News from May 1911 – Schreiner on the
South African Women’s Enfranchisement League & ‘race’

Olive Schreiner rejected ‘the vote on the same terms as (white) men’ and resisted the South African Women’s Enfranchisement League adopting this as a policy.

In late May 1911, she wrote the letter below to Julia Solly, who like Schreiner was one of the founding members of the Cape Town WEL. Its content is rather elliptical, but the letters which Schreiner ‘couldn’t possibly sign’ were connected with this battle and her fierce opposition to the Mrs Macfadyen referred to, who was both a proponent of a racial basis to women’s suffrage and a key figure in the ‘black peril’ moral panic which Schreiner’s letter also refers to. While very friendly with Fred Pethick-Lawrence, her relationship with Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence was more troubled. This was largely because Emmeline favoured a ‘thin end of the wedge’ approach to women’s enfranchisement and appeared to find its racial connotations in South Africa no bar to her advocating it as a policy the South African WEL should adopt. Schreiner’s comment in this letter about not putting Macfadyen in touch with the Pethick-Lawrences was perhaps to prevent allegiances between them regarding this crucial matter.

In the event, the WEL did adopt a racially-based policy franchise regarding women’s suffrage – and Olive Schreiner resigned from her membership.

---

Letter Reference: Olive Schreiner BC16/Box4/Fold4/1911/11
Archive: University of Cape Town, Manuscripts & Archives, Cape Town
Epistolary Type: Letter
Letter Date: 24 May 1911
Address From: De Aar, Northern Cape
Address To: Sir Lowry’s Pass, Western Cape
Who To: Julia Solly nee Muspratt

Copyright transcription: © Olive Schreiner Letters Project. This transcription can be freely used as long as copyright is acknowledged and it is referenced using the information above. A typical reference would be: Olive Schreiner to Jan Smuts, 1 July 1896, National Archives Depot, Pretoria, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. Please also supply letter line numbers for specific quotations.

1: De Aar
2: May 24th 1911
3:
4: Dear Mrs Solly
5:
6: I’m sorry but I couldn’t possibly sign those letters.
7:
8: I’ve never mentioned Mrs Macfadyen’s name even to my dear dear,
9: friends the Pethick-Lawrences. It is quite right for you to write them;
10: ^& send them,^ but I should not have mentioned even the name of the
11: Citizen’s Club if I had known she was connected with it.
12:
13: She is the bitterest enemy the natives have. Don’t think I am
14: condemning your action. But if I write on the matter at all it will be
15: quite an impersonal letter showing how small & cowardly the action of
16: all of us is, who raise the Black Peril cry.
17:
18: Yours faithfully
19: Olive Schreiner
20:
21:
22: