [and] in our pursuit of reform, the [significance] of personal rights and liberties.’ Britain was gripped, the article declared, by an ‘almost unprecedented course’ of legislation that threatened to ‘violate [the] constitutional guarantees of personal liberty’. Laws noted by the *Freeman Journal* as having infringed such principles of individual autonomy were the Infant Life Protection Act (1872) the Pedlars Act (1871), the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1871) and (in bills under consideration) the Public Prosecutors bill and the Contagious Diseases Prevention bill.[[48]](#endnote-48) Most importantly, perhaps, for the PRA at this time was the notorious Section 40 of the Marine Mutiny bill under which terms no member of the serving forces could ‘be compelled to pay for the support of any of his relations who were destitute.’[[49]](#endnote-49) The PRA wasted no time in bringing this information (which may have reduced many wives and children to the workhouse or worse) to the attention of local government officials, and Boards of Guardians from Dundee to Wiltshire consented to memorialise parliament on the issue on account of the PRA’s persistence.[[50]](#endnote-50) While the bill passed both Houses of Parliament subsequently, it did not do so without the increasingly interventionalist nature of the bureaucratic political machine being publicised throughout the country by the PRA – underscoring the ‘public noise’ and clamour referred to by Brian Harrison.[[51]](#endnote-51) The success of the group’s ability to persuade popular opinion as to their views, resulting in numerous written protests to Parliament also suggests a far stronger public presence by (and sympathy for the views of) the organisation than has been acknowledged hitherto.

More significant still, perhaps, is the opinion of the PRA’s Francis Newman when he argued that ‘[t]he nation seem[ed] to have lost all traditional instinct as to what is good law, and what the conditions requisite for it.’ In a personal letter to Wolstenholme Elmy, Newman wrote that all too often parliamentary self-interest created the conditions for ‘stealthy and mischievous law making’, the effects of which were felt most by the weakest in society – the ‘poor women’ who resided amongst the disease and depravity of the urban slums. Newman decried with some force the increasing absorption and centralisation of political powers previously held by local executives, where ministers ‘bound to secrecy and to act within Cabinet’ passed a ‘*pestilent heap*’ of legislation whose clauses often worked directly against, not only the personal inclinations of some parliamentarians, but, more significantly, the principles of democracy itself.[[52]](#endnote-52) It would be hard to find a more melodramatic expression of the alleged infectious contagion of the legislature than in this statement.

In their considerations of how the sensationalist literature of urban exploitation was a key factor in the texts of the CDA repeal movement Judith Walkowitz, Lucy Bland and Anna Clark have all highlighted the contributions made by men – not least the *Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, the infamous investigative exposé of juvenile prostitution published by William T. Stead in 1885.[[53]](#endnote-53) Stead had been a personal friend of Wolstenholme Elmy’s from his years working on the *Northern* *Star* and his radical-reformist credentials are well known.[[54]](#endnote-54) Stead’s actions prior to the publication of *The Maiden Tribute*, however, tested that friendship to breaking point, although the two were later reconciled through their joint opposition to the Anglo-Boer war in 1899.[[55]](#endnote-55) While Stead’s histrionic journalism did indeed help to rend the membership of the PRA asunder in 1886, it must be remembered that many male adherents of the group were also Members of Parliament. [[56]](#endnote-56) Therefore, to study their contributions to exaggerated, heart-rending rhetoric is significant when seeking to assess contemporary constructions of masculinity. Just how, for example, did these MPs manage to affront so many of their colleagues so as to earn themselves the classification of ‘fourth-rate’ members of the legislature? One answer appears to lie, from research to date, in the view that it was not principally in their discourse of gender and power that politicians’ outrage was sited, but rather in the shifting dynamics of the relationship between power and class – at a moment when the nation was once again considering the terms by which the electorate was to be extended. The heart of debate surely was the issue that, if the working male were to be enfranchised, the new classification of ‘citizen’ could not be permitted to include the work-shy, the lunatic, the wife-beater or the criminal?[[57]](#endnote-57) The rhetoric of social improvement, individual autonomy, citizenship and power were, therefore, inextricably and intimately entwined. This, according to Ben Griffin, helped to construct an impression of a ‘benign, disinterested’ legislator free from ‘self-interest’.[[58]](#endnote-58) PRA actors, though, had other ideas and sought to challenge this outwardly benevolent image.

