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John Stuart Mill

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SUFFRAGE FOR WOMEN.

SPEECH BY

JOHN STUART MILL,

IN THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT, MAY 20, 1867.

[Reprinted by the Equal Suffrage League of Baltimore.]

I RISE, sir, to propose an extension of the suffrage which can excite no party or class feeling in the house—which can give no umbrage to the keenest assertor of the claims either of property or of numbers; an extension which has not the faintest tendency to disturb, what we have heard so much about lately, the balance of political power; which cannot afflict the most timid alarmist by any revolutionary terrors, or offend the most jealous democrat as an infringement of popular rights, or a privilege granted to one class of society at the expense of another. There is nothing to distract our minds from the simple consideration whether there is any reasonable ground for excluding an entire half of the nation, not only from actual admission, but from the very possibility of being admitted within the pale of citizenship, though they may fulfill every one of the conditions legally and constitutionally sufficient in all cases but theirs. This is, under the laws of our country, a solitary case. There is no other example of an exclusion which is absolute. If it were the law that none should have a vote but the possessors of £5,000 a year, the poorest man in the community might, and now and then would, attain to the privilege. But neither birth, nor merit, nor exertion, nor intellect, nor fortune, nor even that great disposer of human affairs—accident, can enable any woman to have her voice counted in those common concerns which touch her and hers as nearly as any other person in the nation.

Now, sir, before going any farther, permit me to say that a *prima facie* case is already made out. It is not just to make distinctions, in rights and privileges, between one of Her Majesty's subjects and another, unless for a positive reason. I do not mean that the suffrage, or any other political function, is an abstract right, or that to withhold it from any one, on sufficient grounds of expediency, is a personal wrong; it is an utter misunderstanding of the principle I maintain to confound this with it; my whole argument is one of expediency. But all expediencies are not on exactly the same level. There is a kind of expediency which is

called justice; and justice, though it does not necessarily demand that we should bestow political rights on every one, does demand that we should not capriciously and without cause give those rights to one, and withhold them from another.† As was most justly said by my right honorable friend, the member for South Lancashire, in the most misunderstood and misrepresented speech that I ever remember, to lay a ground for the denial of the franchise to any one, it is necessary to allege either personal unfitness or public danger. Can either of these be asserted in the present case? Can it be pretended that women who manage a property or conduct a business, who pay rates and taxes, often to a large amount, and often from their own earnings, many of whom are responsible heads of families, and some of whom, in the capacity of schoolmistresses, teach more than a great many of the male electors have ever learnt, are not capable of a function of which every male householder is capable? Or is it supposed that, if they were allowed to vote, they would revolutionize the State, subvert any of our valuable institutions, or that we should have worse laws, or be, in any single respect, worse governed by means of their suffrage? [Hear, hear.]

No one thinks any thing of the kind; and it is not only the general principles of justice that are infringed, or at any rate set aside, by excluding women, merely as women, from the election of representatives. That exclusion is repugnant to the particular principles of the British Constitution. It violates the oldest of our constitutional axioms—a principle dear to all reformers, and theoretically acknowledged by conservatives—that taxation and representation should be co-extensive; that the taxes should be voted by those who pay them. Do not women pay taxes? Does not every woman who is *sui juris* pay exactly the same as a man who has the same electoral qualifications? If having a stake in the country means any thing, the owner of freehold or leasehold property has the same stake, whether it is owned by a man or a woman.

There is evidence in our constitutional records that women have voted in counties and in some boroughs at former, though certainly distant, periods of history. But the house will expect that I should not rest my case on general principles, either of justice or of the Constitution, but should produce what are called practical arguments. Now I frankly admit that one very serious practical argument is entirely wanting in the case of women: they do not hold great meetings in Hyde Park—[laughter]—nor demonstrations at Islington.

