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**WOMEN TEACHERS
AND
THE VOTE.**

**Address given by Catherine Mahon at the
I.C.W.S.A.**

(Re-printed from the "Irish Citizen.")

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Though I have been a member of Irish Suffrage Associations for many years—first of the Irish Women's Suffrage Association, and then of the Irish Women's Franchise League since its inception, this is the first suffrage meeting at which I have ever spoken in public.

When I got the circular announcing the formation of the Catholic Women's Suffrage Association, under the patronage of St. Brigid, and the inspiration of Pope Leo XIII., who advised Catholics "to take the initiative in all true social reform," I hastened to join it, for I saw that it was the one society that could win Catholic Irishmen, clerical and lay, to the support of Irishwomen in their demand for the Franchise.

This Association is non-party, politics are taboo in its ranks; it is non-militant; so that even the greatest opponent of the movement need not fear getting his windows broken or his epaulettes torn off, however much he may deserve such treat-

ment. In fact, the aim of the founders of the Catholic Women's Suffrage Association is to make it a Sodality of Catholic women who desire the legal right to take an active part in initiating and compassing true social reform within our own country; not to supersede men or oust them in any way, but to share and share alike with them, in the law-making, peace-making and war-making of the nation—as women are doing with so much success in those few countries where they have been granted equality of franchise with men.

I not only speak for the democracy, but I represent it personally and professionally. As a National Teacher, I am a worker among the children of the workers, and we National teachers have the education of 700,000 of the nation's children in our hands from the time they leave their mother's knee till they are twelve or fourteen years of age. Surely, with that experience, no one knows better than we do the need for reforms and the reforms that are necessary for the workers and their children and their homes. For it is the workers who really want the vote most of all; it is their condition that stands most in need of improvement by beneficent legislation.

I should like to tell you (1) what we women teachers have done regarding the franchise, and (2) why we want the vote

both for ourselves and for the democracy which we represent. With regard to the first, we in Ireland have as yet taken no combined or concerted public action. In England, the women teachers brought forward a resolution at the Annual Conference for the last three years on the question. For the last two years it was ruled out of order; but at the last Conference, 22,000 votes were cast for and 40,000 against. The women were mainly for, the men against. Many of those against were not opponents of the suffrage, but they were against making it a Teachers' Conference question. The English women teachers, nothing daunted by three defeats, declare their intention of bringing the resolution up at every Conference till they carry it, no matter how long it will take them to do so.

In Ireland, suffrage has never been introduced officially at our Congress or meetings. The fact is, we National teachers have had such a struggle for very existence against all the forces that class ascendancy and unbridled and irresponsible officialdom could marshal against us, that we could not risk dividing our forces on any question whatever. The English democracy are now crying out against secret diplomacy in foreign affairs. We teachers have lived under a system of secret diplomacy for the last fourteen years in Ireland.

WOMEN TEACHERS AND THE VOTE.

Individually, the great majority of the women teachers, and a large number of the men teachers—in fact, almost every man teacher whom I have met—are strong in their conviction that women should have the full franchise; and the best thinkers admit that no logical argument can be adduced against it, opposition being in all cases due to selfishness or nervousness. Sincere opponents are afraid women would not make better use of the vote than men, and selfish men wish to extend none of their prerogatives.

I have attended hundreds of meetings, and have been over most of Ireland. I have spoken in twenty-five counties, and in almost every speech I have made I have advanced the claim that women should occupy positions on every Board, Council and committee of the nation, Parliament included, and in such numbers as to make their presence effective, and this sentiment has always been supported vigorously and unanimously. When our administrative troubles are over, and all this star-chamber method of rule, this secret diplomacy by which national education is run is done away with, I have no doubt but the women teachers will become enthusiastic workers for suffrage, as many of them are individually already, when the question is specially brought before them.

WOMEN TEACHERS AND THE VOTE.