The power of melodrama found within textual representations of political culture is a prominent trend in recent scholarship as work by McWilliam, David Andress and James Lehning attests.[[59]](#endnote-59) And in the case of Victorian Britain, as McWillam has pointed out, the attempts by radicals to ‘create a new way of living…seemed to unlock the creative imagination for many.’[[60]](#endnote-60) McWilliam singled out the Chartist Ernest Jones (an associate of Wolstenholme Elmy and others in the Manchester Committee for the Enfranchisement of Women in 1865) for analysis, noting that his work was imbued with a strong social critique. As we have seen in the words of F.W. Newman, such tragi-sentimentalism pervaded the texts of PRA men too, equally and alongside those of its female associates. On occasion, men jointly authored texts with women, such as the damning critique of Clause 40 of the Mutiny bill in 1873, penned by James Stuart (later the MP for Hoxton) and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy.[[61]](#endnote-61) Stuart, who had been brought into the PRA’s orbit via his contacts in the women’s education movement in the 1860s, came to be a stalwart of the association and was certainly a committed publicist of the actual (and potential) horrors of the Mutiny legislation.[[62]](#endnote-62) On his appointment to parliament, however, he became the subject of political caricature and lampooning. *Vanity Fair* satirised Stuart for his ‘many sided and too enthusiastic’ approach to social issues, claiming that, were it not for his ‘pernicious Politics [he] would be a good fellow’![[63]](#endnote-63) Obviously, James Stuart’s practice of seeing the broad picture and working in an ‘engaged’ way to affect change was getting him into hot-water with political commentators, but his stance was hardly surprising given his intellectual and practical contributions to the PRA.

In his published commentary on the Mutiny bill, Stuart argued that ‘successive annual Mutiny Act[s]…[had] provided that no soldier (or sailor) should be liable for the support of any child whether legitimate or illegitimate. [Having] pointed out the evil consequences of such a law’, Stuart wrote, which ‘[freed] a class of men from the natural and sacred obligations which they incur[red] as parents’ he was dismayed to find that ‘members of the Government [had] become cautious’ to ideas of change, instituting by way of reform only a measure through which, by appeal to the Secretary of State alone, a deserted wife could claim maintenance of ‘*threepence a day’*![[64]](#endnote-64) Stuart, obviously incensed, then prepares the *coup de grâce*, claiming that ‘Admiralty and War Office laws’ were prepared and enforced by men who ‘despised the common people’ and thought ‘the public ha[d] no right to interfere’ – either in their terms or in their mode of operation in legislation which sought to confine the immorality amongst the working classes to those military districts subject to their jurisdiction. But, he contended, even if this was so, the

‘present Parliament [of] aristocrats and plutocrats… measure a person’s worth…his political rights, and his rights as a human being, by the size of his income. There seems to me but one way of correcting these things, and that is by having in Parliament, men who can directly represent the feeling and conditions of the poor; and by working men seeing to it that at the next general election men of their own class are returned to Parliament.’[[65]](#endnote-65)

Stuart was thus, in this brave example of rhetorical ire, linking the discourse of political power to the rhetoric of immorality, masculinity and the rights of women.

