

Woman Suffrage

SPEECH

OF

RATCLIFFE HICKS,

DELIVERED IN THE

House of Representatives, Hartford, Conn.,

MAY 11th, 1893,

IN FAVOR OF

THE WOMAN SUFFRAGE BILL,

Giving Women the Right to Vote at School Elections.

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Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Your Committee on Woman Suffrage, to whom were referred many bills relating to that subject, have given this question a patient hearing; and, as a result of their deliberations, have reported with practical unanimity the bill now pending before this House.

This is a question which, like the ghost in Shakespeare's great play, will not down; and if you do not settle it right to-day, it will come here to vex every succeeding Session of the General Assembly of Connecticut until it has been settled, and settled right.

I invoke your serious attention to the little I have to say in favor of the pending bill.

Since the commencement of recorded time, there has been no period of fifty years in the history of the world, so fruitful of good to the human race, as the last fifty years.

I have not the time to portray, and you have not the patience to listen to me, while I recite, one-half that has been done in fifty years—in art, in science, in spreading human comfort, in the developing of government, and in establishing the rights and redressing the wrongs of the governed, in all parts of the civilized world.

No class in the community has welcomed this progress with greater zeal, no class thanks Heaven with a prouder heart, and no class have reaped greater benefits from all this wonderful progress, than the women of this land—our mothers, our wives, our sisters, and our daughters. But the tale is only half told, the book is only half open, the possibilities of the human race—of mankind and of womankind, is still in its infancy. Are we to stop where we are? Are we to make no more progress? Are we to offer the blessings of a free government to all the poor, and degraded, and ignorant of the old World, and to refuse it to our own kith and kin? Are not the women of Connecticut as fit to vote, as intelligent, as much interested in the fair fame of Connecticut as the emigrant who lands at Castle Garden—that Babel of languages and storehouse for paupers—or as the ignorant and homeless negro of the South?

The whole theory of our government is, that it depends upon the consent of the governed, and that every person, White or Black, Native or Foreign born, Jew or Gentile, who has lived to the age of twenty-one years, and who can comply with certain educational requirements, shall have a voice in this government. Why limit it to males? Why give women no voice in the government under which they exist, or in the *laws* you ask them to obey, or in the *taxes* you compel them to pay, or in the control and education of their own children?

Either the theory of a Republican government is wrong, and we should abandon it and establish some other form of government, not depending upon the consent of the governed, or we should be just, and carry out our principles to the end.

I am frank to say, I believe in this system of a Republican government. I believe in the rule of the people, and I believe a Republican system is the grandest achievement of the ages.

I welcome the foreigner, fleeing from the despotic military governments of the old world. I welcome everybody to a lot and share in the benign benefits of a free government. There is room enough in this great Republic for people of all climes and both sexes, and I hope to live to see the day when every loyal subject, male and female, shall have a voice in the affairs of the nation.

Now, this bill recommended by your Committee is so small and so little a concession, that we be-

lieved it would pass this Legislature unanimously.

Women are now, by law in this State, eligible to act as members of boards of school visitors, on school committees and as a school committeeman, and why not go one step further? If they are competent to act in these positions, why are they not competent to say who shall *fill* these places?

Women act to-day with men in the management of churches, hospitals, sunday-schools, asylums, and they are filling all sorts of responsible positions in the educational, commercial and governmental affairs of the world. They are everywhere to be found challenging the respect and admiration of their fellow-men, from the Queen of England, who has for fifty years ruled with consummate ability the proudest and most powerful nation existing to-day, down to the quiet woman who travels along the humblest walks of daily toil. Their abilities are being tested on all the battle-fields of life, and the results of their industry and talents are among the marvels of the times. Over the center arch of the Brooklyn bridge should stand the figure of that woman, to whose mighty genius it owes its completion—the grandest triumph of fifty centuries, in civil engineering.

But, why shall I tarry in this matter? Connecticut, slow and conservative as she has always been is still lagging in the onward march of progress. It took her fifty years to learn the lesson that Thomas Jefferson taught, the separation of

church and state, and it took her seventy-five years to learn that a property qualification was not in harmony with a free government.

To-day, school suffrage, under various conditions, is allowed to women, in the following states—I beg of you to listen while I read the list of states: in Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota, Texas, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin. In Arkansas and Missouri, women may vote (by not signing, or refusing to sign) on liquor licences. In Kansas, women may vote in municipal elections. About 60,000 women voted in 1891, and over 100,000 in 1893, and tolled the knell of *crankism* in that state. In New York, women may vote at school elections and on questions of water works, paving, grading, draining, street lighting and minor local improvements. In Pennsylvania, women vote on local improvements by signing or refusing to sign petitions therefor.

Thomas W. Palmer to whose ability, as much as any other living man to-day, you owe the unparalleled success of the Columbian World's Fair, spoke as follows in the United States Senate, some few years ago: "They cite the physical superiority of man, but offer no amendment to increase the voting power of a Sullivan, or a Heenan, or to disfranchise the halt, the blind, or

* the sick. They object that many women do not desire the suffrage, and that some would not exercise it. It is probably true, as often claimed, that many slaves did not desire emancipation in 1863, and there are men in most communities who do not vote, but we hear of no freedman to-day who asks re-enslavement, and no proposition is offered to disenfranchise all men because some neglect their duty.

"They regard the manly head of the family as its only proper representative, but would not exclude the adult bachelor sons. They urge disability to perform military service as fatal to full citizenship, but would hardly consent to resign their own rights because they have passed the age of conscription, or question those of Quakers, who will not fight, or of professional men and civic officials, who, like mothers, are regarded as of more use to the State at home. They are dismayed at a vision of women in attendance at caucuses at late hours of the night, but, doubtless, enjoy their presence at routs, balls, and entertainments, until the early dawn.

"I share no fear of the degradation of women by the ballot. I believe rather that it will elevate men. I believe the tone of our politics will be higher, that our caucuses will be jealously guarded, and our conventions more orderly and decorous. I believe the polls will be freed from the vulgarity and coarseness which now too often surround

them, and that the polling booths, instead of being in the least attractive parts of a ward or town will be in the most attractive; instead of being in stables, and gin mills, will be in private houses and counting rooms. I believe the character of candidates will be more closely scrutinized, and that better officers will be chosen to make and administer the laws. I believe that the casting of the ballot will be invested with a seriousness—I had almost said a sanctity—second only to a religious observance."

The great Liberal party of England, under the leadership of that man who will go down to history as the most profound statesman of the nineteenth century, William E. Gladstone, has brought forward in the British Parliament, within the past eight weeks, a bill which gives to the women of the three Kingdoms a full and complete voice in the management of all local affairs.

From the rich mine of English jurisprudence, our fathers gathered the principles of our constitution, and ever since in subsequent legislation, these two great kindred nations have together girdled the world with the principles of personal liberty, and the rights of the individual man, and the individual woman. Will we now part company with our Queen sister, in the race for human progress, and the development of mankind? I say no.

In closing, I have but this to say. I appeal to every member of this House. Who taught you the alphabet, to whose kind and constant instructions, more than all else in this World, do you owe the foundation, and possibly the completion of your education,—who followed you with anxious and loving heart that you might be educated and fitted to go out and fight the battles of life and be a man among men? And, who is doing this same work for your children to-day, but a woman.

Give the women, what nature fitted them for, and what should be theirs by every law, human or divine, a *voice* in the control and management of your schools, and in the education of their children, and you will never regret it.