Our Organisation is made up of men and women in about equal numbers. It has 200 branches scattered all over the country, and a central committee elected annually by these branches. Up to 1907, the central committee, which might be called our Cabinet, was the exclusive preserve of men only; and, though an occasional woman delegate was sent from a branch to the Congress, which is our annual Parliament, yet no woman ever took any part in the business, but left it all to the men.

Prior to that time, opinions had been expressed that it would be well to have women on the Congress Committees, and even on the Central Committee, to look after women's interests, but no one took these expressions of opinion seriously, and nothing came of them. In 1906, we women started an agitation for representation, taking as our text that well-worn truism, "Taxation without representation is tyranny." We paid to the funds, and we should have not only votes—we had these already—but women officials in our Cabinet.

To bring our agitation to a practical issue, and to convince the men that we were in earnest, I went forward against two men candidates for the Vice-presidency. This was a most audacious and revolutionary proceeding, when you remember

WOMEN TEACHERS AND THE VOTE.

that ladies had never before aspired to any office, and that even men had to qualify for the Vice-presidency by several years' hard work on the committee as district representatives.

Our opponents predicted speedy and utter ruin for the organisation, and backed their prediction up by the Bible, if women were ever admitted to the Teachers' Cabinet. But the supporters of the women's cause were many; for, though personally unknown, I polled a thousand votes for the Vice-presidency. I did not win; the teachers were roused, and when Congress met it made provision for women members of the Central Committee. And, furthermore, instead of waiting till the new rules came into operation at the next election, Congress there and then elected two ladies provisionally. This was done almost entirely by men: not more than half-a-dozen ladies had anything to say on the matter. During the last seven years the membership of the society has doubled. Instead of the ruin predicted by a few opponents, nothing but good resulted from the granting of representation to women.

Our Central Committee have published an organising circular, and one of the reasons given why every teacher should join the organisation is: "Because it is a thoroughly democratic body, in which the voice and

WOMEN TEACHERS AND THE VOTE.

vote of the novice are as powerful as those of the veteran—in which the question of Women's Rights and Adult Suffrage have long since been settled—and where all, irrespective of rank, religion, politics, sex, or age, can aspire to every office." The teachers, therefore, who have given women a share in the shaping of all legislation within their ranks, and found it to work satisfactorily, could not logically do otherwise than support in the same broad-minded, generous, trustful spirit the extension of this right to the legislation of the nation.

In our work on the Central Committee, we have time and again felt the great drawback it was to us not to have Women Members of Parliament and Women Commissioners of National Education to whom we could appeal for sympathy with the grievances of women teachers. To quote just two instances. There is in Ireland a very large number of married women teachers. In a poor country like this a woman teacher could not afford to get married at all but that she can keep on teaching after marriage. In America, where women can afford to quit the profession upon marriage, the philanthropists are raising the alarm because one-fourth of the teachers have only one year's experience, and one-half only four years' experience, and re

WOMEN TEACHERS AND THE VOTE.

clamouring for the influence of mother-love and mother-insight in education. Over here, in 1911, the secret diplomats of National Education slovenly sprang a rule on us through the public Press (it had been hatched in secret for some time), the effect of which was to fine every married teacher one-fourth of her annual income for every birth. She was ordered to retire for three months at her own expense, and to provide and pay a substitute during her absence. After a year and a-half the Board was compelled, as the result of keen agitation, to refund a couple of thousand pounds in maternity fines (as we called them) which they had stopped from the mothers in that short period. Even junior assistant mistresses on £24 a year, who had married, were fined one-fourth of that miserable salary for the birth of their child. If there were Women Commissioners, surely they would understand that at such a time as that a woman could least afford to lose any of her already miserable salary. And if we could have appealed to women Members of Parliament, we could put our case more freely on this subject to members of her own sex. In every other department of women-workers there are questions similarly affecting child-life, and women's life and work, that require the special advocacy of women legislators.

WOMEN TEACHERS AND THE VOTE.

