

WORDS OF A LEADER :
Being Extracts from the Writings of the late
Miss Lydia Becker

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ORDER OF PARAGRAPHS.

The Claim not an Innovation	p. 3
In accordance with Historic Precedent . . .	p. 4
Its common ground	8
The Law treats differently with Men and Women	p. 9
A painful position for Women	p. 11
Women's Opinions should not be courted by indirect methods	p. 13
Protection various in form	p. 15
Protection by the Sword transferred to the Vote	p. 17
Consequent Elevation of the Individual	p. 19
The Claim appeals to both Parties in the State	p. 23
The Value of the Vote	p. 25
As regards Women whose work contributes to the wealth of the country	p. 27
The present anomalous position	p. 30
The Moral Law objection	p. 32
How Progress is hindered	p. 35
The Help that might come	p. 37
The Claim in its Limits	p. 38
The Claim in its Breadth	p. 39
Its Equity	p. 40
In Conclusion . . .	p. 41

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION.

THE following passages have been selected from the lectures and writings of the late Miss Lydia Becker - the leader whose genius profoundly influenced the Women's Suffrage Movement from its beginning in 1866 to her death in 1890.

Our legislators, especially those more recently elected, may find in these passages much to assist them in forming a right judgment as to the weight of argument in favour of the claim of women to the Parliamentary Franchise, and in forming a true estimate as to the scope of that claim.

HELEN BLACKBURN.

April, 1897.

WORDS OF A LEADER

The claim not an Innovation :

MANY people seem to take it for granted that the claim of women to political power is a novelty, and that if it be admitted it will be a principle wholly at variance with established rules which have governed the world for ages. But if the history of political systems be studied, it will be seen that the idea of excluding women from political power is a notion of modern growth, and dates from the rise of so-called democratic institutions. In monarchical and aristocratic forms of government women who were heirs to thrones and lordships exercised the rights

p.4

and duties appertaining to the same. In times of old, peeresses and abbesses joined in voting the supplies.

In accordance with Historic Precedent :

So long as political power was withheld from the masses of the people, men and women alike, the disadvantages of the exclusion of women from the right to vote was of comparatively less importance. The people at large had no voice in the election nor control over the Parliamentary conduct of their representatives. In this respect men were little better off than women. The representative was mainly in the hands of the great families and the landlords, and persons of these classes of either sex exercised power in sending members to Parliament. There are many writs now in existence with the names of women appended as returning officers or electors. Mrs. Copley

p.5

at Gatton, and Dame Dorothy Packington at Aylesbury, returned the members for their respective boroughs, and the validity of these returns has never been disputed. Anne Countess of Pembroke sat and administered justice in her court at Appleby, and the spirited note in which she refused to be dictated to by a subject in her choice of a Parliamentary representative is familiar to every reader of English history.

Under government by privileged social classes it is not merely sex, but rank and some degree of culture and intelligence, that give individuals a choice in the government. Women have enjoyed in common with men the privileges and influence accorded to these social and personal conditions, and they have been eligible for government in almost every country which has preserved monarchical institutions to the present day.

p.6

Our woman sovereign is an heirloom from the ages when rank and not sex constituted a qualification for a voice in the government, and when women of rank were not held to be incapacitated by sex from the exercise of the most important political functions.

The political position of woman has never been quite equal to that of men. But in the old times it was not so completely depressed as it has been since the general extension of the franchise among one half of the people left the other half in a comparatively worse position. All claims to political power founded on the possession of rank, wealth, intelligence, and education are now becoming discredited, and the one attribute of sex is made the sole qualification for political rights by the demand for manhood suffrage. Under no form of government, therefore, are the political rights of women

p.7

so absolutely ignored as under modern democracy. Whatever electoral rights Englishwomen enjoy are inherited from past ages, and not from recent reforms. There was not the same spirit of separation between the thought and feelings of men and women under the ancient rule. The men who held power in their hands shared it to some degree with women. The men who were excluded from such power were excluded along with women. There was a degree of similarity or companionship between men and women in each class. But to enfranchise the masses of men, leaving women under political disability, tends to create a sense of estrangement unfavourable to domestic happiness.

