

REPORT

OF THE DEBATE ON WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN THE BRITISH HOUSE OF COMMONS.

The Resolution moved by Mr. Mason was in the following terms:—"That in the opinion of this House the Parliamentary franchise should be extended to women who possess the qualifications which entitle men to vote, and who in all matters of local government have the right of voting."

In moving his Resolution, MR. MASON said it simply meant the giving of the Parliamentary franchise to those women who already possessed the vote for municipal councils, for school boards, for boards of guardians, and other similar matters. It seemed to him a great act of injustice to women who discharged the duties of citizenship, paid rates and taxes, and in many other ways fulfilled the obligations imposed on them by law, that the voting power which they possessed should stop short of the vote for members of that House. He trusted that the Government, when they brought in their Reform Bill, would be bold enough to give the franchise to women who were qualified to exercise it.

BARON DE WORMS, in seconding the resolution, said that the fact of his doing so afforded a sufficient proof that this was not a party question. Mr. Disraeli said in 1866 that a woman having property ought to have a vote. In the course of the present Parliament probably a large measure of electoral reform would be introduced, its object being to extend the franchise to farm labourers in the country. Yet, while if it was proposed to give these the franchise, it would be withheld from women who were better educated, and who in some instances might be the employers of the very men on whom the right of voting was about to be conferred. A vote would be given to the uneducated yokel, while it would be refused to the educated woman who employed him. One-seventh of the English landholders were women. It had never been assumed that women were less loyal and patriotic than men. They were educated and intelligent, and what reason could there be, in the face of facts like these, why the House of Commons should withhold from women so qualified the privileges and rights to which, in his opinion, they were as much entitled as men.

MR. E. A. LEATHAM, in opposing the proposal, said nothing could exceed the simplicity with which its advocates ignored the universal practice of mankind in all ages and countries. For what reasons were women to be enfranchised? It could not be that women paid taxes, for taxation and representation had long since shaken hands and parted. The man who made the largest contribution to the State was the drunkard, who had no vote at all. It was required that the voter should be a man, for the right of voting had always been based upon manhood. But it was said that the municipal franchise had been given to women. If, however, Parliament had made a mistake which was trivial, that was no reason for making a mistake which might be serious in its results. The true woman, pure, faithful, and shrinking from publicity, was noble enough already; only let her retain that nobility, and she would never regret being debarred from the mire and filth of a political election.

MR. Inderwick said he had some difficulty in coming to a conclusion whether the hon. member for Ashton-under-Lyne intended to give the franchise to women in general or only to women entitled to vote in local elections. It must be remembered that women could already be churchwardens, parish constables, overseers, or even high sheriffs. But had any one heard of women holding these offices, and was it not therefore a fair argument to say they would not hold other similar offices, even if the right to hold them were conferred upon them? The fact was, the question was encircled with difficulties, and he doubted whether the advantage to be gained would outweigh these difficulties. He believed that the enfranchisement of women would be a calamity to the country, because it would add tens of thousands to that already too numerous class of electors who did not know their own minds.

MR. ELLIS ASHMEAD BARTLETT did not agree with the hon. and learned gentleman who had just sat down, that the conferring the franchise upon women would increase the fluctuating opinion of the country. He thought, on the contrary, that the views of women on the great social, economical, and moral questions, which were really of more importance than so-called political questions, were more stable than those of men. He feared the hon. member had been somewhat unfortunate in the women whose views he had the opportunity of studying. For his own part he had found that women were strongly and permanently devoted to the reclamation of the race. They were devoted to the cause of temperance, of morality, of the improved condition of the poor, and to the cause of education. It was impossible on grounds of logic to deny women the political suffrage.

MR. BERESFORD-HOPE opposed the Resolution, concluding his speech by saying that, in this time of the omnipotent reign of fads, the idea of enfranchising the charming portion of mankind was a preposterous and revolutionary suggestion.

