

1894

VOTES FOR WOMEN

South Australia became the first Australian colony to grant women over twenty-one years of age the right to be elected to Parliament and to vote in Parliamentary elections, when the Adult Suffrage Bill was passed on 18 December 1894 by thirty-one votes to fourteen in the Legislative Council.

This radical move, only a year after New Zealand had enfranchised women, was the result of a long battle begun in 1861 by the author and reformer Catherine Spence with the publication of her book, *Plea for Pure Democracy*.

She and others continued this campaign with a barrage of newspaper articles and pamphlets in the years that followed.

In July 1886 the Adelaide Trades and Labor Council officially pledged support for women's suffrage, but the 'keen opposition' from conservative parliamentarians did not diminish. What helped to tip the scales in the end was the pragmatic realisation among MPs that women could be used to help undermine the influence of rural voters — which admirably suited Labor, for one.

Just how emotional an issue it was is well illustrated by an article which appeared in the *Country*, a short-lived South Australian weekly, after the House of Assembly declared itself in favour of adult suffrage:

We seem to be given over to folly. And no greater folly than this woman's suffrage fad could be well committed. To have fifty or sixty legislators deliberately admitting that men are not able to govern the colony without the assistance of a lot of FUSSY, SNUFFY, GOSSIPING OLD WOMEN is very funny.

If men choose to write themselves down such asses, we cannot help it; we can only look on and wonder. THE SUGGESTION THAT WOMEN ARE EQUAL TO MEN IS ABSURD. They are as inferior mentally as physically. That they are so physically goes without saying; that they are so mentally, the ages have proved.

Once and again there is a brilliant exception, but that only proves the rule. Early ripening is a faculty they have in common with negroes. Up to twelve, a nigger-boy is probably ahead of a white boy; from twelve to fifteen, possibly equal; at fifteen he stops. But nobody would say that because a negro boy was ahead of a white boy at twelve that therefore he was equal, for after fifteen he is hopelessly behind.

ANOTHER PROOF OF THE INFERIORITY OF WOMEN IS THEIR VILLAINY, when they are villainous; their brains cannot control their instincts. In the French Revolution the MOST BRUTAL, FIENDISH, and BLOOD-THIRSTY WERE INVARIABLY WOMEN.

So it is in gaols. All who have ever had experience testify that WOMEN

ARE FAR HARDER TO GOVERN THAN MEN, WHEN CRIMINAL, AND MUCH WICKEDER. This is vouched for by their own sex, by matrons, searchers, nurses, and visitors, as well as by the other sex also.

This extra villainy is not proof of superior ability: i.e., it does not show that powerful intellects give them a greater capacity to be villains. But it shows that their inferior ability renders them less able to put a restraint on their villainy.

In other words, they have not had ability to restrain themselves. Of course, some men have also been deficient in such an ability: The difference is this: THAT THE INABILITY OF MEN IS IN SOME ONLY; THE INABILITY OF WOMEN APPLIES TO ALL.

Yet this weak sex is for the future to govern us; and not the best of the sex, but the worst. The best of the sex will be engaged in nursing babies and other suitable and natural avocations.

In many circles, however, the move was welcomed. Noted the Year Book of Australia:

No question with a more important bearing on the political life of Australia has ever been raised or solved on a colonial legislature. It doubles the electors of the colony to begin with, and it introduces an element that cannot but have a refining and an elevating influence over the course of politics...

It was long coming, and long foreseen as being inevitable as well as just, by the prescient and intelligent... It was said that 'public opinion was not

ripe for it,' which meant, as it generally does, that the dense and the dull witted had not been educated up to it...

In the other colonies suffrage groups were also hard at work. Harriet Dugdale, who pressed for full citizenship rights for women as early as 1869 in a letter to the *Argus* in Melbourne, formed a Woman's Suffrage Society in 1884.

Her partners in this Victorian pressure group were Annette Bear, who had gained valuable experience working with suffragettes in England, and, for a short time, the well-known feminist Vida Goldstein.

Ironically, although this was the country's first formally-constituted suffrage society, it would be the last to achieve its aim.

In New South Wales the campaign was started by Louisa Lawson, fiery mother of the poet Henry Lawson, who in May 1888 founded *Dawn*, a monthly 'journal for the household, edited, printed and published by women'.

The magazine was, in fact, more concerned with fighting for equal rights for women than with the household, to the extent that it employed only women to operate even the heaviest printing machinery.

The following year Louisa established the Dawn Club in Sydney, which campaigned energetically for womens' suffrage and womens' liberation generally.

In 1891 Rose Scott and six others formed the Womanhood Suffrage League in New South Wales which, by being devoted to only one objective, gradually took over the main thrust of the suffrage battle in this colony, although *Dawn* continued to be published until 1905.

Further support for the suffrage struggle came from the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, which was formed in Sydney in 1882 and rapidly expanded to the other Australian colonies.

In Queensland Mrs Emmie Miller, fondly known as Mother Miller, and her Women's Equal Franchise League led the struggle with the active support of the Labor Party.

Federation saw only Western Australia (where women won the vote in 1899), and South Australia with electoral rolls based on adult suffrage.

But this was sufficient to ensure that all Australian women were given a federal franchise early in 1902, since the Federal Convention of 1897 guaranteed a federal vote to all persons entitled to elect the Lower House in their State.

Introducing the Franchise Bill in April 1902, the Home Affairs Minister, Sir William Lyne, told Federal Parliament: 'I believe that by the extension of the franchise to women, we shall get a better Parliament than we otherwise should have, and a greater interest will be taken in its work.'

With the federal battle won, capitulation by the remaining States was inevitable. New South Wales was first in 1902, followed by Tasmania (1903), Queensland (1905), and finally, Victoria in 1908.

It was a remarkable achievement in a country which traditionally followed the lead given by England, where it was to be another ten years before women over thirty were enfranchised, and ten years after that for full adult suffrage to be achieved.