

THE BRITISH GIANTS OF DEBATE ON THE WOMAN SUFFRAGE BILL

Mr. F. E. Smith Opposes and Mr. P. B. Haldane Supports It—
Mr. Smith Sees Disaster—Mr. Haldane Punctures
Mr. Smith's Arguments.

The speech on the woman suffrage bill in the British House of Commons brought out many excellent speeches. Two of the best of these were by Mr. F. E. Smith, Conservative, who opposed the bill, and by Right Hon. R. B. Haldane, minister of war, who supported it.

Mr. F. E. Smith (C. Walton, Liverpool), moved the rejection of the bill. It was said that women had the right to vote. No one had an abstract right of that sort, declared Mr. Smith. The theory that there was such a right was as dead as Rousseau (Laughter.) The vote was given on approved public grounds to such sections of citizens as in the opinion of the state were likely to use it for the benefit of the whole community. If women had a right to vote, they had it everywhere, including priest-ridden Italy and our great eastern dependencies. Supporting our Indian fellow-subjects were ever enfranchised, the operation must include not the men only but the unilluminated zenanas. It would not be right in discussing this question to leave out of account the prodigious fact that we were asked to take a step for which there was no model and no example in any first-class country in the world.

Mr. W. Redmond (N. East Clare)—Is not Australia a first-class country? Mr. Smith explained that he was speaking of countries which discharged in their entirety Sovereign functions. The case of Norway was the only one cited. Norway had a population of 2,328,000, distributed over a territory of 124,000 square miles. Was there anybody who would say a case like that

supplied us with useful guidance in the decision we were asked to take? (Cheers.) Then, as to Australia. Australia had a population of 4,200,000, distributed over 3,000,000 square miles. The House was invited to see in the case of a lady who formerly lived at Blackburn and who now lived in a community where the population was one and a quarter to the square mile, and which was not in the enjoyment of sovereign functions, an overwhelming reason why the Blackburn lady's sister who lived at home should be enfranchised. He was wholly unconvinced by that argument, and, what was more, he might point out that the Blackburn relict would not obtain the suffrage under this bill. (Cheers and laughter.)

The Example of Utah. Continuing, Mr. Smith said that a good deal had been said in previous debates about the illustration supplied by the United States, and great relief had been placed upon the states which enjoyed female suffrage. A recital of the names of those states was sufficient answer. They were Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah. (Laughter.) No one familiar with the government of Colorado would lay great stress on the argument from the circumstances in that state; and, as to Utah, it was an interesting circumstance that the same bill which abolished polygamy stipulated for female suffrage (laughter) and that, as a result of the first election, Mr. Brigham Roberts, the uneasy possessor of three wives, was one of the earliest members returned. (Laughter.) Upon those illustrious precedents we

were asked to mold an empire of 450,000,000 inhabitants, with an Oriental population of 300,000,000 who detested government by women. We were holding the equipoise of empire balanced upon democracy in the west, and bureaucracy in the east, and we were asked to be the body upon whom this experiment was to be made for the first time on a large scale in the history of the world. (Cheers.)

One contention put forward in every debate on this subject had never been answered. Majorities were allowed to rule peacefully because in the last resort they could coerce minorities, and because it was more agreeable to vote than fight in those circumstances. Exactly what banknotes were to gold—the one was effective only because the other was believed to be behind it. He did not say that women in this country would ever vote all together, but women, with a minority of men, might easily attempt to impose their views upon an actual majority.

Women and Military Service. Suppose those men who believed in compulsory national service were able, with the aid of the female vote, to press it upon an actual majority of the male voters. Would the Labor party accept that? Suppose as the result of a sinister alliance between Mrs. Pankhurst and Sir Thomas Whitaker (laughter) every public-house was closed. Would the men of the country ever acquiesce in that? Suppose the powerful eloquence of the late Mr. Gladstone against the Bulgarian and Armenian atrocities had found root in the emotional mind of a female electorate. The result might easily have been that the majority of women would have had to go to fight in a war for which they had no inclination.

In conclusion, Mr. Smith said the moment chosen for creating a million of new electors, as to whose decision no man could pronounce with confidence, was the moment when, if the pacific discussions at the veto conference should unhappily prove unsuccessful, the country would be confronted with the risk of being governed almost under a unicameral system. Mention had been made of illustrious women. He ventured to say that the sum total of human happiness would have been almost unaffected if Sappho had never sang, if Joan of Arc had never fought, if Mrs. Siddons had never played, and if George Eliot had never written. It was because he believed in the influences which most animated mankind were so heavily menaced by the intrusion of women into politics that he moved the rejection of the bill. (Cheers.)