p.8

Its common ground:

THE principles of the virtue of divine right and the benefits of despotic government which men have thrown off as regards their own sex, they still apply to the case of women. The man who, feeling the instinct of freedom strong within himself - conscious of the fact that he is a rational and responsible

being, with a heart and a mind and conscience of his own - disavows the notion that he is bound to obey irresponsible rulers and claims the privilege of a free citizen, will yet assert his right to govern women on the principles which he repudiates in his own case, and will be so blinded by prejudice and custom that he cannot perceive the inconsistency of his conduct. Yet looked at calmly and rationally it will be seen that a woman asserting her claim to political freedom has just as good a case as

p.9

a man, and her case can only be rebutted by the use of arguments which have been tried and found wanting when used against the claims of men.

The Law treats differently with Men and Women:

To individual men the law says: "All of you who have a household qualification shall have your political opinions recognised. You may not be clever and learned, possibly you do not know how to read and write. Still you know your own wants and wishes better than others know them for you; you have a stake in the country, and your views and interests ought to be consulted. You contribute directly to the national revenue a certain portion of your property and earnings, and you shall enjoy in return a small share of direct political power, for the

p.10

exercise of which according to the best light you possess you shall be legally responsible." But to individual women the law says: "It is true that you are persons with opinions, wants and wishes of your own which you know better than any other can know for you. We allow that your stake and interest in the country is equal to that of your next-door neighbour - and that your intelligence is not inferior to that of vast numbers of male voters - but we legislate for you on different principles from those on which we legislate for them. We will tax your property and earnings as we see fit, but in return for your personal contribution to the national revenue you shall not possess the minutest portion of personal political power; we will not allow you to have the smallest share in the government of the country in which you live, nor any

p.11

voice in the making of the laws which determine the legal and political status of persons of your sex."

A painful position for Women:

Now, can any man who feels that he would not like to be addressed in language of this sort seriously believe that women do like it? Surely there is no such difference in the feelings of persons of opposite sexes as to make treatment which would seem mortifying and unjust to one set of persons seem agreeable and equitable to another set. If we do not hear more of such discontent as may exist, it must be remembered that women are naturally shy at expressing any sentiment likely to draw upon them the disapprobation or ridicule of their male friends, and that these, instead of taking the question

p.12

quietly and calmly as one to be settled by fair reasons, have been apt, in discussing it with ladies, to assume a bantering air, and in asking their fair friends whether they want votes, to indicate by their tone and manner the kind of answer they expect, or at any rate would approve of. Men put as it were leading questions, and often receive the reply they prepare for. They do not ask women earnestly whether they will have the franchise, but lightly whether they would like it, and it is not very wonderful if answers given to questions put in this spirit have sometimes been to the effect that the grapes are sour.

p.13

Women's opinions should not be courted by indirect methods :

THE question should be fairly put and honestly answered - Ought the wishes and opinions of women

to be allowed any political influence at all, any weight whatever in the general councils of the nation ? It is for those who answer this question in the affirmative to show cause why they should not be permitted to exercise whatever influence it is thought right they should possess in a direct straightforward manner. But many who allow that women's voice ought to count for something in estimating public opinion say that the proper manner for them to exercise power in the State is through the influence they possess over the minds of their male relatives - when they happen to have any - and that this indirect method of making their opinions

p.14

felt ought to satisfy them. This may sound plausible, but the legal measure of influence accorded under this arrangement to the opinions of women will be found on examination to vanish to a nullity. By what process can the votes of men be made to represent the opinions of women? Is a man bound, before giving his vote, to consult the wishes of the woman or women on whose behalf as on his own account he is supposed to be acting? Each individual voter can give but one voice, his own; that voice represents the sentiments of a single mind. It adds nothing to the weight of this vote in choosing a representative that any number of his women neighbours coincide in the choice of the elector, and if they do not coincide, far from representing their wishes he is thwarting them. If, then, the wishes and opinions of women ought to

p.15

have any political influence at all, a chance should be open to them of expressing their views independent of the votes of men, for these may or may not represent their opinions truly.

