
AMONG the demonstrations of opinion which the discussions on Parliamentary Reform have drawn forth during the past session, no one was more remarkable than the petition signed by fifteen hundred ladies, which was presented to the House of Commons by Mr. J. Stuart Mill. This petition is comprised in a few short sentences, and sets forth that the possession of property in this country carries with it the right to vote in the election of representatives in Parliament; that the exclusion from this right of women holding property is therefore anomalous; and that the petitioners pray that the representation of householders may be provided for without distinction of sex.

... since women are permitted to hold property they should also be permitted to exercise all the rights which, by our laws, the possession of property brings with it... [This] is put forward in this petition on such strictly constitutional grounds, and is advanced so entirely without reference to any abstract rights, or fundamental changes in the institutions of English society, that it is impossible not to feel that the ladies who make it have done so with a practical purpose in view, and that they conceive themselves to be asking only for the recognition of rights which flow naturally from the existing laws and institutions of the country.

[This petition is] a sign of that disposition which various causes (partly political and partly philosophical) have tended to foster of late years, to seek the reform of existing evils rather in the development than in the overthrow of the present order of things. ... we think we are justified in repeating that the appearance of such a claim, supported in such a manner, is a significant indication of the direction public opinion is taking. What we find asked for, then, in this petition seems to be that Englishwomen shall be included in that measure of political freedom which the wisdom of Parliament sees fit to grant to Englishmen. This amount of political enfranchisement is asked for by the means by which men and women have for ages been accustomed, in this country, to make their wants known to the legislature; namely, by petition to the House of Commons.

... this movement is marked by what appear to us some novel and especially national characteristics. It is interesting to observe what form this general tendency towards freedom assumes when it shows itself among a large body of Englishwomen; by what means they propose to work it out, and by what train of reasoning they seek to recommend it to their countrymen. The petitioners ground their request on the principles of the British Constitution. They assert that certain facts in our existing system establish that women cannot be considered to be without the pale of the Constitution, for that there are precedents to show that its general principles have already been applied to women in some particular cases. They point out that in this country the franchise is dependent upon property, and that the acknowledgment of women as sovereigns among us shows that women are not considered disqualified for government. From these two principles, both
of which are undoubted parts of the British Constitution as it stands at this day—the representation of property, and government by female sovereigns—the petitioners draw the evident inference that where the female sex is no bar to the higher, it cannot reasonably be to the lower privileges of political life, when those privileges are dependent upon conditions (such as the possession of property) which women actually fulfill. And they characterize the exclusion of half the human race from any share in self-government as an anomaly in our representative system.

. . . Property represented by an individual is the true political unit among us; and in this we recognise the influence of those mediæval habits of thought, which, putting forward living persons as the representatives of rights supposed to be inherent in particular functions or particular localities, was itself practically an advance on those Oriental ideas of caste which survive in the privileges of class, sex, or colour. This mode of thought was due partly, no doubt, to the influence of the Church, which gave and still gives examples of it in the “incumbent” and “parson” or “persona,” who derives his rights neither from privilege of birth nor even from his functions as priest, but from the induction into the enjoyment of certain property for his life, of which he has the management; and of which he becomes, so to speak, the bodily expression, the “persona,” responsible for the due payment of all charges. It was diffused and perpetuated by the arrangements made under the feudal system for the protection of property in times of war and against all illegal violence; and it seems to have been held, that as only those possessing property could be obliged to furnish a contingent share towards the expenses of government, they alone had any direct interest to protect against the central authority, which, in so far as it preserved peace and order in lawless times, must have stood in the position of gratuitous benefactor towards the unpropertied portion of the people. However this may be, there can be no doubt that the principle underlying our English system of government, is that men are endowed with the privilege of voting in the election of members of the Legislature, in order to enable them to protect their property against undue taxation, or other legislative enactments that might injuriously affect it. So deeply is this idea rooted in the English mind, that long after the separation of the American colonies we find American politicians arguing against conferring votes on negro slaves, upon the express ground that slaves, not being able to hold property, do not require political representation; and for authority for this point of view we find them referring to the acknowledged principles of the British system of law, which, it is well known, is considered as the foundation of the institutions of the United States, wherever not abrogated by the American Constitution or by special legislation.

