



Discrimination in Any Shape or Form: Black Activism and Women's Rights in Interwar Bermuda¹

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We glory in the spirit of the suffragettes, who are fighting because they feel that they are being discriminated against because of their sex. They have let it be known that they abhor discrimination in any shape or form. We feel therefore that they are worthy of our help because they, like us, are struggling against what they consider injustice....

We must therefore follow in their trail, and with them wage a relentless fight against discrimination in any form. They must eventually win. We too must struggle until victory is within our grasp and our rights as citizens within the British Commonwealth of Nations are fully recognized.

-- Editorial, "Suffragettes," Recorder, December 8, 1934²

Abstract: The 1930s and 40s saw a spike in anti-racist and women's rights activism in Bermuda. This article explores the relationship between the white-dominated Bermuda Woman's Suffrage Society (BWSS), its Secretary Gladys Morrell, and the Afro-Bermudian *Recorder* newspaper under editor David Tucker. Tucker and the *Recorder* expressed an ideological alliance with the BWSS in the 1930s, citing a shared battle against discrimination. Suffragists also mobilized against reactionary government policies targeting the black community. However, the Society's failure to take up a broader anti-racist agenda – coupled with political opportunism on Tucker's part – led to a split in the early 1940s. These experiences illustrate both the potential of and difficulties sustaining alliances across race/class/gender lines in a deeply divided society. The tendency of both the *Recorder* and the BWSS to speak on behalf of (rather than providing a platform for) black women also fuelled the splintering of agendas in these years.

Keywords: Anti-racist activism, feminist activism, suffrage, black press, Bermuda

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The interwar years were a period of heightened debate and mobilization across Britain's Caribbean colonies, which lay at the intersection of several activist circuits. Building on earlier suffrage movements and emboldened by the role of women at home and on the battlefield in World War I, women's rights advocates across the British Empire pushed for the right to vote, run for political office, divorce, and inherit property on equal grounds as men (Sinha, Guy and Woollacott 1998; De Haan et al. 2012). Pan-Africanist organizations like the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) flourished in these years, spreading race consciousness around the Atlantic through local chapters, international conferences and a thriving transnational black press (Ewing 2014; Putnam 2013). A series of labour strikes and riots also prompted the formation of the British Caribbean's first broad-scale labour unions and nationalist political parties pressing for universal suffrage, labour rights, and measures to address racial discrimination in the civil services, health care and employment (Alexander 2004; Beckles 2004; Bolland 2001; Howe 2002; Post 1978; Singh 1994).

These currents have often been studied independently of one another, perhaps in part due to the differential race, class, and gender make-up of key leaders and organizations. Generally speaking, elite white women tended to dominate international feminist forums and early women's associations in the interwar years, while men assumed leadership of black activist and labour associations. Scholarship on Afro-Caribbean women's history, however, has challenged the characterization of women's rights and anti-racism as separate spheres of activity. As foundational histories of women's activism in Trinidad (Reddock 1994), Jamaica (Altink 2012; Ford-Smith 2004; Gregg 2005; Vassell 1993) and Belize (Macpherson 2007) point out, Caribbean women often straddled several organizations at once, pushing for women's issues within anti-racist/labour organizations and critiquing racial discrimination within the women's movement. In some cases, black women created their own organizations like the Jamaican Women's Liberal Club, which explicitly blended pan-Africanist, feminist and nationalist ideologies in its 1936 founding charter (Ford-Smith 1982, 81).

But even where independent black feminist organizations did not materialize in these years and activism appears more clearly segregated along race and gender lines, digging a bit deeper can unearth some illustrative connections (and disconnections) between these causes and their leaders. Rhoda Reddock (2014, 61) points out, for example, that some pan-Africanist men supported women's rights movements in the interwar years despite the patriarchal structure of organizations like the UNIA. Some British feminist activists also took critical positions against empire and race/class discrimination after WWI, departing from the more patronizing maternal imperialist feminism of earlier periods (Bush 2016). Rather than taking for granted the separation of these worlds, then, we might revisit this moment and ask: how did (white-dominated) women's rights activism and (male-dominated) black activism in particular places intersect with one another in the interwar years? What points of connection drew them together, and what were the central fault lines that drove them apart?

This article takes up these questions by exploring the relationship among the white-dominated Bermuda Woman's Suffrage Society (BWSS), its leader Gladys Morrell, and the Afro-Bermudian *Recorder* newspaper under activist David Tucker. I focus in particular on the years from 1934 (when Tucker became editor of the *Recorder*) to 1944, when women who met property qualifications obtained the right to vote. During these years, Morrell and the Society primarily promoted the cause of suffrage and brought a feminist perspective into public debates, while Tucker and the *Recorder* sought to represent the perspective of the island's Afro-Bermudian community and challenge racial inequality on the island. Their spheres of activity and critique, however, overlapped in interesting ways. As evident in the quote opening this article, editorials in the *Recorder* expressed broad solidarity with the BWSS in the 1930s, portraying the suffrage movement as ideologically aligned with the black community's struggle against "discrimination in any shape or form." The BWSS, in turn, subscribed to the *Recorder* and attempted to reach out to black community organizations and activists. Tucker and Morrell also found common cause in their opposition to a 1935 Report on Unemployment put forth by the House of Assembly that included proposals for compulsory sterilization measures targeting the black community.