If Stuart’s condemnation of state incursions into personal rights was perhaps more significant in the written, as opposed to the spoken, word during these years, what of other male adherents of the PRA’s cause? While Griffin suggests that there was a ‘growing gulf between parliamentary discourse and the language of the extra-parliamentary women’s movement on the subject of sexuality’ it is possible to see the two colliding in the words of Jacob Bright, MP for Rochdale and a man Wolstenholme Elmy recalls she had to ‘stir up’ initially to support the work of CDA repeal.[[66]](#endnote-66) Bright’s reluctance for the cause of Repeal was quite swiftly overcome however, and a glance at his heritage from within the circle of Manchester Radicals which included his brother John and socialist lawyer Richard Marsden Pankhurst places him quite securely in the ‘ultra-reformist’ camp. He can certainly be considered one of the men who partook in the ‘revolution in compassion’ towards the world’s unfortunates which Michael Barrett has noted was a key part of late-nineteenth century ideals.[[67]](#endnote-67) Many ‘ultras’, however, did not perceive the benevolence ‘revolution’ reaching its full potential if it was led only by parliamentarians driven to support change via a ‘collectivist,’ interventionalist, approach. Bright, for one, vehemently opposed such moves and it is in studying his rhetoric in the case of the prostitute Elizabeth Holt that we can see the ‘intensity of moral claim’ and ‘extravagance’ of conviction that Peter Brooks argues to be the central focus of melodramatic discourse.[[68]](#endnote-68) This shows clearly that researchers, as analysts have long claimed, should be aware of uniform classification when considering the deeds and words of any grouping of historical actors.

As a member of the Executive committee of the PRA Bright wholeheartedly supported the association’s second objective, namely that it worked for ‘the repeal or amendment of all existing laws which directly or indirectly violate’ the principle of egalitarianism between the sexes.[[69]](#endnote-69) It was on this principle that he raised the case of Holt in parliament in March 1870, bringing upon himself the derision and scorn of his fellows. He tabled a question to the Home Secretary, Henry Bruce, regarding Holt’s imprisonment in Maidstone gaol, following her refusal to co-operate in the medical examination demanded by the state after the arrest of any women suspected (in the districts in which the CDA applied) of soliciting.[[70]](#endnote-70) Holt was earning her living as a prostitute in Woolwich and thus clearly subject to the regulations. Bright, however, took parliament to task for subjecting women to such degrading practices and, by so doing, he questioned the very core of the concept of “liberal democracy” and its application in Britain. He begged Bruce to consider

‘[w]hether an *English woman* of the name of Elizabeth Holt is now or has recently been a prisoner in Maidstone Gaol because she declined to subject her person to the fortnightly inspection of a surgeon; and, whether her refusal or the refusal of *any other woman to submit to this outrage* would be followed by repeated periods of imprisonment so as to amount practically to *perpetual incarceration*?’[[71]](#endnote-71)

Bright’s stance here implies that such outrageous treatment of *any* female was against *English* sensibilities, and the possibility of *perpetual incarceration* as the result of merely needing to ply her trade in order to survive against the principles at the core of a state with democratic ideals at its heart. Bruce, in his reply, begged to differ with these assumptions. Holt had been condemned to spend fourteen days in gaol, something which Bruce considered lenient when her sentence could have been ‘three months…with or without hard labour’ as this was not her first offence. Further, the Home Secretary sought to ridicule Bright’s concern for the woman – claiming her to be an habitual offender, who had already been examined on ‘fourteen occasions’ and committed to ‘the [Lock] Hospital’ five times for sexually transmitted disease. Bruce concluded that for any woman to have to ‘submit herself to the justices’ for referral to the surgeon should, firstly, submit without question to the degrading treatment she would receive and secondly, do so without complaint as a consequence of her immorality.[[72]](#endnote-72)

