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THE CITIZENSHIP OF WOMEN

A PLEA FOR WOMAN'S SUFFRAGE

BY MR. KEIR HARDIE, M.P.

It is not my purpose to write a learned dissertation or even an elaborate essay on the Woman question; this has been done by men and women well qualified for the task, and doubtless will be again. My present object is to re-state in plain and homely language the case for Woman Suffrage. To deal with the Woman question as a whole would involve a long inquiry into the causes responsible for the difference in status of the sexes, including women's economic position, the marriage laws, and our social policy. These are subjects interwoven with the position of women, but they are beyond the scope of my ability, and for the moment I leave them aside and confine myself to the one question of their political enfranchisement. I do so mainly because this is a question ripe for settlement by legislation. The other questions hinted at may be left to evolve their own solution as time and chance determine. None of them are within the ken of politics, nor should they be brought into the political arena until women are in a position to influence equally with men the creation of opinion upon them, and, where necessary, the legislation which may be required to assist in solving them. John Stuart Mill declared it to have been one of his earliest, as it remained one of his strongest, convictions, "that the principles which regulate the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by principles of perfect equality admitting no power or privilege on the one side nor disability on the other." I hold it to be true with those who say that the foundation upon which this equality is to be reared is the political enfranchisement of women.

In sentiment we have advanced somewhat since 1790, when a learned writer of the period explained that people who should not be included in the country franchise were those who "lie under natural incapacities, and therefore cannot exercise a sound discretion, or (who are) so much under the influence of others that they cannot have a will of their own in the choice of candidates. Of the former description are women, infants, idiots, lunatics, of the latter, persons receiving alms and revenue offices." We do not now speak of women as being in the same category as "idiots" and "lunatics," but for political purposes we treat them as they were.

No one seeks to deny the existence of differences between the sexes, differences subtle, deep-seated, and ineradicable. But these, being admitted, afford no justification for the usurpation by man of the right to say what duties and responsibilities woman

may be allowed to undertake, and what must be withheld from her because of her sex. Such a theory can only be upheld on the old tradition of the East that woman is one of the lower animals over whom lordly man was given dominion. The harem is the logical outcome of this belief. It is only by removing the disabilities and restraints imposed upon woman, and permitting her to enter freely into competition with man in every sphere of human activity, that her true position and function in the economy of life will ultimately be settled. We can at present form no conception of what woman is capable of being or doing. We have no data upon which to base any real conclusions. Nowhere is woman treated as the free and equal companion of man. Amongst coloured peoples living in a state of nature and in a tribal environment which has evolved itself, and wherein custom is the only law, the woman, though far from being the degraded creature which she has so often been pictured by superficial observers, is still her husband's drudge, and frequently a part of his wealth. In the military state of social evolution, or the age of chivalry as it has been dubbed by persons of a poetic temperament and a vivid imagination, woman is the weaker and more spiritualized sex, requiring to be protected by her lord, and almost worshipped as a superior creation. "Half angel, half idiot" aptly describes this conception of woman. This is but a perverted way of declaring her inferiority; the homage paid to her is much like that we should pay to a child; in no sense is it a recognition of equality; very often it is the exact opposite. In modern life we get back to the savage stage. Woman of the working class is again a drudge who does the menial work. Her husband works for, and is dependent for the opportunity to work, upon a master; his wife works for, and is dependent for her livelihood upon, a husband. That there are varying degrees of this feeling of subjection goes without saying, and I think, and I think it could be shown that the position of women, as most other things, has always been better, more near an equality with man, in Celtic than in non-Celtic races or tribes. Thus in Scotland a woman speaks of her husband as the "man," whilst in Staffordshire he is always spoken of as "the master."