. . . The birthright of an Englishman is defined by this high authority as the privilege of preserving his property. He is refused any birthright inherent in himself, but it is laid down that by the possession of property he comes into possession of a privilege attached to property; a privilege which is a birthright apparently, because it is essential to the system of law under which he is born. It is observable that this way of considering a birthright as not of natural but of legal origin, is in conformity with modern habits of thought in regard to civilized men, . . . It is hard to see how, if the law of England endows a woman with property, it can, consistently with this legal dictum, deprive her of
the essential privilege (which, as we understand Lord Somers, must be her birthright if she is born in England) whereby her property is to be preserved.

. . . In pointing out the quite peculiar position occupied by female possessors of property, the lady petitioners have undeniably touched upon a weak point in our present political system, a kind of gap, where in political life there exists no equivalent for what we have in social and civil life. It is an anomaly, as they assert. For who else among us, entitled by law to hold property to a certain amount, is nevertheless deprived of the vote which the British Constitution looks upon as the safeguard of property? The answer will be—Minors, idiots, lunatics, and criminals. These, and these only, are classed politically along with women. But none of these are so classed in anything but in politics. In no other respect can their standing among us be compared with that of women. We do not mean to compliment the ladies by asserting that they may not be as weak, as foolish, as mad, or as wicked as any of all these classes of the community; but we might be as enthusiastic a woman-hater as ever wrote in the Saturday Review, and still a moment’s reflection on the legal position of these classes would show that it has nothing in common with that of women administering their own property. However incapable these latter may be, our institutions do actually permit them to administer their property for themselves. Women do actually undertake the responsibility and enjoy the privileges of property, excepting only the privilege of voting. They are liable for debts; they can enter into contracts; they can alienate or they can purchase at their own free will and pleasure; they can devise by will or gift; they can sue or be sued in courts of law in vindication of their rights or in punishment of their shortcomings; they can release others from legal obligations towards themselves, and they can incur legal obligations towards others in regard of the property they hold. But minors, idiots, lunatics, and criminals can do none of all these things. They merely hold the right to the possession of property at some future time when they shall have become different from what they now are, along with the right to transfer it to their heirs. Upon them the law bestows no power of dealing with their possessions as seems good to themselves; no power of vindicating their own doings before a legal tribunal; no power of prosecuting those who attack their pecuniary interests; no power, in short, of preserving their property before the civil law.

. . . The English representative system, such as it is, good or bad, represents not persons but property. By holding property women take on rights and duties of property. If they are not interested in politics, their property is. Poor laws and game laws, corn laws and malt tax, cattle plague compensation bills, the manning of the navy, and the conversion of Enfield rifles into breech loaders—all these things will make the property held by English women more or less valuable to the country at large of this and the succeeding generations. It is on the supposition that property requires representation that a property qualification is fixed by the law. It is not the mere personal interests of the rich man that a property franchise is supposed to protect; were it so, the injustice of giving the franchise to the rich man only would have been too grossly palpable to have endured so long, or to be capable of as good a defence as the English Constitution;

. . . the very persons who would most object to importing theories of the abstract rights of man, into a discussion on the franchise, will go off into vague generalities on the
nature of women, and fancy that some such universal axioms can be somehow applicable to the legal position of particular classes of Englishwomen in the nineteenth century. Now we are far from denying that general principles must underlie not only all theory, but also all practice. We readily admit that most people do in reality either accept or reject the abstract theory of the natural equality of all men, just as they do in reality talk either poetry or prose; and so, in like manner, most people have their own theory as to the special aptitudes of women. But the theory that all women are destined for family life is about as applicable to any practical settlement of the franchise in this country, as the somewhat equivalent one that all men are born free and equal. . . . Whether or not all women are destined for family life, all Englishwomen do not live it; whether or not women are fitted by nature to be anything else than wives and mothers, many Englishwomen are something else; whether law ought or ought not to recognise women as anything else, the law of England does so recognise them. Marriage may or may not be the only good, the only ideal existence for all women; but the law of England has long ago refused to drive women into marriage, as sheep are driven into a fold, by shutting every gate against them but the one they are intended to go through. Even if all unmarried women ought to be looked upon as stray sheep, still, as we have already seen, both law and custom in this country have bestowed upon them abundance of rights and privileges; and the assertion that such people have no right even to exist, is out of place in answer to the question, whether the rights they already possess do not naturally imply one right more? It seems to us, therefore, that no abstract ideas of woman’s mission can reasonably be brought forward as proof of an urgent necessity for the exclusion of women from the franchise under our existing system . . . .