How far this omission may be considered to invalidate their claims, I will not pretend to say. But other practical arguments—practical even in the most restricted sense of the term—are not wanting; and I am ready to state them if I may first be allowed to ask, Where are the practical objections? In general,

the difficulty which people feel on this subject is not a practical objection; there is nothing practical in it; it is a mere feeling—a feeling of strangeness. {The idea is so very new; at least they think so, though that is a mistake: it is a very old idea. Well, sir, strangeness is a thing which wears off. Some things were strange enough to many of us three months ago which are not at all so now; and many which are strange now will not be strange to the same person a few years hence, not to say a few months; and, as for novelty, we live in a world of novelties. }

The despotism of custom is on the wane: we are not now content to know that things are: we ask whether they ought to be; and in this house, I am bound to suppose that an appeal lies from custom to a higher tribunal, in which reason is judge. Now, the reasons which custom is in the habit of giving for itself on this subject are very brief: that, indeed is one of my difficulties. It is not easy to refute an interjection. Interjections, however, are the only arguments among those we usually hear on this subject which it appears to me at all difficult to refute.

The others chiefly consist of such aphorisms as these: Politics is not women's business, and would make them neglect their proper duties. Women do not desire the suffrage, and would rather not have it. Women are sufficiently represented through their male relatives. Women have power enough already. I shall perhaps be thought to have done enough in the way of answering, when I have answered all these: it may perhaps instigate any honorable gentleman who takes the trouble of replying to me, to produce something more recondite. [Hear.]

Politics, it is said, is not a woman's business. {Well, sir, I am not aware that politics is a man's business either, unless he is one of the few who is paid for devoting his time to the public service, or is a member of ~~this or of the other house~~. } The great majority of male visitors have their own business, which engrosses nearly the whole of their time; but I have never heard that the hours occupied in attending, once in a few years, at a polling booth, even if we throw in the time spent in reading newspapers and political treatises, has hitherto made them neglect their shops or their counting-houses. } I have not heard that those who have votes are worse merchants, or worse lawyers, or worse physicians, or even worse clergymen, than other people. One would think that the British Constitution allowed no man to vote who was not able to give up the greater part of his time to politics; if that were the case, we should have a very limited constituency.

But let me ask, what is the meaning of political freedom? Is it not the control of those who do make a business of politics by those who do not. It is the very principle of constitutional liberty that men come from their looms and their forges to decide—and decide well—whether they are properly governed, and whom they

will be governed by; and the nations who prize this privilege, and who exercise it fully, are invariably those who excell most in the common affairs of life.

The occupations of most women are, and are likely to remain, principally domestic; but the idea that those occupations are incompatible with taking an interest in national affairs, or in any of the great concerns of humanity, is as futile as the terror once sincerely entertained, lest artisans should desert the workshops and the factory if they were taught to read.

I know there is an obscure feeling, a feeling which is ashamed to express itself openly, that women have no right to care about any thing but how they may be the most useful and devoted servants of some man. } But as I am convinced that there is not one member of this house whose conscience accuses him of any such mean feeling, I may say that the claim to confiscate the whole existence of half the human species for the convenience of the other half, seems to me, independently of its injustice, particularly silly. } For who that has had ordinary experience of human life, and ordinary capacity for profiting by that experience, fancies that those do their own business best who understand nothing else? A man has lived to little purpose who has not learned that without general mental cultivation no particular work that requires understanding can be done in the best manner. / It requires brains to use practical experience; and brains, even without practical experience, go further than any amount of practical experience without brains. /

But perhaps it is thought that the ordinary occupations of women are more antagonistic than men's occupations are to any comprehension of public affairs. Perhaps it is thought that those who are principally charged with the moral education of the future generations of men must be quite unfit to judge of the moral and educational interest of a community; or that those whose chief daily business is the judicious laying-out of money so as to produce the greatest results with the smallest means, could not give any lessons to right honorable gentlemen on that side of the house, or on this, who produce such singularly small results with such vast means. [Laughter.]

