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WHEN WOMEN GOT THE VOTE IN NEW ZEALAND

Fifty Years Ago This Month

WOMEN in various parts of New Zealand regard this as a very important month. Why? Not merely because it is Election month, but because 50 years ago, on September 19, the Earl of Glasgow affixed his signature to a Bill giving women the right to vote for members of the New Zealand House of Representatives. But has this really been important either for New Zealand or for women? Would there have been any difference in legislation if politicians had not had half an eye cocked at the feminine half of their electors? These are not questions which can be satisfactorily answered, or indeed answered at all, but *The Listener* has asked questions on Women's Franchise of three women; one a woman who remembers the passing of the Franchise Bill of 1893, another a woman who played some part as a suffragette in England in the years before the last war, and a third a woman voter of today.

Looking Back to 1893

In an interview with Miss Mary Richmond, of Wellington, *"The Listener"* tried to learn the attitude of an intelligent and politically-minded woman in 1893 towards women's franchise.

"To tell the truth," said Miss Richmond, who has recently celebrated her 90th birthday, but is still as alert mentally as ever she was. "I was not especially in favour of women having the vote at that time. Many of us liked the freedom of having no vote. Once we had the vote, we could not make love to both sides—that would have been improper. We liked to think that in the pre-franchise days we had influence without power."

At 8.12 p.m. this Friday, September 17, Station 2YA (replaced by 2YC if there is an Election address), is scheduled to present a special Jubilee programme entitled "Votes for Women."

"Do you think then," we asked, "that women would have got along as well without the vote?"

"No, I don't think so now. The franchise came comparatively easily in New Zealand just as so many other things, social security, for instance, have come without a violent fight. It was the intensity of the struggle in England that made me realise that women's franchise was a cause that needed support. I had previously thought only about women who were comfortably off and able to exercise the sort of influence that I admired. It was at a large gathering of suffragettes in England that Miss Eleanor Rathbone told a story which showed me clearly that women needed power to change laws. She described how a poor woman who had several children and a very cruel husband had consulted a lawyer as to proceedings against her husband. The lawyer was sympathetic but said, 'The first thing that you must do is to leave your husband's house. You cannot take proceedings against him while you are living with him.' 'But,' said the woman, 'I cannot leave the children with my husband. He might murder them. I cannot go away and take them with me, as I have no money.' 'Very sorry,' said the lawyer. 'In that case, I can do nothing.' In this instance, the husband, in a bout of violence, murdered his wife a little while later. Though this was an extreme example, it made me realise that women who were in a position to fight should do so to protect and gain rights and liberties for their less fortunate sisters."

We asked Miss Richmond whether she could remember much of the excitement over the passing of the Bill or the occasion when she first voted.

"I don't really remember much excitement. The most important prelude to the passing of the Bill was collecting votes for the petition to Parliament. It was the fairly wide support that the Bill had among our leading Liberal statesmen, and indeed men generally, that saved New Zealand the fight that women had in England."

Miss Richmond then recalled an incident that had happened to her in England. She had a ticket to go over the Houses of Parliament, and was surprised to find a large number of policemen outside. She was stopped before entering the House. "I have a ticket, why can't I go in?" she asked.

"It's them suffragettes making trouble," a policeman replied, "wanting votes for women."

"Well," said Miss Richmond, "I am a New Zealander, and I have had the vote for the last 14 years"

A Suffragette Remembers

An English suffragette who recently visited New Zealand described the English woman's "Fight for Freedom" in very vivid terms.

"It wasn't that we liked violence or that we wanted it, but women had been trying to get the vote for 40 years by peaceful and reasonable persuasion, and they just hadn't got anywhere. We didn't like attacking policemen, or breaking windows or behaving like hooligans, but we found that this was News. Hooliganism made people read about and think about women's franchise. A few peaceful meetings by a handful of educated university women didn't. We got so excited, too, that we didn't mind much what we did. I remember being dropped on the marble floor of the lobby and I didn't feel a thing. I just got up and made a bolt for the door shouting 'Votes for Women.' We enjoyed holding up a debate in the House of Commons one day, too, when we chained and padlocked ourselves to the grille of the Ladies' Gallery. Most of us would have been ashamed to behave like that in cold blood, but we just thought of ourselves as martyrs in 'The Cause,' and we behaved as fanatically as martyrs."

"You would have been surprised if you could have gone to the suffragette celebration that was held this year to commemorate the getting of the vote, to see in the group of mild-looking old ladies the termagants who struck fear into the hearts of politicians at Westminster."

Woman Voter of To-day

"YOU ask me whether I think it is of importance that women got the vote in 1893," said a woman voter of to-day. "Of course I do, and so would any thinking woman. It isn't the vote in itself that is important nor any specific piece of legislation that has been passed since: it is just that until women are recognised as having the same rights and citizenship as men, women will shelve their responsibilities to the community."

"And," she added, "both in New Zealand and in England there is still quite a long way to go before women have equal rights with men. The executive committee of the golden jubilee of Women's Franchise in New Zealand have a programme of rights for which women still have to press, some political and some economic. We still have to convert public opinion to acknowledge the right of women to have the same pay as men if they do equal work, and we still have to press for family allowances."