

THE FRANCHISE FOR WOMEN OF PROPERTY.

I.

Not a few of those who support woman suffrage appear to think that such suffrage can be based on a property qualification, and can be used for the defence of property and Conservative principles.

For the moment, all shades of opinion in the Suffrage camp are united in demanding the suffrage for women “on the same terms as men.” It is known that this, if granted, would work out, as things are at present, as largely a property franchise.

All married women would be excluded, except those able to show a separate property or occupying qualification from that possessed by their husbands.

And of unmarried women, considering the great difficulty which the working girl of the labouring class would have in satisfying the conditions of the lodger franchise, probably the majority of those exercising the vote would belong to the middle and upper classes.

All the women of means, possessing or occupying, a house of their own, would have a vote.

All the single women, occupying a separate room in their own name, at not less than 4s. a week rent, would have a vote.

And some married women possessing property of their own, or to whom their husbands had conveyed property for the purpose, would have a vote.

In other words, “the short Bill in this present Session,” for which the Suffragists ask, would be a Franchise Bill on a property basis. Woman suffrage “on the same terms as men” works out as a property franchise.

But let us consider this for a moment. Is it probable that any Government at the present day is going to commit itself to an extension of the property basis of franchise? The tendency is all in the opposite direction; and any extension of the property franchise would be, in fact, a perpetual challenge to the democratic spirit of the large constituencies. **The ownership vote, as it now exists, is a clumsy and inconsistent franchise.** These are some of the facts:

(1) The ownership of freehold property of the clear annual value of 40s. entitles to a parliamentary vote. Accordingly, if a man has such property to the total value of £24, in only one constituency, he is entitled to **one vote**. But if he has property to the clear annual value of £2 **in each of twelve constituencies** (a total value of £24) he can exercise twelve votes. Further, although a man be the sole proprietor of £10,000 worth of shares in a big English railway, and have not the £2 worth of freehold property, he is not necessarily entitled by his railway interest to **any vote**.

The property qualification is, in fact, an anomaly, on its way to abolition. The Parliamentary vote is really based on the principle of manhood suffrage. The primal principle is, that **the man represents his household**. In the same way the men of a class present that class. The interests of the women of property are safeguarded by the votes of the men of the propertied class; just as the women of the working class are represented by the men of that class.

(2) **No Liberal Government could reconcile its professed principles with any extension of the system of property suffrage.** It would be a political endowment of one class of won-ten only, and would instantly be denounced as class legislation.

(3) **No Conservative Government would ultimately profit by an extension of the property suffrage** (though some Conservatives seem to think that their party would so profit). The next turn of the political tide would sweep the anomaly away. But woman suffrage, the principle of it, would remain, and could not be withdrawn. The result would, and must be, the enfranchisement of all **women** and **all men** over twenty-one, in other words, adult Suffrage. And Adult Suffrage would mean **the government of this country by women**. Nor ought it to be forgotten that Adult Suffrage would involve also the enfranchisement of that large class of "undesirables" which has hitherto been excluded altogether from municipal as well as from Parliamentary politics.

(4) That the attempt to introduce a property suffrage for women is but the thin edge of the wedge, or, at any rate, would so work out, is clearly not overlooked by its advocates. For the agitators "demand the vote on the same terms as it is, or **may be**, granted to men." Anyone reading the Socialist newspapers may see clearly enough for themselves that the present demand, in the minds of the majority of its advocates, is a mere stepping-stone to something far more extensive and revolutionary.