I feel a degree of confidence, sir, on this subject, which I could not feel if the political change, in itself not a great or formidable one, for which I contend, were not grounded, as beneficent and salutary political changes usually are, upon a previous social change. The idea of a peremptory and absolute line of separation between men's province of thought and women's—the notion of forbidding women to take interest in what interests men—belongs to a gone-by state of society which is receding farther and farther into the past. We think and talk about the political revolutions of the world, but we do not pay sufficient attention to the fact that there has taken place among us a silent domestic revolution: women and men are,

for the first time in history, really companions. Our traditions about the proper relations between them have descended to us from a time when their lives were apart—when they were separate in their thoughts because they were separate both in their amusements and in their serious occupations. The man spent his hours of leisure among men: all his friendships, all his real intimacies were with men: with men alone did he converse on any serious subject: the wife was either a plaything or an upper servant. All this among the educated classes is changed: men no longer give up their spare time to violent out-door exercise and boisterous conviviality with male associates: the home has acquired the ascendancy: the two sexes now really pass their lives together: the women of the family are the man's habitual society: the wife is his chief associate, his most confidential friend, and often his most trusted counsellor. [Cheers.]

Now, does any man wish to have for his nearest companion, linked so closely with himself, and whose wishes and preferences have so strong a claim upon him, one whose thoughts are alien from those which occupy his own mind—one who can give neither help nor comfort nor support to his noblest feelings and purposes? [Hear, hear.] Is this close and almost exclusive companionship compatible with women being warned off all large subjects—taught that they ought not to care about what it is man's duty to care for, and that to take part in any serious interests outside the household is stepping beyond their province? Is it good for a man to pass his life in close communion of thought and feeling with a person studiously kept inferior to himself, whose earthly interests are forcibly confined within four walls, who is taught to cultivate as a grace of character ignorance and indifference about the most inspiring subjects, those among which his highest duties are cast? [Hear, hear.] (Does any one suppose that this can happen without detriment to the man's own character?)

(Sir, the time has come when, if women are not raised to the level of men, men will be pulled down to theirs.) [A laugh.] The women of a man's family are either a stimulus and a support to his higher aspirations, or a drag upon them. (You may keep them ignorant of politics, but you cannot keep them from concerning themselves with the least respectable part of politics—its personalities.) If they do not understand, and cannot enter into the man's feelings of public duty, they do care about his private interests, and that is the scale into which their weight is certain to be thrown. They are an influence always at hand, coöperating with his selfish promptings, watching and taking advantage of every moment of moral irresolution, and doubling the strength of every temptation. Even if they maintain a modest neutrality, their mere absence of sympathy hangs a dead weight upon his moral energies, and makes him averse to incur sacrifices which they will feel, and to forego

worldly successes and advantages in which they would share, for the sake of objects which they cannot appreciate. But suppose him to be happily preserved from temptation to an actual sacrifice of conscience, the insensible influence on the higher parts of his own nature is still deplorable. Under an idle notion that the beauties of character of the two sexes are mutually incompatible, men are afraid of manly women [a laugh]; but those who have reflected on the nature and power of social influences, know that, when there are not manly women, there will not much longer be manly men. [Laughter.] When men and women are really companions, if women are frivolous, men will be frivolous; if women care only for personal interests and trifling amusements, men in general will care for little else. The two sexes must now rise or sink together.

It may be said that women can take interest in great national questions without having a vote. They can, certainly; but how many of them will? All that society and education can do is exhausted in inculcating on women that the rule of their conduct ought to be what society expects from them, and the denial of the vote is a proclamation, intelligible to every one, that society does not expect them to concern themselves with public interests. Why, the whole of a girl's thoughts and feelings are toned down by it from her earliest school-days; she does not take the interest, even in national history, that a boy does, because it is to be no business of hers when she grows up. If there are women, and fortunately there now are, who do care about these subjects, and study them, it is because the force within is powerful enough to bear up against the worst kind of discouragement, that which acts not by interposing obstacles which may be struggled against, but by deadening the spirit which faces and conquers obstacles.

