

Should Canadian Women Have the Parliamentary Vote?

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SHOULD CANADIAN WOMEN HAVE THE PARLIAMENTARY VOTE?

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WHATEVER opinion we may hold on the subject of this article, it is impossible to deny that it has become a live question now that women have been enfranchised in all the States of our sister Dominion of Australia, and in New Zealand, as well as in ten States of the Union, while in, at least, seven other States of the Union the cause is evidently far advanced on the road to victory. My present object is to deal with it in the way which appeals most strongly to my own mind, in the hope that others may be thereby induced to take the same view. I do not then intend to argue upon the basis of any supposed rights or wrongs,—the right of women to be *pars reipublicae* as well as *pars domus*—her right to have a hand in the making of the laws which govern her;—the wrong of taxation without representation. Because when we get into the region of 'rights,' we are on very debateable ground; and as Pilate asked, "What is truth?" so we, with just as much reason, may ask, "What is a right?" Nor again shall I refer to the "militancy" of certain English suffragettes, except to observe that if their militant tactics are a good argument for denying the vote to the great body of respectable, law-abiding English women, abstinence from militant methods is, *quantum valeat*, an argument in favour of enfranchising Canadian women. I intend to place the matter entirely upon the ground of expediency, and, if in the result we favour votes for women, we shall, at least, be in harmony with the expressed opinions of men of the calibre of Lord Chancellor Haldane, Sir Edward Grey, Mr. Balfour, the late Lord Salisbury, the late George Meredith, and the present Bishop of Oxford. We shall have no reason to be ashamed of the company we shall find ourselves in.

To develop my argument I must first call attention to certain organizations of women in Canada, the objects they have in hand, the tendencies they show, the work they are doing, and the causes they are advocating. I refer, of course, to the National Council of Women in Canada, and the various affili-

ated Local Councils which have been formed in practically all cities and towns of any importance in each province. Let us first see what are the basal objects of these organizations as expressed in their Constitutions. That of the National Council is thus expressed in the preamble:

"We, Women of Canada, sincerely believing that the best good of our homes and nation will be advanced by our own greater unity of thought, sympathy and purpose, and that an organized movement of Women will best conserve the highest good of the Family and the State, do hereby band ourselves together to further the application of the Golden Rule to society, custom, and law."

In like manner the fundamental objects of the Local Councils are thus expressed in the preamble of their Constitutions:

"Believing that the more intimate knowledge of one another's work will result in larger mutual sympathy and greater unity of thought, and, therefore, in more effective action, certain Associations of Women interested in philanthropy, religion, education, literature, art, and social reform have determined to organize Local Councils."

Now these organizations have been working persistently and patiently for many years—the National Council was founded 21 years ago, the Toronto Council, 19 years ago—but so far as their efforts have merely advanced the general cause of philanthropy and charity, and splendid as their record is in that respect, they are not relevant to my argument. I am not even concerned with the work they have done in the direction of improving the government of cities or other municipalities. What is to my purpose is to indicate the nature of their efforts in the direction of general law reform: and for that purpose I shall refer only to their Reports for 1912. We there find the National Council of Women urging upon the Dominion Parliament legislation raising the age of consent from 16 to 18, and for the more stringent suppression of the white slave traffic, and other provisions directed against the social evil, and for the protection of women; while the Local Councils are seeking from the provincial legislatures such reforms as the following: separate trials for women in the Police Courts to which the male outside public shall not be admitted; the compulsory

establishment of Juvenile Courts in all parts of the province; the introduction of a system of State pensions for the benefit of destitute minors who have lost their fathers, and whose mothers do not possess separate estate; the prohibition of employment after 8 p.m. of children under 14 years of age, in trades and conditions which are not covered by the Factory Acts applying to the employment of minors; that insane paupers and poor people shall not be admitted to jail whether accused of crimes or not, but shall be received in institutions where proper treatment can be extended to them; State provision for the aged and infirm poor of the province; that separate classes for defective children shall be made compulsory in connection with public schools; that medical inspection of school children shall be extended to the rural districts of Ontario, and be made compulsory.

Now here is a notable thing. Here is a class in the community, to wit, the women, who are willing to interest themselves in public affairs, with sustained energy and enthusiasm—not to gain anything for themselves, not with any axes of their own to grind, not even to gratify personal ambition, but in order to protect the ignorant, to support the weak, and to assist those who have no helper. The mother soul is strong in women. Men, if they are honest to the truth, must admit, especially in such a business community as we have in Canada, that they are, almost all of them, absorbed (and very properly so, it may be) in their own businesses and professions—a few piling up wealth, the most well content if by strenuous toil they can keep the domestic pot boiling, and that they have not the surplus time or the surplus energy to search for and slay the hydra-headed brood of abuses ever lurking in secret places in the body politic; nor is this sort of thing good business for the practical party politician, or at least it doesn't seem so to him. It is mere matter of history that, even in England, where there are any number of men of leisure, it is only when some phenomenal man of abnormal sympathy and imagination comes to the front—a Howard, a Plimsoll, or a Lord Shaftesbury—and, perhaps the next generation will be willing to add, a Lloyd George, that legislative reforms of a purely altruistic and philanthropic character have found their way on to the Statute book.

