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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY
THE

POLITICAL STATUS

OF

WOMEN.

BY

ANNIE BESANT.

[THIRD EDITION.]



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POLITICAL STATUS OF WOMEN.

VARIOUS arguments are advanced by the opponents of woman suffrage, which require to be met by those who maintain that the political status of women should be the same as the political status of men. Of these the principal—apart from party arguments, such as those which regard the momentary strengthening of Tory, Whig, or Radical, by the female vote—are as follows:—

Why should the political incompetency of women receive so much attention when more pressing wrongs require a remedy?

Women are naturally unfit for the proper exercise of the franchise.

They are indifferent about the matter.

They are sufficiently represented as it is.

Political power would withdraw them from their proper sphere, and would be a source of domestic annoyance.

It can scarcely be necessary for me to clear my way by proving to you that there are such things as *rights*. "Every great truth," it has been said, "must travel through three stages of public opinion: men will say of it, first, that it is not true; secondly, that it is contrary to religion; lastly, that every one knew it already." The "rights of man" have battled through these first two stages, and have reached the third; they have been denounced as a lie, subversive of all government; they have been anathematised as a heresy, to be abhorred of all faithful Christians; but now every one has always known that men have rights, it is a perfect truism. These rights do not rest on the charter of a higher authority; they are not privileges held at the favour of a superior; they have their root in the nature of man; they are his by "divine"—that is to say, by *natural*—right. Kings, presidents, governments, draw their authority from the will of the people; the people draw their authority from themselves.

It is quite a new light to the general public that women have any rights at all; duties? ay, plenty of them, with sharp penalties for their non-fulfilment. Wrongs? ay, plenty of them, too—wrongs which will not be borne much longer. Privileges? yes, if we will take them as privileges, and own that we hold them at the will of our masters; but *rights*? The assertion was at first met with laughter that was only not indignant, because it was too contemptuous. Our truth is as yet in its infancy—first, it is not true; secondly, it is contrary to religion. The matter is taken a little more seriously now; men begin to fancy that these absurd women are really in earnest, and they condescend to use a little argument, and to administer a little “soothing-syrup” to these fractious children. Gentle remonstrance takes the place of laughter, and thus we arrive at my first head—surely there are more pressing female wrongs to attend to than the question of political incapacity.

It is perfectly true that the want of representation in Parliament is not, *in itself*, a grave injury. In itself, I say, it is of secondary importance; its gravity consists in what it involves. You do not value money for its own sake—those little yellow counters are not intrinsically beautiful, nor are they in themselves worth toil, and trouble, and danger; but you value them for what they represent; and thus we value a vote, as means to an end. In a free country, a vote means power. When a man is a voter, his wishes must be taken into consideration; he counts as one in an election—his opinion influences the return. When the working-classes wished to alter laws which pressed hardly on them, they agitated for Parliamentary reform. What folly! what waste of time! what throwing away of strength and energy! how unpractical! Why agitate for an extension of the franchise, when so many social burdens required to be lightened? Why? Because they knew that when they won the franchise they could trust to themselves to remedy these social anomalies—when they had votes, they could make these questions the test of the fitness or unfitness of a candidate for Parliament. Non-voters, they could only *ask* for reform; voters, they could *command* it. And this is the answer of women to those who urge on them that they should turn their attention to practical matters, and leave off this agitation about the franchise. We shall do nothing so foolish. True, certain laws press hardly on us; but we are not going now to

agitate for the repeal of these laws one by one. We might agitate for a very long time before we gained attention. We prefer going to the root of the matter at once. We will win the right of representation in Parliament, and when we have won that, *these laws will be altered*. Ten years after women become voters, there will be some erasures in the Statute Book. There will no longer be a law that women, on marriage, become paupers, unless steps are taken beforehand to prevent it; marriage will have ceased to bring with it these disabilities. There will no longer be a law which gives to the father despotic authority over the fate of the child; which enables the father to take the child from the mother's arms, and give it into the charge of some other woman; which makes even the dead father able to withhold the child from the living mother. There will be no longer be a law which sanctions the consignment of thousands of women to misery and despair, in order that men's lives may be made more safely luxurious, and their homes, when they choose to make them, kept more pure. The laws whose action is more and more driving women (in the large towns especially) to prefer unlegalised marriages to the bonds of legal matrimony, will have vanished, to the purifying of society and the increased happiness of both men and women. The possession of a vote, by giving women a share in the power of the State, will also make them more respected. Hitherto, law, declaring women to be weak, has carefully put all advantages into the hands of those who are already the powerful. Instead of guarding and strengthening the feeble, it has bound them hand and foot, and laid them helpless at the feet of the strong. To him that hath, it has indeed been given; and from her that hath not, has been taken away even the protection she might have had.

