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## OPINION: British Establishment blocks Minute Silence for Suffragette - By Yvonne Ridley

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IN A FEW weeks time the 100th anniversary of the death of heroic suffragette Emily Wilding Davison should be marked with a minute's silence at the iconic Epsom Derby but this small act of remembrance is being resisted by the very same Establishment attitude that tried to crush the movement for women's rights back in 1913.

Emily was fatally injured when she deliberately ran onto the track during the 1913 Derby and was knocked unconscious by the flying hooves of King George V's horse Anmer.

Acting on the suffragette slogan 'Deeds not Words', Davison's protest against the refusal of Britain's rulers to grant votes for women turned her a martyr for democracy and women's rights. Despite newspapers writing off her actions as those of a suicidal, mad woman Emily's intentions were far more noble in that she was trying to raise awareness about women's rights and equality by pinning the colours of the suffragette movement onto the horse.

Isn't it ironic that while the male-dominated media, government and establishment of the day tried to silence the demands for women's rights way back then, a century later some officials from the male-dominated racing world are trying to do the same?

In some ways it would be unfair to hold the men in tweeds and trilbies at Epsom Downs Racecourse directly responsible, because the influence at the very top of the racehorse fraternity trickles down from the Royal Household. Add Her Majesty's displeasure to that of sponsors, commercial interests, the Jockey Club and the police to name but a few who were consulted and you can see why there is absolutely no support for the minute's silence from any of the Derby stakeholders.

While Emily was still unconscious in hospital it is also worth noting Queen Alexandra, the Queen Mother asked one of her flunkies to send a telegram to the jockey who was recuperating at home. The note read: "Queen Alexandra was very sorry indeed to hear of your sad accident caused through the abominable conduct of a brutal lunatic woman."

Could it be that there is still very little enthusiasm in the Royal Household to revive the spirit of Emily?

However, supporters of the Emily Wilding Davison Memorial Campaign, the movement set up to commemorate the centenary anniversary, will be pleased to know they do have some powerful allies in the arcane world of horse racing. Sally Rowley Williams, one of the most influential female figures in the industry says she

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"We are at a point today when the guns will fall silent and ideas will speak," declared Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey, on March 21. "Turks and Kurds fought together (in the First World War), and launched the Turkish parliament together in 1922. The basis of the new struggle consists of ideas, ideology and democratic politics." And with that, he declared a cease-fire.

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Why did George W. Bush choose March 19, 2003 to invade Iraq, rather than some day in May, or July, or never? Because he was afraid that further delay would give United Nations arms inspectors time to refute the accusation (his sole pretext for making an unprovoked attack on an independent country) that Saddam Hussein's regime was working on nuclear weapons.

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One of the most influential female figures in the industry says she is baffled by the decision to refuse a minute's silence.

"It's a tragedy that should be acknowledged at the very least by a minute's silent. She was an important figure and I'd like to think that in this day and age such a historic event should be acknowledged. A minute's silence seems like a pretty small gesture but one full of meaning.

"I'm baffled as to why it's such a problem or even an issue. At a football match it happens so I don't know why racing doesn't embrace this. I've witnessed moments of silence at big football matches and I think it happens at rugby games as well," added Williams, the founder of Women in Racing.

Katherine Connelly, the centenary campaign co-ordinator and Elly Badcock the campaign's press officer, put their case for the one minute's silence to Rupert Trevelyan, the London Regional Director for Jockey Club Racecourses and Johnno Spence, the Director of Public Relations at Epsom during a recent meeting.

At the meeting it was agreed they could present their case at the next stakeholders' gathering but that offer was mysteriously withdrawn shortly afterwards and campaigners were also informed that the plan for a minute's silence had been rejected.

Connelly said: "The Emily Wilding Davison Memorial Campaign is extremely disappointed by the decision not to grant a minute's silence to mark the sacrifice that Emily made for womens rights and democracy. We were particularly shocked that the offer to present our case and petition at the next stakeholders meeting was withdrawn.

"We are committed to continue the campaign for the recognition of this anniversary which is important to so many people."

I put this to Johnno Spence at his London PR headquarters in leafy West London and asked him why the racecourse was refusing to mark the centenary event with a minute's silence.

"Refused is a bit of a strong word. We are unveiling a plaque on the 18th of April and her great, great, great niece is coming to unveil it for us. You're very welcome to come," he said enthusiastically. And the minute's silence? He responded hesitantly: "The problem with a minute's silence is that the Derby is not held in a controlled environment like other sporting events as in football or rugby when everyone turns up around the same time in one stadium.

"On Derby Day there's 140,000 arriving at different times and there's ten different enclosures and it wouldn't work. All the stakeholders were consulted and the final decision was taken by the MD. No one supported the minute's silence because it's completely unmanageable with 140,000 people. It's been done previously when perhaps there's been no more than 2000 people attending."

As if to push his female-friendly credentials Spence added of Emily: "I think what she stood for was absolutely fantastic but it's not something we want to condone or for it to happen again."

While few would disagree with his final sentiments the point is the Establishment do not want to give a minute's silence to mark the centenary and the reasons are still not clear.

"The graveyards are full of indispensable men," said Georges Clemenceau, Prime Minister of France during the First World War, and promptly died to prove his point. He was duly replaced, and France was just fine without him. Same goes for Hugo Chavez and Venezuela.

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Dr Helen Pankhurst, granddaughter of Sylvia Pankhurst and international development and women's rights campaigner, recently said at a gathering for the campaign said: "Really the issue of Deeds Not Words still applies today; identifying concrete do-able actions such as this one to commemorate specific events and specific people and their contributions and their sacrifices to the wider changes. I think that's massively needed and I think this is a very clever, single issue do-able action which is incredibly important."

Bearing in mind the world's largest ever commemorative silence is held annually at 11am on November 11 for the war dead when every street, every town, every city in the UK comes to a halt with tens of millions taking part, the excuses coming out of Epsom over a refusal for 60 seconds in memory of Emily Wilding Davison look pretty weak and pathetic.

The truth is a hundred years on we as women are still facing inequality and oppression. It's vital that the sacrifice she made in the fight for democracy and women's rights is never forgotten. The Emily Wilding Davison Memorial Campaign has been set up to campaign for a minute's silence at the 2013 Derby Day in her memory. Activists include Bonnie Greer, Miriam Margoyles, Frances O'Grady, several trade unions including the NUT, UCU, UNITE and the WEA.

And it's a safe bet these committed activists - both men and women - will make sure that the spirit of Emily will be remembered on the 100th anniversary of her sacrifice ... with or without the blessing of the men who run Epsom Downs Racecourse.

*British journalist Yvonne Ridley is a supporter of the Emily Wilding Davison Memorial Campaign To find out more about the campaign and sign the petition check out [http://emilywildingdavison.org/?page\\_id=11](http://emilywildingdavison.org/?page_id=11)*

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