The universality of this subjection of woman is assumed by many as an infallible testimony to the truth of the theory that woman must in some way be inferior to man. Were it not so, say these quidnuncs, there would be some exceptions to prove the contrary. They overlook the one obvious explanation which explains everything—Motherhood. In the early days of the race, the days of the huntsman and the warrior, when the spoils of war and the trophies of the chase were the only wealth of nations, child-bearing must have been a serious handicap to the woman: add to this the fact that war meant prisoners, and that from the very first, probably, even when men captured in warfare were killed as an incumbrance, women for reasons which will be understood without being stated, were spared by their captors and; coming down to later times, when men captives were made slaves and women-raiding became a favourite pastime, we can see explanation enough of the position which in process of time woman came to occupy, and from which she is only now slowly and toilsomely emerging. Already we see how the intensity of the struggle for political recognition is developing, in individual cases, those qualities of mind and brain which man has been wont to assume as being his special monopoly; and from these cases we may infer how richly endowed the field of human thought will become enriched by the product of the brains of men and women working together on terms of equality, and free from the debasing and sinister influences which subjection, in any form, imposes alike upon the subdued and the subduer. So true it is that one end of the chain which binds the slave is fastened round the life of his master, that the emancipation of women will also infallibly give freedom to the man.

Curious are the changes which a quarter of a century produces in the political horizon. Questions arise, no larger than a man's hand at first, and are driven by the force of agitation nearer the arena in which the political strife of the day is waged, and keep gathering size as they approach, until they obscure everything else. They are debated, wrangled over, and made leading issues at General Elections, and even whilst the strife which their coming has caused waxes hot, they begin to move away from sight without having been resolved. Disestablishment and Republicanism are questions which illustrate my meaning here. But so also does Woman Suffrage. In the days of the franchise agitations, the enfranchisement of woman, promoted by Mill and strenuously supported by Fawcett, Dr. Pankhurst, and other leaders of reform, promised to become a question of first political importance, but with the passing of the one and then the other of these friends of the movement, leaving no successors to carry on their tradition, it gradually passed into semi-obscurity. As it is again emerging and showing fresh vitality,* it may not be amiss to briefly record its history, particularly as it connects itself with the various Reform Bills.

In the Reform Act of 1832 the word "male" was interpolated before "persons." Never before and never since† has the phrase "male persons" appeared in any Statute of the Realm. By this Act, therefore, women were legally disfranchised for the first time in the history of the English constitution. In 1851 Lord Brougham's Act was passed, providing that the word "man" should always include "woman," except where otherwise stated. That seemed to clear the ground, and give women the same legal status as men. But, alas!

In 1867 the Representation of the People Act came before the House. John Stuart Mill's amendment, that it should be made expressly to include women, as defeated, but so also was the amendment that the phrase "male persons" of 1832 should be replaced. The word "man" was used instead. During the discussion the Hon. John Denman, Justice of the Common Pleas, asked the following question:—

"Why, instead of the words 'male person' of the Act of 1832, the word 'man' had not been substituted in the present Bill? In the fifth clause he found that after saying that every 'man' should be entitled to be registered, it proceeds to say, 'or a MALE PERSON in any University who has passed any senior middle examination.' In the light of Lord Brougham's Act, if the Court of Queen's Bench had to decide to-morrow on the construction of these clauses, they would be constrained to hold that they conferred the suffrage on female persons, as well as on males."

The Government did not answer this question, and passed the Bill as it stood. It was thought, therefore, that women were now entitled to vote, and in Manchester 5,347 women got on the register as voters. In Salford 1,500 (about) were registered, and large numbers in other places. Great uncertainty prevailed as to how to treat them, but most revising barristers threw them out. The Manchester women consolidated their claims, and appealed against the decision, and the case of *Chorlton v. Lings* was heard in 1868.

The case was tried in the Court of Common Pleas, with Mr. Coleridge, afterwards Lord Coleridge, and the late Dr. Pankhurst representing the women. It was argued that inasmuch as women had in the middle ages been recognized as voters by the State, and as that right had never been expressly taken away, therefore they had a *prima facie* right to vote. Further, it was contended that under Lord Brougham's Act referred to above, the Franchise Act of 1867 must apply to women, since the term used was "men," and not "male persons," as in the Act of 1832. Despite this pleading, the judges decided that women had no statutory right to be recognized as citizens, and that until that right was expressly conferred upon them by Act of Parliament, they must remain outside the pale of the franchise.