"Women are naturally unfit for the proper exercise of the franchise." It has been remarked, more than once, that, in this contest about the voting of women, men and women have exchanged their characteristics. Women appeal to reason, men to instincts; women rely on logic, men on assumptions; women are swayed by facts, men by prejudices. To all our arguments, to all our reasoning, men answer, "It is unfeminine—it is contrary to nature." If we press them, How and why? we are only met with a re-assertion of the maxim. I am afraid that we women sadly lack the power of seeing differences. It is unfeminine

to be a doctor, but feminine to be a nurse. It is unfeminine to mix drugs, but feminine to administer them. It is unfeminine to study political economy, but feminine to train the future Statesmen. It is unfeminine to study sanitary laws, but feminine to regulate the atmosphere of the nursery, whose wholesomeness depends on those laws. It is unfeminine to mingle with men at the polling-booth, but feminine to labour among them in the field and the factories. In a word, it is unfeminine to know how to do a thing, and to do it comprehendingly, wisely, and well ; it is feminine to do things of whose laws and principles we know absolutely nothing, and to do them ignorantly, foolishly, and badly. We do not see things in this light. I suppose it is because we, as women, have "the poetical power of seeing resemblances," but lack the "philosophical power of seeing differences." We must, however, analyse this natural inferiority of women ; it is shown, we are told, in their mental weakness, their susceptibility to influence, their unbusiness-like habits. If this natural mental inferiority of woman be a fact, one cannot but wonder how nature has managed to make so many mistakes. Mary Somerville, Mrs. Lewis (better known as George Eliot), Frances Power Cobbe, Harriet Martineau, were made, I suppose when nature was asleep. They certainly show no signs of the properly-constituted feminine intellect. But, allowing that these women *are* inferior in mental power to the uneducated artisan and petty farmer, may I ask why that should be a *political* disqualification ? I never remember hearing it urged that the franchise should only be conferred on men of genius, or of great intellectual attainments. Even the idea of an educational franchise was sneered at, low as was the proposed standard of education. When a law is made which restricts the franchise to those who rise above a certain mental level, the talk about mental inferiority will become reasonable and pertinent ; but, when that law is passed, I fear that nature will not be found to have been sufficiently careful of the male interest to have placed all men above the level, and all women below it. Susceptibility to influence is an argument that also goes too far. I am afraid that many people's opinions are but rarely "opinions" at all. They are simply their neighbours' thoughts covered over with a film of personal prejudice. It is, however, a new idea in England that a class liable to be unduly influenced should be disfranchised ; the Ballot.

Act lately passed was, I always understood, specially designed to protect the weak from the pressure of the strong. Oliver Cromwell said that it was unjust to deprive any one of a natural right on the plea that, were it given, it would be abused. Not so; "when he hath abused it, judge." Business incapacity may, or may not, exist on the part of women; it is difficult to judge what power a person may have when he is never permitted to exercise it. Tie up a man's hands, and then sneer that he has no aptitude for writing; or chain his feet, and show his natural incapacity for walking. John Stuart Mill has remarked: "The ladies of reigning families are the only women who are allowed the same range of interests and freedom of development as men, and it is precisely in their case that there is not found to be any inferiority. Exactly where and in proportion as woman's capacities for government have been tried, in that proportion have they been found adequate." In France, at the present day, the women rule business matters more than do the men, and the business capacity of French-women is a matter of notoriety. Lastly, I would urge on those who believe in women's *natural* inferiority, why, in the name of common sense, are you so terribly afraid of putting your theory to the proof? Open to women the learned professions; unlock the gates which bar her out from your mental strifes; give her no favour, no special advantages; let her race you on even terms. She *must* fail, if nature be against her; she *must* be beaten, if nature has incapacitated her for the struggle. Why do you fear to let her challenge you, if she is weighted not only with the transmitted effects of long centuries of inferiority, but is also bound with nature's iron chain? Try. If you are so sure about nature's verdict, do not fear her arbitration; but if you shrink from our rivalry, we *must* believe that you feel our equality, and, to cover your own doubts of your superiority, you prattle about our feebleness.

