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# THE VOTERS' PETITION FOR WOMEN'S FRANCHISE

## I

THE extraordinary position of British women during a general election must be obvious to anyone who considers the matter with an unbiassed mind. On the one hand, our services are demanded not only to bring reluctant voters to the polling-booth, but also to explain the point of view of the party for which we are working. On the other hand, many candidates who avail themselves eagerly enough of our influence refuse to listen to our claim for direct representation. Women, it seems, may employ their best energies in the interests of men, but not for their own ends. Their rights and aspirations must take a subordinate place, to be considered at men's good will and pleasure, and domestic reforms that cry out for immediate legislation, and have the approval of men and women of all shades of opinion, are postponed in favour of some Bill that involves what is dearest to the heart of the average politician—a good party fight.

To-day, more than ever before, appeals are being made to women to come to the rescue of their country. The press of all parties urges upon women the duty of

exerting themselves to the utmost to further the success of party views ; our time, our energy, our money are claimed on public grounds. This must mean one of two things: either that women are capable of forming a sound judgment on public affairs, or that, though they are incapable of doing so, men are willing to, pretend, for a time, that they are capable, and so use them as puppets for their own ends. If women are capable of understanding what they are urged to press upon electors, the last shred of reason for refusing them a vote disappears, for they already, as taxpayers and as citizens responsible before the law, fulfil every obligation which carries with it the right to vote. Nor will the plea avail that it is contrary to the interests of society for women to court publicity, for it is at the very crisis of publicity, when every eye is fixed on the polling-booth, that they are dragged forward and thrust into the hustle, and no means of influence they possess is scouted, from the Duchess of Devonshire's celebrated kiss, [1] to the persuasive appeal of the candidate's affectionate wife. Is it fair, is it playing the game, is it decent, for men who have had no hesitation in profiting by a woman's labours to turn round, as soon as they have gained their seats, and say that she unsexes herself by showing interest in public affairs; that her nature unfits her for any sphere but home; that she loses every title to chivalrous respect if she claims a voice in politics ? One thing at least is clear. It is the obvious duty of every anti-suffragist candidate to proclaim, at the outset, his determination to

discourage any appearance of women before the electors on his behalf ; he must openly object to their canvassing or speaking for him, or wearing his colours; for if he accepts aid, he is guilty by his own admission of helping to degrade an entire sex—including, in almost every case, his female relatives and friends—for the sake of his own personal advantage.

Successful candidates have been very polite in acknowledging the service of the ladies. Even Mr. Asquith, the arch-enemy of our cause, condescends to tender his thanks to the women Liberals. ‘I must not,’ he said, in his speech after election, ‘except the ladies from my thanks; for whatever may be going on in the streets, I have never been at an election in Fife where women have shown the same amount of interest and enthusiasm. At every meeting they have been to the fore, and their keenness and applause, their intelligent appreciation of what was going on, and their healthy influence on the masculine members of the community, have had not a little to do with keeping things in a satisfactory condition.’

Why is it that the intelligence and enthusiasm that Mr. Asquith so much appreciated may not be exercised in the actual ballot? How long will women be content to be put off with pretty speeches; to do the dirty work for men while they are refused equality of citizenship? At every election-time we are told by either party, ‘You must wait patiently. The country is in great danger. Serious issues are at stake. Put aside your own grievances, and work for us, and all in due

time you will reap your reward.' But the election once over all mention of the promised test is dropped, to be brought forward once more as a bait at the next.

Fortunately for the cause of women's suffrage a large number of women have already decided to be dupes no longer, but to work for their own hand. They have made up their minds that the only way to obtain the suffrage is to toil for that, and that alone; to show the electors that they really desire the vote and mean to get it.

Our real work is to convince the electors of what our cause means and of its justice. There is no such good opportunity for this as at elections, when all thoughts are turned to politics, and when every converted elector can bring pressure to bear on the candidate he supports. We must capture the vote-holders, and through them the attention of the candidate. And we must go further than the candidates: Parliament in its corporate capacity must be brought to understand that the enfranchisement of women is practical politics. Petitions from the unfortunate class who are non-voters and can do nothing with Parliament except petition it ought, one would think, to receive some attention on that very account. But this is not the case; experience has shown us the uselessness of making this sort of appeal ourselves; it is like speaking through a telephone with no one at the other end. But voters are on a very different footing; you can't cut them off. Members of Parliament are bound to lay every petition from their constituents before the House, and a goodly number

of petitions in favour of Women's Franchise would make it impossible for any Government to shunt the question.

Influenced by these considerations. the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies determined to take advantage of the elections to obtain signatures to a voters' petition in favour of women's suffrage, and a large army of volunteers was enrolled for this purpose. The workers were of all ages—from the white-haired pioneer of the feminist movement, who had spent her life in promoting the interests of her sex, to the girl in her teens just fresh from school. Among them were to be found mothers old and young, graduates, professional women, women of independent means, and working women of every kind. Young and old, strong and fragile alike, stood patiently at the entrances to the polling stations, for hours at a time, through rain and wind, asking electors to sign a petition in favour of the enfranchisement of their sex.

It was amusing through the long day to watch the procession of voters, the Masters of England, as they came to the polling stations—the healthy, the infirm, the defective, the blind; the navy, the merchant, the shop-keeper, the publican, the professional man, the retired officer. Some appeared to be in a desperate hurry, as if they grudged the few minutes claimed by the State. Others hung about before and after, discussing the chances of the election or indulging in chaff. Many of the voters were brought by smart lady canvassers; many were accompanied by their wives.

Among the throng of electors were men in bath-chairs taken charge of by policemen, and mere boys—probably for the most part youthful lodgers. All were entertaining to watch, and almost all did their best to pretend not to see the women waiting with the petition. Regretfully we must state that a considerable number of London voters came to the polling stations the worse for liquor. This was true not only of what are usually known as the ‘working classes,’ but of a number of well-dressed men who should have been gentlemen. The fact that a certain proportion of the electors poll when not fully responsible for their actions emphasises the absurdity of the contention that women must not be allowed to vote because they are not capable of exercising that duty with sound judgment. On the whole, our experience at the stations did not tend to increase our respect for the British elector, though we received much kindness and courtesy from individuals. It is impossible to speak too highly of the kindness, consideration, and sympathy shown us by the police. Their interest in our proceedings was marked; and they had much encouraging praise for the endurance with which we stuck to our posts through all weathers. The election agents of both parties also treated us, as a rule, with perfect civility.

Owing to the outrage on the polling-booths at Bermondsey by members of the militant section in the late by-election, no women were allowed by the police inside schoolyards (the polling stations are mostly at schools), and there is no doubt this went far

to spoil our chance of getting signatures. The business was so very public, and many an elector of goodwill felt shy and disinclined to sign a woman's petition in such a conspicuous manner. That this is true was proved by the fact that at town halls in a big thoroughfare far fewer signatures were obtained than in the by-streets; and at one school, where in the evening the suffragists were allowed to stand inside the yard, one worker obtained ninety-nine signatures in an hour, instead of about fifteen or twenty at most.

The early hour at which the polls open (eight o'clock) was a trial on a winter's morning. If a worker living in Kensington had to be at Bromley or Norwood by 8 am. a very early breakfast was necessitated, and tales of porridge made over-night and hastily warmed over a lamp before fires were lit in the morning have not been uncommon.

It was not always a cheering reception that the cold and nervous suffragist received from the early voter. At one station the first man to poll arrived in a fine motorcar, wrapped in furs. He was timidly approached with the usual request, 'Sign your petition? I'll be d—d first. I hate all women,' and more loud swearing. 'Never mind, miss,' said a sympathetic policeman, 'the gentlemen haven't begun to poll yet.'

The following are a few samples of remarks made to and about our workers in the London constituencies:—

*Liberal Agent.* —'You'll excuse my saying so,

miss; but you've made this afternoon very pleasant to us. I'm sure you must be very cold in all this rain and wet. I'm just going round the corner to get a drop of something hot myself, and if you'll allow me I'll be pleased to bring you something.'

*Liberal Agent.*—'I know these suffragettes. Nine-tenths of 'em old, and nine-tenths of 'em ugly. The whole lot of 'em unmarried, and nine-tenths couldn't get married if they tried. Yah!'

At Westminster a strange old gentleman, half Socialist, half street-preacher, fired off an amazing indictment:—'Give *you* votes? Think of the soldiers and sailors and policemen and firemen and hall-porters in uniform who vote—(implied, a monstrous regiment)—and you would add to them *the women!* The women, who produce all the blind, deaf-and-dumb, hump-backed, knock-kneed, swivel-eyed children; and fill all the asylums and workhouses! Vote, indeed!'

More than one person objected to women having the vote because thereby their wages would be raised, 'and there's not enough money to go round among the men, as it is.' To this objector (he hailed from Battersea) the suffragist rather meekly suggested, 'You see, we've got to live; and we aren't all married.' 'I know it!' he exclaimed, tragically. 'I know you've got to live; that's the dreadful part of it. Perhaps I might as well sign your petition.'

Another elector objected to signing on the same score that our wages would be raised. He felt rather sore about it, he said, because a woman had got his

job. It was suggested to him that probably she was paid much less than he for the same work; he knew it, and that appeared to be his only consolation. The idea that if her wages were the same as his he would probably not have lost his post came as a new suggestion. He signed the petition.

A man in Knightsbridge, who was in the act of signing, suddenly gave back the pencil 'Oh, I forgot! All my relations are "antis."'

Allied with him was the young gentleman in North London, who, when asked to sign, raised his hat politely. 'Ah, no, I really cannot! My young lady friends would laugh at me.' The girl with the petition took his measure. 'That's perfect nonsense,' she said severely. 'No one would take the trouble to laugh at you. You must sign the petition at once.' And he did.

At Poplar a departing voter was pursued with the stereotyped question, 'Will you sign our woman's suffrage petition?' and, turning, disclosed the visage of a negro, showing his teeth in a patronising grin. To the wet and weary canvasser this seemed the last straw. It brings the full humiliation of the women's position home to one to think that the alien man, albeit scarcely removed from the savage are withheld from the best of our sex.

Then there was the old man who, after long discourse about the twenty years he had been a Chelsea voter, was pleased to sign our document, and ended up by saying, when asked for his voting number, 'Twas mostly spite, but they had not put him on the register this year.'

From a country town in one of the Home Counties comes a most encouraging story. At the close of a long, weary day of standing in snow and biting wind, a lady was approached by the Chief Constable of the Borough. 'I'm glad to see you here, miss,' he said. 'You have done us all good. I have never seen the men so orderly at the polling stations before.' In the same town the local paper, in its account of the election, said the ladies outside the polling-booths were an example to all for their patience and endurance, and had gained much sympathy.

At Amptill an old man, George Berry, read the petition over and said he was glad to sign it, because he had signed a similar petition fifty years before in Manchester.

At Barnsley in Yorkshire, the suffragists had one of the most encouraging experiences of the whole campaign. The day before the election, the Liberals, without any suggestion from the women, put up a huge poster with 'Vote for Walton and the Enfranchisement of Women'<sup>[2]</sup> on it. Not long afterwards the Conservatives followed their example, and a rival poster appeared with 'Vote for Groser and the Enfranchisement of Women.' Throughout the Barnsley district there was great enthusiasm for our cause and large numbers of voters signed the petition. At Royston some miners took charge of the petition while the women workers went away to obtain some much-needed refreshment, and the police gave all the help they could. When the poll was declared, the number of signatures obtained for our petition—

7560—was put up in the local newspaper office together with the results of the poll.

In one or two parts of London ‘antis’ appeared at the polls; ladies engaged in jotting down they didn't quite know what. It was an awkward situation. According to them we behaved shamefully in speaking to the electors, so they had to be silent. But they obligingly explained they were putting down a mark for every one who wouldn't sign our petition when asked. Upon that our worker moved off; the next polling station she knew was for the moment ‘unmanned,’ and we left the ‘antis’ in possession.