Bright’s words in the case of Elizabeth Holt are also intriguing in that he does not highlight the woman’s social class – although it is perhaps obvious, with hindsight, that she falls into that segment of the prostitute population who were hardened to their lot, either by inclination or by harsh economic circumstances. Bright in his question, however, is careful to link her by implication with *everywoman* (or in his terms ‘any other woman’) – this broadening the gender inclusivity aspect of the issue during a time where the extension of the CDAs to the whole population was under discussion.[[73]](#endnote-73) Bright took a position in the vanguard of egalitarian commentary here – perhaps at a moment when the more delicate of women supporters of the repeal movement would have baulked at going so far in support for their unfortunate ‘sisters’ in subjection. The result of his actions meant that Bright provoked ruffled feathers in the House of Commons – though he dished out equal critical verbiage in response. When Lord Elcho, for example, claimed the ‘rusty sword’ of Bright’s liberal rhetoric was amongst the least effective of those who argued against increasing statism, Bright returned the salvo that only ‘illogical and weak minds…[i]n a House composed, for the most part, of rich men’ would sanction reforms that ignored the rights of individuals ‘without sacrificing their own comforts’![[74]](#endnote-74) One can only speculate that if, when His Lordship sat down after this assault on his wealth and intelligence, he felt suitably chastised.

**Conclusion**

The raising of Elizabeth Holt’s circumstances in parliament, therefore, is a perfect exemplar of how the power of rhetoric merged successfully with the discourse of civil rights in order to confront elite assumptions about gender, class and moral issues. The fact that Bright and his equally vociferous male compatriots in the PRA continued to bring such issues to the heart of the theatre of the state and did not fear to privilege humanitarian causes over the (perhaps more popular) tenets of state incursion into civil liberties showed a tenacity in ideals and methods that they were convinced would pay dividends and attract wider support. Returning to the arguments of Brian Harrison, it is possible to claim that groups such as the PRA were disproportionally influential within Liberal circles – this article showing convincingly that its intellectual and elite male membership had, and took, the ample opportunities offered to influence others of their station towards their beliefs.[[75]](#endnote-75) We must not be blind, however, to the uphill struggle of those whose self-interest fought their ideals and who often prevailed. The vision of masculinity drawn by the men of the PRA is one where class did not necessarily denote barbarity in male treatment of women, in drunkenness, crime or immorality. And the oratory of Newman and the journalism of Stead sought to show (no matter how their peers sought to claim otherwise) that the morals of their own class were equally suspect to contagion through greed and self-interest. Another key element of understanding the PRA is to consider that the relationship between its male and female activists was not oppositional or antagonistic, but co-operative and serves to highlight the complex and varied roles women placed in defining and re-defining the Victorian nation-state. The membership of the PRA pulled together on a kaleidoscope of issues over this period and did so to the extent that their campaigns left male activists open to personal ridicule. This article makes no apology for forsaking women’s activism in the PRA for analysis of their male colleagues because we need to understand, above all, as gender historians the importance of reclaiming the dimensions of such active working relationships. The fact that men did not shy away from using a melodramatic rhetorical challenge to highlight state incursions into individual liberties indicates a true humanitarian conscience. Though they may be argued to have been idealists, their words, and deeds, challenged head on the quashing of the personal freedoms that *all* people, not those just born to privilege and power should have access.

