

Woman's Place in the Commonwealth.

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Woman's Place in the Commonwealth.

(BY CATHERINE HELEN SPENCE, PRESIDENT OF THE EFFECTIVE VOTING LEAGUE OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.)

SIXTY years ago, a little barque sailed from Greenock, in Scotland, to Australia. Of the 180 passengers, some landed at Adelaide, some at Melbourne, and the rest at Sydney. I believe that many rose to wealth and position. In South Australia two were members of Ministries, and of these one was long President of the Legislative Council.

It was my good fortune to land at Adelaide, in the province where women have taken a larger share in public affairs than in any other colony in the island continent, and it has consequently been my privilege to aid in building up a Federated Commonwealth.

I was even bold enough to stand as a candidate for the Federal Convention. South Australia had been the first community to give the municipal vote to women rate-payers, and in 1894 it had admitted women to full rights of political citizenship, so that there might well have been one representative woman among her ten delegates. It was also a good advertisement for the electoral reform which I have advocated by pen and voice for forty years if I stood or fell on the single issue of Effective Voting for Federated Australia. I need not say that I was not elected by the Block vote. It is not easy to get new blood or new ideas into any Parliament by that discredited method.

The grand democratic basis of the Commonwealth constitution of "one man one vote," needs to be expanded into "one adult one vote," and "one vote one value," to make our Senate and our House of Representatives a model to the civilized world. All over the world representative institutions are on their trial, and the fears of the timid as to the encroachments of democracy, can only be allayed by "more democracy." While half of the human race is shut out from public activities, no one can call the government really democratic. While large and intelligent minorities are by means of defective machinery disfranchised, democracy is deprived of its saving salt, of its boldly progressive as well as its wisely conservative elements.

In the Federal outlook, will not the South Australian leaven work on the rest of the Commonwealth, especially as the trend of popular feeling is in

favour of the political enfranchisement of women? The Upper Houses, which opposed "one man one vote," have opposed more strongly the admission of women to political rights. The election of the first Commonwealth Parliament is a more important event than any that has ever taken place in Australia\ s-\ more important than any subsequent election for this great legislative body can be; so it is no wonder that all the earnest, thoughtful women in Australia and Tasmania re-double their efforts for the suffrage, so that they make their influence felt here, and now, even if they fail wholly or in part. The Federal constitution has been more liberal than most of the colonies, and to the larger and grander legislature the claim of women will appeal with every hope of success.

We have heard much of the Pilgrim Fathers, but nothing of the Pilgrim Mothers in the United States\ ??\ It was the custom of our ancestors to accept the services and the sacrifices of their womenfolk as a matter of course. But here, in the nineteenth century, in the life time of many of us, the wilderness has been reclaimed; great cities have been built, governments have been established, new lights have fallen upon old traditions inherited from our forefathers, and here, under the Southern Cross, a great Commonwealth has been organised through peaceful evolution.

In the clearer light of modern thought men see and acknowledge that women have borne their share of the hardships and the labours of these new colonies, and this is why New Zealand and South Australia, when emigration was mainly of families, have given full political rights to women. Four of the newer States in America have also enlisted woman's practical common sense and moral influence through the ballot-box, into their local legislatures. The opposition to woman's suffrage in other more populous and older States comes from the politicians, who dread the entrance of a vast number of voters not so manageable for party purposes as men. All the weight of the drink and gambling interests is brought to bear against the admission of women to the suffrage, both in England and America; but the anomaly is greatest in America, because the social influence of women is incomparably strongest there.

They have invaded every avocation and profession, not in dozens, but in hundreds and thousands. They have shown powers of public speaking and organization and united action that have astonished the world. Women's clubs are more numerous than men's, and embrace a greater variety of objects, and withal they continue to be the most charming women in the world. But the wire-pullers and the professional politicians deny votes to them, while they give them to ignorant foreigners who are more amenable to party ends and party discipline.

As for the result of granting the suffrage in South Australia, I never thought that this would transform politics and moralise politicians at once. The educational effect on both men and women is good, and it will have increasing influence as experience goes on. As a rule, the newly enfranchised women have voted on the same lines as their husbands and fathers; but there are exceptions, and so far as I have been able to ascertain, these exceptions cause no quarrels or bitterness. Men allow their wives to go to the churches to which they conscientiously adhere, and the far less important matter of politics is looked on in the same way. I could not say that any special candidate has been returned by the women's vote, who would not have been elected without it; but the attitude of candidates and Members of Parliament towards all questions affecting women and children has been very much changed now that so great a voting strength lies in the hands of women.

As for influence, that subtle thing which we are told is so much better for us and for the world than actual responsible power that has by no means diminished; on the contrary, it has increased. Husbands, sons, and brothers respect the opinions of wives, mothers, and sisters far more when these can be backed by votes. Women attend political meetings in considerable numbers, and put questions to the candidates. Their presence is felt to be a restraining and moralising influence, even by the rowdy. As for election day, when once in three years or so, women go to the polling booth, it is so quiet and orderly that it feels like going to church. Our elections have always been orderly since we, first of all the colonies, first, indeed, in all the world, introduced the secret ballot, known in the United States as the Australian ballot. George Grote, the Historian of Greece, year after year in his place in Parliament, moved for a secret ballot, and was called an un-English faddist for his pains; and it is interesting to note that the first realization of his idea was carried out in South Australia, of which he was one of the founders; and one of the chief streets of Adelaide bears his name.

I believe the results in New Zealand have been similar to the results here, but of that I cannot speak from personal knowledge. The educational value of the suffrage may be seen here after five years' experience. There is far more interest felt in public questions, in the character of public men, in questions of public policy, of loan and expenditure, by the average woman of South Australia than in the other colonies. These have become part of her business; with the suffrage comes the responsibility. Frivolous women there are, as well as indifferent and apathetic men, but the atmosphere is more stimulating to both when equal rights have been gained.

In the establishment of a Federal magazine to take broad views of all

political and social questions, I hope that there will be a thorough discussion of this large subject, as well as some scope for those women from all of the colonies, who love Australia and seek her best interests, to contribute to its pages. A one-sexed society such as men have in clubs, and women at afternoon calls, is incomplete and unsatisfactory; and a one-sexed Federal magazine will not be adequately representative of Australia.