In 1884 Mr. Gladstone procured the rejection of the amendment to his County Franchise Bill, which would have enfranchised women, by threatening to abandon the Bill if the amendment was carried. In 1889 came the case of *Beresford Hope v. Lady Sandhurst*, in which it was decided that women are incapacitated from being elected members of a County Council. (...)

In Miss Hall's case, 1900, the right of a woman to become a law agent in Scotland was denied by the judges on the ground that "person" when it is a case of exercising a public function means "MALE PERSON." The judges relied on the case of *Chorlton v. Lings* as the ground of their decision. Now in view of these decisions, the situation is quite clear.

A woman, for the purpose of citizenship, has no legal existence in England, and has to be created before she can be enfranchised. To the uninitiated this may appear absurd and ridiculous, but it is the plain, unvarnished truth none the less. A woman may be a criminal, a queen, a tax and rate payer and owner of property, but she may not be a citizen of Great Britain and Ireland until a right to become such has been created by Act of Parliament. If only people would bear this fact in mind they would be saved from much error when considering her claims to the franchise.

During the past two sessions of Parliament a measure has been introduced, at the instigation of the Independent Labour Party, having this for its object. It is a Bill of one clause, which reads as follows:—

"In all Acts relating to the qualifications and registration of voters or persons entitled or claiming to be registered and to vote in the election of members of Parliament, wherever words occur which import the masculine gender the same shall be held to include women for all purposes connected with and having reference to the right to be registered as voters and to vote in such election, any law or usage to the contrary notwithstanding."

There are those who see in this innocent-looking measure a sinister attempt to extend and strengthen the property qualification, and by enfranchising propertied women enable these to range themselves on the side of the reactionaries in opposing the enfranchisement of working-class women. Needless to add, as strong section of the Liberal Press adopts and enforces this mis-statement with all the ingenuity which a fertile and untrained imagination can lend to a bad cause. One would have thought the record of the Liberal party in connection with Woman Suffrage would have chastened the ardour of those organs of Liberalism which are opposing this Bill in the interests of "true female suffrage"; but the gift of perspective is rare in politics, and a strict desire for accuracy an inconvenient failing when there are party ends to serve. The late Mr. Gladstone, as already stated, threatened to abandon his Reform Bill in 1884 if the Women's Enfranchisement Amendment were carried. There have been three Conservative premiers who have publicly committed themselves, in speech at least (none of them have acted), to this reform, which has yet to find the first Liberal premier who will say a word in its favour.

Any one who takes the trouble to read the Bill quoted above will note that it does not oppose any franchise qualification, but asks that, whatever the qualification, women shall enjoy the franchise on the same basis as men. It is a Bill which only proposes to do one thing, and that is, to remove the sex disability which debar a woman, because she is a woman, from becoming a voter. If the qualification for men be a property one, it shall be the same for women, no more and no less; and if it be a manhood suffrage, it shall also be a womanhood. A woman may have the brain of a Bacon, the talent of a Shakespeare, the eloquence of a Demosthenes, and the wealth of a Croesus all combined, but being a woman she may not vote for a member of Parliament, and this Bill proposes to remove the disability which stands in the way of her becoming a citizen; to remove her from the sphere of "idiots, lunatics, and paupers," and to recognize that, woman though she be, she is a human being who may now become a citizen.

And now let us ascertain, if we can, what women would be enfranchised under the terms of the Bill quoted above.