We are told that women do not wish the suffrage. If this be so, it only proves that nearly all women are still under this deadening influence, that the opiate still benumbs their mind and conscience. But there are many women who do desire the suffrage, and have claimed it by petitions to this house. How do we know how many more thousands there are who have not asked for what they do not hope to get, either for fear of being ill thought of by men or by other women, or from the feeling so sedulously cultivated by the whole of their education—aversion to make themselves conspicuous. |

Men must have a great faculty of self-delusion if they suppose that leading questions put to the ladies of their families, or of their acquaintances, will elicit their real sentiments, or will be answered with entire sincerity by one woman in ten thousand. No one is so well schooled as most women are in making a virtue of necessity. It costs little to disclaim caring for what is not offered; and frankness in expressing feelings that may be disagreeable or unflattering to their nearest connections is not one of the virtues

which a woman's education tends to cultivate. It is, moreover, a virtue attended with sufficient risk to induce prudent women to reserve its exercise for cases in which there is some nearer interest to be promoted by it.

At all events, those who do not care for the suffrage will not use it. Either they will not register, or if they do, they will vote as their male relatives advise them, by which, as the advantage would probably about equally shared among all classes, no harm would be done. Those, whether they be few or many, who do value the privilege, would exercise it, and would experience that stimulus to their faculties, and that widening and liberalizing influence on their feelings and sympathies, which the suffrage seldom fails to exert over every class that is admitted to a share in it. Meanwhile, an unworthy stigma would have been taken off the whole sex, the law would have ceased to stamp them as incapable of serious things, would have ceased to proclaim that their opinions and wishes do not deserve to have any influence in things which concern them equally with men, and in many that concern them much more than men. They would no longer be classed with children, idiots, and lunatics—[laughter and cheers]—as incapable of taking care either of themselves or others, and needing that everything should be done for them without asking for their consent. If no more than one woman in twenty thousand used the vote, it would be a gain to all women to be declared capable of using it. Even so purely theoretical an enfranchisement would remove an artificial weight from the expansion of their faculties, the real evil of which is far greater than the apparent.

Then it is said that women do not need direct political power because they have so much indirect through the influence they possess over their male relatives and connections. [Laughter.] Sir, I should like to try this argument in other cases. Rich people have a great deal of indirect influence. Is this a reason for denying them a vote? [Cheers.] Did any one ever propose a rating qualification the wrong way, and bring in a reform bill to disfranchise everybody who lives in a £500 house, or pays £100 a year in direct taxes? [Hear, hear.] Unless this rule for distributing the franchise is to be reserved for the exclusive benefit of women, the legitimate consequences of it would be that persons above a certain amount of fortune should be allowed to bribe, but should not be allowed to vote. [Laughter.]

Sir, it is true that women have already great power. It is part of my case that they have great power. But they have it under the worst possible conditions, because it is indirect, and, therefore, irresponsible. [Hear, hear.] I want to make that power a responsible power. [Hear, hear.] I want to make the woman feel her conscience interested in its honest exercise. I want to make her feel that it is not given to her as a mere means of personal ascend-

ency) I want to make her influence work by a manly interchange of opinions, and not by cajolery. [Laughter and cheers.] I want to awaken in her the political point of honor. At present many a woman greatly influences the political conduct of her male connections, sometimes by force of will actually governs it; but she is never supposed to have any thing to do with it. The man she influences, and perhaps misleads, is alone responsible. Her power is like the back-stairs influence of a favorite. The poor creature is nobody, and all is referred to the man's superior wisdom; and as, of course, he will not give way to her if he ought not, she may work upon him through all his strongest feelings without incurring any responsibility. Sir, I demand that all who exercise power should have the burden laid upon them of knowing something about the things they have power over. } With the admitted right to a voice would come a sense of the corresponding duty. }