The resulting cross race/class/gender community mobilization was able to bring a quick halt to this particularly reactionary measure. However, the *Recorder* was also critical of the BWSS for failing to engage seriously with the broader agenda outlined by the paper, namely universal suffrage and the battle against racial discrimination in nursing and the civil services. This tension – as well as a dose of political opportunism on Tucker's part – contributed to a fracturing of relations in the early 1940s, leading the BWSS to cancel its subscription to the paper and publicly condemn Tucker. These experiences show both the powerful potential of alliances across race/class/gender lines, as well as the difficulty of sustaining these alliances in a reactionary society where activists felt compelled to prioritize agendas of “their” community over a broader anti-racist, feminist agenda recognizing race and sex discrimination as intersecting/interlocking systems of domination (see Crenshaw 1989; hooks 2005). Coverage in the *Recorder* and meeting minutes from the BWSS also suggest that both tended to speak on behalf of (rather than providing a platform for) black women, which further fuelled the splintering of agendas in these years.

Connections

A small island of just 20.6 square miles, Bermuda has often been left out of accounts of twentieth-century Caribbean history. This may reflect in part Bermuda's physical distance from other islands, located some 1500km northeast of the Caribbean Sea due east of North Carolina. Bermuda's social and economic structure also had several unique characteristics. Although Bermuda shared with other islands a historical trajectory fundamentally shaped by the twin forces of British colonization and African slavery, the island's economy centred on military activities, small-scale farming, and commerce rather than the massive sugar plantations characteristic of the Caribbean proper. The island also had a much larger white settler population, forming 42% of the population in 1933 as opposed to 7% or less in other British Caribbean colonies. Bermuda's Colonial Parliament (consisting of an elected House of Assembly and an appointed Legislative Council) was given more power over local affairs than

elsewhere in the British Caribbean, although notably less than in the Dominions of Canada, Australia, and South Africa. Sex disqualification and high property qualifications, however, limited the franchise to some 8% of the population and ensured the dominance of the white male elite, with only a handful of black men able to obtain seats in the House of Assembly in the early twentieth century. The growth of the American tourist industry in Bermuda after World War I also provided justification for more explicit forms of racial segregation. In addition to the subtle discrimination by exclusion which prevented access to jobs in the civil services and other sectors, “coloured” Bermudians were restricted from owning properties or renting in areas reserved for whites, banned from tourist hotels and forced to sit in specially designated rows in theatres, cinemas and some churches. Interwar Bermuda thus sat at the intersection – geographically, politically, and socially – of Britain, North America and the Caribbean (Alexander 2004, 98-100; Brown 2011; High 2003; Swan 2009).

Bermuda's unique status within the British Atlantic and regressive race relations were a subject of frequent commentary in the Afro-Bermudian run *Recorder* newspaper, founded by Garveyite Alfred Brownlow Place and associates in 1925 as a counter to the island's main newspaper *The Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily* (widely considered an organ of the conservative white elite). The establishment of the *Recorder* built on and helped fuel a larger wave of black mobilization on the island. In 1920, a protest-turned-“riot” spurred by dissatisfaction among members of the black Bermuda Militia Artillery (BMA) drew attention to racial divisions on the island; that same year saw the creation of a Bermudian branch of the UNIA. Both events were harshly repressed by the government, which also banned the UNIA's *Negro World* newspaper and refused to allow Marcus Garvey to visit the island on four occasions. Still, Quito Swan argues that this period marked something of a “Black Renaissance,” evident in the flourishing of a number of community associations and the influence of the *Recorder* on race consciousness. Beginning as a small weekly tabloid, by the mid-1930s the paper had expanded to a 12-page broadsheet published on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Although the *Recorder* was not linked directly to any one organization, it sought to spread a Garvey-inspired message

of race pride, represent the concerns of “the masses” and connect Bermudians to a broader transnational black community (Swan 2009, 13-14; Butler 1987, 11; Philip 1987, 88-95). This focus comes across clearly in surviving copies of the paper held by the Bermuda National Library, covering the period from 1933 to the last issue in 1975. Articles in the 1930s likened the struggles of local Bermudians to the broader oppression of “the coloured races of the Empire”³ and regular columns such as “So This is New York” and “Boston Bean Pot” kept islanders up to date on political and social life among Bermudian expats in the United States. The paper’s “News in Brief” section focused on news pertaining to Africa and the African Diaspora, while the “Society” pages and “Poetry Corner” provided spaces to highlight black leisure and creative expression.