. . . if the question is asked — What good would be gained by [giving women the vote] the answer is very plain — Whatever good is to be gained by the British Constitution. If that be a good, it is evident that the carrying it out must be good. The perpetuation of an omission which originated in circumstances that have long since passed away, must do as much harm to those who are omitted as would have been done to their countrymen if the British Constitution had not existed. If it be an advantage to be able to protect one’s property by the power of voting for members of Parliament, the possession of this advantage must be a good for all those who live and own property under Parliamentary Government. The good that would be done to women themselves is, in fact, not open to dispute, unless we dispute the advantage of Parliamentary Government and representation of property; and in that case we must dispute the advantage of the English system of government altogether. If, continuing to confine ourselves to a strictly constitutional point of view, we ask what would be the advantage to the country in general of the political representation of female holders of property, on the same conditions as men, we think, as we have already indicated, that the reply is equally clear. If the representation in Parliament of those who are interested in property is a national good, tending to the preservation and fostering of all property interests, to the increase of our national wealth, and to the handing down to our descendants of the national property under favourable conditions, then the disfranchisement of any class of holders of property must be an evil proportioned to their numbers, and their enfranchisement an advantage in the same proportion.
If it be urged that the power of voting may make women more independent than it is thought they ought to be, it appears to us, once again, that English law has already decided that women may be independent, and that a woman who is absolute mistress of her own life, person, and property, will not be rendered more independent of men by the power of giving an occasional vote for a member of Parliament. There are some who think that by giving to any women whatever the power politically to protect their own interests, we should diminish that generous, disinterested, and romantic character which is so charming in women, and which indeed we all like to see in others, and most of us even to encourage in ourselves, so long as it does not expose us too defenceless to the selfishness of the selfish. Yet the remarks we have already made on the legal ability of women to defend their own pecuniary interests will apply even more appositely here [i.e., aptly, given the circumstances]. For if the sole responsibility of all their own private pecuniary affairs does not unsex spinsters and widows, and make them coarse, worldly, avaricious, grasping, and selfish, the addition of a vote, giving them a very slight direct influence on public affairs, is not likely to have so extraordinary an effect upon the most gentle and amiable half of mankind; on the contrary, as we find that the names of ladies abound on all charitable and philanthropic subscription lists, showing how kindly and generous a use they are disposed to make of their property, so we might reasonably expect that such little direct influence on politics as the possession of a vote would give to women, would probably be chiefly used in the direction of what we may call philanthropic legislation . . . .

it is too late to be afraid of letting Englishwomen share in the life of Englishmen. We cannot shut up our women in harems, and devote them to the cultivation of their beauty and of their children. We have most of us long ago acknowledged that a perfect woman is “Not too bright and good For human nature’s daily food.” The fear that a womanly nature could be corrupted or hardened by politics, would strike at the root of our Western and Christian civilization, which owes much of its progress to having devolved upon women a share of the commonplace practical cares and duties which go to make up the sum of ordinary human life, whether domestic or political. The ingenuity, the love of luxury, the taste, and the housewifely instincts of women, have contributed much to the comforts of modern civilization; a more rapid and efficient adaptation of these same comforts to prisons, schools, barracks, and workhouses, would be a useful and probable result of the extension of women’s energies to political life. It is, indeed, remarkable how large a part of the subjects which occupy most attention in modern politics are of this quasi-domestic character; and how growing a tendency there is for them to become ever more so. The homes of the working-classes, education, factory acts (regulating the labour of women and children), sanitary laws, water supplies, drainage (all municipal legislation in fact), the whole administration of the poor-laws, with its various subdivisions—care of the pauper sick, pauper schools, etc.—all these are subjects which already, by common consent, are included in the peculiarly feminine province of home and charity. If the possession of a vote should induce more women to extend their interest to the comfort and happiness of other homes besides their own, it will certainly not have exercised a deteriorating influence on their character.