

The Constitutional Amendment (Adult Suffrage) Bill 1894 Years 9-12



Clerk:

First Line

Honourable Members please stand.

Rules

1. Always stand up to speak.
2. Always address your remarks through the President.
3. Address the President as Mr President.
4. Members speak without interruption.
5. The President keeps order.

Bill – First Reading

The Constitutional Amendment (Adult Suffrage) Bill 1894

A Bill for an Act to amend the Constitution.

President:

Members, please sit down. Parliament is now in session. The rules of the Parliament must be obeyed. Clerk, please read out the rules.

The Constitutional Amendment Adult Suffrage Bill 1894 will now be debated. Clerk please read out the Bill.

I call on the Chief Secretary to introduce the Bill

I call on the Honourable Sir John Duncan

I call on the Honourable Sir Lancelot Stirling

I call on the Honourable Dr Sylvanus Magarey

I call on the Honourable John Warren

I call on the Honourable Sir John Bice

I call on the Honourable Dr Allan Campbell

I call on the Honourable Mr Ebenezer Ward

I call on the Honourable Mr Andrew Kirkpatrick

I call on the Honourable Mr Martin Basedow

I call on the Honourable Mr David Charleston

Does anyone else wish to speak on the Bill? Stand if you wish to speak.

I call on

I call on the Chief Secretary to close the debate.

A vote on the bill will now be taken. All those in favour say "aye"

All those against say "no"

The ayes/noes have it

A division has been called. Clerk, ring the bells.

Those who support women having the right to vote will move to the right of the chair. Those who do not support it will move to the left of the chair.

The result is # who want to grant women's suffrage, and # who want to refuse suffrage.

The Bill has/has not passed.

In a tie: There being equal votes for and against the Bill I cast my vote for the Bill. The ideas put forward by the Honourable Members have made me decide to vote for the Bill.

Chief Secretary

(Hon. Sir John Hannah Gordon KC, Member for the Southern District)

First speech

Thank you, Mr President. I am almost inclined to think that the time has arrived in the social evolution of South Australia when it is sufficient to lay this Bill upon the table of the Council. This is not, of course, the first time that a proposal to extend the franchise to women has been made in the South Australian Parliament, though never before has it been in so simple and complete a form as that embodied in the present Bill.

It will hardly be necessary to deal with the old argument that women are so inferior to men in intellect that their admission to political rights would lower the standard of political life, though that opinion, so flattering to the male, seems still to linger in some high places. This old notion of mental inferiority is fast being shown the door. Upon every plane of life except the lowest – that of mere brute strength – women are proving themselves the equals of men, and in many new ways their superiors.

And then we are told by some that to allow man and wife both to vote would tend to break up the harmony of the home. This is pure fudge. It is a marriage union built upon the flimsiest of foundations which could be injured by an intelligent expression of independent opinion by man and wife.

And then we are told, and I have heard members of the Council advance the argument, that it is derogatory to the delicacy of woman to vote at the polls. Again I say fudge. We have silenced that argument already by allowing women to vote at municipal elections. Many of the sweetest women in the world have to go out into the struggle for bread and earn their living, and often the living of their husbands, side by side with men in the rough and tumble of the work-a-day world, and it is simply ridiculous to argue that the native delicacy of the female character would suffer from the exercise of the franchise.

But after all the best answer to all these objections is in the actual experience of those countries in which female suffrage is the law. Woman's suffrage has been tried in Wyoming, U.S.A., in which it has been adopted for about 20 years, and the result is exceedingly satisfactory. In the Isle of Man, Austria, and Hungary the same system is in vogue, and no mischief has resulted. To these instances we can now add that of New Zealand, in which the principle of female franchise has worked splendidly, and is bearing in the healthiest manner upon public life and opinion. Nor can it be otherwise. I give my strongest adhesion to the view that the votes of women would exercise the most beneficial effect upon social conditions.

Second speech

Thank you, Mr President. I thank all Honourable Members for their contributions and look forward to a productive Committee of the Whole for this Bill.

Sir John Duncan

(Member for the North-Eastern District)

Mr President, the Chief Secretary has displayed a great deal of wit and introduced the Bill in his usual cheerful way. This speech appeared to me, however, to be more suitable for an audience of ladies after an afternoon tea party than for an assembly of Members of Parliament.

I have read the speech through very carefully and failed to find anything in it to reply to.

The Chief Secretary lauded ladies up to the skies.

No reasonable demand has been made throughout the colony for female suffrage. I am aware that a contingent of the gentle sex, chiefly in Adelaide, have been making a stir about the matter, but the bulk of the people of the colony have not considered it. We would find cranks on all questions, but that is no reason why the Government should seek to foist on the people a measure they do not want.

