

FROM: EDITH HOW-MARTYN, M.Sc.  
PRESIDENT OF SUFFRAGETTE FELLOWSHIP  
FRIEND OF WOMEN'S SERVICE LIBRARY

AL/1736

C/O. MRS. E. PALMER  
30 QUEEN'S AVENUE  
LONDON, N.10

PRESENT ADDRESS:

4 BARNCLEUTH SQ.  
ELIZABETH BAY  
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Dear Mrs. Alderman White,

20-25<sup>th</sup> June 1949

Certainly I have an inclination to answer your interesting and delightful letter and if it seems rather delayed it was because I wanted to receive the papers you said you were sending me. However they have not yet arrived. Also my activities are rather limited as I am an asthma victim and am only kept going by my husband's great care and several injections of adrenaline a day. However I am cheerful enough and not at all an object of pity but it is a handicap.

As far as I know you are the only woman Alderman on the Council of a Capital City. Those you mention are members of Councils of smaller cities and towns. Mrs. Fowler who was Mayor of Newtown is now a member of the State Parliament as is also Mrs. Quirk. Let us hope your success will inspire suitable women to come forward and Parties to endorse them.

The reasons you give for standing for the Council are the best possible and a woman who went on the Council with the idea of showing the men how things should be done would only show how unfit she was for the position. So please do not allow such foolish notions to disturb you but concentrate on your own idea "to play a part in conjunction with men in the community life of the city"

It will be a pleasure to me if anything I can tell you about my experiences as the first woman on the Middlesex County Council would in any way give you any encouragement.

England being a Unitary form of government while Australia is a Federal government makes comparison somewhat difficult and unless care is taken also misleading. Please forgive me if I am telling you what you already know.

The Parliament at Westminster is the only Legislative body in Britain, the Councils are created by Parliament, their functions are fixed by it and in most cases <sup>it</sup> audits their accounts. Every action taken by the Councils whether County, Borough or Rural must be authorised by the Acts of Parliament which deal with them. The whole country is divided into County and County Borough Councils and these do not overlap. The County Councils are divided into Borough Urban and Rural District Councils.

Elections are held every three years when Councillors are elected by universal franchise. At the first meeting of the Council the Councillors elect Aldermen not exceeding one third of the number of Councillors and the Alderman hold office for six years and are eligible for re-election.

Voting is not compulsory and little interest is taken in the elections.

Like you I felt the responsibility of my position as the first woman Councillor and I made a special effort to take my position seriously and to do the work as well as I could. As I was a member of 25 committees and subcommittees this gave me a full time job. I always read through the agenda and any reports which were to be considered in time to make inquiries on any points on which I needed further information. This practice also made the meetings much more interesting.

The chief committees were Health, Education, Mental Hospitals, A Holiday Home for necessitous Middlesex children, Finance, Maternity, Midwives and Child Welfare and Public Control.

As far as I could I visited the Institutions for which the Council was responsible but I must limit myself to one illustration of these adventures. Among the duties of the Public Control Cee. was to see that the people of Middlesex had pure milk, butter and other foods also that the scales used in the shops were correct. I asked the County Analyst if I might visit the Laboratory. He readily agreed. When I arrived he said "Welcome for though I have been working for the County for very many years you are the first member of the Council to visit the Laboratory to see what is being done &

Also I formulated a few rules for myself :-  
Not to expect any special consideration as a woman.

To emphasise that I was a councillor like themselves and not a separate kind of member because I was a woman.

To speak only when I had something to say and then to be as brief and to the point as the subject permitted.

When my resolutions were defeated to accept the result with good temper and when they were carried not to be unduly elated.

To avoid becoming specially friendly with any of my 80 men colleagues but treat all alike and however heated the debate not to continue it outside the Council Chamber.

To advocate and defend equality for women whenever occasion offered. But not to make myself a nuisance about it.

At the end of three years my husband's health made it undesirable that I should stand for re-election which rather troubled me until I was assured that two women were standing with very good chances of election. Both were elected and served for many years. At the following election the number increased to five and at the last election the number of successful women candidates was about twenty.

So I have had the pleasant satisfaction of knowing that my pioneer effort has been followed up, and the Council has never been without women members since.

There were many amusing incidents. When I took my seat a man in the public gallery said to his companion, "there she is the window breaker" a friend of mine sitting near said to them "She is breaking more than windows to-day". (For your information I did not break windows in the suffrage campaign as I belonged to a society which had a different policy. I certainly went to prison and was sentenced to two months in the second division for refusing to go away from the entrance to the House of Commons when told to do so by a policeman)

Before I went on the Council there was a movement among some of the male staff to try to get rid of the female staff. I was told some time later by one of the top officials that soon after I was on the Council he went to the group and said "It is no use boys there is a Portia on the Council and she will never let you do it. I certainly should have done my best to prevent such an injustice.

While on the Council I learned a great deal e.g. that it was easy to work with men when one does not expect any special privileges. Members are unpaid though since my time Parliament allows travelling expenses to be paid. I respected the men from many walks of life who by sacrificing much of their leisure managed to combine Council work with their business or profession.

The punctuality of meetings was wonderful. In my three years I never knew a meeting to start a minute late. Indeed as the Middlesex Guildhall where we met was in Parliament Square we could hear Big Ben and it was amusing to be sitting waiting for the first stroke of the clock for the Chairman to open the meeting. Also I learned a great deal about chairmanship for we had some remarkably good chairmen among the members.

I do hope I have not bored you and if you have any questions you would like to ask me I will do my best to answer them.

If my health permitted I would come to Brisbane to enjoy a chat with you and to see you sitting among the Alderman.

I do hope the papers you were sending have not got lost on the way.

Wishing you a very enjoyable and successful term  
of office

Yours very truly  
Edith Howdnartyn.