



# WOMAN SUFFRAGE

*George Sutherland*

**I**T IS NO PART OF MY PURPOSE to enter upon an argumentative discussion of Woman Suffrage: first, because I am admonished that the speeches here this afternoon are to be brief, and of course nobody has any right to expect a member of the United States Senate to make a brief argument about anything; and second, because the fallacy of the reasons which have heretofore been urged against the right of women to vote has been conclusively exposed by a light far stronger and more illuminating than any argument of min[e] could possibly be, and that is by the light of practical experience. Twelve states in the Union have actually tried out the experiment of Woman Suffrage,— some of them for a great many years,— and like the Lord, Who looked upon His handiwork at the completion of the Creation, each and all of them have pronounced it good. Woman Suffrage, therefore, has ceased to be a theory to be accepted or rejected according to the impression which the predictions and speculations of its friends and its enemies may make upon our minds, and has become a fact which, like any other fact, is to be judged and approved or disapproved according to the results which it has brought about.

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*Advance Copy of Speech of Senator George Sutherland of Utah, at the Woman Suffrage Meeting, Belasco Theatre, Sunday, December 12th, 1915 (George Sutherland Papers, Library of Congress).*

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When I was a boy I remember hearing a story told at the expense of Louis Agassiz. I do not vouch for its truth. I do not know whether it is true or not, but I give you the story as it was given to me. Professor Agassiz, as we all know, was a very great biologist — particularly learned in the science of zoology. He knew more about fish than the fish knew about themselves, and so when he declared with great positiveness that the trout of a certain species could not develop beyond a weight of two pounds, everybody unhesitatingly accepted the statement as true, and even the fish of this particular family were so impressed with his authority that they apparently restricted their growth within the limits which he had fixed. But one day a friend sent the Professor a trout of the particular species which tipped the scales at three pounds. Professor Agassiz in acknowledging the gift wrote his friend “The theory of a lifetime has been knocked into a cocked hat by a dead fish”. And so it has been with numerous other theories in this world. Advanced by learned and positive people they have passed current as the truth until they have been broken into fragments by coming into collision with the unyielding adamant of fact.

And so it is with the theory that the adoption of Woman Suffrage would bring about all sorts of terrible evils,— which has been “knocked into a cocked hat” by coming into collision with the fact that in none of the twelve states where woman suffrage is effective have any of these evils materialized. In Utah and Wyoming and Colorado and Idaho, where I am particularly well acquainted with conditions, the women have voted for a score of years and more, and they have exasperatingly persisted in retaining their womanly charm and in remaining good wives and mothers and home loving women. In spite of pessimistic predictions they have not developed unpleasant unfeminine traits; they have not become wandering political busy-bodies; and the children and the male head of the household continue to get three meals a day as elsewhere. To my own mind the right of women to vote is as obvious as my own right. When we have established the righteousness of the case for a Democracy; when we have proven the case for universal manhood suffrage we have made clear the case for womanhood suffrage as well.

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Women on the average are as intelligent as men, as patriotic as men, as anxious for good government as men; they are affected by good or bad laws the same as men, and to deprive them of the right to participate in the government is to make an arbitrary division of the citizenship of the country upon the sole ground that one class is made up of men, and should therefore rule, and the other class is made up of women, who should, therefore, be ruled. To say, and to prove if it were capable of proof, that such a division will not materially affect the government is not enough. I suppose if we were to provide arbitrarily that all male citizens except those who were blessed with red hair should possess the franchise that things would go on pretty much as usual, but I can imagine that the disfranchised contingent would very speedily and very emphatically register their dissent from the program. If we were to draw a line north and south through the state of Pennsylvania and provide that citizens east of the line should vote and those west of the line should not, we would have a condition to my mind not less arbitrary than is presented by the line which has been drawn separating the voters and non-voters only because of a difference in sex.

My own observation is that instead of women being injured by having the right to vote they have been benefited. What logic is there i[n] saying that the right and responsibility of participating in the government has elevated men and the same thing would degrade women? The effect of having the vote would naturally and necessarily induce the average woman to fit herself to properly discharge the duty. It must result, and it does result, in a great spiritual and intellectual awakening. Surely a woman who can gather her young sons about her knee and intelligently put into their plastic minds the lessons of good government, which as a participant in government she would more definitely understand, is a better mother than one who remains in ignorance for the lack of a practical incentive to learn.

And so I am a believer in the fundamental right of women to vote, not as a matter of theory, or speculation, but as a matter of earnest conviction the result of years of practical observation. I think the day when this right will be accorded to all the women of the United States is very near. The wall of opposition is being un-

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dermined at every point, and one of these days, all at once, it will come tumbling down, never to be lifted again.

It gave me peculiar pleasure the other day to introduce in the Senate the so-called Anthony Amendment. I should not be surprised to see it adopted in the Senate by the necessary two-thirds vote, for even in that conservative body the cause of equal suffrage is gradually but surely gaining ground. It has been said that the men of the West would if they had the power get rid of Woman Suffrage, but inasmuch as half of the voters are women, our hands are tied. Of course nothing could be further from the truth. In the Western states – in my own state – a proposition to deprive the women of the right to vote would be resented quite as strongly as a proposition to deprive men of the same right. Here is a little piece of history not generally known. Utah adopted Woman Suffrage while it was a territory in 1870, one year after Wyoming had acted. The law was in operation for seventeen years. In 1887 the Congress of the United States, which possesses plenary power in the territories, annulled the law and provided that no woman should be permitted to vote in that territory. This condition prevailed for nine years, but in 1896 the territory came into the Union as a sovereign state with a constitution into which the men of the state had written the provision restoring to the women the right of suffrage. If there had been any foundation for the claims of the opponents of Woman Suffrage surely seventeen years experience would have developed it and with a full opportunity to again act upon the matter as an original proposition Woman Suffrage would certainly not have been restored.

But it is still insisted that in some mysterious way the possession of the right to vote will take from woman the charm of her femininity – will destroy the “clinging vine” tendency which seems to mean so much to the fervid imagination of youth, but which yields in later years to the more prosaic demand of maturity for something a little more utilitarian. The fear is voiced that sex antagonism will be developed. Of course nothing of the kind in the nature of things could possibly happen. Let us exercise our common sense. For anybody to say that Woman Suffrage or any other successful propaganda, wise or unwise, righteous or unrighteous, could bring about any wide or

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lasting condition of sex antagonism is simply to talk drivelling nonsense. In the beginning God created us man and woman – made us so necessary to one another – so imperiously complementary of one another – wove our mutual dependence so deeply and so firmly into the warp and woof of our very existence that we not only would not if we could, but we could not if we would, separate the thousand strong, yet tender threads by which our common destinies are interlaced and bound together for weal or woe for all time to come. Oh no, my friends, we may confidently possess our souls in peace. The possession of the right to vote will not change in any disastrous way woman’s fundamental nature; but it will deepen her sense of responsibility, give her a more intelligent appreciation of her country’s needs and broaden her opportunity to “do her bit” for the common good.

