

The cover features a central globe with a rainbow-colored band across its middle. Several books are shown in a 3D perspective, appearing to float or be attached to the globe. To the right of the globe, there are three interlocking gears in green, red, and blue. The background is a dark green with a faint, repeating pattern of icons representing various subjects like science, history, and art.

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Text of Reasons for and Against the Enfranchisement of Women by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon Published by the National Society for Women's Suffrage.

London, Mccorquodale & Co., Printers,
6, Cardington Street, Hampstead Road, N.W.
1872.

Reasons For And Against The Enfranchisement of Women.

THAT a respectable, orderly, independent body in the State should have no voice, and no influence recognised by the law, in the election of the representatives of the people, while they are otherwise acknowledged as responsible citizens, are eligible for many public offices, and required to pay all taxes, is an anomaly which seems to require some explanation. Many people are unable to conceive that women can care about voting. That some women do care, has been proved by the Petitions presented to Parliament. I shall try to show why some care--and why those who do not ought to be made to care.

There are now a very considerable number of open-minded, unprejudiced people, who see no particular reason why women should not have votes, if they want them; but, they ask, what would be the good of it? What is there that women want which male legislators are not willing to give? And here let me say at the outset, that the advocates of this measure are very far from accusing men of deliberate unfairness to women. It is not as a means of extorting justice from unwilling legislators that the franchise is claimed for women. In so far as the claim is made with any special reference to class interests at all, it is simply on the general ground that under a representative government, any class which is not represented is likely to be neglected. Proverbially, what is out of sight is out of mind; and the theory that women, as such, are bound to keep out of sight, finds its most emphatic expression in the denial of the right to vote. The direct results are probably less injurious than those which are indirect; but that a want of due consideration for the interests of women is apparent in our legislation, could very easily be shown. To give evidence in detail would be a long and invidious task. I will mention one instance only, that of the educational endowments all over the country. Very few people would now maintain that the education of boys is more important to the State than that of girls. But as a matter of fact, girls have but a very small share in educational endowments. Many of the old foundations have been reformed by Parliament, but the desirableness of

providing with equal care for girls and boys has very seldom been recognised. In the administration of charities generally, the same tendency prevails to postpone the claims of women to those of men.

Among instances of hardship traceable directly to exclusion from the franchise and to no other cause, may be mentioned the unwillingness of landlords to accept women as tenants. Two large farmers in Suffolk inform me that this is not an uncommon case.

They mention one estate on which seven widows have been ejected, who, if they had had votes, would have been continued as tenants.

The case of women farmers is stronger, but not much stronger, than that of women who, as heads of a business or a household, fulfil the duties of a man in the same position. Their task is often a hard one, and everything which helps to sustain their self-respect, and to give them consideration and importance in the eyes of others, is likely to lessen their difficulties and make them happier and stronger for the battle of life. The very fact that, though householders and taxpayers, they have not equal privileges with male householders and taxpayers, is in itself a deconsideration, which seems to me invidious and useless. It casts a kind of slur on the value of their opinions; and I may remark in passing, that what is treated as of no value is apt to grow valueless. Citizenship is an honour, and not to have the full rights of a citizen is a want of honour. Obvious it may not be, but by a subtle and sure process, those who without their own consent and without sufficient reason are debarred from full participation in the rights and duties of a citizen, lose more or less of social consideration and esteem.

These arguments, founded on considerations of justice and mercy to a large and important and increasing of class, might in a civilised country, and in the absence of strong reasons to the contrary, be deemed amply sufficient to justify the measure proposed. There remains to be considered those aspects of the question which affect the general community. And among all the reasons for giving women votes, the one which appears to me the strongest, is that of the influence it might be expected to have in increasing public spirit. Patriotism, a healthy, lively, intelligent interest in everything which concerns the nation to which we belong, and an unselfish devotedness to the public service,--these are the qualities which make a people great and happy; these are the virtues which ought to be most sedulously cultivated in all classes of the community. And I know no better means, at this present time, of counteracting the tendency to prefer narrow private ends to the

public good, than this of giving to all women, duly qualified, a direct and conscious participation in political affairs. Give some women votes, and it will tend to make all women think seriously of the concerns of the nation at large, and their interest having once been fairly roused, they will take pains, by reading and by consultation with persons better informed than themselves, to form sound opinions. As it is, women of the middle class occupy themselves but little with anything beyond their own family circle. They do not consider it any concern of theirs, if poor men and women are ill-nursed in the workhouse infirmaries, and poor children are ill-taught in workhouse schools.