The *Recorder* would also become a critical medium for the views of David Tucker, a lawyer and intellectual who became one of the island’s most forceful anti-racist activists. Tucker had left the island to obtain a BA and MA from Howard University in the United States before moving to London in 1929 to attend law school. While in London, Tucker served as Assistant Secretary of the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) and editor of its journal, *The Keys* (Butler 1987, 33; Hodgson 1997, 32). Upon returning to Bermuda in 1933 he began writing features for the *Recorder* before assuming the editorship from 1934-1951. Under his reign, the paper focused on questions of citizenship and racial discrimination, critiquing segregation in schools and hospitals, demanding a Civil Service entrance exam and touting the cause of universal suffrage. Tucker also used the *Recorder* to organize mass protests against particular policies put forward by the Colonial Parliament, suggesting a substantial readership.⁴



Fig 1. *David Tucker. The Recorder, 2 September 1933, p.1. Courtesy of the Bermuda Archives.*

The interwar years were also a period of heightened activism among Bermudian suffragists. While early bills to give property-owning women the same rights as men had been put forward (and defeated) in 1895 and 1896, local historian Colin Benbow (1994) cites the formation of the Bermuda Woman's Suffrage Society (BWSS) in January 1923 as the beginning of an organized movement. The Society was formed by a group of elite white women led by Gladys (Misick) Morrell. A member of a prominent local family, Morell was educated in London and returned home energized by the extension of the franchise to propertied women in the UK in 1918. Several provinces of Canada, New Zealand, Australia and India had also granted women's suffrage; closer to home, women who met property or income qualifications could vote in municipal elections in Belize as of 1912 and (on unequal terms with men) in Jamaica in 1919 (Macpherson 2007, 37; Altink 2011, 156-60). The BWSS sought to seize on this momentum and began holding regular meetings, drafting legislation and organizing public protests. Officially, the Society's goal was limited to the effort "to obtain for the women of Bermuda political enfranchisement on the same terms as it is, or may be, granted to men" (Benbow 1994, Appendix B). However, Morrell and the BWSS

also intervened in wider social and political debates, holding lectures and taking positions on subjects such as juvenile delinquency, youth reform, taxation and labour policies. The BWSS also made attempts to engage with the black community by subscribing and writing letters to the *Recorder* in addition to the *Royal Gazette*, speaking before black community associations, and stating clearly in its Constitution that: “[n]either race nor alien nationality shall constitute any bar to membership” (Benbow 1994, Appendix B). In reality, the BWSS remained heavily dominated by white elite women, although a few black women do appear in meeting minutes, most notably nurse and community organizer Alice Scott and educator Marjorie Bean.⁵ The Society also reached out to British suffragists and MPs like Florence Underwood and Eleanore Rathbone, who wrote letters to the Colonial Office in London imploring officials to intervene on behalf of Bermudian women's suffrage.⁶



Fig 2. Left to right: Gladys Morrell, Suffragists marching in Bermuda. Gladys Morrell Collection, Bermuda Archives. Courtesy of the Bermuda Archives.

These efforts, however, bore little fruit in the 1920s and 1930s. Although the BWSS had support from several representatives in the House of Assembly, bills and court challenges to extend the franchise to women brought forth in 1925, 1929, 1930, and 1935 were roundly defeated (Benbow 1994). The slow progress in Bermuda reflected in part the generally conservative approach to political, economic and social change on the island (known as “one of the most reactionary colonies in the British Empire” (High 2003, 7)) as well as the sexist attitudes of representatives who openly stated that women were not suited to political life. Bermuda’s long history of local control also limited the Colonial Office’s willingness and ability to exert pressure from above. Benbow (1994) and commentators at the time, however, placed particular stress on the race politics of suffrage in a society where black and white communities were seen as two separate groups with competing political interests. As the BWSS stated plainly in a petition to the Colonial Office in the early 1930s, both white and black Bermudians suffered from “racial fears, i.e. fears of the dominance of the other race. Each thinks that the extension of the franchise will benefit the other race at their own expense.”⁷ While the BWSS tried to assuage these fears with figures showing that an equal number of white and black female property-holders would be eligible to vote under the contemporary qualifications, white Members of Colonial Parliament (MCPs) portrayed any change as a threat to white rule. The few black MCPs also voted as a block against women’s suffrage bills throughout the 1920s and 30s, fearing it would tip the racial balance even further in favour of the white community (Benbow 1994).

