

UNB Brunswickan

Perspectives: Women-Then and Now

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"Queen Victoria, a woman, was the ruler of the greatest empire under the sun, and yet we would be shocked if women were given the right to vote in a provincial election." - [Mr. Emmerson, N.B. Legislature, 13 April 1899](#)

The idea is fast gaining ground in some circles that our new Senate should be half female---by the seductively simple method of electing two members, one of each sex, in every tiding.

On totally unrelated matter, let's turn to the April 13, 1899 debate in the N.B. legislature on a resolution to extend the provincial franchise to women.

After an afternoon recess, Mr. Emmerson rose to start debate, pointing out that "there had been a great change in public sentiment on this question within the last few years", and contending that "the idea was not un-British".

Warming to his subject, "he did not feel called upon to discuss this matter from the standpoint of principle, because there could be no successful objection or argument made against the principle". However, he did recognize "the light manner in which a great many young men view this right", that it was true "a large majority of women did not want the right to vote", and even that "there were some who thought it was not womanly", but reasonably concluded that "if there were women who would not exercise the franchise if they had it, that was no reason why we should deny it to those who would exercise it".

Clearly, Mr. Emmerson was a wild-eyed idealist: "Women as a rule are not paid much more than half the salary which a man would receive for doing the same work, and I feel sure that if women had the right to vote, the compensation which they should receive would be materially changed, and it is in the light of common sense that it should be so".

Mr. Porter seconded the resolution, full of fire: "While our constitution professed to be by the people, for the people, yet only half the people had a voice. Wherever we find civilization, thrift and intelligence, woman is in the van. Wherever we find poverty, lawlessness and barbarism, woman is degraded... We must extend the franchise to women. The banner of liberty should be carried to the heights of progress and prosperity by the hand of the 'lady of the snows'".

Mr. Pugsley followed Porter, "not entirely opposed to the granting of suffrage to women", but noted that "though King's County was one of the most enlightened counties in the

province, no sentiment had been expressed there by the women in its favor", and cautioned that "if the right to vote was given to women, the right to represent the people in the legislature would inevitably follow". In short, "it was because I desire that the homes of this country should remain as they are today that I hesitate to throw the women of the country into the storm and strife of political life".

Mr. Robertson followed Pugsley, having none of his puerile clap-trap: "As to the question of whether women were prepared to take the full responsibility I ask: Why not? The world is standing today armed to the teeth, yet hoping that war should be no more... The governor of Wyoming has declared that women's franchise had conferred inestimable benefits upon the people, and pauperism and crime had been banished from the state... The invariable experience in this province in school, church and other public matters was that long after men became weary in well doing, noble women will continue the work, and their influence is thrown against everything savoring of bribery and corruption. No man would dare approach a woman with a bribe".

Mr. Hazen, following Robertson, "found an almost universal expression that women are not anxious to have this obligation placed upon them. The reason was that they felt if they properly attended to their domestic and social duties they had sufficient responsibility imposed upon their shoulders". Furthermore, "If the franchise were extended suddenly to 75,000 women the result might be to add a very undesirable class to the electorate... Behind all legislation is physical force, and in the end the man must rule".

Mr. Emmerson closed the debate with a brief rebuttal: "It is absurd to suppose that bad women would vote while good women would not... The house should treat this matter in a bold, courageous manner... The present provincial franchise, though very liberal in its scope, is based upon property. If unmarried women owning property had a right to vote, why should it be withheld from the married women?" The vote was taken, and the resolution defeated, thirty-four to seven.

Choose as many lessons as are applicable: (1) Our new Senate should be half female. (2) Mr. Emmerson, Mr. Robertson, and Mr. Porter all had remarkable wives. (3) Even men had to own property to vote in 1899. (4) Only women dare offer other women bribes. (5) We've come a long way, baby*.

(* Long time Virginia Slim's cigarettes marketing slogan to women.)