If the roads are bad, the drains neglected, the water poisoned, they think it is all very wrong, but it does not occur to them that it is their duty to get it put right. These farmer-women and business-women have honest, sensible minds and much practical experience, but they do not bring their good sense to bear upon public affairs, because they think it is men's business, not theirs, to look after such things. It is this belief--so narrowing and deadening in its influence--that the exercise of the franchise would tend to dissipate. The mere fact of being called upon to enforce an opinion by a vote, would have an immediate effect in awakening a healthy sense of responsibility. As far as experience goes, the power women have had as householders to vote at the School Board Elections has been an unmixed good. It has certainly drawn public attention to the education of girls, and, in many places, has awakened an ardent interest in new subjects among women themselves, by the simple fact that they had had to discuss the different opinions of the candidates. There is no reason why these women should not take an active interest in all the social questions--education, public health, prison discipline, the poor laws, and the rest--which occupy Parliament, and they would be much more likely to do so, if they felt that they had importance in the eyes of members of Parliament, and could claim a hearing for their opinions.

Besides these women of business, there are ladies of property, whose more active participation in public affairs would be beneficial both to themselves and the community generally. The want of stimulus to energetic action is much felt by women of the higher classes. It is agreed that they ought not to be idle, but what they ought to do is not so clear. Reading, music and drawing, needlework, and charity are their usual employments. Reading, without a purpose, does not come to much. Music and drawing, and needlework, are most commonly regarded as amusements intended to fill up time. We have left, as the serious duty of independent and unmarried

women, the care of the poor in all its branches, including visiting the sick and the aged, and ministering to their wants, looking after the schools, and in every possible way giving help wherever help is needed. Now education, the relief of the destitute, and the health of the people, are among the most important and difficult matters which occupy the minds of statesmen, and if it is admitted that women of leisure and culture are bound to contribute their part towards the solution of these great questions, it is evident that every means of making their co-operation enlightened and vigorous should be sought for. They have special opportunities of observing the operation, of many of the laws. They know, for example, for they see before their eyes, the practical working of the law of settlement--of the laws relating to the dwellings of the poor--and many others, and the experience which peculiarly qualifies them to form a judgment on these matters ought not to be thrown away. The fact of the election of a certain number of ladies to the School Boards has done away with much of the prejudice against women being of any use out of their families and parishes. If it becomes customary to allow them to be useful to their towns, we may expect to see them, without unkind criticism, allowed to be useful to counties, even to the country at large. We all know that we have already a goodly body of rich, influential working-women, whose opinions on the social and political questions of the day are well worth listening to. In almost every parish there are, happily for England, such women. Now everything should be done to give these valuable members of the community a solid social standing. If they are wanted--and there can be no doubt that they are--in all departments of social work, their position in the work should be as dignified and honourable as it is possible to make it. Rich unmarried women have many opportunities of benefiting the community, which are not within the reach of a married woman, absorbed by the care of her husband and children. Everything, I say again, should be done to encourage this most important and increasing class to take their place in the army of workers for the common good, and all the forces we can bring to bear for this end are of incalculable value. For by bringing women into hearty co-operation with men, we gain the benefit not only of their work, but of their intelligent sympathy. Public spirit is like fire, a feeble spark of it may be fanned into a flame, or it may very easily be put out. And the result of teaching women that they have nothing to do with politics, is that their influence goes towards extinguishing the unselfish interest--never too strong--which men are disposed to take in public affairs.

Let each member of the House of Commons consider, in a spirit of true scientific enquiry, all the properly qualified women of his acquaintance, and he will see no reason why the single ladies and the widows among his own family and friends should not form as sensible opinions on the merits of candidates as the voters who returned him to Parliament. When we find among the disfranchised such names as those of Mrs. Somerville, Harriet Martineau, Lady Burdett Coutts, Florence Nightingale, Mary Carpenter, Louisa Twining, Emily Davies, and many others scarcely inferior to those in intellectual and moral worth, we cannot but desire, for the elevation and dignity of the Parliamentary system, to add them to the number of electors.*

It need scarcely be pointed out that the measure has nothing of a party character. We have precedents under two very different governments, those of Austria and Sweden, for something very similar to what is now proposed. Now, let us calmly consider all the arguments we have heard against giving the franchise to women.