If racial tensions created clear division in the political realm, however, coverage of the BWSS in the *Recorder* in the 1930s suggests more enthusiastic support for women’s suffrage amongst other sectors of black society. Tucker, in particular, portrayed women’s rights as a cause that ran parallel to the anti-racist struggle. In a December 1933 feature on “Secondary Schools in Bermuda,” for example, Tucker noted that “[w]omen’s suffrage and the adherent of the same is looked upon with suspicion in some quarters today. Someday we will realize how foolish we were in trying to fight against progress and in attempting to erect barriers on account of sex, creed or colour.”⁸ As editor, Tucker published some fourteen

editorials in the 1930s (unsigned, but likely written by Tucker himself)⁹ highlighting the work of the BWSS and/or touting the cause of women's suffrage more generally. These editorials portrayed women's right to vote as a hallmark of "enlightened" society, noting that: "among important countries within the Empire only South Africa and Bermuda have denied women the vote."¹⁰ The paper also chastised Bermuda's government for being "backwards" on the question,¹¹ adding: "it is indeed unfortunate that we should have anything in common with the Union of South Africa."¹²

This commentary on women's suffrage reflected a broader support for women's rights evident in the *Recorder* during these years. The paper published several feature articles tracing "women's progress" internationally, including features on women's political participation in different European countries, the role of black women in the U.S. Army, the appointment of women to leading positions in church congregations and the international travel of black feminists like Jamaican Una Marson.¹³ Editorials traced the intellectual history of women's rights from Plato to John Stuart Mill to Silvia Pankhurst,¹⁴ arguing that: "[t]he emancipation of women from a position of inferiority to one of absolute equality in all things political economic and social must come."¹⁵ The paper claimed that Bermuda was "to some extent living in the Stone Age when women were regarded as chattels"¹⁶ and argued that "world opinion...laughs at Bermuda's antiquated ideas on treatment of women."¹⁷ Editorials even addressed the subject of masculinity, mocking the "superiority complex" of "our men folk" and praising men like Amelia Earhart's modest husband who belonged to "the new school of thought" able to step aside and support their wives' careers.¹⁸

As evident in the quotation that opened this article, the *Recorder* portrayed solidarity between the BWSS and the black community as a natural outgrowth of their common struggle against injustice and "discrimination in any shape or form." Indeed, the overwhelming dominance and audacity of the island's white male MCPs could be a powerful unifying force, as evidenced in the swift mobilization of both the *Recorder* and the BWSS against a Report on Unemployment produced by the House of Assembly in May of 1935. Tapping

into a wave of neo-Malthusian and eugenic anxiety spreading across the globe in the 1920s and 1930s (Bashford and Levine 2010; Bourbonnais 2016), the Report argued that population growth threatened the economic and political security of the island and recommended the dissemination of birth control at Board of Health clinics as well as the compulsory sterilization of “mental defectives,” women who mothered two illegitimate children and men who fathered one illegitimate child.¹⁹ The Report made plain its disdain for the “indolent and inefficient”²⁰ local labour force and its willingness to resort to extreme measures to instill control over the population.

The *Recorder* came out immediately against the Report, arguing in a scathing editorial that the “ruthless proposals” made “the effort of Hitler to ‘purge’ the German nation seem tame” and would “rock the very foundation of our social system.”²¹ The paper also called readers to a public protest meeting at Alexandria Hall chaired by David Tucker, where members of the community highlighted the racist undertones of the proposals targeting the labouring population and births out of wedlock. Since black Bermudians made up the majority of labourers and illegitimacy rates were believed to be higher amongst black residents, one participant stated frankly that: “they [the sterilization proposals] will hurt the coloured people more than the white...it will decrease our population if the measure is carried through, and that is one of the motives aimed at.”²² Although the *Recorder* had previously published several pieces arguing in favour of increased access to contraception, it stressed that any birth control plans needed to be voluntary, apply to “every section of our island community” and not merely “one group,”²³ and be accompanied by education, employment opportunities, and other measures to address wider economic inequalities.

The BWSS entered the debate in part on feminist grounds, challenging the right of an all-male House of Assembly to enter into the realm of birth control “without any effort to ascertain women’s views thereon.”²⁴ But Gladys Morrell also moved beyond the issue of suffrage into a wider critique of Bermudian social mores and economic policy. In a letter to the *Royal Gazette* she scolded the House for

attacking the “defenceless” and defended those born out of wedlock, suggesting that many such persons were “reputable Bermudians.”²⁵ At a meeting of the BWSS in late May, Morrell also argued against “shifting the emphasis from unemployment to over-population” because:

I think that is getting away from the real issue. No country can call this problem a problem of over-population. It is, and I think we should not cease to emphasise it, an economic problem of unemployment, and we should deal with it as such. Maybe we will have to face the question of unemployment relief. I think that is what the Legislature is afraid of; they are afraid they might have to put their hands in their pockets and pay some persons during unemployment which is unavoidable on their part.²⁶