To give another instance of the need of safeguards for women, the Commissioners, in 1906, invented a class of teacher, known as junior mistress, at £24 a year. We protested against the introduction of cheap labour at starvation wage, but the Board persisted till it had appointed 2,000 of them. Surely, if there were women on that Board, they would realise that these young girls could not exist on a wage they must give their cooks, in addition to lodging and maintenance. It is a pathetic sight to see these young girls, a continual drain on the means of their poor parents in the struggle to exist on a starvation wage, at a time in which they should be at least self-supporting.

In our work in the schools as teachers we are concerned, not only with the child at school-going age, but with the child from infancy, for on its care in infancy depends its success in school life. How many children get a legacy of delicacy for want of good new milk. The State should step in and see that even the humblest cottager has facilities for procuring an adequate milk supply. It might mean money, but the State ought never to grumble at expenditure on national and social philanthropic reform when it lavishes money recklessly on war.

But deplorable as is the case of the stunted, neglected, ill-nourished child, it is

by no means impossible to educate, given better conditions. There is only one child outside the pale of hope—one class of child who sets the teacher who loves humanity at war with the world as it is—and that is the child of the drunkard, the child that has been handed down a heritage of dullness from drunken parents. All these problems vitally affect women, and will not be properly attended to till women get the vote.

Now, as to the best means of winning it, I think that we shall never get the vote from Irishmen by physical force. In England they will get it in no other way. The Cabinet Minister who told the suffragettes that they were not in earnest because they did not act like the men who burned down Nottingham Castle, in their demand for the franchise, spoke the truth on that question. England will not yield except to fear or annoyance. We shall see what she will do for those suffragists who have given up the movement to help men in the war, to make munitions at home, and to tend them on the battlefield. Irishmen do not wonder at women helping in war; to us the sight is not novel. Many years ago the women of Limerick won fame in history by carrying munitions of war to their men, helping them to erect defences, and fighting beside them on the battle-ground. And though the end of it all was one of these worthless

“scraps of paper,” the women did their part in winning the victory, and kept their side of the treaty. No doubt, in those days, superior people were shocked at such unwomanly conduct, yet now, after 225 years, English women are following the example, as far as permitted by legislators, who want their help, but are unwilling to use it properly. In this question, as in many others, Ireland must work out her salvation from her own standpoint.

If Home Rule ever comes (and we have been assured over and over that it is an “absolute certainty”) the most practical and effective way, to my mind, to win the suffrage would be to return a woman member to the Irish Parliament. Let her, when elected, march up to the Bar of the House of Commons and demand her right to sit and act, and if she has a good fighting constituency at her back, she dare not be refused, and the law must then necessarily be immediately amended to give women all the other rights of the Constitution. There are, I know, many technical difficulties in the way, but none of them are unsurmountable. Funds are essential, and a willing constituency, of course. This is how Catholic emancipation was won in Clare by Daniel O’Connell, and Clare to-day would be an ideal battle-ground for another fight for emancipation; so would Kerry. I do not

WOMEN TEACHERS AND THE VOTE.

wish to particularise any county, but these are less Anglicised, and consequently truer to the old Irish ideals of honour for women and trust in womanhood, and would therefore, in my opinion, be more favourable to us. Irishmen admire pluck and courage, and a bold stroke like this would appeal to their sporting instincts far better than any form of violence, and they would be far more likely to support it.

No one knows what the future may bring, but one outcome of this war must be that the democracy of labour, the men and women who keep the nation's pot boiling, must have more voice in shaping national decisions in the future; there must be true and real democratic control of the actions of governments. We Catholic women should organise and prepare ourselves, as well as the women of other denominations, always animated and inspired with the noblest Catholic and Christian motives, and always true to the traditions and ideals of great Irishwomen of the past—whether these are interpreted in the warrior spirit of Macha and Maeve, the diplomacy and daring of Granuaile, the self-sacrificing heroism of the women of Limerick, or the benevolence of Margaret O'Carroll of Ely and Offaly, according as our temperament and outlook, and as the developments of our agitation may require.