Protection various in form:

It is commonly believed that the greatest men have been the sons of superior women. It is universally admitted that the first condition required for securing the due nurture and development of a human being is to have a good and judicious mother, or to be under the care, in infancy, of a woman capable of supplying such a mother's place. Therefore the full development of all the faculties, and the protection and preservation of women, are objects of primary importance to humanity, and should be the first consideration of the social philosopher and the statesman.

p.16

We maintain that women, in consideration of the vitally important functions they perform and their more defenceless natural condition, need special protection from violence and aggression. The nature of the protection must vary according to the constitution of the society in which they live. In a state of barbarism, when every man's hand was against his neighbour and he had to trust to his good sword to keep his head on his shoulders, probably the best protection for women was to be found in keeping at home behind stone walls. This guarded them from foreign foes, but exposed them to domestic oppression. Under the rule of the strongest, women can never secure adequate protection.

The true way to improve the condition of those employed is to increase their knowledge,

p.17

their independence, and their power, and that can never be accomplished - but will be indefinitely retarded - by the imposition of legislative fetters.

Protection by the Sword transferred to the vote :

THE ultimate appeal on a disputed question of policy is not now made to the swords of the people, but to their votes. Rival politicians do not ask one another how many men each can send into the field, but how many votes each can count at the polling-booth. Should there arise a dispute as to the succession to the throne, the war of the Roses of the present period would be fought, not on the battle-field, but at the ballot-box.

It is this mighty change which has rendered possible the political equality of women with men, and made it practicable

p.18

to secure for them the protection which is necessary for their security, development and the future progress of the race. For a vote, unlike a sword, is a weapon which is as potent in the hands of a woman as in that of a man.

* * * * *

But the sword of modern political warfare is the Parliamentary vote, and the use of this weapon, whose point is not physical but moral force, elevates and ennobles the possessor as surely as the employment of brute force degrades him. I do not, of course, maintain that the mere bestowal of a vote will turn a low-minded man into a high-minded man; but I do say that withholding the suffrage from a class on the ground that it is a low or degraded or incapable class, has a tendency to perpetuate the degradation which is alleged

p.19

as an excuse for such deprivation; and I also maintain that to bestow the suffrage on a section of the community, hitherto unenfranchised, has a tendency to elevate that class intellectually, morally, and socially.

Consequent Elevation of the Individual:

EVERY individual who is enfranchised feels that he has suddenly become of more importance to the community and his concerns will acquire additional consequence, not only in the eyes of others, but even in his own. The most powerful stimulus to improvement is self-respect - those who possess political power are respected by themselves and others - and it is this powerful agency which we wish to see brought to bear on the elevation of women.

p.20

Then it must be remembered that the individuals of a class are perpetually changing, and that every day a certain number awaken to the consciousness of life. First impressions are the most powerful and lasting. Those who have had to be emancipated can never have quite the same sense of their right to freedom as those who are born free. Were all women enfranchised tomorrow, the habit of bondage would cling to them still. They could not all at once throw off the feeling that they had no right to hold or to act on opinions of their own. They would soon exercise their unwonted freedom to a large extent and develop much power, but we should not see the full extent of the change until a generation of women was grown up who were born with the sense of political and social equality with men. And

p.21

it might take two or three generations ere the hereditary sense of bondage was completely eradicated.