1. Endnotes

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   Annual Report of the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights, *Journal of the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights*, (1872), p.4. (My emphasis.) Bishopsgate Institute, London. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jacob Bright (1821-1899). Liberal politician and advanced Radical. Brother of John Bright, co-founder of the Anti-Corn Law League. Elected to Parliament as Member for Manchester, 1867. Married the feminist campaigner Ursula Mellor (1855). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Annual Meeting of the Vigilance Association’, *Journal of the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights*, (1881) 15 March, p. 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Annual Meeting’, (1881), p.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Charles Hopwood, QC. (1829-1904). Liberal politician and judge, Member of Parliament for Stockport 1874-1885. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ‘The Vigilance Association’, (1881) *The Journal* *of the Vigilance Association*, 15 January, p.1. For the pioneer studies of the PRA see, Mary Lyndon Shanley (1989) *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*, (London: I.B. Tauris), pp.89-93. M.J.D. Roberts (1995) ‘Feminism and the State in Later Victorian England’, *The Historical Journal*, 38 (1), pp. 85-110. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wolstenholme Elmy was secretary of the PRA from January 1871 until October 1874. She was the first paid employee of the women’s emancipation movement and her salary while PRA secretary was £300 per annum. Maureen Wright (2011) *Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and the Victorian Feminist Movement: the biography of an Insurgent Woman*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press), pp.87-9. I refer to Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy by her full name throughout, although her marriage to textile manufacturer Benjamin Elmy did not take place until 12 October 1874. The epithet of the ‘parliamentary watch dog’ was conferred upon Wolstenholme Elmy by James Stansfeld, parliamentary leader of the movement for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Fran Abrams (2003) *Freedom’s Cause: Lives of the Suffragettes*, (London: Profile), p.1. Muriel Fielding (1988) *Elizabeth C. Wolstenholme Elmy: A Forgotten Feminist*, Unpublished M.Litt dissertation, Victorian Studies. Women’s Library, London Metropolitan University. Sandra Stanley Holton (1996) *Suffrage Days*: *Stories from the Women’s Suffrage Movement*, (London and New York: Routledge), Chapters 1 and 2. Elizabeth Crawford (2001) *The Women’s Suffrage Movement: a Reference Guide*, (London and New York: Routledge [first published 1999]), pp.188-206. Laura Schwartz (2012) *Infidel Feminism*: *Secularism, Religion and Women’s Emancipation, England 1830-1914*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lydia Becker to Elizabeth Wolstenholme, 26 April 1868. Lydia Becker’s Letter Book, M50/1/3. Manchester Women’s Suffrage Collection. It was impossible, at that time, for teachers to practice their profession if they did not conform to orthodox religious doctrine. Wolstenholme Elmy criticised her brother Joseph for continuing to work as a Fellow of St. John’s College, Cambridge in defiance of the loss of faith he chose to conceal from his employers. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy to Harriet McIlquham, 25 September 1899, fol.21. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy Papers, Add. Mss. 47449-54, British Library. (Hereafter EWEP, BL.) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For biographical portraits of these women see Crawford, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement.* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy to Harriet McIlquham, ‘St Patrick’s Day’ 1909, fol.239-40. (EWEP, BL). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Wolstenholme Elmy’s views on biographical writings were such (she claimed them to be an ‘impudent intrusion’) that her autobiography would have concentrated principally on the public works with which she was engaged – thus providing readers with only a partial reading of her life. Maureen Wright (2009) ‘An “Impudent Intrusion”?: Assessing the Life of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, First-Wave feminist and social reformer (1833-1918)’, *Women’s History Review*, 18 (2), pp.243-264. