

VOTES FOR WOMEN

SPEECH

OF THE LATE

JOHN STUART MILL

AT THE

GREAT MEETING

IN FAVOUR OF

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE,

HELD IN THE

MUSIC HALL, EDINBURGH, JANUARY 12th, 1871

PRICE TWO PENCE

To be obtained from the Secretary,
CENTRAL SOCIETY FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE,

25, VICTORIA STREET, S.W.

MR. JOHN STUART MILLⁱ (who was received with great enthusiasm, the audience rising and waving their hats and handkerchiefs) said : If there is a truth in politics which is fundamental—which is the basis of all free government—it is that when a part of the nation are the sole possessors of power, the interest of that part gets all the serious attention. This does not necessarily imply any active oppression. All that it implies is the natural tendency of the average man to feel what touches self of vastly greater importance than what directly touches only other people. This is the deep-seated and ineradicable reason why women will never be justly treated until they obtain the franchise. They suffer, assuredly, much injustice by the operation of law. But suppose this changed ; even then—even if there were no ground of complaint against the laws, there would be a break-down in their execution as long as men alone have a voice in choosing and in removing the officers of Government.

All our recent constitutional reforms, and the whole creed of reformers are grounded on the fact that the suffrage is needed for self-protection. All experience proves that if one part of the community is held in subjection by another part, it is not trusted with the ordinary means of self-defence, but is left dependent on the good-will and pleasure of those who are more privileged, the most vital interests of the subject-portion are certain to be, if not recklessly trampled upon, at least postponed to almost anything else.

The treatment of women is certainly no exception to the rule. They have neither equal laws, nor an equal administration of them. The laws treat them as they could not long be treated if they had the suffrage; and even if the laws were equal the administration of the law is not. Police magistrates and criminal judges cannot be exceptionally bad men; they are not chosen for their bad qualities ; they must be thought, by those who appoint them, to represent fairly, or better than fairly, the moral feelings of average men. Yet, what do we see? For an atrocious assault by a man upon a woman, especially if she has the misfortune to be his wife, he is either let off with an admonition, or he is solemnly told that he has committed a grave offence, for which he must be severely punished, and then he gets as many weeks or months of imprisonment as a man who has taken five pounds' worth of property gets years.

We are told that the good feelings of men are a sufficient protection to women. Those who say so can never, one would suppose, look into the police and law reports. If good feeling does not protect women against being beaten and kicked to death's door every day of their lives, and at last beaten and kicked to actual death by their special guardians and protectors, can we expect that it will secure them against injuries

less revolting to humanity ? Most men, it will be said, are incapable of committing such horrible brutality. Perhaps so ; but it seems they are quite capable of letting it be committed. If women who are maltreated by their husbands found a defender in every other man who knew of it, they might have some chance of protection without the weapon of the suffrage. But it is never so ; slaves did not find it so ; serfs did not find it so ; conquered nations do not find it so ; and neither do women. There are many men who would not consciously do them any wrong ; but there must be a great moral improvement in human nature before most men will exert themselves to prevent or to redress wrongs committed by others under the sanction of law. And of these two things—the suffrage for women, and a grand moral improvement in human nature—the suffrage, to my thinking, is likely to be the soonest obtained. (Cheers.) I could afford to stop here. I have made out an ample case. There is portion of the population, amounting in number to somewhat more than half, to whom the law and its administration do not fulfil their duty, do not afford even the bodily protection due to all—this half happening to be that which is not admitted to the suffrage. Their most important interests are neglected—I do not say from deliberate intention, but simply because their interest is not so near to the feelings of the ruling half as the ruling half's own interest. The remedy is plain ; put women in the position which will make their interest the rulers' own interest. Make it as important to politicians to redress the grievances of women as it is to redress those of any class which is largely represented in Parliament.

If nothing more than this could be said in support of their claim to the suffrage, no claim could be more fully made out. (Cheers.) And if the claim is just, so also is it strictly constitutional. One of the recognised doctrines of the British Constitution is that representation is co-extensive with direct taxation. The practice, of the Constitution, it is true, for a long time did not correspond with the theory ; but it has been made to conform to it at last, in cities and boroughs, provided the taxpayer is of the male sex ; but if a woman, she may be the largest taxpayer in the place, and the person of greatest practical ability besides ; no matter, she has no vote. This is something very like punishing her for being a woman. The conditions which in the eye of the law and of the Constitution confer a title to a voice in public affairs are all fulfilled by her, with the single exception of having been born a male. This one deficiency, which I humbly submit she cannot help—(laughter)—is visited on her by the privation of a right as important to her as to any man, and even more important, since those who are physically weakest require protection the most. This is not an injury only, but an indignity. I grant that those who uphold it are in general quite unconscious of its

being so ; but this comes from the inveterate habit of having one rule and measure for all that concerns women, and another for everything else.

