

July 1889

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE.

A paper read at the Dawn Club by the President.

23rd May 1889.

Louisa Lawson

THE popular idea of an advocate of women's rights is this:—she is an angular hard-featured withered creature with a shrill, harsh voice, no pretence to comeliness, spectacles on nose, and the repulsive title, "blue-stocking" visible all over her. Metaphorically she is supposed to hang half way over the bar which separates the sexes, shaking her skinny fist at men and all their works.

I don't think it will be difficult to unseat this idea as soon as we can get people to think about the subject at all, for it is remarkable that almost every thinking man who does investigate the topic seriously, at once hands in his allegiance. For as a clever American woman has said:—

"There are no arguments against women's suffrage—only 'objections'."

Now as we have no time to be elaborate or diffuse, we must be methodical and we will take first the reasons why women claim the right to vote; then we will pick up the objections one by one and turn them inside out to show their entire vacuity, and finally review briefly what women are doing now in other countries (in order to show how woefully we in New South Wales are behind the times.) For the thoughts we entertain on this and other sections of the Woman's question are merely scattered unshaped blocks lying rough in the quarry, while in America and England they are already squared and set together in the foundations of that new social edifice which the 19th century is building.

The whole principle of the justice of the woman's vote agitation may be compressed into a question:—

"Who ordained that men only should make the laws to which both men and women have to conform?"

No strong faction however honorable they might be, ever yet looked at the rights and interests of a weaker party with quite the same consideration as they bestowed on their own concerns; no parliament responsible only to men voters can ever take any but a purely masculine view of things, although both men and women are equally concerned, and in fairness the reasons of both sides should be heard. Pray why should one half of the world govern the other half? Is it just to first ensure the silence of the weaker half by depriving them of a citizen's status, and then inform them that by the laws of the stronger section this is the way they must act and this is the way the world may legally use them. A woman's opinions are useless to her, she may suffer unjustly, she may be wronged, but she has no power to weightily petition against man's laws, no representatives to urge her views, her only method to procure release, redress, or change, is to ceaselessly agitate with the hope that after many years the sense of justice in the majority of her rulers may be stirred and some tardy concession be granted, perhaps in time to benefit her grand-daughters.

Lucy Stone in an article on "Lobsters, Crows and Women" reminds us that in Maine the lobster question, important to fishermen, was discussed in Parliament and duly passed in committee; a price was set on the heads of the crows on the plea of the men voters; the gipsies robbed the fowl yards and straight on the motion of men who, having votes, had power, the laws were made more stringent; but when the women of Arkansas sent in a petition that temperance might be taught in the State schools they promptly had leave to withdraw. The Bill was hardly presented before a resolution to table it was carried without discussion; the women had no votes so what did their desires and opinions matter?

The form of liberal government is a government in accordance with the wishes of the majority; these wishes are written down and put in a ballot box for convenience in counting and in thus taking the sense of the community certain classes by tacit consent are omitted from participation in the right. We always omit minors, felons, idiots,

and women; why women? what kind of liberal government or government by a majority is this? Does housekeeping or any other woman's employment make any one more unfit to conscientiously and usefully record a vote than, bricklaying or writing up a ledger? It is not the right to rule which women want; they have no desire to change places with men; they only claim the right to record an opinion, a right difficult one would think to justly deny an intelligent creature. (Here in New South Wales every man may vote, let his character be bad, his judgment purchasable, and his intellect of the weakest, but an honorable thoughtful and good woman may be laughed at by such men, they can carry what laws they please in spite of her.)

It cannot be urged that women have no need to vote because justice is always done even though they are silent. It is only since 1886 that a mother's right to share in the guardianship of her children has been legally admitted; even now in some places the husband may separate the children from their mother if he wills to do so. Not alone as a citizen but even as a mother a woman has not full legal recognition. In divorce men are protected from infidelity—not women. In intestate estates women do not share equally with men. In educational endowments and facilities they have not the same privileges. (Wives may still be forced to live in the same house with a husband whom they hate or fear. Have women no need of a vote to protect them in these things and in the multitude of other interests affecting women and children; to say nothing of the larger questions of vice and drunkenness in which the happiness of women and children is always closely involved.)

But the vote in these things is not all. The expression of woman's desires leads to a change in public opinion which is far more powerful than law. It leads moreover to the development of thought in women, and to the purification of governing bodies; for women in the mass will never vote for corrupt or dishonourable representatives.

(They say that if women vote we shall have an effeminate nation, but those nations are strongest where the women are most free.) How can it be otherwise while the principle of heritance remains a universal truth? Children inherit from both parents and are most influenced in their training by their mothers. (From thoughtful women will come noble sons, and the enfranchisement of women must make the thoughts of women wider.) Their interests less selfish, their ambitions ampler and more noble." With a share in the national life they will learn to care for the good of other homes and other affairs than their own.

As to the effect of woman's influence on government we can turn from theory to fact. In Kansas with women voting and the prohibition law in force, more than half the state gaols are now without prisoners. In Wyoming women have had the right to vote since 1869 and the Speaker of the House of Representatives there has been asked to give the results of his experience. This is what he says:—"I started with the strongest prejudice against women's suffrage and was decidedly opposed to it at all points, but on its introduction I became a close observer of its practical results. I have been twice Speaker of the House of Representatives, and I have had opportunities of forming judgment upon the circumstances. I can now say that the more I have seen of the results of women's suffrage the less have my objections been realized and the more has the thing commended itself to my judgment and good opinion, and I must frankly acknowledge, after all my distrust, that it has worked well and been productive of much good to the Territory and of no evil that I am aware of."

He then refers to the influence of women's suffrage in

inducing both parties to choose respectable men as their candidates, and adds, that the interest taken by women in politics since their admission to the franchise, has led to "No domestic trouble, or made any of us speak alightingly of women."