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See, for example, Ben Griffin (2012) *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women’s Rights*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Rohan McWilliam (2012) ‘The Performance of Citizenship’, in Martin Hewitt (Ed) *The Victorian World*, (London and New York: Routledge), pp.362-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In a letter to the *Western Daily Press*, the PRA’s secretary takes the newspaper to task for printing erroneous information about the organisation. In so doing it is clearly stated that the objects of the society was ‘the defence of the personal rights of *both men and women*’, especially where any legislation sought to curtail their independence of action. E.A. Lawrence to the Editor (1876) ‘The Vigilance Association’, *Western Daily Press*, 7 February, p.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Nina Attwood (2011) *The Prostitute’s Body*, (London: Pickering and Chatto), p.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For a biographical appraisal of the work of Josephine Butler on behalf of the Ladies’ National Association see, Jane Jordan (2001) *Josephine Butler*, (London: John Murray). For Wolstenholme Elmy see, Anon., ‘Public Meeting at York’, (1871) *The Shield*, January. [www.attackingthedevil/related/acts/php](http://www.attackingthedevil/related/acts/php) Accessed 3 February 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Wright, *Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy*, Chapters 1-2. Christina De Bellaigue (2007) *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France 1800-1867*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press). G. Sutherland (1990) ‘Education’, in F.M.L. Thompson (Ed) *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Britain, 1750-1950*, Vol.3, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.119-170. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Butler formally resigned from the post in **[finish…]** [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. PRA Annual Report, (1877), p.3. and p.18. Taylor possessed a reputation as an ultra-radical – one newspaper informed its readership that it was of ‘such a sturdy type…it would be hard to distinguish [it] from Republicanism.’ Anon. (1884) ‘Peter A. Taylor’, *Leicester Chronicle*, 21 June, p.5. See also, Anon., [Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and Rosamund Hervey] (1871) *Infant Mortality: Its Causes and Remedies*, (Manchester: A. Ireland & Co.). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Anna Clark (2008) *Desire: A History of European Sexuality*, (New York and London: Routledge), Chapters 8 and 9. Stephen Garton (2004) *Histories of Sexuality: Antiquity to Sexual Revolution*, (London: Equinox), Chapter 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Anon. (1873) ‘Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 22 October, p.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Anon. (1873) ‘Vigilance Association’, 22 October. While in the period under discussion the PRA’s challenge to parliamentary injunctions did not involve the performance of direct acts of militancy against the state that later groups executed rhetorically the message was implicit. Joseph Hiam Levy, editor of the PRA’s journal foresaw that ‘not until [women] can be roused into something like rebellion against their status of subjection will their enfranchisement…come within the range of practical attainment.’ Editorial (1902) *Personal Rights Journal*, 25 January, p.1. On the concept of ‘engaged citizenship’ see, Laura Nym Mayhall (2003) *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Chapter 1 especially pp.20-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Maureen Wright (2010) ‘The Women’s Emancipation Union and Radical-feminist politics in Britain, 1891-99’, *Gender and History*, 22 (2), pp. 382-406. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Olive Banks (1986) *Becoming a Feminist: the Social Origins of First-Wave Feminism*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press), p.64. For information on now Bank’s constructed her statistical evidence see table in above p.51. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. PRA Annual Reports 1872, 1873 and 1874, Executive Committee membership lists. Archive held at the Bishopsgate Institute, London. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Extract from letter from Elizabeth Wolstenholme to the Editor (1873) *North Devon Journal*, 27 March, p.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Anon. (1877) PRA Report, p.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. For a selection of reports of deputations to government by the PRA see, PRA Annual Report (1874), pp.5-6. Also, Anon. (1883) ‘Compulsory notification of Infectious Diseases’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 13 March, p.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. On the winding up of the PRA, most of the remaining membership joined the