Men are so much accustomed to think of women only as women, that they forget to think of them as human. (Hear, hear.) It is not only for their own sake that women ought to have the suffrage, but also for the sake of the public. It is for the interest of us all, both men and women, and of those who are to come after us. The reasons that may be given for this are many, but I may content myself with two. One, and the strongest, is what we sometimes hear unthinkingly urged as an argument on the other side—because women have so much power already. (Laughter.) It is true they have much power. They have the power which depends on personal influence over men. They have the power of cajolery—(laughter)—and often that of a petted favourite; power sadly inadequate to their own just and necessary protection against wrong, but sufficient at times to produce only too much effect upon the public conduct of the men with whom they are connected. But as this power, instead of being open and avowed, is indirect and unrecognised, no provision is made for its being rightly used. As it is conventionally assumed that women possess no power outside the domestic department, the power which they do and always will possess is exercised without the necessary knowledge, and without the proper responsibility.

It having been decreed that public matters are not a woman's business, her mind is carefully turned away from whatsoever would give her a knowledge of them, and she is taught to care nothing about them—that is, until some private interest or private likings or dislikings come in, when of course these private feelings have it all their own way, there being no public principles or convictions to control them. The power, therefore, which women now have in public affairs is power without knowledge. It is also power without responsibility. A man's wife is very often the real prompter either of what he does well and nobly, or of what he does foolishly or selfishly ; but as she gets no credit for the one, so she is not held accountable for the other ; if she is selfish, a very little art suffices to exempt her from censure though she succeeds in compassing her ends ; if she is simple and well meaning, she does not feel bound to inform herself, so as to have a reasonable opinion on what is solely the man's business, though all the while her ignorant prepossessions or her natural partialities may be acting as a most pernicious bias on what is supposed to be his better judgment. From this combination of absence of instruction and absence of responsibility, it comes to pass that, though women are acknowledged to have, as a rule, stronger conscientious feelings than men, it is but a very small

minority of women who have anything that deserves the name of a public conscience. How great an evil this is, there needs no argument to show. What is the greatest obstacle which the friends of political and social improvement have to struggle with—the drag which is constantly obstructing their efforts and disappointing their hopes? Is it not the weakness of the average citizens' political conscience? Is not this the special danger and failure to which popular institutions are exposed—that the elector does not sufficiently feel his obligations to the public, and either stays away from the poll, or goes there and votes on the prompting of some private interest? And how can we hope that he will learn to postpone private interests to public, while he has beside him, in the person of his closest intimate, one who has been trained to have no feeling whatever of his duties to the public, but who has the keenest feeling of his duties to his family, and who, even without intending it, cannot but sway his mind strongly in the direction of the only interests which she understands and appreciates? (Applause) It must be remembered, too, that this is a growing evil. Time was when the wife was very little a companion of her husband—their lives were apart; the associates of his leisure and of his recreations were other men. But now the home and its inhabitants are so much to a man, that no other influence can, as a rule, compete with theirs. The time, therefore, is come when, if we would have public virtue in our men, we must have it in our women. (Hear, hear and applause.) And how can a woman have a conscience about the public good, if she is told, and believes, that it is no business whatever of hers? Give women the same rights as men, and the same obligations will follow. Instead of hanging a dead weight on men's public conscience, their greater susceptibility of moral feeling will make their habitual influence a most valuable support to the honest performance of public duty. (Loud applause.) This, then, is one of the reasons why it is for the good of all that women should have an admitted right to take part in public affairs. Another is the vast amount of brain power and practical business talent which now runs to waste for want of an outlet into those great fields of public usefulness, in which no one, I suppose, will pretend that such qualities are not very much wanted. Few men, I suspect, are sufficiently aware of the great amount of administrative ability possessed by women; for want of considering that the essential qualities which lead to practical success are the same in what are called small things as in great.