There are four main heads under which the franchise qualifications fall to be grouped—(1) Owners of property; (2) Householders; (3) Lodgers; (4) Service. One set of opponents of the Woman's Enfranchisement Bill say it would be from classes one and three that the new citizens would be drawn, which, if true, would leave working-class women out in the cold. Few working women own property, and not many earn wages enough to pay the four shillings a week for unfurnished apartments, which is necessary to qualify for the lodger franchise. Rich men, they assert, would be able to put their wives and daughters on as voters and outvoters, which would tend to greatly increase an evil which is already of sufficient magnitude. Fortunately, we have already an index to guide us as to the extent to which this statement is true, even were the worst fears of our opponents to be realized. There are, roughly, 7,000,000 electors in Great Britain, of whom 220,000 are lodger voters. A very large proportion of these are workmen, and it is doubtful whether rich men's sons, qualifying from their father's property, account for more than 20,000 of the whole. Even were a like number of daughters to be put upon the voters' roll, they would not, save in those few constituencies where the property vote is overwhelming, and where, therefore, they could do no harm—save in these few cases, I say, they would not constitute an appreciable fraction of any constituency. As for the outvoters, we may surely anticipate, with some degree of assurance, that the coming Liberal Government will at least put an end to their existence, and so we need not worry ourselves about them one way or the other. In so far as the service franchise will give women the right to vote, those brought in will be working women, and we may pit these against the daughters of the rich. It will, I think, be concluded that the great bulk of those who will be enfranchised by the Bill will be householders, and here, I repeat, we have reliable data on which to base our conclusions. Women may not be elected to a town or burgh council, but they may vote in the election of such councils. Owing to difference of opinion in the ranks of the Independent Labour party over the Woman's Enfranchisement Bill, it was decided it make a serious effort to obtain from the municipal registers some guidance as to the class of women already registered as municipal voters, and who would be entitled to be placed upon the parliamentary list should the Bill become law. Accordingly, a circular was issued to every branch of the party, some 300 in all, containing the following instructions:—

“We address to your branch a very urgent request to ascertain from your local voting registers the following particulars:—

“1st—The total numbers of electors in the ward.

“2nd—number of women voters.

“3rd—number of women voters of the working class.

“4th—Number of women voters not of the working class.

“It is impossible to lay down a strict definition of the term ‘working class,’ but for this purpose it will be sufficient to regard as ‘working class women’ those who work for wages, who are domestically employed, to who are supported by the earnings of wage-earning children.”

The returns to hand are not very complete, but they comprise fifty towns or parts of towns, and show the following results:—

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| Total electors on the municipal registers | 372,321 |
| Total women voters | 59,920 |
| Working women voters as defined above | 49,410 |
| Non-working women voters | 10,510 |

Percentage of working women voters, **82.5**

As will be seen at a glance, the proportion of women voters on the registers tested for the purpose of the above return—and these were not in any way selected, but were included because they were in the ward or parish within which the branch was

situated—is equal to one-sixth of the whole. Assuming, as we may fairly do, that the same proportion obtains for the country as a whole, it would give us 1,250,000 women voters, of whom 82 per cent. are working women, and everyone of whom would at once be placed on the parliamentary register were the Bill now before Parliament to become law.

Here, then, we have it proved beyond cavil or question that whatever the Woman's Enfranchisement Bill might do for propertied women, it would for a certainty and at once put 850,000 working women on the parliamentary voters' rolls of Great Britain, and a like proportion in Ireland. The fact speaks for itself. The Woman's Enfranchisement Bill does not concern itself with franchise qualifications; it is for the removal of the sex disqualification only; and yet on the present franchise qualifications and reactionary registration laws it would at once lift 1,250,000 British women from the political sphere to which "idiots, lunatics and paupers" are consigned, and transform them into free citizens, and open wide the door whereby in the future every man and every woman may march side by side into the full enjoyment of adult suffrage.