Now we will consider the objections made to Women's Suffrage. I have collected all which I have ever heard or read.

Some say:—"If you want to share men's rights you must share their responsibilities too: men have to fight for their country, are the women also ready to do the same?"

This objection cuts both ways—if rights and responsibilities must be exactly halved, the men must help to mind the children and do the cooking. But seriously if the ability to fight is the one necessary qualification enabling citizens to have a voice in the making of the laws under which they live, you must disqualify all old men, and the lame, and the feeble, for they are as unfit to be soldiers as women are. You must also exclude clergymen, and Members of Parliament, for they don't fight—except amongst themselves.

Another objection urged is, that women have no knowledge of politics and that to vote will interfere with their domestic duties.

It seems to me that a very large proportion of men voters use their vote without any previous close study of politics; moreover that a knowledge of the burning questions of the day is very quickly learned even if it is not thrust upon the attention of all reading and thinking people. And inasmuch as both men and women suspend their occupations at odd times on various pretexts without upsetting the order of things, (the little time taken by the recording of a vote will not seriously disturb the conditions of domestic life.)

Some say that women have no commercial training and cannot therefore understand political and economical questions.

Now we know that in the trading classes in France, and in the working classes in English speaking nations the financial affairs of the whole household are usually left in the wife's hands. We know that there are thousands of women managing business institutions, and hundreds of thousands of women commercially employed, and therefore getting political training,—if this is what commercial training means.

If house-keeping does give narrow views, give women an interest in the affairs of the nation and let their views be widened, for it is the interest of all men to have intelligent housekeepers and the interest of all the world to have intelligent mothers.

Women have sufficient commercial talent to be post-mistresses: there are 3000 women in such positions in the United States alone.

As to women being inherently destitute of average talent, there is so much evidence to the contrary that the objection is hardly worth answering.

It is usual to allege that the instances relied on are instances of quite phenomenal women, but when we see so many thousands of women holding high places in all varieties of vocations it is transparently clear, that, if women have any stimulus to work, and fair chances to develop, their talent reaches nearly as high an average as man's. We could weary any one to death with instances, but taking merely a few more recent papers and records we find these fragmentary facts in evidence and they show what the sum total of women's public work to-day would be, if the statistics could be collected. In England we read in the few papers from which these facts are culled that during the three years between 1885 and 1888, six women were elected to serve on school boards.

Women were elected on the New County Councils but the law decided they are ineligible. The London Council elected Miss Emma Cons to be an Alderman of the City but she will also probably be disqualified. Two women have been elected by the Council to act on the Committee

on the housing of the poor. Women have inaugurated and are managing Trades Unions among working women.

They are managing hospitals, asylums and schools, they are appointed as Inspectors under the Poor Laws Act. They compete on even terms with men as artists, musicians, journalists, dentists, photographers, farmers storekeepers, and their successes in literature are numberless.

Miss Waterson has taken the diploma of the Edinburgh College of Surgeons, and is the first woman to take the Certificate of the Medico Physiological Society. Miss Cradock medical officer to the women's clerks at the Liverpool post office has been made a member of the Liverpool Medical Society. Two lady students took the highest prizes for descriptive and practical anatomy at the Irish Royal College of Surgeons. The report of the Dublin University shows that in 1888 one woman took the degree of L. L. D. two took the M. A. degree, and 18 the B. A. degree. At the London University, one woman has taken the L. L. D. degree, two that of Doctor of Science, six the M. A. degree, 20 the degree of B. Sc., over 150 the degree of B. A. At Oxford and Cambridge they have done as well, but at those Colleges no degrees are conferred.

Recent papers from America, not complete statistics I must remind you, mention that no less than 2500 women hold first class diplomas from duly incorporated medical colleges. There are 60 women dentists. Reference is made to two women who are licensed commanders of steam vessels on the Mississippi, to two women sculptors, and to several women editing newspapers. The Vassar College is founding a Chair of Astronomy in honour of Professor Maria Mitchell who has long worked in the department of Astronomy at that College; Mrs. Braman is Commissioner of Deeds in New York; Mrs. Russell is a Prison Commissioner. Dr. Sarah Millsop has been appointed by the Southern Homoeopathic Association to the Chairmanship of a section. Miss Hayden has just beaten fifteen young men in an original architectural design at the Institute of Technology, Boston. *Harpers Bazaar* was for many years edited by a woman. Frank Leslie's Illustrated was not successful until Mrs. Leslie took charge after her husband's death. There are 213 clubs of women formed in New Orleans for the study of political economy.

It is clear that women are at work and that they are fit to work. Abroad they are not idle but my information is scanty.

There are 16 women doctors in Paris and at the recent Medical Congress in St. Petersburg 162 women doctors attended. The Professor of Literature at Stockholm is a woman, so also is the Professor of Pathology at Pisa.

If these and the thousands of other instances are all cases of phenomenal women there must be a great many exceptions to the "Smaller brain" theory.

The latest objector in the Fortnightly Review says that women's judgments are hasty, and that they lack sagacity: well this is merely generalising and as Mrs. Fawcett (Widow of the late Postmaster General) says, the only real basis of conjecture as to the effect of the Woman's franchise is "The work which women employed publicly have already done."

Women serve as jurors in Washington Territory, and this is what Chief Justice Greene says of them: "Twelve terms of Court I have held in which women have served as grand and petit jurors, and as a fact beyond dispute, other twelve terms so salutary for the restraint of crime have ever been held in this territory. For 15 years I have been trying to do what a Judge ought, but have never in the last six months felt underneath and around me, in the degree that every judge has a right to feel it, the unobscured weight of the people in line of full and respectful enforcement of the law."

Women have been managing the affairs of a town of 2000 inhabitants in Kansas.