Among these, the first and commonest is--Women do not want votes. Certainly that is a capital reason* At Pontefract 199 men out of 1236 voters, or nearly one-sixth, were unable to read and had to be assisted in filling up the ballot paper--and yet women are rejected on the ground of incompetency. why women should not have votes thrust upon them. There are many men who do not care to use their votes, and there is no law compelling them to vote. The statement, however, that women do not wish to vote, is a mere assertion, and may be met by a counter-assertion. Some women do want votes, which the petitions signed, and now in the course of signature, go very largely to prove.* Some women manifestly do; others, let it be admitted, do not. It is impossible to say positively which side has the majority, unless we could poll all the women in question; or, in other words, without resorting to the very measure which is under discussion. Make voting possible, and we shall see how many care to avail themselves of the privilege.

But, it is said, women have other duties. The function of women is different to that of men, and their function is not politics. It is very true that women have other duties--many and various. But so have men. No citizen lives for his citizen duties only. He is a professional man, a tradesman, a family man, a club man, a thousand things as well as a voter. Of course these occupations sometimes interfere with a man's duties as a citizen, and when

he cannot vote, he cannot. So with women; when they cannot vote, they cannot.

The proposition we are discussing, practically concerns only single women and widows who have freeholds, or other county qualifications, and for boroughs, all those who occupy, as owners or tenants, any dwelling house within the borough, or a lodging of the value of £10 a year. Among these there are certainly a great number whose time is not fully occupied, not even so* The number of signatures in 1871 were 186,976. Last Session 355,806 signatures were presented, of which about one-half were women. much as that of men. Their duties in sick rooms and in caring for children, leave them a sufficient margin of leisure for reading newspapers, and studying the pros and cons of political and social questions. No one can mean seriously to affirm that widows and unmarried women would find the mere act of voting once in several years arduous. One day, say once in three years, might surely be spared from domestic duties. If it is urged that it is not the time spent in voting that is in question, but the thought and the attention which are necessary for forming political opinions, I reply that women of the class we are speaking of, have as a rule, more time for thought than men, their duties being of a less engrossing character, and that they do, as a fact, bestow a considerable amount of thought and attention on the questions which occupy the Legislature. Social matters occupy every day a larger space in the deliberations of Parliament, and on many of these questions women are led to think and to judge in the fulfilment of those duties which, as a matter of course, devolve upon them in the ordinary business of English life. And however important the duties of home may be, we must bear in mind that a woman's duties do not end there. She is a daughter, a sister, the mistress of a household; she ought to be, in the broadest sense of the word, a neighbour, both to her equals and to the poor. These are the obvious and undeniable duties, and within the limits of her admitted functions; I should think it desirable to add to them--duties to her parish and to the State. A woman who is valuable in all the relations of life, a woman of a large nature, will be more perfect in her domestic capacity, and not less.

If we contemplate women in the past, and in different countries, we find them acting in addition to their domestic part, all sorts of different r"les. What was their r"le among the Jews and the Romans? What was it in the early Christian churches? What is it amongst the Quakers? What is it in the colliery districts,--at the court of Victoria? We can conjure up thousands of pictures of women, performing different functions under varying conditions.

They have done and do, all sorts of work in all sorts of ways. Is there anything in the past history of the world which justifies the assertion that they must and will do certain things in the future, and will not and cannot do certain other things? I do not think there is.

But to return to my argument, and supposing that there were enough data in the past to enable us to predict that women will never take sufficient interest in politics to induce even widows and single women to wish to vote once in several years, should we be justified in realising our own prediction, and forbidding by law what we declare to be contrary to nature? If any one believes, as the result of observation and experience, that it is not a womanly function to vote, I respect such belief, and answer--only the future can prove. But what I do not respect, is the strange want of toleration which says--"You shall not do this or that." We do not want to compel women to anything; we only wish to see them free to exercise or not, according as they themselves desire, political and other functions.

The argument that 'women are ignorant of politics,' would have great force if it could be shown that the mass of the existing voters are thoroughly well informed on political subjects, or even much better informed than the persons to whom it is proposed to give votes. Granted that women are ignorant of politics, so are many male householders. Their ideas are not always clear on political questions, and would probably be even more confused if they had not votes. No mass of human beings will or can undertake the task of forming opinions on matters over which they have no control, and on which they have no practical desire to make. It would by most persons be considered waste of time. When women have votes, they will read with closer attention than heretofore the daily histories of our times, and will converse with each other and with their fathers and brothers about social and political questions.

