

Transcription, February 2015:

The Times (London) No. 38884 (16 Feb. 1909): 12b-12c.

[p. 12b]

‘To the Editor of the *Times*.’

Sir,—The letter from Dr. A. R. Wallace, read at the Godalming woman suffrage meeting on February 10, is a very strange production.

The only argument for woman suffrage which (he says) has any weight with him is the following:—“All the human inhabitants of any one country should have equal rights and liberties before the law.” These are, of course, civil rights, and, in England, all “human beings” (except aliens) have them, women as well as men, and also (as far as is practicable) young people under the age of 21; as these are “human beings” Dr. Wallace must include them. So far (I might remark in passing) as women are concerned, they have, in fact, “before the law” some considerable advantages over men. Dr. Wallace then proceeds:—“Women are human beings; therefore they should have votes as well as men.” But votes are not civil rights or liberties; they are political power. The syllogism, therefore, breaks down.

His concluding sentence runs:—“The term ‘Liberal’ does not apply to those who refuse this natural and indefeasible right,” the vote, to women.

Such an affirmation raises the whole question of natural and indefeasible rights, which is known to be highly contentious ground. At least one large school of philosophy absolutely denies the existence of “natural” rights; the Benthamites maintain that every right must be gauged by its utility. And this particular “natural” right, the right to the franchise, was expressly denied by the apostle of woman suffrage, John Stuart Mill, in the *locus classicus* on this subject, the speech made by him in the House of Commons on May 20, 1867, in proposing the extension of the franchise to women. I quote from “Hansard’s” report of the debate on the “Representation of the People Bill” (“Hansard,” Vol. 187, page 818):—“I do not mean that the electoral franchise, or any other public function, is an abstract right, and that to withhold it from any one, on sufficient grounds of expediency, is a personal wrong; it is a complete misunderstanding of the principle I maintain to confound this with it. My argument is entirely on of expediency.” And again:—“To lay a ground for refusing the suffrage to any one, it is necessary to allege either personal unfitness or public danger.” This is, in substance, the allegation of those who oppose woman suffrage—sex unfitness and danger to the Empire.

As to Dr. Wallace’s denial of “the term ‘Liberal’” to all who decline to believe in woman government, it is quite outrageous and indefensible. Such ostracism is mere bigotry; it is the fanaticism which fixes its eyes on one red-hot spot and is blinded to all the world besides. Not that this blindness is at all uncommon, or never willful. It is the defect or the cue of those who desire or scheme to force their particular shibboleth on a whole party. They insist on the identification of the party with themselves. I myself was told by an enthusiastic woman suffrage member of the House of Commons that as I did not accept woman suffrage I ought to “sit with the Tories.” But there are plenty of “Tories” who do accept woman suffrage. Where, then, are they to sit? With the Liberals? What nonsense it all is! Woman suffrage is not, at present at any rate, a party question, and, as a matter of fact, it has never been an admitted item in the Liberal or the Conservative programme. And what about such uncompromising opponents of

woman suffrage in recent days as Gladstone, Bright, and Harcourt, and, at the present time, as various prominent members of the Cabinet and of the Government outside the Cabinet, and as Mr. Bryce, Professor Goldwin Smith, Mr. Frederic Harrison, and a host of other Liberals? Does “the term ‘Liberal’” not “apply” to them? *Solvuntur risu tabulae*.

I am, Sir, John Massie.
Oxford, Feb. 12.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.