A woman is not generally inferior in tenderness of conscience to a man. Make her a moral agent in matters of public conduct. Show that you require from her a political conscience, and when she has learnt to understand the transcendent importance of these things, she will see why it is wrong to sacrifice political convictions for personal interest and vanity; she will understand that political honesty is not a foolish personal crotchet, which a man is bound for the sake of his family to give up, but a serious duty; and the men whom she can influence will be better men in all public relations, and not, as they often are at present, worse men by the whole effect of her influence. [Hear, hear.]

But, at all events, it will be said women, as women, do not suffer any practical inconvenience by not being represented. The interests of all women are safe in the hands of their fathers, husbands, and brothers, whose interest is the same with theirs, and who, besides knowing better than they do what is good for them, care a good deal more for them than they care for themselves.

Sir, this is exactly what has been said of all other unrepresented classes—the operatives, for instance; are they not all virtually represented through their employers? are not the interests of the employer and that of the employed, when properly understood, the same? To insinuate the contrary, is it not the horrible crime of setting class against class? Is not the farmer interested along with his laborer in the prosperity of agriculture? Has not the cotton manufacturer as great an interest in the high price of calicoes as his workmen? Is not the employer interested as well as his men in the repeal of taxes? Have not employer and employed a common interest against outsiders, just as man and wife have against all outside the family? And are not all employers kind, benevolent, charitable men, who love their work-people, and always know and do what is most for their good? Every one of these assertions is exactly as true as the parallel assertion respecting men and women.

Sir, we are not living in Arcadia, but, as we were lately reminded, in *facie Romuli*; and in that region workmen need other protection than that of their masters, and women than that of their men. }

I should like to see a return laid before the house of the number of women who are annually beaten to death, kicked to death, or trodden to death, by their male protectors. [Hear, hear.] I should like this document to contain, in an opposite column, a return of the sentences passed in those cases in which the dastardly criminal did not get off altogether; and in a third column a comparative view of the amount of property, the unlawful taking of which had, in the same sessions or assizes, by the same judge, been thought worthy of the same degree of punishment. [Cheers.] We should thus obtain an arithmetical estimate of the value set by a male legislature and male tribunals upon the murder of a woman by habitual torture, often prolonged for years, which, if there be any shame in us, would make us hang our heads. [Cheers.]

Sir, before it is contended that women do not suffer in their interests, especially as women, by not being represented, it must be considered whether women, as women, have no grievances—whether the law, and those practices which law can reach, treat women in every respect as favorably as men. Well, sir, is that the case? As to education, for example, we continually hear it said that the education of the mothers is the most important part of the education of the country, because they educate the men. Is as much importance really attached to it? Are there many fathers who care as much, or are willing to expend as much, for the good education of their daughters as of their sons? Where are the universities, where the public schools, where the schools of any high description for them? [Hear.]

If it is said that girls are best educated at home, where are the training schools for governesses? What has become of the endowments which the bounty of our forefathers established for the instruction, not of boys alone, but of boys and girls indiscriminately? I am informed by one of the highest authorities on the subject that, in the majority of the deeds of endowment, the provision was for education generally, and not especially for boys. One great endowment—Christ's Hospital—was designated expressly for both. That establishment maintains and educates one thousand one hundred boys, and exactly twenty-six girls.

Then when they have attained womanhood, how does it fare with the large and increasing portion of the sex, who, though sprung from the educated classes, have not inherited a provision; and, not having obtained one by marriage, or disdaining to marry merely for a provision, depend on their exertions for support? Hardly any decent educated occupation, save one, is open to them. They are either governesses, or nothing.