They will become interested in a wider circle of ideas, and where they now think and feel somewhat vaguely, they will form definite and decided opinions.

Among the women who are disqualified for voting by the legal disability of sex, there is a large number of the educated class. We shall know the exact number of women possessing the household and property qualifications, when the return ordered by Parliament has been made. In the meantime, the following calculation is suggestive. In the 'London Court Guide,' which of course includes no houses below the value of £10 a year, the number of

householders whose names begin with A is 1149. Of these, 205, that is more than one-sixth, are women, all of whom are either unmarried or widows.*

The fear entertained by some persons that family dissension would result from encouraging women to form political opinions, might be urged with equal force* The returns of the municipal voters is a fair indication. There were 11,189,657 men in England and Wales represented by 1,250,019 voters in boroughs and cities, and

801,109 voters in counties; in all, 2,051,128. There were

11,663,705 women represented by 108,838 municipal votes.

Taking the proportion of women to men who had the municipal vote, there would be altogether about 170,000 women who would obtain the franchise by the Bill. against their having any opinions on any subject at all.

Differences on religious subjects still more apt to rouse the passions and create disunion than political differences. As for opinions causing disunion, let it be remembered that what is a possible cause of disunion is also a possible cause of deeply-founded union. The more rational women become, the more real union there will be in families, for nothing separates so much as unreasonableness and frivolity. It will be said, perhaps, that contrary opinions may be held by the different members of a family without bringing on quarrels, so long as they are kept to the region of theory, and no attempt is made to carry them out publicly in action. But religious differences must be shown publicly. A woman who determines upon changing her religion--say to go over from Protestantism to Romanism--proclaims her difference from her family in a public and often a very distressing manner. But no one has yet proposed to make it illegal for a woman to change her religion.

After all--is it essential that brothers and sisters and cousins shall all vote on the same side?

An assertion often made, that women would lose the good influence which they now exert indirectly on public affairs if they had votes, seems to require proof. First of all, it is necessary to prove that women have this indirect influence,--then that it is good,--then that the indirect good influence would be lost if they had direct influence,--then that the indirect influence which they would lose is better than the direct influence they would gain. From my own observation I should say, that the women who have gained by their wisdom and earnestness a good indirect influence, would not lose that influence if they had votes.

And I see no necessary connection between goodness and indirectness. On the contrary, I believe that the great thing women want is to be more direct

and straightforward, in thought, word and deed. I think the educational advantage of citizenship to women would be so great, that I feel inclined to run the risk of sacrificing the subtle indirect influence, to a wholesome feeling of responsibility, which would, I think, make women give their opinions less rashly and more conscientiously than at present on political subjects.

It was no doubt true, that in many places polling was carried on in a turbulent and disorderly manner. All arguments against women voting, based on this former state of things are now of no force, the ballot has mended this evil; and elections for members of Parliament will in future be as orderly, we believe, as elections for the School Board. Those opponents of women's suffrage who have had no objection to found their opposition upon but the unfitness of the polling booth for women, are now of course no longer opponents.

There are certain other difficulties sometimes vaguely brought forward by the unreflecting, which I shall not attempt to discuss.

Such, for example, is the argument that as voters ought to be independent, and as married women are liable to be influence by their husbands, therefore unmarried women and widows ought not to vote. Or again, that many ladies canvass, and canvassing by ladies is a very objectionable practice, therefore, it is inadmissible that women should have any direct and open method of influencing elections. Into such objections it is not necessary here to enter.

Nor is it needful to discuss the extreme logical consequences which may be obtained by pressing to an undue length the arguments in favour of permitting women to exercise the suffrage.

The question under consideration is, not whether women ought logically to be members of Parliament, but whether, under existing circumstances, it is for the good of the State that women, who perform most of the duties, and enjoy nearly all the rights of citizenship, should be by special enactment disabled from exercising the additional privilege of taking part in the election of the representatives of the people. It is a question of expediency, to be discussed calmly, without passion or prejudice.

In England, the extension proposed would interfere with no vested interests. It would involve no change in the principles on which our Government is based, but would rather make our Constitution more consistent with itself. Conservatives have a right to claim it as a Conservative measure. Liberals

are bound to ask for it as a necessary part of radical reform. There is no reason for identifying it with any class or party in the State, and it is, in fact, impossible to predict what influence it might have on party politics. The question is simply of a special legal disability, which must, sooner or later, be removed.

McCorquodale & Co., Printers,
6, Cardington Street. London N.W.