But now see the irony of things. When these organized bodies of large-hearted women approach the Government of the day they have to do so in the character of suppliants, as though they were seeking some favour for themselves. When a deputation of men wait upon Ministers, the latter, whether they accede to their demands or not, have to assume the attitude of public servants, only anxious to give effect to the public will. To women, unsupported by male voters, Governments, even in this so-called democratic country, are autocrats and despots. Women have no more direct leverage against them than the Russian or Turkish peasant has—or had until very recently—against Czar or Sultan. Women everywhere, where they have not the parliamentary vote, are, as women, living under a pure despotism, save in respect to municipal matters; and this is equally true whether the despot be an individual, or a male-elected man-consisting legislature. Shall we not give them at least the leverage of the vote of themselves, and such of their sister women as they can carry with them in support of their platform?

But my subtle and ingenious critic will immediately say: "Because a few women are active in pursuing these altruistic efforts for reforms—most, or all of which we are bound to say, we cordially support—is that any reason for such a revolutionary proceeding as to give votes to women in general on the same terms as men?"

Let me, then, fairly face this fearful prospect. First, in its private aspect, we are told that to give women the vote will cause serious deterioration in the female character and destroy domestic happiness. I am convinced that the Spirit of Use and Wont never conjured up a more absurd bogey to block the path of progress. How far is the character of the ordinary man affected by the right he possesses to put a piece of paper in a ballot box every few years? How innumerable are the men who very seldom exercise this right though they do possess it; and who never dream of attending public meetings, or taking any part whatever in active politics? And if this is so with men, it will assuredly be still more the case with women. We may depend upon it, after women have the vote, both parties to the marriage contract will, in the great majority of cases,

feel so little interest one way or the other in public affairs that domestic felicity will continue to find destruction through the usual channels. Of course, the probability of women being even more indifferent than most men are to their electoral privileges, is no argument for giving them the vote, and I do not advance it as such, but as an answer to those who predict such far-reaching consequences as likely to follow from conceding what seems to me a manifestly just demand.

But many men talk as if the immediate effect of women having the parliamentary vote would be that all men would at once forsake political life, in every shape and form, and hand over the entire direction of affairs to women. Women would crowd the legislatures, for it would be impossible to keep them out—and women would occupy all the Cabinet positions. Undoubtedly women would find their way into the legislature when they could induce the majority of men and women voters in the constituencies to elect them. But, in the first place, if a constituency desires to be represented by a woman, who has any right to say that it shall not be so represented, any more than I, gentle reader, have a right to say that you shall not appoint a woman as agent or representative in any business you desire to have transacted? And, in the second place, what kind of a woman must it be who would succeed in carrying a constituency? A Jane Addams, perhaps, a Beatrice Potter Webb, an Olive Schreiner, a Dr. Helen MacMurchy—some few women of outstanding force and character; and greatly would the wisdom and efficiency of any parliament be enhanced by such additions. As to government office, to be in the Cabinet, a woman would have to belong to a Government commanding the confidence of the majority of members of the popular House. Surely this is enough to say on that point. But here looms up another chimaera. Women would exercise a solid vote! The solid female vote would carry anything women wanted. But what prospect is there of such a solid vote, when we see such wide divergence amongst women on the initial point of whether their sex should have the vote at all or not? If women cannot agree in desiring the political enfranchisement of their own sex, it is little likely that they will agree in minor matters. No, if women show a united front in favour of any public cause, it will be in such matters as we have seen

the United and Local Councils of Women are now advocating—it will be only in the cause of justice, and mercy and right; and if, like Disraeli, we are on the side of the angels, we shall give them the support of the parliamentary vote, and any other help we can.

I cannot close this article without mentioning an argument in this matter which has for a long time seemed convincing to my own mind, though I admit it is of a rather philosophical and abstract character. It is this.

The character of national life is everywhere necessarily the resultant of many converging forces. Some of these are material, some personal. The personal may be termed comprehensively the stream of male tendency on the one hand, and the stream of female tendency on the other. If one of these forces—if the stream of female tendency—is blocked and checked at its source by denying the parliamentary vote, and the power which flows therefrom, to women, we can never have anything but a lopsided national life. The same thing on a smaller scale has proved true in domestic life. The most conservative of men in these days would scarcely deny that our domestic life is higher and fuller than domestic life could have been in days when the wife, as to person and property, was in complete subjection to her husband. When the Roman bride, in days when Roman women had emancipated themselves from legal subjection to their husbands, crossed the threshold of her husband's home for the first time, she used to say "Ubi tu Caius, ibi ego Caia,"¹ thus asserting her claim to a share of influence and control in domestic matters. When in public matters, Canadian women can say to the male voter, "Ubi tu Caius, ibi ego Caia," then, and then only, can we hope for a full and perfect development of national life.

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¹ "Where thou art Caius, there I am Caia."