Her argument was echoed by fellow suffragist Margaret E. Misick, who felt that birth control should not be seen as “a panacea for all economic ills” and called for “a wider application of the principles of social justice and a broader conception of a government’s responsibility for the welfare of its people.”²⁷ In doing so, both moved beyond their own priorities as elite white suffragists, suggesting a broader vision for social change and labour rights on the island. Morrell and Misick’s position was challenged by at least two members of the BWSS who expressed support for the proposals at the meeting that May. But in the end, the Society unanimously passed a resolution strongly condemning the recommendations of the report.²⁸

Morrell also mobilized her connections with British high society to prevent the proposals from moving forward, including a copy of the Report’s recommendations in a letter to British suffragist Florence Underwood on May 27.²⁹ Morrell’s letter was forwarded to Lady Astor (Britain’s first female MP and a longstanding ally of the BWSS), who in turn passed it on to the Secretary of State for the Colonies Malcolm Macdonald, adding: “if it goes through for want of protest in this country it will be a disgrace to the whole British Empire.”³⁰ By the time the Colonial Office actually got in touch with Bermuda’s Attorney General in August of 1935,³¹ the recommendations under question had already been discarded in response to the local protests.³² But a flurry of memos suggest the

Colonial Office was ready to act; although officials noted that the disallowance of Bermudian legislation would be an “unusual step,” the proposals were considered so extreme that the Secretary of State would have no alternative but to intervene.³³ Organizing from both above and below, black civil society and women’s rights activists thus formed a powerful front against the local oligarchy, able to overturn legislative proposals and potentially even override the island’s longstanding local autonomy within the British Empire.

Disconnections

The protests against the 1935 Report on Unemployment marked a high point in Bermudian civil society activism and illustrated the possibility of effective cross-group mobilization. But this enthusiasm was difficult to sustain. In July of 1936, the *Recorder* lamented the lull in political life that seemed to have taken over the island just one year after the protest at Alexandria Hall.³⁴ This stood in stark contrast to islands in the Caribbean proper, where wide-scale labour strikes and riots in the mid- to late-1930s brought the reality of race and class discrimination to the forefront of public debate and prompted a wave of nationalist and labour organization (Hart 1998). This period also opened up new spaces for women’s activism, both within labour and nationalist organizations and in new women’s clubs and federations (Reddock 1994; Gregg 2005). While Jamaica saw the election of its first woman (teacher and social activist Mary Morris-Knibb) to public office in 1939, bills to expand suffrage to women in Bermuda were defeated again in 1937 and 1942. This period also saw increasing tensions between key Bermudian activists like Tucker and Morrell, culminating in a severing of relations between the BWSS and *Recorder* in May of 1943.

The split built on longstanding tensions simmering beneath the ideological alliance built between the two in the 1930s. Indeed, although the *Recorder* consistently supported the cause of women’s suffrage, the paper also expressed concern from the outset about some of the apparent gaps between the suffragists’ ideology and practice. In particular, the paper pointed to the close

links between the BWSS and two other organizations: the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE), a charitable organization with chapters in different British dominions, and the Bermuda Welfare Society (BWS), which had overseen the island's district nursing programme since 1925. Although not officially affiliated, many of the Society's most prominent suffragists were members of one or both of these organizations. As the *Recorder* pointed out, the practices of the IODE contradicted the suffragist's commitment to advancing the rights of black and white women alike, as the organization's Craddock Scholarship was available only to white girls.³⁵ The BWS was technically open to all but required district nurses to be official "Queen's nurses," a qualification that required training at hospitals in England known to discriminate against black nurses (Williams 1994, 96-97). As an editorial in the *Recorder* noted, in practice this was "another way of telling the coloured girl that she must try some other profession."³⁶ Editorials supporting the BWSS were thus occasionally accompanied by calls imploring suffragists to expand their agenda and "[g]ive our local nurses a chance, open the doors of scholarships, institute exams for the civil services – in short, work for the alleviation of the evils of the present system."³⁷

The concern for nurses in particular was likely influenced in part by Tucker's early work with the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) in London. As Tucker noted in a feature on "Nursing in Bermuda" in 1933, one of the LCP's first campaigns had centred around discrimination against nurses in London's hospitals and institutions.³⁸ Back home, Tucker was appalled to find that Bermudian nurses trained in American hospitals were able to work at the island's (severely underfunded) black-only "Nursing Home" or set up their own practice, but were excluded from government hospitals and the BWS.³⁹ Tucker saw this as blatant evidence of discrimination on the island and called on the (male) black community to advocate on behalf of nurses. As he wrote:

We must rouse ourselves from our lethargy and realize that a dignified profession is slowly but surely being wrested from the grasp of our sisters. We must protect them and safeguard their interest. They have a right to be nurses, chemists, or hold any other post for

which they are educationally equipped. Let us look into the matter, and help them to maintain their right to live.⁴⁰

Tucker's appeal tapped into a subject of considerable friction on the island, as evident in a handful of letters to the editor. As one nurse who had recently returned from abroad wrote to the *Recorder*, for example, it was crushing to work so hard and yet "find so many doors closed to us."⁴¹

Tucker's invocation of "the right to live" illustrates his awareness that black women's interests in these years may have included but also likely expanded beyond the desire to vote and into concerns for economic survival. The *Recorder* thus pushed the BWSS to expand their agenda to "do good for the greatest number, which may not necessarily result from the project which is being put forward."⁴² Meetings of the BWSS suggest its members were aware of these critiques,⁴³ prompting Morrell to speak before the Sandy's Educational Association (SEA) in January 1937. The SEA had been organized by Alice Scott and included David Tucker among its members, making the speech a critical opportunity to build bridges across activist circles. But Morrell's speech seems to have taken a more accusatory rather than conciliatory tone, focusing on the political opposition amongst black MCPs. As the *Recorder* covered, according to Morrell:

During the time when the [latest suffrage] Bill was discussed in the House of Assembly, in looking over votes for, and against she discovered that four of the coloured members had voted against it. She asked herself the question, Are they free? She came to the conclusion that they were not; they were dominated by fear, and selfishness.⁴⁴

That this speech did not achieve the desired effect is evident in an editorial published by the *Recorder* a few months later which again expressed ideological support for the suffrage movement but noted that: "[t]he various addresses made by speakers for suffragettes have never given any explanation for their treatment of local nurses and their attitudes on many problems affecting their Negro sisters and brothers."⁴⁵

Another opportunity to connect anti-racist and women's rights agendas more concretely came in May 1938, when the BWSS interviewed Tucker on the question of suffrage in the context of his bid for a seat in the House of Assembly in the island's upcoming elections. Tucker referred to the positive impact of women's suffrage in England and noted favourably the increased presence of women at local political meetings. While Tucker did not address the question of the IODE and BWS directly with Morrell, he did note that some voters worried that women in power would want to take away votes from the black community. Morrell countered by arguing:

From its very beginning the Suffrage Society has been firm in its attitude on the race question. Our forefathers established the political equality of the races in Bermuda and on that basis has been built the satisfactory condition which exists here.

But just because we Suffragists accept the justice of political equality between the races we are the more determined to fight against the unjust discrimination which still exists between the sexes.

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In a sense, Morrell's response to Tucker mirrored his own logic, which situated sex and race equality as parallel causes. But Morrell's invocation of "the satisfactory condition which exists here" also suggests a certain blindness to the depth of racial discrimination on the island and the barriers facing black women beyond political rights. Indeed, Morrell and others repeatedly responded to calls that they address the problems of the black community by re-stating that "this Society has always upheld that the vote should be granted to all women, irrespective of race."⁴⁷ In doing so, Morrell drew on a wider discourse surrounding race relations in the Caribbean, in which the lack of official distinction on the grounds of colour was taken as evidence of racial equality and used to stifle discussion of racism (Bryan 1991, 17; Lewis 2001, 158). Indeed, statements encouraging black women to speak up at a BWSS meeting in 1942 were tinged by strong admonitions against anyone who would attempt to make suffrage a "racial issue," which would be "strongly depreciated" and a "very

unwise thing.”⁴⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, this did not seem to create much space for discussions of the intersections of race and gender. As the BWSS minutes for this particular meeting noted: “Miss Marjorie Bean was the only coloured woman who spoke”⁴⁹ (what exactly she said, unfortunately, went unrecorded).

Morrell and the BWSS seem to have determined that only the most narrow of political agendas (propertied women’s right to vote) could be successful, even if this meant ignoring or eliding other struggles forwarded by black activists and organizations. When challenged by a crowd at St. Paul’s A.M.E. Lyceum to take up the cause of universal suffrage, for example, Morrell argued that “the object of our Society was, that the vote should be granted to women on the same basis as it is or may be granted to men;” if the crowd wanted universal suffrage, “she advised them to draw up a bill to cover their requirements, form themselves into a society and work for it as the women were working.”⁵⁰ Political calculations also seem to have ultimately undermined Tucker’s support for the BWSS. Running again for political office in 1943, Tucker came out explicitly against women’s suffrage, invoking precisely the race-based arguments he had previously chastised. Tucker argued that he had to respond to the “fear on the part of the Coloured people that, with women voting, they would be swamped politically and would cease to exist as members of the House of Assembly” and stated that as a minority group they could not afford to “commit political hari-kari.” Tucker also alluded to frictions over nursing by noting that in the future he hoped that “women of both groups” could get together and “iron out their problems.”⁵¹ In doing so, Tucker seemed to posit himself as a defender of black women’s interests at the same time as he denied them the political franchise, sacrificing the rights of those black women who might have qualified for suffrage for the support of his existing black male voting base.

