

# PARLIAMENTARY FRANCHISE FOR WOMEN 1904

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To the Editor of "The Times"

Sir,—Amidst the various questions of more or less urgency which at the present moment beset the public mind, the division on March 16th on Sir Charles McLaren's resolution, "That the disabilities of women in respect of the Parliamentary franchise ought to be removed by legislation," has hardly received the attention which from its importance it would seem to demand. On this, the first opportunity of bringing the question of women's suffrage before the present Parliament, the gratifying result was obtained that the Resolution was carried by a majority of 114, the votes being 182 to 68. That the total of members present was comparatively small, was no doubt partly due to the fact that the resolution could have no immediate practical consequences; but may it not have been also that it reflected a general attitude towards the question, a willingness to consider it, an unwillingness to pronounce decidedly on either side?

Those who have long watched the movement for the enfranchisement of women notice that within the last 20 years a marked change has taken place in public opinion with regard to it. The tone of mingled disapproval and derision, once so common, has to a great extent disappeared, and a disposition is shown to give the question a fair hearing, with an undertone of prophecy "it will come." The change is no doubt due to various causes. Elections have ceased to be the scenes of disorder and riot of which we read in earlier days, and the shrinking naturally felt by persons of refinement from the idea of women's participation in such orgies has passed away with the occasion for it. For many years women have been in the habit of voting for School Boards, Poor Law guardians, &c. Their voting power has been exercised with insight and discrimination, and they have not been unpleasantly transformed into something different from what they were before. Women who vote are, in fact, no more distinguishable in manners and appearance from those who do not than men who vote are distinguishable in outward demeanour from those who do not. And while the experiment of municipal voting has been successfully carried out at home, the further step of the extension of the Parliamentary franchise has been taken in

many of our Colonies with none of the evil consequences which has been feared. In New Zealand the suffrage was granted in 1893. The example was followed by South Australia in 1894, by Western Australia in 1900, by New South Wales in 1902. Tasmania has recently followed, and as including the several States of the Commonwealth, the suffrage for the Federal Parliament was granted in 1902. These facts are surely of great significance, claiming the serious consideration of thoughtful persons. In the contiguous States there must have been opportunity for closely observing the working of the experiment and the result has proved an incitement to imitation. We are told that in New Zealand the addition of women to the electorate made no difference in the balance of political parties. As regards Australia, the evidence was conflicting. It was stated in the Parliamentary debate that "women had voted there with the result not only that men of good standing and character had been returned, but the cause of Labour had been everywhere supported"; while, on the other hand, the Sydney correspondent of the "Globe" writes that "the recent Federal elections have shown that the Australian woman voter is opposed to Socialist principles and takes a more practical and common sense view of public matters than do many of the sterner sex. The Labour party clamoured for the female franchise, and now it has become conceded they find it against them." Probably the explanation of these contradictory statements is to be found in the fact that "the women's voice" is not, as is sometimes assumed, a solid substance to be deposited whole in one quarter or another, but that, like the men's vote, it is composed of varied elements, which may preponderate in different proportions in different localities.

The impossibility of ascertaining where "the woman's vote" would go, has no doubt been a hindrance to the adoption of women's suffrage as a Government measure by either of our political parties. Liberals are convinced that women would vote Conservative and are unwilling to do anything which might strengthen their opponents. Conservatives, as such, are not predisposed to favour a considerable constitutional change, and they are by no means so certain that it would be to their advantage as to be prepared to risk the fortune of their party on chance. All sides are, however, glad to secure the help of women in party warfare; and among the causes contributing to the change which has been noted in public opinion, perhaps none has been more potent than the eagerness everywhere shown to summon women into the political arena. In the words of the late Lord Iddesleigh:—

"You may have women taking part in public meetings, making speeches, and canvassing, as any man would do, throughout an election; but when it comes to going into the polling booth to give a vote in a peaceable manner, protected by the ballot, then you say you demoralize

and lower her character. Is that common sense"?

Can the politicians who have achieved success largely by calling to their aid the zeal and energy of women turn round upon them and declare that though they are quite competent to advise and influence men in the use of their votes, they are not fit to vote themselves, that they are out of place in the field of politics and should confine themselves to their proper sphere—the home?

As we all know, there are many people who do not much care about being consistent; but there are signs that the services of women will no longer for the most part be at the disposal of candidates for election who, while seeking their help, refuse to support their claim to the vote, and the untenableness of the position may be brought home to such candidates in a way which they cannot afford to disregard. At a meeting held at Bristol in May 1903, a resolution, moved by so gentle and moderate a social reformer as Miss. F. Davenport Hill, "That, in the opinion of this meeting, women should work only for those candidates for Parliament who pledge themselves to support the Parliamentary enfranchisement of women," was carried unanimously. Similar resolutions are being adopted, either at public meetings or silently by individual women, in all parts of the country. That women should arrive at the conclusion that they will no longer take part in the indefinite postponement of this question would surely not be unreasonable, even if the reform were regarded as affecting only one-half of the community; but the advocates of women's suffrage do not so regard it. They believe that measures tending to make women stronger, more independent, less heavily weighted in the battle of life, will increase the vigour—physical, intellectual and moral—of our race, and that while women would most directly and consciously gain by enfranchisement men would share the benefits. The well-known Labour leader, Mr. Keir Hardie, declaring that this is "as much a man's question as it is a woman's question" refers to the way in which women are used to keep down wages, and says—

"By treating women—I am speaking now from the working class point of view—as equals, by conceding to them every concession which men claim for themselves, the women will play the part of the equal, not only in regard to wages, but in all other matters appertaining to industrial life. . . . The possession of the franchise itself would give women a new standing, a new increase of power, and would enable them to win for themselves concessions which are to-day withheld."

How strongly this has been felt by working women has been shown by petitions from 29,300 textile workers in Lancashire, 303,184 in Yorkshire, 4,300 in Cheshire, 8,600 tailoresses in the West Riding of York, and by recent petitions and deputations from many thousands of working women in the Potteries, Leicester, Hinckley, and other places;

but it is still more striking and significant that working men are beginning to recognise their interest in the matter, as is shown by a petition presented by Mr. Shackleton from 71 trade and labour councils and 62 trade unions, representing over 100,000 workmen, and one presented by Mr. Keir Hardie from the Independent Labour party.

Those who have worked in the face of much discouragement for the enfranchisement of women are now animated by a fresh stimulus, that of a nearer and more confident hope. The movement is supported by a constantly increasing body of adherents, new societies or committees springing up all over the country. We look to the Press for its powerful aid in bringing into view new facts, throwing fresh light on the situation; and we trust that a calm and unprejudiced consideration of the case as it now stands will ere long bring about a reform which, while beneficial to all classes of the community, can be injurious to none.

EMILY DAVIES.

6, Montague Mansions, London, W., March 31st.

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