On returning an hour after, she was greeted with, ‘Where *have* you been? I have been looking for you everywhere—I can't speak to them myself, and there is nothing to write down.’ The lady was chaffed a little on the futility of her task, and asked how she could do such a wicked thing as to congregate at the polling-booths when she ought to be at home? She replied with passionate heat, ‘We hate it—it's all your fault.’ Well, we hated it too, but we stuck to it, and made no suggestions of ‘pairing.’ I suppose there were not many ‘anti’ women to be found to undertake this dreary duty, so men were placed at certain stations to say, ‘Are you against Woman's Suffrage?’ One of these confided to our petition-holder that he was really in favor of Women's Suffrage, and would like to sign for us, but he was put there by his employer, and couldn't refuse the job.

Innumerable excuses were given by electors for refusing to sign our petition, but certain reasons

recurred incessantly in all parts of London, more particularly that based on the conduct of the militant-suffragists. A list of reasons against signing the petition was drawn up by one of our workers and may prove amusing.

*Why they wouldn't sign our Petition:—*

Because, he hadn't time.

Because he didn't approve of our objects.

Because he 'had an old woman at home.'

Because he 'had four at home.'

Because he was afraid his wife might get a vote.

Because his wife might not get one.

Because it might lead to adult suffrage.

Because we were not asking for adult suffrage.

Because he wished we were all drowned.

Because he wished we were all burnt.

Because it would add to the heavy expense of elections.

Because we should get the vote without any such petition.

Because women ought all to be married.

Because women were entering men's professions.

Because if he died his wife might get a vote.

Because he was too drunk to hold a pencil.

Because many other things were urgent.

Because we oppose the Liberal.

Because he had just signed an anti-vivisection petition.

Because we ought to stay at home.

Because women would next sit in Parliament.  
Because he objected to militant tactics.  
Because women were too good to mix in politics.  
Because we should add to the Conservative vote.  
Because we should add to the Liberal vote.  
Because it was against his principles to sign any document.  
Because his friends might not like it.  
Because we hadn't asked him.  
Because we had asked him.  
Because none of the great European Powers had adopted it.  
Because he couldn't do it in public.  
Because it wouldn't do him any good.  
Because he had a wife already.  
Because he couldn't understand.  
Because women were inferior beings.  
Because Adam was made to rule over woman.  
Because we couldn't fight

A common reason alleged both in favour of and against women's suffrage, was that it would lead to a strict measure of temperance reform. In this connection, the opinion confided to us by a chairwoman is worth noting. Weary of the drudgery of 'keeping' her husband for six months on end and doing the work of the house as well, Mrs. S—went out for a little relaxation; This is how she related her experience :—

'I'd put back the dinner and run out with the baby to see the procession; where come back, Bill was dishin' it up hisself in a narsty timper. "That's your

woman's suffrage,” he says, “men gettin' their own Sunday dinner.” “No 'taint,” I says, “it's more than that.” Last night I met 'im comin' down the street with some of 'is companions, a very small 'at on the side of 'is 'ead, a-doing the Christy Minstrel. [3] “Woman's suffrage,” I said, “will be more than 'arf the public-ouses shut,” I said, “and that will stop your gallop, my man.”

[At time of going to press the full number of signatures to the petition is not known. This article will therefore be concluded in the April number. - ED]

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[1] Georgiana, the 5th Duchess of Devonshire, 1757 - 1806. The Duchess of Devonshire was the first woman to campaign for a candidate in an election. This was in the Westminster election in 1784 (the candidate was Charles Fox). The reference to the duchess' kiss hints at her alleged use of the kiss to win votes.

[2] Alfred A. Walton (1816-1883), working-class activist and liberal reformer who tried to unify the different sections of British Radicalism and to secure the representation of labour in parliament.

[3] Christy Minstrels is the name for a black-faced entertaining group, originally founded by Edwin P. Christy in 1846 in the U.S. Christy himself retired in the mid-50s, and his group disbanded soon after. E. P. Christy was well-known as a ballad singer. In 1857, however, J. W. Raynor and Earl Pierce founded a new establishment, and opened as Raynor & Pierce's Christy Minstrels in London that year. These shows enjoyed considerable popularity, and existed into the first decade of the twentieth century. As this genre spread, the name Christy Minstrels came to denote any black faced minstrel show, and this is how it is by the woman in the text.