Hitherto I have been dealing with those opponents whose objections to the Bill is that it does not go far enough, and who prefer waiting for a measure of adult suffrage under which every man and every woman, married and single alike, shall be enfranchised at one stroke. Now, I have had some experience of politics and of political methods, and I give it as my deliberate opinion that nothing would so much hasten the coming of that much-to-be-desired time as would the passing of the Woman's Enfranchisement Bill. If the workers were prepared to lay every other reform on the shelf, and begin an agitation for adult suffrage, they might, if specially fortunate, be successful in getting it about the year 1929.¹ Manhood suffrage could probably be secured almost at once and for the asking; but the complete enfranchisement of all men and all women at once would be resented bitterly by all parties. And the main difficulty in the way would be the enfranchisement of all women, married and living with their husbands, as well as single. The leap from what is now to what this proposes is too great for the mind of the British elector to grasp, and not by any means the least of the opposition would come from the working classes. Reformers gain nothing by shutting their eyes to facts which stare up at them from every part. I speak what most people know to be true when I say that the chief obstacle to reform of any kind in England is the conservative, plodding, timid mind of the average man. Hence the reason why all our reforms have come to us, not leaping and bounding, but slowly and hesitatingly. Even the franchise, such as it is, has been dribbled out to us in almost homeopathic doses. This difficulty applies to women's enfranchisement in a special degree. The male man, even he of the working classes, will not lightly or all at once part with the authority which has so long been his, and admit that the wife of his bosom is his political equal. But once women are admitted to citizenship and some women become voters, the male mind will inevitably accustom itself to the idea of woman citizenship, and the way thus prepared for adult suffrage complete and unrestricted by sex, poverty, or marriage.

To those who are opposed on principle to women having the vote at all I have little to say. These I find it easier to pity than to reason with. But when they foresee the deluge following upon the enfranchisement of women, I refer them to the Colonies. There women are citizens and voters, but they have not because of that ceased to be

¹ Little did Hardie know that his prophecy became truth. Women got full enfranchisement in Britain in 1928!

wives—even housewives, or mothers. Their outlook on life has been a little broadened by the possession of the vote which, willy nilly, forces them to interest themselves somewhat in political and social questions. They are thus in a fair way to become better companions to their husbands, and—and I say this with deep conviction— better mothers. Women whose circle of interests is circumscribed by her pots, pans , and scrubbing brushes, varied by an occasional gossip with a neighbour or quarrel with her husband, can never, however, affectionate, be other than a curb upon the opening, eagerly questioning intelligence of her children. Broaden the outlook of the mother, and you open a new world for childhood to grow in, and bind many a wild, wayward youth to his home-life whom is now driven out into the hard world for lack of that sympathetic, intelligent companionship which an educated and enlightened mother can alone supply. Colonial statesmen and social reformers all admit that women’s influence in the sphere of politics has been healthy and quickening, and, as it has been there, so undoubtedly would it be here.

The “half angel, half idiot” period is over in the woman’s world. She is fighting her way into every sphere of human activity. Her labour is coming into competition with that of man in nearly every department of industry. In the learned professions she is forcing herself to the front by sheer determination and force of intellect in a way that will not be denied. Sooner or later men will be compelled to treat with her and recognize her as a co-worker, and they could not begin better than by admitting her right to be a co-voter. Those who prate so glibly of adult suffrage might surely learn something of men’s opinion of women by taking note of the way in which lawyers and doctors are resisting her encroachments upon their preserves. A woman may be Queen of England, but she may not enter the profession from which Lord Chancellors are drawn.

The enfranchisement of women is not a party question. Its supporters and opponents are distributed over all parties. The measure is again coming well within the sphere of practical politics, and it is for women to see that it is kept there until a settlement is reached. If they will, as I think they should, make it not a test but a test question at elections, and resolutely refuse to work for or in any way countenance any candidate who is not whole heartedly with them, they will, if not in this Parliament, then certainly in the next, secure the passage of a measure through the House of Commons at least which will place them on terms of political equality with men. If this comes as part of a measure for giving complete adult suffrage well and good; but political equality they should insist upon, whatsoever the conditions of that equality may be.

Disraeli speaking on this question in the House of Commons said:

“I say that a country governed by a woman—where you allow women to form part of the other estate of the realm—peeresses in their own right, for example—where you allow a woman not only to hold land, but to be a lady of the manor and hold legal courts—where a woman by law may be a churchwarden and overseer of the poor—I do not see, where she has so much to do with the State and Church, on what reasons, if you come to right, she has not a right to vote.”

And with these words I conclude.

J. KEIR HARDIE