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THE VOTERS' PETITION FOR WOMEN'S FRANCHISE

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IN our last issue we published an article on the Voters' Petition, which was organized during the General Election by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. The signatures to this petition number over 800,000, and were gathered during the election from between two and three hundred constituencies in Great Britain. As we explained in our former article, the petition was confined to men voters, and in each case the voter's number was appended to the name and address of the signatory, thus showing conclusively that electors, and electors only, are the petitioners on this occasion. The number of signatures obtained is most encouraging, especially considering the great difficulties under which they were collected and the shortness of the time at the disposal of workers. The Anti-Suffragists boasted loudly of their petition of 254,000 signatures, gathered together during many months of hard labour. Suffragists had only the fortnight or so of the elections in which to obtain these 800,000 names.

In cases where a Committee Room was opened in constituencies a short time before the election, voters were invited to come in and sign the petition, the name and address given being in each case verified by a reference to the Parliamentary Register. Other names were obtained for the petition at the same time by house-to-house canvassing. By far the greater number were, however, secured at the polling-stations as already described. It is believed that this petition is the first that has ever been obtained at the polls in like manner, and it speaks volumes for the enthusiasm inspired by our cause that women of the educated class should have come forward in hundreds to undertake the unpleasant and humiliating task of standing in the gutter, craving justice from learned and ignorant alike. Those who undertook this duty were one and all women who, in the struggle for liberty, are careful to

obey the law in every particular, and to whom unconstitutional methods of propaganda are forbidden by their principles. Officials and organizers of the Societies were of course assisting, but the majority of workers were ordinary members of a local branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.

The fact that no suffragist was allowed under cover meant a heavy loss to the petition. As we pointed out in our last number, the publicity of the occasion made many of the voters ashamed to sign when they might readily have done so in greater privacy. Also the wind and rain, which prevailed during the greater part of the election time, rendered electors less inclined to stop and listen to arguments. It cannot be claimed, therefore, that all who declined to sign, or persistently refused to recognize the existence of the canvasser, were opponents of women's suffrage. The genuine hurry of the electors, too, necessarily militated against success. Most of them had to poll on their way to or from work—often at some distance from home—or during their dinner hour, and were naturally impatient of any delay. In the rush, many came and went without having their attention called to the petition at all, while others signed in such haste that their signatures were illegible.

The genuine character of the voters' petition for Women's Suffrage is shown by the open way in which signatures were obtained. There were none of those attempts at confusing the real issues which are so dear to the heart of the 'Anti's.' The following paragraph from the *Sussex Daily News* of February 17th shows what care was taken by collectors of signatures for our petitions to ensure that every signature was genuine:—

Doubtless in your part of the world the non-militant Suffragettes were pretty busy during the elections collecting voters' signatures for their petition. They could not organize the collection thoroughly everywhere, of course. Moreover, unlike many people who get up petitions, they refused to accept signatures which were not absolutely genuine. I myself, for example (in order to see what would happen), endeavoured to sign the petition in two constituencies in which I do not reside, was cross-examined, and then ruthlessly turned away. Nevertheless, the number of actual electors' signatures obtained, I hear, is at least a quarter of a million. Those politicians who believe there was not much electoral opinion behind the Suffrage movement will have to modify their views.

Some disappointment is felt that it has not been possible to arrange for the presentation of all petitions in the Open House. A petition may be presented in two ways. It can either be 'presented in Open House' or 'laid upon the table.' In the first case, the member presenting the petition, standing up, says, 'I present a petition from the electors of So-and-So in favour of the enfranchisement of women.' In the second, the member in charge of the petition places it in a basket behind the Speaker's chair. This, however, does not mean that no attention is called to the document. Two separate records of every petition presented to the House appear in the Parliamentary Papers. Every day a blue paper is published, and a copy sent to every Member of Parliament, giving the agenda for the day in the Commons, and also some information about the business of the previous day, including mention of all petitions presented in the House. The blue papers during March contain, therefore, daily reference to the Great Voters' Petition. At the time of writing the petitions are being presented in the House at the rate of ten to twenty a day. Periodically a White Paper appears, dealing with the petitions presented to Parliament. This paper mentions all petitions presented since its last issue, stating the number of signatures and other particulars. Every petition presented to Parliament undergoes a strict scrutiny by a Select Committee on Public Petitions, with a view to making sure that there are not, among the signatures, several in the same handwriting. It is well known that the Anti-Suffrage Petition came badly through this Ordeal.

Considering all things, 800,000 signatures is a number to be very proud of. So many of the enfranchised have never pressed, by petition or otherwise, for the enfranchisement of others, and it will be impossible to urge again that the question of women's suffrage is one to which the electorate are entirely indifferent. Another encouraging sign was the sympathy shown at suffrage meetings during the elections, resolutions being carried at thousands crowded and enthusiastic gatherings.

We regret that the London Press has so far ignored the petition and the lesson it bears. The Provincial Press, however, has adopted a more sympathetic attitude, and all over the country notices of the presentation of the local petitions to Parliament by the member are appearing from day to day. Judging from the number of signatures there seems to be most enthusiasm for

women's enfranchisement in the North: Manchester, North of England Society, for instance, securing as many as 47,853 signatures, Glasgow 25,237, as against 29,000 obtained by the London Society.

This is probably because the economic independence of women is better established in the important manufacturing centres than in any other part of the country. Women's claim for equal citizenship does not seem so unnatural to men who are accustomed to regard them as breadwinners, capable of maintaining themselves.

It is unquestionable that in the event of any Reform Bill being brought in by the Government, the demand for the inclusion of women will at least receive careful consideration. Over 340 members of the present House have declared themselves in favour of the enfranchisement and the suffrage societies are endeavouring to win over those who hold indefinite opinions.

A clear proof that the demand for the women's enfranchisement is gaining more and more support in the country is furnished by the extraordinarily rapid increase in the number of suffrage societies of all kinds. Within a year fifty new societies have been added to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies alone.