It should also be remembered that there are very many women born with natural faculties which lift them intellectually and morally immeasurably above the men of their own families or immediate circle of acquaintance. Genius is no respecter of sex, and mental ability is scattered in supreme disregard of conventional arrangements. Every person who has the opportunity of social intercourse measures himself, consciously or unconsciously, with those he meets, and no one can remain long unaware of the fact who possesses any great superiority in attainments or mental station to those about them. To a woman whose consciousness informs her of her mental superiority to most of the men she knows, the

p.22

sense of degradation conveyed in the denial of rights which they enjoy by virtue of assumed

superiority to her is bitter in the extreme. It causes deep and exquisite pain. It is a kind of pain which could not be felt by an ignoble nature, which cannot be expressed in that coarse and clamorous manner which seems necessary before the average masculine intelligence can compass that notion that suffering exists. But it is very real suffering, and the finer and more sensitive the nature, the deeper and keener the smart, and the stronger the impulse to hide the wound from the knowledge of men.

p.23

The Claim appeals to both Parties in the State :

THE question has claims not only on general grounds of justice and expediency, but on grounds more especially held by each of the great parties which divide the political world. To the Conservative we say that we stand on the ancient lines of the Constitution preserved in the laws which regulate elections for local government. In these days when the suffrage has been so widely extended as to admit the multitude of poor and uneducated men, are they prepared to say that educated women who have property and a large stake in the country should be denied the protection of the suffrage, and placed under the rule of the democracy of men? Shall the lady of the manor be deprived of a right which is enjoyed by her male servants, and when she claims to have a voice in the election

p.24

of the member for her county shall she be bidden to be content with the representation of her opinion which she may obtain by using her "influence" with her footman or her groom?

To the Liberal we ask if the doctrine that taxation without representation is tyranny has become obsolete, or if tyranny is less odious over women than over men? Liberals have made household suffrage a party cry - on what principle can the suffrage be justly withheld from one-seventh of the householders who bear their full share of the burden of the State? We ask if it has not ever been their creed that special disabilities, imposed on any class of persons otherwise qualified for the franchise, are oppressive and injurious, and if they have not laboured busily and successfully for the removal of such disabilities formerly

p.25

imposed on persons of a different creed or class? We ask them now to complete their march towards electoral freedom - join with us in the effort to remove the last remains of electoral disability imposed by English law on persons not incapacitated for other legal acts, and we cannot doubt what the answer must be.

True liberty is tested by the willingness to apply, as regards others than themselves, the principle on which men claim rights or privileges for themselves, and women are now beginning to try all professing Liberals by this test.

The Value of the Vote :

THE general distribution of political power necessitates the giving of a share to women, because every extension of the franchise to classes hitherto excluded lowers and

p.26

weakens the status of the classes which remain out of the pale.

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Because the mere possession and occasional exercise of a vote seems a small thing in itself, is actually an infinitesimal factor in the sum of most people's experience, they imagine it is an equally unimportant matter to the interests of a class. One drop is an infinitesimal item in a shower, yet it would not be safe to say that the shower is unimportant because each drop composing it is a very small thing. It matters little or nothing personally to any individual woman whether she has a vote or not. It is of vital consequence to the interests of women as a class that they should have

representative government.

p.27

As regards Women whose work contributes to the wealth of the country:

OUR Bill does indeed concern hard-working women, who by daily toil of hand or brain earn their daily bread. It directly affects a large proportion of the industrial population of this country, who are, to use a noted expression, "flesh and blood." We have heard a great deal within the last few years of the claims of the working-man to the suffrage. These claims have now been satisfied, and the working-man is in possession of a vote. But has not the working-woman as good a claim as the working-man to enjoy all the privileges of the wealth created by her labour? The industrial classes - those who live by weekly wages - are not only the numerical majority, but the bone and sinew of the nation. By their toil they lay the foundation of the superstructure

p.28

of wealth to which is owing much of the power of the country. One of the privileges attaching to a certain amount of wealth is that of political representation. The men whose industry creates that wealth are now in possession of the privilege. We ask it on the same terms for women.