War Minister's Friendship. Mr. Haldane, secretary of state for war, reminded the House of the position in which the members found themselves. "Here, with a question of absolute first-rate importance before the House," he said, "it is impossible for the Government of the day, but it is equally true of the front Opposition bench. We are divided in opinion, and the division is of such a character that I believe it to be impossible under any conditions which are likely to occur soon for any Government to give a lead on this question."

"There is this new feature in the situation at this moment—that the Government has never made for the full discussion of this question so that this House of Commons may, for the first time, express itself, and that some judgment may be passed as to what the mind of this House of Commons is. No doubt that the question has been conceded to opinion, because if this House of Commons expresses itself very strongly upon the principle, then it is reasonable that an effective order for the House to translate its opinion into a concrete form." (Cheers.)

Mr. Haldane cautioned the House, as a strong supporter of women's suffrage, to act carefully, in the absence of government guidance. He was against the relegation of the bill to a committee, which might be disastrous to the measure in another place. As to the proposals of the bill, he had to one of the most admirable of many speeches made by the honorable and learned member for Walton (Mr. F. E. Smith), whose earnestness no one could have failed to appreciate; but there was one relation which must have gone through their minds, and that was the fact that the bill, however admirable, however important, would have been at an earlier stage in the history of this question, "too late." (Cheers.)

The Woman on the Throne. The honorable member for Walton spoke of this question, the war secretary proceeded, "as though it were an open one, which we were discussing on its merits without a history behind it. He told us, and with great eloquence, that the sovereign reigns over between 300 and 400 millions of colored subjects, who would resent the denigration of government by women. Well, I think it might, however crushing force, have been retorted on him that these very subjects not only endured, but accepted and welcomed, the reign of a woman on the throne, and that if we are to take the stands out prominently in the history of this country, it is that its throne can be occupied, that has been occupied, by women, who have imparted to the supreme position in the state and in the empire a distinction, and an influence that have been outdone by no man." (Cheers.)

Mr. Haldane went on to speak of the steady development of the position which women had taken in the nation. And who, he asked, were those who objected to this enfranchisement? They were the very same men who were welcoming the advent of women to take a large part in imperial questions. (Cheers.) There were many superior persons who wrote in the newspapers for and against the emancipation of women on abstract grounds. But this was not a matter which could be decided on abstract grounds. The real argument to-day was in the concrete. That was why he did not find himself in sympathy with the line of argument pursued by some of the very aristocracy of thought, who, notwithstanding their

guilty of grave breaches of trust, embellishing the funds of individuals and institutions. Fear is the passion that usually prompts such action. Investments have been made and failures threatened. It is a time to bravely face disaster, but this base passion fear turns the honest man into a thief. Even more shocking crimes than theft have been occasioned by fear. The majority of the murders of the world are committed to conceal lesser crimes. Dread seizes the criminal that he may be discovered for some deed against society and to remove the danger he resorts to murder. Practically all suicides, save those of the unfortunate insane, are the acts of cowards who fear to face the battle of life.

The passion of fear like the passions of joy, and hate, is contagious. What is a panic, but a sudden plague of fear? In a crowded building an unusual cry starts some timorous soul. A rush is made for safety. Without knowing why, others act in a similar manner and the panic spreads till the audience is a seething mass of humanity. Such a building becomes a pandemonium filled with wild-eyed, unreasoning demons. Occasionally when a ship has been in collision on the ocean a panic seizes crew and passengers. A fierce scramble for life follows; boats are overcrowded and overturned, the weak are thrown into the sea. In the presence of such scenes the truth of Joan of Arc's words, "Of all base passions, fear is most accursed," is realized.

In time of battle fear is the greatest enemy with which troops have to contend. Courage is as valuable as a regiment, if fear reigns in the opposing host. Every war presents a number of instances of this base passion. Regiments through fear have acted as night sheep at the approach of wolves. Individuals show the white feather, and by fear armies have been swayed. When a retreat begins, it spreads. At first only a few timid cowards may fall to the rear, but their act often causes contagious fear to seize their comrades. They fear an ill report less

than their personal safety. There is no nation but has to blush when some battlefield is recalled. Fear lowers moral character, courage raises it. Cowards are usually crueler than brave men when they have an opportunity of showing their power. The Anglo-Saxon race has been, since the days of William the Conqueror, renowned for its courage. And what people or what individuals are as generous to their defeated enemies?

Courage can be cultivated. There are few men who have it in their first battle. A regiment must be shot over before it can be depended on. If it stands firm under a storm of bullets, no fear of a panic seizing its members in future engagements. Every man has spiritual and physical enemies to meet. Whether he is to be strong or a weakling depends upon the way he faces his first battles. If fear pos-

sesses him he cannot win. He may turn and flee, or, in the cowardly effort to save himself, become a very "devil" in human form. After all Shakespeare was not far wrong when he made Joan of Arc say, "Of all base passions, fear is most accursed."

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