"Women are indifferent about the possession of the franchise." If this is altogether true, it is very odd that there should be so much agitation going on upon the subject. But I am quite willing to grant that the mass of women are indifferent about the matter. Alas! it has always been so. Those who stand up to champion an oppressed class do not look for gratitude from those for whom they labour. It is the bitterest curse of oppression that it crushes out in the breast of the oppressed the very

wish to be free. A man once spent long years in the Bastille; shut up in his youth, old age found him still in his dungeon. The people assailed the prison, and, among others, this prisoner was set free; but the sunshine was agony to the eyes long accustomed to the darkness, and the fresh stir of life was as thunder to the ears accustomed to the silence of the dungeon; the prisoner pleaded to be kept a prisoner still. Was his action a proof that freedom is not fair? The slaves, after generations of bondage, were willing to remain slaves where their masters were kind and good. Is this a proof that liberty is not the birthright of a man? And this rule holds good in all, and not only in the extreme, cases I have cited. Habit, custom, make hard things easy. If a woman is educated to regard man as her natural lord, she will do so. If the man to whom her lot falls is kind to her, she will be contented; if he is unkind, she will be unhappy; but, unless she be an exceptional character, she will not think of resistance. But women *are* now beginning to think of resistance; a deep, low, murmuring is going on, suppressed as yet, but daily growing in intensity; and such a murmur has always been the herald of revolt. Further, do men think of what they are doing when they taunt the present agitators with the indifference shown by women? They are, in effect, telling us that, if we are in earnest in this matter, we must *force* it on their attention; we must agitate till every home in England rings with the subject; we must agitate till mass meetings in every town compel them to hear us; we must agitate till every woman has our arguments at her fingers' ends. Ah! you are not wise to throw in our teeth the indifference of women. You are stinging us into a determination that this indifference shall not last; you are nerving us to a struggle which will be fiercer than you dream; you are forcing us into an agitation which will convulse the State. You dare to make indifference a plea for injustice? Very well; then the indifference shall soon be a thing of the past. You have as yet the frivolous, the childish, the thoughtless, on your side; but the cream of womanhood is against you. We will educate women to reason and to think, and then the mass will only want a leader.

"Women are sufficiently represented as it is." By whom? *by those whose interests lie in keeping them in subjection.* So the masters told the workmen: "*We* represent you; *we* take care of your interests." The workmen answered: "*We*

prefer to represent ourselves : we like to have our interests guarded by our own hands." And such is our answer to our "representatives." We don't agree with some of your views; we don't like some of your laws; we object to some of your theories for us. You do not really represent *us* at all; what you represent is your own interests, which, in many cases, touch ours. The laws you pass are passed in the interests of men, and not of women; and naturally so, for you are made legislators by men, and not by women. There are few cases where men are really the representatives of women. John Stuart Mill—now dead, alas!—noblest and most candid of philosophers and Statesmen; Professor Fawcett, a future leader; Jacob Bright, our steadfast friend: these, and a few others, might fairly be called representatives of women in Parliament. Outside the House, too, we have a few gallant champions, pre-eminent among whom is Moncure Conway, whose voice is always raised on the side of freedom and justice. But what we demand is the right to choose our own representatives, so that our voice may have its share in making the laws which we are bound to obey. We share the duty of supporting the State, and we claim the right of helping to guide it. Taxation and representation run side by side, and if you will not allow us to be represented, you have no right to tax us. I may suggest here, in reference to the contest about married women having votes, that this point is altogether foreign to the discussion. The *right* to a vote and the *qualification for* a vote, are two distinct things, and come under different laws. The one is settled by Act of Parliament, the other by the revising barrister. A blunder was lately made by putting into a Bill a special disqualification of married women. Such a clause is absurdly out of place. We are contending to remove from a whole sex a legal disability; the details come later, and must be arranged when the principle is secured. A man has the right to vote because he is a man; but he must possess certain qualifications before he can exercise his right. Let womanhood, as such, cease to be a disqualification; that is the main point. Let the discussion on qualifications follow. Further, if it be urged that women are represented by their husbands, what are we to say about those who have none? In 1861, fifteen years ago, there were three and a half millions of women in England working for their livelihood—two and a half millions of these were unmarried, and were, therefore, unrepresented. Is