It is my belief that, in all those parts of the business of life which depend on the vigilant superintendence and accurate estimation of details, women, when they have the necessary special knowledge, are better administrators than men. And I am now speaking, not of women as they might be—not as some improved mode of education would

make them—but of women as they now are, and of the capacities which they have already displayed. If an example is wanted of what women's powers of organisation can accomplish in public life, I appeal to one of the most striking facts of modern times, the Sanitary Commission in the late American War. The history of that Commission ought to be as well known all over the world as it is in America. From the beginning, and throughout, it was women's work. It was planned, organised, and worked by women. The Government was jealous of them at first, but the hopeless inferiority of its own arrangements made it soon glad to make over the first place to them. Not only had such work never been so well done, but nobody had ever supposed it possible that it could be so well done. I am aware that this argument would carry us much further than the suffrage : but I suppose it will be acknowledged that those who are themselves eminently capable of practical business, must be fit to take a share in the choosing of those to whom practical business is to be entrusted. The ability which is specially required for the exercise of the suffrage—that of selecting the persons most capable for the work that is to be done—is one of the qualifications for business in which women have always excelled. Great queens have in nothing shown themselves greater than in their choice of Ministers. When the ladies of the Sanitary Commission wanted men to help them, they knew the right men and how to use them; and they distinguished themselves not less by the work which they caused to be done, than by that which they did in their own persons (Applause.) These are some of the reasons which make it equally just and expedient that the suffrage should be extended to women. It must, at the same time, be borne in mind that, by admitting them to the suffrage, no other question is in the smallest degree prejudged.

Supposing it true, what some people are so fond of affirming, that women have nothing to complain of, and that the vast majority of them do not desire any change ; if so, giving them the suffrage can do nobody harm, and would afford them an opportunity of showing their perfect contentment with their present lot, in a manner beyond the reach of dispute. (Applause.)

If what we are told is true, that women ought to be, and always must and will be, in a state of domestic and social subordination to men, why, then, they require the suffrage so much the more, in order that the sovereignty of men over them may be exercised under the fitting responsibility. None need political protection so much as those who are in domestic dependence, since none are so much exposed to wrong. On every possible supposition, therefore, they have a claim to the suffrage. And we live at a period of human development, when the just claims of large numbers cannot be permanently resisted.

The whole movement of modern society, from the middle ages until now, greatly accelerated in the present century, points in the direction of the political enfranchisement of women. Their exclusion is a last remnant of the old bad State of society – the regimen of privileges and disabilities. All other monopolies are going or gone. The whole spirit of the times is against predetermining by law that one set of people shall be allowed by right of birth to have or to do what another set shall not, by any amount of exertion or superiority of ability, be allowed to attain. (Applause.) If nature has established an ineradicable and insuperable difference in the capacities and qualifications of the two sexes, nature can take care of itself. What nature has decided may safely be left to nature. But when we find people making themselves uneasy for fear that nature's purposes should be frustrated unless law comes to her assistance, we may be pretty certain that it is not nature they are so careful about, but law pretending to be nature. To all such pretences the growing improvement of mankind is making them more and more adverse.

I do not know how long a time it may require to get rid of women's disabilities. Great changes in the habits and opinions of mankind are always slow. But of one thing I am certain – that when once they have been got rid of – when their true aspect is no longer disguised by the varnish of custom and habit – they will appear in the retrospect so devoid of any rational foundation, and so contradictory to the principles by which society now professes to guide itself, that the difficulty which will be felt will be to conceive how they can ever have been defended, and by what possible arguments they can ever have been made to appear plausible. (Loud and prolonged cheering.)

VACHER & SONS, Printers, Westminster.

ⁱⁱ John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was the son of the philosopher and economist James Mill. He worked for his father in the East India Company for many years. 1865-8 he was Liberal MP for Westminster. In the 1830s he edited the Westminster Review. From 1830 till his death he wrote and worked for getting people to understand the necessity of a scientific approach when dealing with issues of social, political and economic change, while also not forgetting or ignoring the insights of poets and creative writers. His best known works are *System of Logic* (1843) a key text in the study of logic; *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) which took up the links between economic growth and the environment. it was thought of as 'worker's capitalism' or socialism. A utilitarianist he published *Utilitarianism* in 1861, a classic text on the welfare of all.

Liberty was important to Mill as seen in his *Essay on Liberty* (1859). He was therefore a strong supporter of women's emancipation and in 1869 published *The Subjection of Women* a classic statement of liberal feminism, published today with an essay by his wife Harriet Taylor Mill on the same theme.