The proportion of women to men among the industrial classes has been too much lost sight of. I obtained from one of the millowners in a neighbouring town a table showing the amount of wages paid and the number of persons employed for one week. From this it appears that out of a total number of 278 persons employed 200 were women. The total amount of wages paid during the week was £212, of this £81 was earned by men and £130 by women. If this will be a fair average specimen of the factory system - and I am informed that it

p.29

may be so considered - it would appear that of the labourers whose industry supports the great cotton manufacture of which Manchester is the centre more than two-thirds are women, and if the proportion of wealth produced can be measured by the proportionate amount of wealth paid to the producers, nearly the third of the wealth of Lancashire, so far as the cotton trade is concerned, is the result of the labour of women. Now, we maintain that these two-thirds of the workpeople engaged in the cotton trade have as just a claim to representation in the House of Commons as the one-third which have recently obtained the vote; and we say that the interests of the former are just as likely to be injuriously affected as those of the latter by the imposition of political disabilities.

p.30

The present anomalous position:

Now that women are admitted as eligible for these public positions - now that they are placed on the burgess rolls in municipal districts and sent to the ballot box every year to take part in popular elections, what can be said against the proposal to extend to these enrolled citizens the right to vote once in four or five years in the election of a Parliamentary representative? Nothing can be alleged in objection to the latter which does not apply with equal force against the former, and the reasons which made it just to give the municipal vote are precisely those on which the Parliamentary vote is claimed. The Legislature has committed itself to a distinct course as regards the electoral rights of women. It is bound to find some kind of a reason for the decision

p.31

it gives on any grave question of political principle.

It cannot refuse our claim on the plea that women ought not to vote in popular elections, for it has recently admitted them to such vote. It cannot refuse on the plea that women are legally incapacitated for every political function, for the highest political function known to the Constitution is discharged by a woman. The present political status of the sex is thoroughly anomalous. That a woman may exercise political power in the British Constitution is an unquestionable fact. That she

may vote at popular elections in representative government is equally a fact. No new principle is introduced by placing these two propositions together, and deducing therefrom the consequence that women ought to be allowed to vote at

p.32

popular elections which have a political object.

The Moral Law objection:

THE objectors say that if votes are given to unmarried women on the same terms as they are given to men, large numbers of women leading immoral lives will be enfranchised. This statement appears to be a monstrous exaggeration, whether as regards the absolute number of such women or their proportion to the rest of those who would have votes. If the assertion refers to lodgers, it should be remembered that the stringent conditions of the lodger franchise as to rent, term of residence, and of personal claim to be placed on the register would probably preclude most of the immoral women from becoming entitled to vote. But, after all, Women who lead immoral lives form but a

p.33

small proportion of women lodgers. These comprise such classes as teachers of music and other accomplishments, teachers at high schools, daily governesses, telegraph and other clerks in the Civil Service, shop assistants, elementary schoolmistresses, ladies with small independent means, ladies engaged in literary pursuits, and others, forming a numerous body of self-dependent, self-respecting women who are maintaining themselves in as honest and honourable a manner as any other class in the community. Nothing shows more clearly the contempt which underlies some of the most specious professions by men of respect for women, than the instinctive manner in which, when women lodgers are in question, men ignore the great body of the respectable women, and single out as a type of the class the unfortunate beings whom they

p.34

maintain in a condition of degradation, and on whom they impose the reproach of their own sins. It may be that to place the power and the protection of the Parliamentary suffrage in the hands of this outcast class, to raise the fallen woman from under the feet of the partner in her sin and to place her as a political equal at his side would do more to arrest the conscience of men, and to uplift the standard of morality accepted in the world, than any other influence that has yet been brought to bear for wiping out the reproach of ages and strengthening the moral life of the community.

The purification of Society is to be looked for, not through oppressive legislation, but through the change which will come over men's minds when they shall have learned to look upon women as political and social equals. I have faith that a community of

p.35

men and women associated together as equals and left in a condition of reasonable freedom to choose their modes of life and recreation would be more likely to go right than wrong, and more likely to develop elevating than demoralising social influences.

