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FULL PARTICIPATION WITHIN THE SYSTEM

February 3, 1972

Statement to the Bill of Rights Committee

Helena, Montana

My Delegate Proposal No. 13 reads as follows:

"Persons 18 years of age are declared to be adults for all purposes and shall have the right to hold any public office in the state."

It is most appropriate that this constitutional convention grant full participation within the system to those who were only recently granted the right to vote for all public offices in our state and nation but who are at the same time prohibited from being a candidate for any of the offices they are voting for.

On two previous occasions in our history the question arose as to the advisability of including in our democratic system, groups of formerly disenfranchised citizens. Our nation first faced this question in 1865 when after a bloody Civil War we were led by the words of a man of compassion who felt "malice toward none and charity toward all" and as a nation we met the challenge of the times and we gave the right to vote and hold public office to those who, because of slavery many argued, lacked the education and experience to intelligently vote as equals or to serve in any public office. But at that time our faith in the democratic process prevailed over doubt and our nation can look back with pride for having the strength to meet and accept that challenge and we gave the blacks the right to vote and hold public office in spite of strong objections from those who argued that it was unwise and premature.

Secondly, in the Montana Constitutional Convention of 1889, one of the crucial debates concerned the same question of whether or not to allow a major group of disenfranchised citizens to have the right to vote. That convention, facing

an all male electorate which would either accept or reject the new constitution, trembled at the controversial question of whether or not to give women the constitutional right to vote or even allow the legislature to give them the right to vote in the future.

Our sister state of Wyoming had already distinguished herself 20 years earlier in 1869 by leading the nation in giving women the right to vote and by her action set an example which was a guiding light that all other states followed.

It is no credit to our 1889 convention delegates that after extended debate they did not measure up to the challenge of their times and they failed to take the stand that would have given women the right to vote and equally as important the right to full participation within the system. But the delegates of 1889 did not display the confidence in our citizens to accept an idea whose time had come and their failure resulted in women being denied the right to vote for an additional 25 years after the convention. It was not until a constitutional amendment was passed in 1914 that our state followed the majority trend and finally granted women the right to vote. This was an embarrassing 45 years after the historic example set by Wyoming.

And now our constitutional convention and state faces the last major group of disenfranchised citizens, the young generation. The challenge of our time is to give full participation in the system to those who have, in the shortest length of time in our history, been accepted as equals with the right to vote in all elections of our nation. We can be proud that last spring Montana ratified the 26th Amendment which removed all state and local voting restrictions for those 18 years of age and which went into effect when the state of Ohio ratified it and on June 30, 1971, it became the law of the land.

In both previous examples, first after the Civil War for the Blacks and secondly in 1889 for Montana women, our system faced the same challenge to give the right to vote and the equally important right to hold public office to a large disenfranchised group of our citizens. Similar arguments were raised by those who opposed the expansion of suffrage to those that they felt did not have the experience or knowledge to vote or hold public office. It is with more than historical interest that we should now review the 1889 Constitutional Convention and the objections raised by the doubters of their day.

A delegate from Missoula, concerned about the all male electorate, favored the proposal that would give the legislature the right to later confer upon women the right to vote. He said that "it is not true that by going to the polls the woman is degraded to the level of a man nor does she suffer from any contaminating influences which she finds at the polls."

The delegate from Custer County while agreeing with the statements of the Missoula delegate, believed that it was an issue introduced at the wrong time; an idea whose time had not yet come.

The delegate from Fergus County pointed out that for 20 years Wyoming had proved that women having the vote was a grand success and the ballot was an effective way for her to protect her home, her children, and her person from the unjust acts of a brutal husband by allowing her to say, "I can vote and I will cast my vote for an officer that will enforce the laws that protect me."

The Madison County delegate said his wife's vote would be as good as his, but he could not imagine her ever being elected Governor because of the humiliation it would cause him to have to walk down the streets of Helena and have men whisper, "There goes the husband of the Governor." He would oppose her ever going to Congress.

The Silver Bow delegate feared the adoption of the proposal supported by the Missoula delegate because, "There are enough ungallant men in Montana to defeat the Constitution." But he added, "I say it with pride, that I have taken my wife's hand upon my arm and led her to the polls and voted with her upon school questions. I loved her just as dearly; reposed just as much confidence in her afterwards as I had done before."

The Deer Lodge delegate was opposed to giving women the right to vote because it would, in his opinion, be the "entering wedge which will bring about her downfall." He suggested that the Silver Bow delegate "would not be so eager to lead his wife to the polls if he knew she voted a different ballot. As long as the woman obeys the man and she votes as he does, he is glad to take her to the polls; but the instant she refuses to be governed in that vote, there will be dissension, that will cause diversion and that will cause the downfall of woman instead of her elevation."

The Jefferson County delegate said that he would wage a new hat that every wife in the state would vote contrary to her husband in every instance.

Another Silver Bow County delegate observed that "Politics is degrading and if a woman engages in it, she will lose some of her charm and grace of manner to which man looks up with so much admiration and respect."

He pointed out that when the first male college opened its doors for co-education a "howl of indignation and horror went up from one end of the land to the other at the shocking spectacle of a young lady sitting side by side with a young man trying to gain a liberal education."

The Silver Bow County delegate concluded by saying: "I believe that women have the best of the question as it is, and I am thoroughly satisfied that I am not occupying an ungallant

position when I say that I am willing to let them have the better of the question, and I am not willing to impose upon them the responsibilities of suffrage."

The motion by the Missoula delegate to allow the legislature to give women the right to vote was then voted on and was defeated by a vote of 29 for and 34 against. That vote was no credit to our state. Today in this constitutional convention we face the same challenge of granting full participation within the system to those whom we have only recently accepted as equals for voting but have not yet accepted for holding public office. The young generation is today's challenge to this convention.

We now have the opportunity to redeem our state by setting a national example in this historic convention and the eyes of the nation are upon our deliberations.

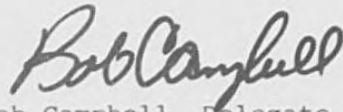
We now have the historic opportunity to correct the tragic reluctance of the preceding convention which was too timid to face the great issue of its time and could not measure up to the challenge of change.

Although humorous for us now to recall the serious objections raised in 1889, it can be seen that the same arguments are presented today as were raised against the blacks after the Civil War, and the women of Montana in 1889. Today young people have only half their rights; the right to vote for offices that they are forbidden to hold. The right to hold office is absolutely essential to achieve full participation within the system. The present situation is ^{as} unfair as it would have been to give blacks the right to vote but only for whites. Young people deserve equality. It has always been argued that any such group of formerly disenfranchised citizens do not have the knowledge or experience to act responsibly within the system and I submit to you that the doubters of the

past and present are all equally wrong. The artificial barriers to public office must be removed now. The courage of Wyoming in 1869 is an inspiration to Montana to regain that full measure of individual and progressive thought with which we in the West take great pride.

The objections of the past reflected a basic lack of confidence by those who feared that the democratic process is incapable of accepting a new group of responsible citizens. There was no basis for the doubts of the past nor is there a basis for the doubts of today. Such doubt only represents the insecurity of those who hold them.

In the next few weeks we will decide issues which will lead our state and nation for this and succeeding generations. I submit to you that the challenge of today in this state and nation is the challenge of the younger generation and let us now enthusiastically accept and welcome this historic opportunity to become the guiding light for this nation and grant to those whom we have accepted as voters, the final measure of full participation within the system. We can do no more, and history demands no less.



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