    organisation The Libertarian Alliance. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. On the founding of CALIPW see, *Women’s Suffrage Journal* (1871) 2 November, p.106. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Shanley *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*, pp.89-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Roberts ‘Feminism and the State in Later Victorian England’, pp. 85-110. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. M.J.D. Roberts (2004) *Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787-1886*, (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press), p.viii. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. PRA Report, 1872, p.4. (My emphasis.) [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Wright, ‘Women’s Emancipation Union’, p.383. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Editorial (1881) *Manchester Courier*, 28 February, p.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Brian Harrison, ‘State Intervention and Moral Reform’, in Patricia Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from Without in Early Victorian England*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1974); 289-322, here 298. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*, p. 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. ‘The Case of Elizabeth Holt’ (1870) Hansard, 10 March, Vol.199: c1628. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. McWilliam, ‘Performance of Citizenship’, p. 366. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. F.W. Newman (1873) ‘Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 22 October, p.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. The *Journal of the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights* was published between 1881-6, when it was re-named the *Personal Rights Journal*. It continued under this title until 1903, when it became *The Individualist*. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. *Judy* (or the *London Serio-Comic Journal*) was published from 1867-1910. As its name suggests, contributions to its columns were often designed as political satire and the price, set at tuppence weekly, was designed to be attractive to a lower-middle-class readership. The magazine too had an ‘irreverent’ slant and a ‘knowing cynicism for Victorian [upper class] sexuality’ that may have made its Editors view PRA activities sympathetically. Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor (Eds) (2009) *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, (Gent and London: Academia Press), pp. 327-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Anon. (1872) ‘The News’, *Judy*, 2 October, p. 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. McWilliam, ‘Performance of Citizenship’, p. 362. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. McWilliam, ‘Performance of Citizenship’, p. 363. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p.103. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Anon. (1872) ‘Personal Rights’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 14 September, p.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. ‘Liff and Benvie Parochial Board’, *Dundee Courier*, 27 November 1872, p.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Anon. (1872) ‘Protest against Recent Legislation’, *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 14 September, p.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Harrison, ‘State Intervention and Moral Reform’, p.298. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. F.W. Newman to Elizabeth Wolstenholme, 6 November 1873, Appendix to the VADPR Annual Report, 1873. Bishopsgate Library. (My emphasis.) [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Judith Walkowitz (1980) *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp.247-249. Lucy Bland (1995) *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885-1914*, (London: Penguin), pp. xiv-xvii. Clark, *Desire*, p.146. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Stead’s biographer claims that he possessed ‘a rare combination of attributes [having] pioneered the “dark arts” of investigative journalism [to become] a master of tabloid sensationalism [while contemporaneously being both] a devout Christian and strict moralist.’ W. Sydney Robinson(2012) *Muckraker: The Scandalous Life and Times of W.T. Stead Britain’s First Investigative Journalist*, (London: The Robson Press), p.vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Wolstenholme Elmy was to write a poem for publication in Stead’s anti-war periodical, *War Against War* on 1 January 1900, and the two went on to form a re-establish their firm partnership as allies as the shift to militancy in the women’s suffrage campaign gathered pace in 1903. See, Wright, *Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy*, Chapter 7 and Appendix, p.242. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Wright, *Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy*, p. 131-2**.** Roberts, ‘Feminism and the State’. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. The practice of wife-beating was not out-lawed until the case of Regina *v.* Jackson in 1890. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p.102. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. McWilliam, ‘Performance’. David Andress (2005) ‘Can culture *really* explain politics? Interdisciplinary historiography, enlightenment and revolution’, *SVEC*, 4, pp.260-69. James R. Lehning (2007) *The Melodramatic Thread: Spectacle and Political Culture in Modern France*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. McWilliam, ‘The Performance of Citizenship’, p. 373. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Elizabeth Wolstenholme and James Stuart (n.d. *c*. 1873) *The New Military Centres and the Vice-Protecting Clause of the Mutiny Act*, p.3. Archives of the PRA, Bishopsgate Institute, London. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. James Stuart (1873) ‘The Mutiny Bill 1873’, *The Beehive*, 5 April. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Anon. (1899) ‘James Stuart’, *Vanity Fair*, 5 October. <http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/Extras/Stuart> Accessed 10 September 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Stuart, ‘The Mutiny Bill 1873’. (My emphasis.) [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Stuart, ‘The Mutiny bill 1873’. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, p.102. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy to Harriet McIlquham, 2 February 1896, fol.254-5. (EWEP, BL.) [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Michael Barnett (2011) *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press), p.49. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Peter Brooks (1976) *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p.ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. PRA Annual Report (1872), p.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Anon. (1870) ‘Imprisonment under the Contagious Diseases Act’, *Dundee Courier*, 8 March, p.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Jacob Bright to Henry Bruce (1870) ‘The Case of Elizabeth Holt’, Hansard, 10 March,199, c.1628. (My emphasis.) [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Henry Bruce to Jacob Bright (1870) ‘The Case of Elizabeth Holt’, Hansard, 10 March,199, c.1628. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Jacob Bright to Henry Bruce (1870) ‘The Case of Elizabeth Holt’, Hansard, 10 March 1870, 199, c.1628. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Hansard (1871) 27 March, 205, cc.619-38, here 627. Hansard (1871) 23 March 1871, 205, cc.462-517, here 501. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Harrison, ‘State Intervention and Moral Reform’, p.298. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)