

EDITORIAL:
THE QUESTION OF WHO
SHALL VOTE

Emily Murphy

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June, Nineteen-Nineteen



by Judge Emily Murphy



Judge Murphy, of Edmonton, Alta., President of the Federated Women's Institutes.

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AT the present moment a movement is hot-afoot in Canada to have the educational test applied to the franchise and the movement seems to gain ground in many quarters. Even the women who have just been enfranchised themselves, have “turned Turk” and are doing their utmost to disqualify thousands of male persons who have always had the right to vote, and many of whom actually assisted the women in the suffrage campaign.

In spite of the ancient principle that the rights of franchise are inalienable except to criminals and idiots, it is astonishing what an appeal this campaign for the application of the educational test makes to some of us. It sounds so well in theory, and makes so potent a plea to our sense of the proprieties that even the fairest-minded of us are apt to be ensnared by its fallaciousness.

In a vague undefined way most of us have an idea that the polling booth, like Elysium itself, is a place to which access should only be had by a sort of superior person who carries a linen handkerchief in one pocket and a copy of the “Atlantic Monthly” in the other; in a word, a place for the gentry and for fair ladies—preferably those who wear white spats and lorgnettes.

Why, surely, the vote is safe with us (“us” must here be considered as heavily underscored) but always we are mightily suspicious of the other fellow. “The Man with the Hoe” and the woman stitching on the shirt may have their places in the anthology of poetry, but seeing the hoe and the needle cut short their acquaintance with the pen and the primer, these can have no place at the polling booth. We’ll disqualify every mother’s son of them.

A washerwoman, who has bought and paid for her little house and garden out of her earnings has no right to say how it shall be taxed, or who shall tax it. Oh no! This is a privilege only for the woman who inherits her home, or holds it against her husband’s creditors.

It is true that child-labor, food prices, and coal prices fall more heavily on the home of the washerwoman, but if she wants to vote then, for any sake, let her stop washing and go to school. The thing is plain as print.

Besides, the washerwoman doesn’t know (how could she?) that when the nobles wrested the Magna Charta from John of England, hardly a one of

them could write. Indeed, John was not in a position, himself, where he could say over-much about the educational test, so wisely held his tongue.

Ah yes! and we had almost forgotten to say it—only ladies with “charm” should vote. Mrs. Louise McKinney, Member of Parliament for Claresholm, Alberta, said the other day that it was strange how quickly the suffrage arguments had become obsolete. Our forgetting the charm argument amply verifies her statement.

As far as the country woman is concerned, there were her duties at home or her distance from school which, as a child, kept her from acquiring the education the Intellectuals would insist on her possessing.

When she came home from the Minneapolis Suffrage Convention, a while ago, my friend, Mrs. Nellie McClung, told me how one of the speakers had said a cow has been known to keep a woman at home all her life. Not the same cow, mind you, but the same woman.

Only the other day, in the Police Court at Edmonton, a girl of eighteen who had been born in Alberta, and who had always lived in an isolated district, told under oath that, until three months previously, when she was brought in to the Beulah Mission to give birth to her illegitimate child, she had not known anything concerning the Deity, had never seen a Bible, said a prayer, or been in a church or school.

Yes, I am sure she ought to vote. Someone would have to explain the ballot to her and what the names thereon stood for. Maybe, after all, the wrong and soul-hurt we have wrought upon our fellows is to be healed outside of the churches and schools, and even outside what is generally known as “polite society.”

This disfranchising men because they didn't get their due chance as lads, isn't playing the game squarely. Besides, as a mere argument it is wholly lacking in humor and imagination. Let us say, rather, that the laboring men should be disfranchised because they are lacking in physical stamina. More male children die than females; there are statistics to prove it.

Neither have they the requisite moral stamina. Why the prisons are full of men, and the gambling resorts are full of them, to say nothing of the livery barns where illicit liquor is sold. Indeed, in the words of Mr. H. Lauder, a Scotsman of highly convivial tendencies, they are “a' fu',” with something in the bottle for the morning.

If they want to vote, advise men to acquire “stamina” and “domestic virtues,” and, above all, they must acquire “charm.”

But here I am forgetting that this is an editorial, and that it is out of order to say “I” at all. “We” is the proper pronoun editorially. It’s use is intended to convey to the people that the editor does not speak as a lone, unsupported person, but that he or she has the backing of the editorial staff, if not of the whole Government itself.

Having, therefore, assumed this attitude, let us forget our frivol on the franchise, and ask the intellectuals—male and female—to consider whether the time and effort spent in disqualifying our unlettered citizens would not be infinitely better expended in educating them and imbuing them with our most cherished national ideals.

Make no mistake about it, we shall pay a heavy price if we alienate, segregate, or kick under any very considerable proportion of our population as unfit for the franchise. We may think they are only a body of death, but we shall find they still possess qualities that are remarkably lifelike in nature.