Tucker’s words came as a considerable shock to the BWSS. In a meeting at the beginning of the next year Morrell described his speech as “a betrayal of the higher standards of education and integrity and a menace to the standards of public life.”⁵² Scott also expressed her surprise at Tucker’s position and stated that the allusion to nurses was “only made to cause discord and to cloud the

issue,” although she added that: “the only slight grievance felt among the Bermuda nurses had been caused by the action of the Welfare Society in not including any of their number as district nurses.” But Scott’s attempt to raise this issue within the BWSS – even when framed in such a delicate way – was quickly dismissed, as Morrell and others repeated the oft-cited explanation that “the only reason” for the Welfare Society insisting on Queens Nurses was because they were “highly qualified and also undergo special training in district nursing.”⁵³ Morrell closed the meeting by proposing a letter to the editor of the *Recorder* “assailing his duplicity and insincerity, severing connections with the paper and requesting a statement of our account as of March 1st.”⁵⁴

Tucker and Morrell would not mend fences until the passing of a women’s suffrage bill in the House of Assembly in April 1944. Although Tucker voted against the bill in the Assembly, he spoke at the BWSS’ victory celebration and praised the organization in the *Recorder* shortly after. As he wrote:

We must offer our congratulations to the Suffrage Society for the dignified way in which they have waged their fight. Less than 300 ladies were powerful enough to alter our franchise. Surely 20,000 people, if united, should be able to bring about universal suffrage, and thereby, give every adult in the Colony an opportunity to have a voice in the affairs of Government.⁵⁵

Tucker’s enthusiasm for a united front in favour of universal suffrage and against racial discrimination, however, proved overly optimistic. The BWSS dissolved soon after the bill passed, rather than moving into the broader realm of women’s rights and social reform hinted at in some of Morrell’s speeches and advocated by the *Recorder*. Practical steps to address discrimination in healthcare would have to wait until the mid-1950s and the first black BWS nurse was not hired until the 1960s (Williams 1994, 122-148; Williams 2007, 48-51). And while the majority of Caribbean islanders obtained universal adult suffrage over the course of the mid-1940s to mid-1950s (Buddan 2004), all adults over 25 would not receive the vote in Bermuda until 1963 (Swan 2009, 14-18; Zuill 1999, 201-203).

Conclusion

An analysis of the relationship between the *Recorder* and the BWSS in the 1930s and 1940s vividly illustrates both the powerful potential and the tensions shaping civil society mobilization against oligarchical rule in the interwar British Atlantic. The *Recorder* challenged the opposition to women's suffrage among black politicians, highlighting the ideological connections between women's rights and black activism in these years. When key figures like Tucker and Morrell were able to unite around particular issues (such as the Report on Unemployment), they could also serve as a powerful obstacle to the white male elite oligarchy. But the BWSS's legitimacy in the black community was hampered by its failure to address the problem of discrimination in nursing head on or consider agendas beyond political rights for propertied women, while Tucker temporarily abandoned his support of the BWSS in his pursuit of political power. When push came to shove, both privileged the priorities of their perceived "group" (whether defined as "women" [read: white women] or the "black community" [read: black men]).

These approaches were at least partly strategic, a response to the extremely conservative context in which any expansion of rights was seen as a fundamental threat to the island's rigid social system. But the tendency of both to see women's rights and the anti-racist struggle as parallel (but not necessarily intersecting) causes likely also reflected the marginalization of black women by both sides. While both the *Recorder* and the BWSS claimed to represent the interests of black women and advocated on their behalf, neither appears to have provided a strong platform for the actual black women activists within their midst. Women like Alice Scott and Marjorie Bean are mentioned only sporadically in the *Recorder*, as members of associations or keynote speakers at meetings.⁵⁶ When they appear in BWSS meeting minutes, their concerns are frequently unrecorded or dismissed by other participants (as evident above). As a result, we have little sense of their lived reality at the intersection of race and sex discrimination or how they managed the tensions between their different activist allegiances. Perhaps if these women had been given more space within

the BWSS to speak or the chance to write their own articles for the *Recorder*, their experiences might have illustrated more concretely the fundamental fallacy of separating women's rights and black activist agendas and the powerful potential of a united feminist, anti-racist platform.

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² The *Recorder* was accessed through the library's online text-searchable database: <http://bnl.contentdm.oclc.org/>. There are some gaps in coverage, notably in the mid-1940s.

³ Editorial, "The Centenary of the Abolition of Slavery," *Recorder*, August 26, 1933, 2.