The Bill before us has never been before the country, and involving as it does such an important departure it is a question whether the opinion of the constituencies should not first be obtained. Is the proposal an admission that the present electorate is effete and incapable? Is manhood played out?

Sir Lancelot Stirling KCMG OBE

(Member for the Southern District)

Thank you, Mr President. It might be expected of me that I should follow in the footsteps of my brother, Dr Stirling, who introduced the first Adult Suffrage Bill into the House of Assembly. Many of us have our fads and fancies and one brother is not supposed to do exactly the same as the other.

I think it would be better if the franchise were granted only to those who have the intelligence to exercise it, and whose condition of life, behaviour, and duty towards the State has been such as to entitle them to that right.

If, however, it is claimed that a man simply because he reaches the age of 21 should ipso facto have a right to vote the logical sequence is that the same concession should be given to women; but there are those who think that certain classes of the community do not exercise the franchise with that intelligence which they should. I would rather see every man justify his vote than act like a parrot repeating some words it was taught. If an intelligent interest in politics is to be the test, have women shown an aptitude for that test?

I ask Members to take the average woman with whom he has conversed, and say whether in 90 cases out of every hundred she has not failed to show an intelligent interest in politics. An intelligent interest in politics should be shown before the franchise is granted.

The Chief Secretary has given us the picture of two hearts that beat as one, but I would like him to come down from that high pedestal and put himself in the position when he and his wife would disagree about politics. The Bill would be a large thorn constantly scratching at domestic harmony. I can imagine a man going home and giving orders as to how his wife is to vote, and if it afterwards turned out that she voted otherwise there is sure to be friction.

The proper parental duty is the maintenance and establishment of home legislation, home ties, home management, and home prosperity, and raising up children that they might do honour to themselves, their homes, and their country. Is that not a duty noble enough for women?

From what I have said you will have no misapprehension as to the way I will vote, but if it should be decided against my wish to extend the franchise to women, then let us also give for experiment the prize that the franchise should hold for them – a seat in the Legislature. If the advocates of the Bill were true to their cause and were not being merely made a catspaw of they would do that.

Dr Sylvanus Magarey

(Member for the Central District No. 1)

Mr President, as for the argument that women are not qualified to manage business affairs I might mention that I know several institutions managed by the fair sex and they have worked exceedingly well, and how much better off would many a man be if his wife had always taken care of the pounds, shillings, and pence. By natural ability they are forcing themselves into commercial life, and will continue to do so. It is an effect of the gradual spread of education and the fact that woman's abilities are getting freer play.

Mr Stirling contends that women should not be accorded the franchise because they are not politically educated. Does he propose that no man should be allowed to vote until he has satisfied the authorities that he is sufficiently conversed in politics. It is argued, too, that woman is physically inferior to man, and that she cannot bear arms.

Let those who argue thus be true to their convictions, and so amend the Constitution Act that men who do not possess the qualifications which they say are lacking in women should be debarred from voting.

Mr John Warren

(Member for the North-Eastern District)

Mr President, are we prepared to give the vote to women who are engaged in shops, factories, restaurants, and other business places who do not in the least degree understand elementary politics? There is another class of women who live in such streets as Rosina Street; are they going to be placed in the same position as the best and noblest women in the colony? If so, it would be an unspeakable wrong, and I am ashamed to think anyone would advocate such a thing. If the power were given to those women very possibly one of them would aspire to the position held by the President.

The Chief Secretary said the Women's Suffrage League represents the women of South Australia, but I utterly deny the assertion. The League is composed of honest, straightforward, well-meaning women, who are doing what they think is right, but they are very much mistaken.

The Bill proposes to impose a new duty on women, a duty they are totally unprepared for, and for which they have had no training, and in which they think they have no interest. It is unfair to them and unfair to the country.

Sir John Bice KCMG

(Member for the Northern District)

Thank you, Mr President. I want to say a few words on the subject of the objection commonly urged against granting the reform we are discussing. The principal objection, and one often urged, is that women are represented by their male friends. Then I would say that the neglect of duty shown by those friends in the past is a sufficient reason for making the change. In the laws relating to marriage the terms of the contract are altogether in favour of men.

It has also been urged that women would be subjected to insult at the polling booth and to intimidation at home, but that argument of course comes from opponents. In reply to this I would say let us be thankful that the opponents are daily becoming fewer, and as they decrease so will the women's liability to insult and intimidation disappear.