MR. HENRY H. FOWLER said the hon. members for Huddersfield and Rye never touched the principle on which the franchise was granted. It was co-existent with the ownership or occupation of property. The

owners and occupiers of one sex being admitted, it rested with those who objected to show why the other sex should be excluded. Why should they have it? He would rather put it: Why should they not? Women were taxed, and they ought to be represented. He thought the House overlooked and neglected many questions in which the women of England had the deepest interest. He believed this extension of the franchise would be not a political danger but a political benefit. It was for this reason, and also because he could not ignore the historical fact that the influence of women for the last fifty years had always been on the side of the good and the true, that he should be glad to see women brought within the pale of the Constitution.

MR. NEWDEGATE said the hon. member had ended his remarks with a political watchword—progress. He was afraid that in his dull constitutional way he should be obliged to answer that with the question, "Whither?" He asserted that in the constitutional history there was an antecedent condition to the occupation or possession of property, and that qualification was fitness. He had seen an hon. member expelled from that House because he was not of sound mind. (Laughter.) Bankrupts were not fit, women were not fit—(hear, hear, and murmurs)—and priests were not fit. (Loud laughter.)

MR. JACOB BRIGHT said that what gave importance to the question now was the fact that the Government would endeavor to extend the franchise. Those who were in favor of the present motion strongly objected to the franchise being extended as it had been heretofore. They said if it was to be household suffrage it should be real household suffrage. It was estimated that something like one house in seven had a woman as its head. Who were those women? One of them was a woman of property, another was eminent in art or literature, another was a benevolent woman who went about as a ministering angel among the poor and suffering, and the major part would be persons in humble life who worked hard to support their families. Why, then, should these houses be passed over? That question had not been answered that night in a manner to satisfy either the people of this country or those who were excluded from the franchise. To declare women incapable of voting, however large their property, and however great their intellect, and to declare men who possessed neither property nor intellect capable of voting, was calculated to degrade women in their own estimation and in the estimation of the public at large. He believed it would be advantageous to woman to have the franchise, and advantageous to members of the House to have their support.

MR. RAIKES said he recognized in woman a great moral superiority to the other sex, but if they were going to detach her from those duties peculiarly her own and ask her to turn her attention to political questions, study the columns of the daily newspapers to the exclusion of other duties, and to take her out of that sphere in which she contributed so largely to the happiness of the other sex, he feared the result would be far from beneficial. In voting against this Resolution, so far from being desirous of disparaging the merits of women, he was only anxious to save for them the safe and honorable seclusion which he believed had been given them by nature and by general consent for their happiness.

MR. COURTNEY protested against the notion that woman would be degraded by being brought into contact with political life. On the contrary it would supply what she required, whether for herself or as the companion of man. Women had assisted so admirably in administering the poor-law that the Local Government Board itself had nominated them where they had not been elected, and successive Presidents endeavored to promote their election. So far as his experience of public life went, women exercised their political functions just as easily as men.

THE ATTORNEY-GENERAL (Sir H. James) said women lacked the experience which was necessary for the conduct of public affairs. The men sitting in that house had all practical experience in different walks of life. Some had military experience, others legal, and others commercial. But what knowledge had women of such matters. There were many men who cared little for political life, but who found their happiness in their homes, and who believed that upon the stability of those homes the greatness and prosperity of the country depended. If once they should think that the women who formed their happiness were about to be called from their houses to join in public affairs, they would unhesitatingly prohibit such a movement.

The House divided, and the numbers were—

For Mr. Mason's Resolution	114
Against	130
	—16

The Resolution was therefore lost.

THE WOMEN DID IT.

The pastor of Tremont Temple, Rev. Dr. Ellis, closed his discourse in review of Rev. Dr. Crosby's calm view, with this eloquent peroration:

A company of men were once raising the heavy frame of a mill; they had started to raise the main vent, as it is called; but when part way up, when they had reached the "pinch in the vent," the foreman saw his men were about to fail. 'Up with it, men,' he cried. They bent to the polls, but it hung above them as a dead fall; they could not raise it past the 'pinch.' 'Lift, men, for your lives lift,' cried the foreman. But the men