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WOMAN SUFFRAGE #1467

SPEECH

OF

HON. GEORGE SUTHERLAND

OF UTAH

IN THE

SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

FEBRUARY 13, 1914



WASHINGTON  
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SPEECH  
OF  
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The Senate had under consideration the joint resolution (S. J. Res. 1) proposing an amendment to the Constitution of the United States extending the right of suffrage to women.

Mr. SUTHERLAND. Mr. President, I wish to say a few words upon this resolution, and as I shall probably occupy more than 5 minutes—perhaps 10 or 15—I should like the permission of the Senate to proceed until I have finished.

Mr. SIAFROTH. Mr. President, I ask—

The VICE PRESIDENT. The five-minute rule has been suspended.

Mr. SUTHERLAND. I do not underestimate the value of tradition, to which we are indebted for a good deal of wisdom; but since tradition rides in an omnibus which carries all sorts of passengers from one generation to another and not in a golden chariot whose seats are reserved exclusively for the righteous, it has been responsible for the perpetuation of a good deal of foolishness as well. On the whole I entertain a profound regard for notions which have long persisted, because, having passed the scrutiny and survived the buffetings of time, they are more likely to be right than wrong, and yet error has a pernicious habit of sometimes clothing itself in such seemly garb that it is passed along without question from age to age until some doubting hand strips off the disguise and exposes the deception. One of these respectably clothed traditions which we are just now engaged in overhauling is that which teaches that women are either too good or too bad or too weak or too busy in the kitchen to participate in the tribal councils.

Let us inquire by way of cross-examination. If the ballot on the whole elevates man, what particular element of weakness in the character of woman will enable the ballot to pull her down? Have women in the aggregate less native intelligence than men? Have they less desire for social and governmental righteousness? Are they less patriotic? Are they less interested in the common welfare? Have they less at stake? If not, wherein lies the superiority of the male portion of the population? In one respect only is there common agreement as to the inferior condition of womankind, and that is in the matter of physical strength. I am not sure but that in this element of inferiority lies the explanation of the fact that for thousands of years women were not accorded an equality of legal status, an injustice which in civilized communities has been or is in process of being consigned to the limbo of discredited superstitions, and I suspect that it is the survival of a rudimentary bias reaching back for its primal origin to this ancient condition which accounts for the persistence of the obsession which leads so many worthy people to deny her equality of political status in this day of broadened vision. We have many examples of such survivals long after the decay of the root from which they grew. Intelligent men have ceased to believe in the malign influence of sorcery and witchcraft—in spells—in the ill luck inseparably associated with the possession of certain inanimate objects which have received the sinister attentions of the devil—in the malevolence of black cats and cross-eyed gentlemen of color—but a good many of them continue to entertain suspicions respecting the number 13, in spite of its harmless character, and derive more or less mental discomfort from the initiation of any enterprise on Friday, although Friday is in truth as benign a day as any in the calendar. And so in the matter of our objection to woman suffrage are we quite sure that what we regard as twentieth-century wisdom is not the lag end of a medieval superstition?

We are told that if women are given the ballot the household will suffer; that woman's place is the home. The obvious retort is that if the workshop, and the farm, and the mine, and the

office, and the countingroom continue in operation, notwithstanding the responsibility which now rests upon the male voter, the household may survive even if the women of the country study politics and take a few minutes off on election day to vote.

It is urged that giving the ballot to woman will destroy her charm and femininity; that she will develop unattractive masculine traits. These are new words set to a very old tune. The same thing was urged against the new woman a hundred years ago when she demanded an equal opportunity for education. She was told that that was exclusively masculine business and solemnly warned to return to her spinning wheel at the peril of losing her womanly sweetness, but girls to-day go to school with their brothers and the brothers of other girls, and young women to-day go to college in brazen disregard of ancient conventionalities, and they are better wives and better mothers, and better women and better citizens not in spite of it but in consequence of it. The objection is in a class with the demand for the preservation of the sidesaddle, lest we give verification to the suspicion that the normal tendency of humanity is to accumulate legs in pairs quite irrespective of the accident of sex.

Some people are fearful that if we enfranchise the women the bad women will vote and the good women will refrain from voting. But if the right to vote carries with it the correlative duty to exercise the right in the case of women, as it is supposed to do in the case of men, there is no good reason to expect that good women will shirk in greater proportion than good men do, for women on the average are quite as conscientious as men in faithfully discharging their responsibilities. However that may be, if we are justified in allowing men to vote irrespective of good or bad character, because of our inability to separate them in terms of legislation, how can we justify withholding a similar right from women because of a like unfortunate division among them of good and bad?

Again, it is said by some that the result would simply be to double the vote without changing the result; that the women would generally vote as their husbands do. And it is said by

others that it will develop unfortunate antagonism between husband and wife over political differences. I think generally, though not always, in those States which have adopted equal suffrage, that husband and wife vote the same ticket just as generally, though not always, they attend the same church. There is nothing remarkable or sinister in this any more than there is in the fact that generally, though not always, the male members of the same family agree in their political affiliations. There are, it is true, occasional differences of opinion between husband and wife, but I have not observed that it is followed by anything more serious than generally follows from the occasional differences about other matters or from similar differences among brothers and sisters or between mother and son.

I have no intention of entering upon any affirmative argument in justification of woman suffrage. Indeed, to my own mind, the most convincing argument for the political enfranchisement of women is the absence of any really persuasive argument against it. If it be right to extend the voting privilege to all sorts and conditions of men, I am not quite able to see the justice of denying the same right to all sorts and conditions of women. If we have extended the privilege too broadly in the case of men and wisdom demands that we should eliminate the unfit, the thriftless, and the illiterate, that is a good reason for denying the privilege to these classes of both sexes. It is no reason for denying it to the women who are fit and capable. In other words, the line which should separate the voters from the nonvoters is one of character and not one of sex.

In my view of the matter it is not important to consider whether woman suffrage will result in a betterment of conditions. It is enough for me to be convinced that conditions will certainly be no worse. I do not put my support on the ground of expediency or on the theory that society will be greatly or at all or immediately or ever benefited by the change. I suspect that the human nature of men and women in the aggregate does not materially differ. I would not, therefore, expect the political millennium to be noticeably hastened by the change.

Things would probably go on pretty much as they do now. We would continue to move forward more or less slowly, more or less painfully, sometimes slipping backward, as we do now, sometimes falling as we now do, but in the end recovering ourselves, picking ourselves up and going on afresh, and on the whole, I hope, toward wiser and better things.

I give my assent to woman suffrage because, as the matter appeals to me, there is no justification for denying to half our citizens the right to participate in the operations of a government which is as much their government as it is ours upon the sole ground that they happen to be born women instead of men.

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