In our national life, it must inevitably happen that we “march to fate abreast”—that is, we must, unless we wish to emulate Russia and other countries who tried out this scurvy game of keeping the peasantry under.

The Canadian coat-of-arms may have many colors but it must be a seamless garment. Or, if you would put it differently, Canada is a theme, or a song, and it must be sung together.

That the intellectuals, at this enormously tragic crisis of the world’s history, when as never before the unlettered laborer has sensed the grievous wrongs inflicted upon him by society generally, and has further sensed the power that is his for the taking, should lightly consider the process of disfranchising him, is a thing almost beyond comprehension. It must have been something like this the philosopher meant when he said “Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.”

Marie Antoinette of France, writing to her friend, the Queen of Russia, said that sovereigns should pursue their way undisturbed by the rude mouthings of the uneducated populace in the same manner that the moon passes on her peaceful course, undeterred by the howlings of dogs. This was a fearless statement, and well-expressed, but one day the uneducated populace of France edited it to their entire satisfaction by cutting her head off.

The uneducated man has come to find out that he is uneducated because he has been neglected and exploited from his birth, and that the intellectuals

and capitalists would now be rid of the results of their neglect by taking his vote away. It has taken him a long time to find this out, but he is seeing it now with a clarity and a celerity concerning which there can be no mistake whatsoever.

Yes, this would be as good a conclusion as any. You will remember, it occurs on the pedestals of Pompeii: “Cave Canem—Beware the dog!”

IT is spring on the prairie! Never a need to look at the calendar; look to the earth, listen the sky. It may be we’ll be catching a troll, you and I, from the birds and from the flowers.

Spring has a baton of wizard green. He is the concert-master who halts the feathered migrants on their way from wintry skies. With a gentle stroke he loosens the wing of the homing wavey so that she rests on the air and waits to preen her feathers. Watch how he sends the keen-winged hawk loud whistling through the air like an upshot arrow! See the dip and dart of the martins; have an ear to the barking crows, and the clip of their wings. The crow is not really a thief—he is only an egotist.

You’d think to watch these black-birds step sedately across the ploughlands they were Daniels come to judgment. See the black-blue of their throats, and how they primp about to show their scarlet epaulettes. Roving bachelors every one, but hesitating—hesitating.

Lilt of meadow-thrush, honk of geese, call of prairie pullet, and hark you to the mellow gong of the robin. He wasn’t killed at all. It is very demurely spoken that the fly who saw him die was bonused by the lark. He is the uniformed scout of spring, this swashbuckling fellow, with his scarlet surcoat, and would make believe to be lordlier than his fellows.

Spring on the prairie, with soft grass for the early weanlings! Spring on the prairie, and the herbage quivers into flowers! Some day, a young-hearted boy who has been playing among the stars will come a-near and fill a book about the plains. It will be a large, large book—there is so much to write about.

Maybe he will see the prairie as sleepy and satisfied. Maybe he will notice the roll of the land that seems to be activity in immobility. Maybe it will be a parchment that God has unrolled to his reading. But, mind you, boy, to tell the homely things. How a man on the prairie is lonely for the boughs of trees and for the sound of falling waters; how he draws sap from the primal soil as the willows draw sap from slough mires, and that he is a

guiltless pagan, bowing to the moon and singing to the sun instead of Christ,
our Lord, who lives in the blue of the skies.

Permanent Peace.

WILL the League of Nations now being formed in Europe ensure a permanent peace? The question is uppermost in every mind. He is a dullard who does not think now.

Men who write books about the treaties of Europe say that in thirty centuries the balance of power has been put level eight thousand times, and that its average poise is for two years.

If a soldier dies, shall he live? Everyone knows the answer. Our soldiers can only live again when the permanent peace for which they died has been accomplished, otherwise we have betrayed them with a lie.

Whether this permanent peace shall come from more armament, or none at all, we cannot tell, in that the latter method is yet untried. That the establishment of an arbitral court, and of a world police, should, after eight thousand failures in treaties, be given a fair and proper test can hardly be gainsaid. It should be tested for a century or so. It seems a pity that the human race should have to go on being crucified on the same cross and in the same way forever. We ought, at least, to try some other shape of a cross.

Yes, we should reconsider our methods, for it is plainly evident that, in allowing each nation to be the plaintiff, judge and executioner in its own case, the result must be injustice, and a consequent violence to the conscience of men. Among the many evils of warfare, this is the greatest.

It is not reasonable to expect that the litigants, being interested parties, can pass judgment upon their own cause. Indeed, they make no attempt to judge it on merits. It is determined by the greatest destruction of life and wealth. This is why we sometimes tell the truth with inadvertence and speak of the result as "the fortune of war," meaning thereby that a force which is sightless conquers.

Only this we can say about the master-men in the League of Nations—they seem to have grasped the inutility of the old methods as no master-men have ever done before.

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Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Question of Who Shall Vote* by Emily Murphy]