

Louisa Lawson: That Nonsensical Idea (1890)

'I am utterly opposed to this nonsensical idea of giving women votes,' said one of the members of parliament commenting on the proposed Electoral Bill. So are we opposed to it if it is nonsensical, but as so many reforms and discoveries of incalculable value have at first sight been declared idiotic and absurd, we may as well look at the foundation facts and see if this proposed Bill contain the essence of foolishness or whether it does, as some claim, bring us as near to pure justice and absolute freedom as any human law has yet approached.

We are a community of men and women living in one corner of the globe which we have marked off as our own, and since the business of so many people cannot be managed by all, we select 150 men to make laws for us and manage our public offices. The laws made by these deputies are binding on women as well as men, but the women have no advocates or representatives in the Assembly, nor any means of making their wishes known. The life and work of every woman is just as essential to the good of the community as that of every man. Her work and the character she bears raise or depress the standard of the state as much as does the life of any individual man; why is she set aside and disabled from expressing her opinion as to what should be done by this community of which she is a member? Why are her rights less than her brothers? She bears a full half of the trouble when the affairs of the state are depressed, an unjust law or the lack of law brings to her life care or hardship or injury as it does to men, yet none of the deputies ask what she wishes—why should they, she has no vote. She belongs to the better behaved sex—for women only contribute one-fifth to the criminal class (four-fifths are men)—and it would therefore seem likely that her opinion would be worth having, yet she is expressly discouraged from the formation of opinions, they are declared ineffectual by the other half of this community of people. It does not seem so nonsensical after all, this idea that a woman's opinion as to the fitness of a deputy may be as just and right and worthy of weight as a man's opinion.

Supposing

There are two views of the woman's suffrage question commonly discussed, the justice of the measure, and its expediency. Few doubt its justice, many question its expediency, and yet, being just, what does all else matter?

Suppose that the right to vote lay with women only, and that the progress of the world was bringing expansive thoughts and hopes of a happier future into the minds of men. When men perceived that this right was unjustly withheld from them, and felt that their individual manhood was title enough to this right to a voice in decisions affecting all, would they tolerate discussion as to the expediency or wisdom of the measure? Would they stand by and hear the women conjecture how men might perchance misuse the concession if granted, would they quietly wait while political factions summed up the chances of the support of the new voters? No, they would say 'Curse you—it is my right. What business is it of yours how I use it?'

Her Proper Sphere

As to expediency the arguments have been so often repeated that it seems foolish to reiterate them, especially as nothing cogent is brought forward on the opposing side. In Parliament such old phrases as these were used, viz. that 'woman should be kept in her proper sphere' and 'women have duties quite outside the political arena'. One would think the political arena consisted of the parliamentary refreshment room, they are so sure it is not a desirable place for a woman to be seen in. In the minds of these objectors 'politics' seem to consist of the petty animosities and personalities which the law-making business now gives rise to, but 'politics' in reality cover nearly all questions which thinking men or women do now consider and form opinions upon. Laws are made upon divorce, the sale of liquor, factory regulations, the employment of children, gambling, education, hours of labour, and scores of subjects upon which women do think, and respecting which they ought to have the power of giving effect to their wishes by the selection of men representing their shade of opinion. And if women do not also at once enter the 'political arena' so far as to care greatly about the

land laws and mining acts, pray do men voters come to an intelligent decision on every possible subject of legislation before casting a vote? Most men do not seriously consider and decide in their own minds upon more than two or three of the many subjects which come within the wide circle of 'politics', and it would not therefore take women long to reach equality in that respect. We are inclined to believe that a woman can form as good an idea as to the best man among parliamentary candidates as the average man voter.

More Logic

But say some people, women do not want the vote, most of them would not use it if they had it. What will happen after they have the vote may be left to the prophets to say, but if A and B do not want something is that a reason why C who has a just claim should be denied?

Prematurity

In the debate, Mr Traill, who said he was in favour of woman's suffrage, urged that the measure would be premature; that women should be first educated to the use of a vote by possessing the suffrage under a local government Act. 'Then,' said he, 'if found to be using it well they should be permitted to influence Imperial questions.'

This would be kind indeed, but this is not the method hitherto employed when new classes have been admitted to the franchise. We have not first put them through political schools; we have taken the raw material, and under the influence of its new liberty and swayed by the responsibilities of its new standing, the raw material has developed, but where has any government ever had raw material so certain to act conscientiously, so prepared already with intelligence and with a strong bias towards moderation, peace, steady reform, and moral purgation? Probably it is because they know that with women voting the men of bad character would have little chance of future election, that makes men so fearful that women 'might not use it well'.

Women Members

Many of the speakers in the House contended that if women received the right to vote they should also logically have the right to sit in parliament. This is not asked for and need not at present be decided. Few women would care for such a post, but it may be safely said that if exceptional women spring up such as the world has hitherto had some examples of, they could not fail to raise the tone of the House and fill a place worthily. It is to be remembered that men will not cease to vote when women have the suffrage, and that women are decidedly critical of their own sex. She would need to be a remarkable woman who could win the confidence of a mixed constituency of men and women. A young married woman is the usual illustration taken to show the absurdity of a woman member and a woeful picture is drawn of her deserted babies and dinnerless husband. But these pictures only show the speaker's ignorance of women, for there is no woman who would not think of her baby and the happiness of her home long before she desired in her wildest fancies the barren honour of a parliamentary seat. She would not be likely to be asked to stand, and she would not consent if asked.

Some members treated the question in the old semi-facetious way, conjecturing the effect of pretty women in parliament and the power of a lovely woman premier to win susceptible opposition members to her side. This presupposes that the political convictions of men are but wavering undecided beliefs, and easily unseated, and forgets this fact that a woman of such attainments and character that a mixed constituency of men and women esteemed her a fit parliamentary representative, would by her very nature, her modesty and quiet sense, make this silly gallantry impossible; and she would so scorn adherents won only by beauty that they would probably begin under her influence to form their opinions firmly and honestly. Another member alleged that his brother members would do no work if ladies sat beside them. If men are indeed so silly that in a place of business they must inevitably be simpering to women, it will not be so nonsensical to give a vote to a class undoubtedly not prone to publicly exhibit their weakness or their foolishness.