A fact has quite recently occurred which is worth commemorating. A young lady, Miss Garrett, from no pressure of necessity, but from an honorable desire to find scope for her activity in alleviating the sufferings of her fellow-creatures, applied herself to the study of medicine. Having duly qualified herself, she, with an energy and perseverance which cannot be too highly praised, knocked successively at every one of the doors through which, in this country, a student can pass into medical practice. Having found every other door fast shut, she at last discovered one which had been accidentally left ajar. The Society of Apothecaries, it appears, had forgotten to shut out those whom they never thought would attempt to come in; and through that narrow entry this young lady obtained admission into the medical profession. But so objectionable did it appear to this learned body that women should be permitted to be the medical attendants, even of women, that the narrow wicket which Miss Garrett found open has been closed after her, and no second Miss Garrett is to be suffered to pass through it. [Cheers.]

Sir, this is *instar omnium*. As soon as ever women become capable of successfully competing with men in any career, if it be lucrative and honorable, it is closed to them. A short time ago women could be associates of the Royal Academy; but they were so distinguishing themselves, they were taking so honorable a rank in their art, that this privilege, too, has been taken from them. That is the kind of care taken of women by the men who so faithfully represent them. [Cheers.] That is our treatment of unmarried women; and now about the married.

They, it may be said, are not directly concerned in the amendment which I have moved, but it concerns many who have been married as well as others who will be so. By the common law of England, every thing that a woman has belongs absolutely to her husband; he may tear it all away from her, may spend the last penny of it in debauchery, leaving her to maintain by her labor both herself and her children; and if, by heroic exertion, she earns enough to put by any thing for their future support, unless she is judicially separated from him, he can pounce upon her savings, and leave her penniless; and such cases are of very common occurrence. If we were besotted enough to think such things right, there would be more excuse for us; but we know better. The richer classes have found a way of exempting their own daughters from this iniquitous state of the law. By the contrivance of marriage settlements, they can make in each case a private law for themselves, and they always do. Why do we not provide that justice for the daughters of the poor which we take good care shall be done to our own daughters? Why is not what is done in every particular case that we personally care for made the general law of the land?—that a poor man's child, whose parents could not afford

the expense of a settlement, may be able to retain any little property which may devolve on her, and may have a voice in the disposal of her own earnings, often the best and only reliable part of the sustenance of the family? [Hear.] I am sometimes asked what practical grievance I propose to remedy by enabling women to vote. I propose, for one thing, to remedy this. I have given these few instances to prove that women are not the petted favorites of society which some people seem to imagine; that they have not that abundance, that superfluity of influence, which is ascribed to them, and are not sufficiently represented by the representation of those who have never cared to do in their behalf so obvious an act of justice. Sir, grievances of less magnitude than the laws of the property of married women, when affecting persons and classes less inured to passive endurance, have provoked revolutions.

We ought not to take advantage of the security which we feel against any such danger in the present case to refuse to a limited class of women that small amount of participation in the enactment and the improvement of our laws which this motion solicits for them, and which would enable the general feelings of women to be heard in this house through a few female representatives. We ought not to deny to them what we are going to accord to everybody else: a right to be consulted; the common chance of placing in the great council of the nation a few organs of their sentiments; of having what every petty trade or profession has—a few members of the legislature, with a special call to stand up for their interests, and direct attention to the mode in which those interests are affected by the law, or by any changes in it. No more is asked by this motion; and when the time comes, as it is certain to come, when this will be conceded, I feel the firmest conviction that you will never repent of the concession. I move, sir, that the word “man” be omitted, and the word “person” inserted in its place. [Cheers.]

There were 73 votes for Mr. Mill's amendment, 196 against it—it was lost, therefore, by 123 votes.

“The Tribune” correspondent says, “Some of the greatest intellects in Parliament, and nearly all the young men on whom the future of England depends, made an honorable record on this great question. Among them were Hughes, Stansfield, Taylor, Lord Amberley, Oliphant, Mr. Denman, Mr. Fawcett, the O'Donoghue, and the sturdy old Roman Catholic, Sir George Bowyer.”