Mr President, it is also contended, with some show of reason, that women are ignorant of politics, but I would ask who is responsible for this? Is it not the men who have always, with a view of maintaining their supremacy, told the women they have nothing to do with politics? To sum up that aspect of the question, women must have votes to protect their own interests, because the constant and determined consideration of men has been to look after number 1. All the policy of the men has been to keep women out of politics, and the argument of ignorance applies equally to young men as to young women, because young men do not give much interest to politics until they have attained the age of 21.

Dr Allan Campbell

(Member for the Province)

Mr President, with regard to the question of women sitting in Parliament the Bill contains a clause which would preclude them from doing so, and I agree with those who would have it struck out. If we are going to give freedom it should be full freedom. So far as women have enjoyed freedom they have shown themselves equal to the emergency, and I would leave the question of their return to Parliament entirely to the electors. If the electors choose to send women to Parliament why should they not be allowed to do so?

Mr Ebenezer Ward

(Member for the Northern District)

Mr President, looking back at the first mandate given to man upon the subject of the relation of woman to man, and which has been taken through all the succeeding hundreds of centuries that have elapsed, are we to summarily reject the results of that wisdom and experience at the command of a few?

Nonsense. Proof cannot be given that the electors have asked for what is provided for in the Bill. At whose bidding are we going to set aside the accumulated wisdom and experience of ages past? It is at the bidding of a lot of fanatics and faddists who call themselves social reformers, and assume to represent the people. They are not merely a lot of females who are not feminine, but they are associated with and supported by a lot of males who are not masculine.

The Chief Secretary's was certainly a charming speech, and I listened to it from start to finish. It was admirably adapted, as it did, to afford a pleasant hour's entertainment to the gallery audience it was specially addressed to. Much as I enjoyed it I regret that the rules of the Council prevented muffins and crumpets and tea, cakes and confectionary being handed round. But seriously, nothing in such a speech could justify a measure involving such a gross violation of existing electoral rights.

We are attacking the Constitution in the wrong way, and until we can see our way clear to alter the present law on a surer basis and with happier results my sincere advice is not to allow the Bill to become law.

Mr Andrew Kirkpatrick

(Member for the Central District No. 1)

Mr President, we certainly should give women a vote to make Parliament complete. I know it is said that women suffer under no disabilities by not having the vote, but I deny that. Take one instance – the divorce laws. A husband can commit a certain offence in the sight of God and man with impunity, and unless the wife can also prove cruelty or neglect she has no redress. A husband can continue his evil practice for a lifetime, heaping on his wife and children shame and humiliation without breaking any legal enactment, but should wife commit the same offence, not for a lifetime, but only once, the husband has only to prove his case in a law court and he is granted a divorce. Does not that show that women have suffered great injustice through being deprived of a voice in the making of our laws?

Although women might not desire to govern, we have no right to withhold from them the means to prevent men from misgoverning them. I maintain that if it is wise and right that a woman should occupy the highest and most important position in the State – that of Queen and Empress of the British Empire – and is fitted to perform the functions and duties appertaining to that office, it cannot possibly be wrong to grant to all other women the much lesser privilege of the vote.

Mr Martin Basedow

(Member for the North-Eastern District)

Thank you, Mr President. What would be the effect of the system on women themselves? A family is the bedrock of society, and if we interfered with its wellbeing then we would at the same time injure the State. At present it is considered that husband and wife are one, always pulling the same way, assisting one another in love and peace and harmony, and educating their children, and generally striving to disseminate peace and happiness.

Is it supposed that man and wife would always agree on political questions? If woman took a lively interest in politics, as she would have to do if she were to perform her political rights and duties, her sublime destiny – to marry, to study the happiness of her husband, to become a mother and the centre of a happy family – would to a great extent be frustrated. Marriages have already become less in number than they need to be, but involve women in politics and men would become still more shy of matrimony.

Mr David Charleston

(Member for the Central District No. 1)

Mr President, I have listened to the debate with a large amount of pain. Originally I was opposed to women taking an active part in politics because I felt that their proper place was in their home. But the commercial and industrial life of the nation is such that woman is dragged from her lofty position.

Women are compelled to obey the laws of the country, and although men might look with pride to the fact that they go into the battlefield to fight for their country, women pay their share of taxation to send men out to be shot down. Women should have a voice in determining whether dreadful wars should be carried on. Women form about half of the population of the community and have to compete with men in many walks of life. Should not women have a say in altering the laws which would prevent them taking up such demoralising work.

Mr President, introduce women into politics, and I am quite sure it would be beneficial in all ways. Let members vote for the Bill and start a new era of prosperity in the land.