there no pathos in these figures? Two and a half millions struggling honestly to live, but mute to tell of their wants or their wrongs. Mute, I say, for not one in a thousand has the power of the pen. And this is not the worst. Oh, friends! below these, pressed down there by the terrible struggle for existence, there is a lower depth yet, tenanted by thousands of whom it is not here my province to speak, thousands, from whom a bitter wail goes up, to which men's ears are deaf. Surely, women need representation—surely, there are grievances and wrongs of women which can only be done away by those whom women send to Parliament as their representatives. It is natural that men should not desire that many of these laws should be altered. In the first place, it is impossible they should understand how hardly they press on women; only those who wear it, says the proverb, "know where the shoe pinches." And, in the second place, the holders of a monopoly generally object to have their monopoly interfered with. They can't imagine what in the world these outsiders want pressing in upon their social domains. The nobleman cannot understand why the peasant should object to the Game Laws; it *is* so unreasonable of him. The farmer cannot make out why the labourer should not attend quietly to his hedging and ditching, instead of making all this fuss about a union. The capitalist cannot see the sense of the artisan banding himself with his brethren, instead of going on with his duty, and working hard. Men can't conceive why women do not attend to their household duties instead of fussing about Parliament. Unfortunately, each of these tiresome classes cares very little whether those to whom they are opposed can or cannot understand *why* they agitate. We may be told continually that we are sufficiently represented; we say that we do *not* think so, but that we mean to be.

"Political power would withdraw women from their proper sphere, and would be a source of domestic annoyance." Their proper sphere—*i.e.*, the home. This allegation is a very odd one. Men are lawyers, doctors, merchants; every hour of the day is pledged, engrossing speculations stretch the brain, deep questions absorb the mind, great ideas swell in the intellect. Yet men vote. If occupation be a fatal disqualification, let us pass a law that only idle people shall have votes. You will withdraw workers from their various spheres of work, if you allow them to take an

interest in politics. For heaven's sake, do not go and take the merchant from the desk, the doctor from the hospital, the lawyer from the court; you will disorganise society—you will withdraw the workers. Do you say it is not so—that the delivery of a vote takes up a very short time at considerable intervals? that a man must have some leisure, and may very well expend it, if he please, in studying politics? that a change of thought is very good for the weary brain? that the alteration of employment is a positive and most valuable relaxation? You are quite right; outside interests are healthy, and prevent private affairs from becoming morbidly engrossing. The study of large problems checks the natural tendency to be absorbed in narrower questions. A man is stronger, healthier, nobler, when, in working hard in trade or in profession for his home, he does not forget he is a citizen of a mighty nation. I can think of few things more likely to do women real good than anything which would urge them to extend their interests beyond the narrow circle of their homes. Why, men complain that women are bigoted, narrow-minded, prejudiced, impracticable. Wider interests would do much to remedy these defects. If you want your wife to be your toy, or your drudge, you do perhaps wisely in shutting up her ideas within the four walls of your house; but if you want one who will stand at your side through life, in evil report as well as in good, a strong, large-hearted woman, fit to be your comfort in trouble, your counsellor in difficulty, your support in danger, worthy to be the mother of your children, the wise guardian and trainer of your sons and your daughters, then seek to widen women's intellects, and to enlarge their hearts, by sharing with them your grander plans of life, your deeper thoughts, your keener hopes. Do not keep your brains and intellects for the strife of politics and the conflicts for success, and give to your homes and to your wives nothing but your condescending carelessness and your thoughtless love. Further, do you look on women as your natural enemies, and suppose they are on the look out for every chance of running away from their homes and their children? It says very little for you if you hope only to keep women's hearts by chaining their minds, or limiting their range of action. What is it really worth, this compelled submission—this enforced devotion? Do you acknowledge that you make home-life so dull, so wearisome, that you dare not throw open the **case-door**,

lest the captive should escape? Do you confess that your service is so hard a one that she you call your friend is only longing to be free? You do yourselves an injustice, friends; you shame your own characters—you discredit your homes. A happy home, the centre of hopes and fears, the cherished resting-place from life's troubles, the sure haven from life's conflicts, the paradise brightened by children's prattle and children's laughter—this home is not a place where women must be chained down lest they should run away. Admitting, however, for argument's sake, the absurd idea that women would neglect their homes if they possessed the franchise, may I ask by what right men restrict women's action to the home? I can understand that, in Eastern lands, where the husband rules his wives with despotic authority, and woman is but the plaything and the slave of man, woman's sphere is the home, for the very simple reason that she cannot get outside it. So, in this sense, in the Zoological Gardens, is the den the sphere of the lion, and the cage of the eagle. Shut any living creature up, and its prison becomes its sphere. But if the prisoner becomes restless—if nature beats strongly at the captive's heart—if he yearns for the free air and the golden sunshine, you may, indeed, keep him in the sphere you have built for him; but he will break his heart, and will die in your hands. Many women now, educated more highly than they used to be—women with strong brains and loving hearts—are being driven into bitterness and into angry opposition, because their ambition is thwarted at every step, and their eager longings for a fuller life are forced back and crushed. A tree *will* grow, however you may try to stunt it. You may disfigure it, you may force it into awkward shapes, but grow it will. One would fain hope that it is in thoughtlessness and in ignorance that men try to push women back. Surely they do not appreciate the injury they are doing, both to themselves and to women, if they turn their homes into prison-houses, and the little children into incumbrances. In the strong, true, woman there is a tender motherhood which weaker natures cannot reach; but if these women are to be told that domestic cares only are to fill their brains, and the prattle of children to be the only satisfaction of their intellect, you run a terrible risk of making them break free from home and child. Allow them to grow freely, to develop as nature bids them, and they will find room for home-cares in **their**

