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Women and Politics

A QUESTION MARK discussion will be heard shortly from YA stations on whether women have made "the best use" of the vote. What will be said on the subject, we do not know; but there will be more to say than can be pressed into a half-hour's exchange of opinions. This is one of those deceptively simple topics which lead us further than we had expected to go. So much depends, as the late Dr. Joad would have said, on what is meant by "the best use." If it means to exercise the right to vote, women in New Zealand have done equally as well as men. Voting figures at general elections are usually high, and there is nothing to show that the defaulters are mainly women.

The intention, then, may be to discover whether the vote has been used intelligently. It would be impossible to answer the question if it were asked about men. Some persons of both sexes are suggestible; they can be influenced easily by propaganda, and are targets for the more emotional statements thrown out in election campaigns. But a great many other people, perhaps the majority, have made up their minds long before polling day. The so-called "floating vote" probably changes its direction earlier than is supposed, and even if it floats belatedly there is no evidence that the waverers are women. If we cannot decide whether men use the vote intelligently (and how can we, without research into motives far beyond the reach of academic inquiry?) we must be equally remote from a safe judgment about their wives and daughters. It is sometimes said that most wives and husbands have the same political convictions. Perhaps they have, though we cannot know what independent thinking may take place in the secrecy of the booth. But the statement is put forward as an argument against the value of the female vote. If the two partners in a marriage are voting together, what has been gained? The underlying and strange assumption is that women

are not using their vote properly unless it becomes recognisably a woman's vote, somehow distinct from a man's. It should have resulted, critics say, in the election of more women to Parliament, in a stronger influence on policies, in a more noticeable attention to women's interests.

The number of feminists in the community is probably very small, so that few voters are likely to send a candidate to Parliament simply because she is a woman. Further, the candidates are selected by their parties; and women, like men, find they are voting for a policy and not for an individual. Yet in the shaping of policy the woman's vote has been influential. In the 60 years since suffrage became universal, New Zealand has moved far and fast in "family" legislation. Social Security might have come in the end if only men were voting, but we may doubt if it would have come so quickly or completely. Moreover, if husbands and wives go together in politics—a union to be wished for if family life is to remain relatively peaceful—there are issues separated from party feeling on which women are plainly able to follow their own convictions. The referendum on "six o'clock closing" was one example; and if reformers say that on this occasion the women did not make the best use of their vote, the answer must be that they had to decide between two bald alternatives, and chose what seemed to be the safer. It is, however, a mistake to look too closely for results. The highest value of the vote has been intangible, and should be looked for in the electorate as a whole. A woman who is free to vote is sharing with her husband a responsibility related to the family's welfare and future. Her opinions may sometimes be badly formed, but so are men's; and the remedy is in the gradual lifting of educational standards. Meanwhile a mother with a vote is more likely to guide her children towards citizenship than is a mother whose opinions can never reach the ballot box.



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