⁴ See, for example, "Country-Wide Protest Against the Unemployment Report," *Recorder*, June 1, 1935, 1. Although I do not have figures on readership for these years, an article in *The Bermudian* puts circulation at 5,000 during the "height" of the *Recorder*, likely referring to the 1940s-60s, when the population of the island was around 30-40,000 people. Meredith Ebbin, "A Trio of Pioneering Newsman: A look back at the lives of three publishing legends," *The Bermudian.com*, August 1, 2016, accessed online at: <http://www.thebermudian.com/features/1917-a-trio-of-pioneering-newsmen>.

⁵ Although there is little information on these women in the academic literature or my sources (as discussed in the Conclusion to this paper), brief biographies of Scott and Bean can be found at: "Alice Scott," *bermuda bios*, <http://www.bermudabiographies.bm/Biographies/Biography-Alice%20Scott.html>, and "A fitting tribute to Dame Marjorie Bean," *The Royal Gazette*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.royalgazette.com/article/20150512/ISLAND03/150519934>.

⁶ See, for example, Florence A. Underwood to S.E.V. Luke, December 6, 1935, CO 37/282/5, and Eleanor F. Rathbone to the Right Hon J.H. Thomas, Letter, November 29, 1935, CO 37/282/5, National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, U.K. (hereafter "NAUK").

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- ⁷ "Note of Points Made by Mrs. Morrell of the Bermuda Woman Suffrage Society Before the Empire Parliamentary Delegation of Imperial Parliament," (Petitions (1931-1944), Bermuda Woman Suffrage Society, Private Papers, Bermuda Archives (hereafter "BWSS, Private Papers, BA")).
- ⁸ David Tucker, "Secondary Schools in Bermuda," *Recorder*, December 16, 1933, 5.
- ⁹ Local histories attribute editorials in these years directly to Tucker (see Hodgson 1997, 32; Benbow 1994, 56). I have erred on the side of caution and speak generally of "editorials under Tucker" since the authorship is not clear.
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- ¹¹ "The Week in Brief," *Recorder*, March 16, 1935, 1.
- ¹² Editorial, "Suffragettes," *Recorder*, December 8, 1934, 2.
- ¹³ See for example: "Women's Progress During Past Year," *Recorder*, January 9, 1937, 5. "Coloured Women Serve the Country in the U.S. Army," *Recorder*, May 19, 1943, 2; "Negro Jamaican Girl at League of Nations" (from the Jamaica Gleaner), *Recorder*, November 14, 1936, 1.
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- ¹⁵ Editorial, "Amelia Earhart," *Recorder*, July 7, 1937, 2.
- ¹⁶ Editorial, "New Year 1938," *Recorder*, January 1, 1938, 2.
- ¹⁷ Editorial, "Bermuda's Abuse of Power," *Recorder*, February 8, 1936, 2.
- ¹⁸ Editorial, "Amelia Earhart," *Recorder*, July 17, 1937, 2.
- ¹⁹ "No.75: Report on Unemployment," May 15, 1935 (Journals of the House of Assembly of Bermuda: Session 1934-35, BA), 284, 282.
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- ³⁸ David Tucker, "Nursing in Bermuda," *Recorder*, December 2, 1933, 1.
- ³⁹ Editorial, "The Welfare Society," *Recorder*, February 24, 1934, 2. For more on the Bermuda Nursing Association and Nursing Home, see Williams (1994, 88-107); on nursing in the Caribbean more generally, see Barriteau and Cobley (2001).
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- ⁴¹ An Anxious Reader of the Recorder, "Letter to the Editor: Local Nurses," *Recorder*, March 7, 1936, 5. See also George Dixon, "Letter to the Editor," *Recorder*, December 3, 1938, 4; Vox Populi, "Letter to the Editor," *Recorder*, December 15, 1934, 5; "Visitor Lectures at St. Paul's A.M.E. Lyceum," *Recorder*, August 15, 1936, 1, 6.
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- ⁴⁶ "Members of Women's Suffrage Society Interview Assembly Candidates," *Recorder*, May 28, 1938, 4.
- ⁴⁷ "Committee Meeting," May 19, 1943 (Minutes 1943-45, BWSS, Private Papers, BA), 1.
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- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁵⁵ Quoted in Benbow (1994, 56). The paper from this date was not available through the Bermuda National Library's Digital Collection.
- ⁵⁶ See, for example, mentions of Alice Scott at "Sandys Educational Association Honours Mr. David Tucker, M.A.," *Recorder*, October 7, 1933, 3; INTERESTED, "Letter to the Editor: Omitted," *Recorder*, March 24, 1934, 5; "Society", *Recorder*, April 14, 1934, 5; on Marjorie Bean at "Old Towne Notes," *Recorder*, March 10, 1934, 4.