minds, and the warmest nestling-place in their bosom will be the haven of the little child. But if you check, and fret, and carp at them, you will not succeed in keeping them back, but you will succeed in souring them, and in making them hard and bitter. Oh, for the sake of English home life—for the sake of the tender ties of motherhood—for the sake of the common happiness, do not turn into bitter opponents the women who are still anxious to be your friends and your fellow-workers. This is no imaginary danger; it is a thunder-cloud brooding over many English homes. I can scarcely believe that men and women would be so unreasonable as to make the power of voting into a domestic annoyance. Of course, if a married couple want to quarrel, there are sure to be plenty of differences of opinion between them which will give them the proper opportunity. But why should *political* disagreement be specially fatal to domestic peace? Theology is now a fruitful source of disagreement. If the husband is the free-thinker, he does not suffer, because he does not allow his wife to worry him too far; but if the free-thinking is on the side of the wife, matters are apt to become uncomfortable. There is only one way to remedy this difficulty. Let the husband feel, as the wife now does, that between two grown-up people control of one by the other is an absurdity. Bitterness arises now from disagreement, because the wife who forms her opinion for herself is regarded as a rebel to lawful authority. Remove the authority, which is a tyranny, and people will readily "agree to differ." There will possibly be a little more care before marriage about the opinions of the lady wooed than there is now, when the man fancies that he can mould the docile girl into what shape he pleases, and the future happiness of both is marred if the woman happens to be made of bright steel, instead of plastic clay. In any case, Parliament is scarcely bound to treat one half of England with injustice, lest the other half should find its authority curtailed.

One by one I have faced the only arguments against the extension of the franchise to women with which I am acquainted. You yourselves must judge how far these arguments are valid, and on which side right and justice rest. I would add that I feel sure that, when the matter is fairly placed before them, most men will sympathise with, and assist our cause. Some noble and brave men have come forward to join our ranks already, and speak boldly for

woman's cause, and work faithfully for its triumph. The mass of men only need to study our claims in order to accept them. They have been reared to regard themselves as our natural superiors; small blame to them that they take the upper seats. Kind and gentle as many of them are, working hard for wife and children, thinking much of women and loving them well, it cannot be expected that they should readily understand that their relations to the weaker sex are founded on an injustice. But if they want to see how false is their idea of peace, and how misled they are when they think women's position satisfactory, let them go out and see what the laws are where the power they give is wielded by brutality and tyranny. Let them try to imagine what women suffer who are too weak and timid to resist the strength under whose remorseless exercise they writhe in vain; let them try to appreciate the sharper agony of those whose bolder hearts and stronger natures defy their tyrants, and break, at whatever cost, their chains. Laws must be tested by their working; these laws which make the woman the helpless servant of man are not enforced in happy homes; but they exist, and elsewhere they are used.

Injustice is never good; it is never even safe. There is a higher life before us, a nobler ideal of marriage union, a fairer development of individual natures, a surer hope of wider happiness. Liberty for every human being, equality before the law for all in public and in private, fraternity of men and women in peaceful friendship, these are the promise of the dawning day. Co-workers in every noble labour, co-partners in every righteous project, co-soldiers in every just cause, men and women in the time to come shall labour, think, and struggle side by side. The man shall bring his greater strength and more sustained determination, the woman her quicker judgment and purer heart, till man shall grow tenderer, and woman stronger, man more pure, and woman more brave and free. Till at last, generations hence, the race shall develop into a strength and a beauty at present unimagined, and men and women shall walk this fair earth hand-in-hand, diverse, yet truly one, set each to each—

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