How Progress is hindered :

THE great hindrance to the progress of political freedom and enlightenment amongst the people is ignorance, and the timidity and apathy which springs from ignorance. A man who never casts a thought or a care on the interests of the nation of which he forms a part, acts as a dead weight upon the progress of society, and even when he is not actively hostile to the efforts of those who are trying to improve it, his passive resistance and the effect of his example on

p.36

those within his influence make him a deadweight on the social machine. Now if you take half the population of a district and deny to those persons the right to concern themselves with public affairs,

impress upon them the duty of leaving such matters to others, and forcibly deprive them of all constitutional rights, you will induce among them a spirit of carelessness and indifference which will infallibly spread among those with whom they pass their lives, and on whom they exercise a powerful and ceaseless influence.

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All who have turned their energies to public affairs feel how tame and imperfect is the advance of opinion on great questions, and in the suppression of intelligent and responsible opinion in women we find the cause of this lethargy.

p.37

The Help that might come :

WHAT might have been gained during this time had women succeeded in establishing their claim to the suffrage under the Reform Act of 1867 can never now be known, but we believe that had this been effected there would have been more just laws regarding the property and maintenance of wife, more complete recognition of the sacred rights of mothers, more efficient protection for the maimed and miserable victims of the murderous outrages on wives, more freedom to engage in professional and industrial occupations for the increasing number of women who must depend on their work for their living, more scope for the energies of women who do not need to work for their livelihood in public affairs, such as the relief of the poor, the supervision of workhouses, parochial schools, and prisons

p.38

where women are immured. In short, there would have been more progress in every direction in which women have been seeking to improve their own condition and to render service to the community. For women do not ask for their rights in order to further selfish interests or with a view to forsaking their natural duties. They ask for their rights in the interests of the community, and in order that they may better perform the duties that devolve upon them as members of the family and citizens of the State.

The Claim in its Limits:

SPECIFICALLY, then, our claim is for the exercise of the Parliamentary suffrage by a certain number of women, small in proportion to the number of new electors and small in proportion to the number of women the country. But, broadly, our claim is

p.39

for the enfranchisement of women, and this will be effected, as the enfranchisement of men is effected - not by giving to every individual man or woman a vote, but by admitting to the exercise of the suffrage every individual who complies with the conditions which the people, through their representatives, have adopted as those on which the vote is to be granted.

The Claim in its Breadth:

WOMEN claim the right to vote, not as a boon to be granted by Parliament, although they must receive it, as any disfranchised class of the people must receive it, through the machinery of an Act of Parliament, but as a right inherent in them as human beings, a right which men can neither give nor take away whatever their power may be to withhold from women the exercise

p.40

of their rights. Women claim the suffrage because they form an integral part of the people by whose assent and for whose benefit Parliament has the power to legislate. The people do not derive their political rights from their representatives, but the representatives derive their authority from the people. By the people is not meant the electorate merely, but the whole body of the people. Members of Parliament for a particular district consider themselves as sent to the Legislature to represent the

interests, not of those electors only who have voted for them, nor yet of those persons only who are registered electors, but of the whole of the inhabitants of that district...

Its Equity :

WE are asking for our own; we are not asking men to give us something which is theirs by divine
p.41

right to the exclusion of our rights; we are asking for that which is ours by the same right that men have. In appealing to the Legislature to pass the Bill, which is necessary before we can exercise the functions of citizens, we appeal not as to a sovereign body which is to create new rights and confer them upon us - we appeal as to a High Court of Equity for a decree to give effect to a just claim.

In Conclusion:

POLITICAL freedom begins for women as it began for men, with freedom in local government. It rests with women to pursue the advantage that has been won, and to advance from the position that has been conceded to them in local representation to that which is the goal of our efforts - the concession of the right to a share in the representation of our common country.

Return to MLFHS, Oldham & District Branch, Research/Miscellany page, [HERE](#) September 2022