**Before you celebrate the centenary of women voting remember that it isn't actually the triumph you think it is**

**Dr Rachael Attwood**

The [coverage](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-5353627/Images-Suffragettes-brought-life-colour.html) of the centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act raises some fundamental questions about the portrayal of women’s rights in the media today.

Over the past year, there has been a steady stream of celebratory pieces on "the 100th anniversary of women getting the vote for the first time". Yet, there is a striking lack of nuance in a good deal of the coverage of this important milestone. Several pieces that touch upon the centenary either marginalise or altogether overlook the fact that, while a major stride was taken towards the political equality of the sexes in 1918, not all women were given the vote, and not all women got the vote on the same terms as men.

Under the 1918 Act, all men over 21 (or over 19 if they were servicemen) were enfranchised. Women, by contrast, had to be over 30 and either had to own a property, be or be related to a member of the local government register, or be a graduate in a university constituency. This equated to 40 per cent of women in the UK. Due to the large numbers of men who died in the First World War women assumed around a 43 per cent stake in the electorate. Such a high percentage meant that the government only wanted women who were well into adulthood and who possessed a sufficient amount of property (read: wealth), social status, and/or education to be entrusted with the vote.

Any milestone in women’s journey to plitical and social equality deserves to be celebrated and the law that brought some women into the national electorate for the first time in 1918 is a massive achievement. But let’s not remember 1918 as the year that a benevolent male parliament gifted women political equality in recognition of their work during the First World War and valiant campaigning for the vote, as certain articles in the past year claim.

So why have the tabloid press succumbed to making generalisations in their coverage of such an important law, and why have they put a positive spin on a law that, however progressive it was in its day, still failed to directly benefit many women and was still underpinned by sexism?

A less generous onlooker may suggest that the red tops’ one-size-fits-all attitude is born of the patriarchal belief that women are a homogenous group, the 1918 Act was ‘women’s legislation’, and women should be grateful for any concession granted, however unevenly, to members of their sex. However, a more charitable interpretation is that tabloid journalists understand the power of the past to upset today’s political apple cart. How we see the past conditions is how we see the present. If press coverage of the Act encouraged scrutiny of the government’s actions to improve women’s rights back in 1918, there’s a strong chance that many of us would bring the same critical gaze to the present government and its record in fostering equality of the sexes. What exactly is being done to combat the pay gap between the sexes? Why are only 32 per cent of MPs women? Why has funding been cut for refuges that help victims of domestic violence? What about those instances of sexual harassment in Westminster? The list goes on.

It is far easier for the press to paint a rose-tinted picture of past progress, reform, and equality that people are happy to leave as part of the proud history of modern Britain, than to portray the past for what it was and have people question the society which they live in and the government they are told acts in their interests. A more nuanced and critical coverage of the 1918 Act would make people realise that, although women have passed many crucial milestones on their journey to political and social equality in the past century, there is still a lot of road left to travel.

Let’s raise a glass on 6 February, the date that the 1918 Act received Royal Assent, to all those people whose efforts won a valuable and overdue victory for some women, but let’s not forget the many women who unfairly remained without the vote for another decade.