

# A NEW FORM OF SUFFRAGE PROPAGANDA.

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## THE LIVERPOOL ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN CITIZENS.

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Let me first describe the procedure of the Association of Women Citizens and then indicate the ideas which have led the Liverpool Society for Women's Suffrage to set it on foot.

The first step was to call a meeting of members of the Suffrage Society, to resolve to form an Association of Women Citizens, and to elect a small Provisional Committee, care being taken to include in this Committee women who were in sympathy with each of the three political parties.

The objects of the Association were defined as follows:—

- 1.—To foster the sense of Citizenship in Women.
- 2.—To encourage Self-education in Civic and Political Questions.
- 3.—To secure the return of Women Members of the City Council and Boards of Guardians.
- 4.—To secure, by law-abiding methods, the Parliamentary Enfranchisement of Women.

It was decided that the annual subscription should be sixpence, and that the organization of the Association should be by Wards, each being taken in succession and thoroughly canvassed.

The Association has already been set on foot in three Wards. The procedure, which it is intended to repeat at the rate of at least one Ward per month until the whole city has been covered, is as follows:—

- 1.—A Ward having been selected, a date about a month ahead is fixed for an Inaugural Meeting, at which the objects of the Association are to be explained and Members enrolled. A Chairman and two or three speakers are secured, and a Hall or Schoolroom in a central situation in the Ward is engaged.

- 2.—Cards of invitation for the Meeting are printed in two colours, one to be used for women voters and one for wives of voters. The invitation is issued in the names of the members of the Provisional Committee, and the Cards are addressed on the back, the names being taken from the register of voters. As the register does not, of course, show whether a

male voter is married or not, we have to chance this, the card intended for the residence of William Smith being addressed to Mrs. Smith.

3.—The streets of the Ward having been parcelled out among the available workers, the cards are delivered in person, the canvasser explaining briefly to the lady of the house the objects of the Association.

4.—On the appointed day the meeting is held. Three or four short, simple speeches are followed by questions and sometimes by an impromptu discussion on some of the practical needs of the Ward. Then tea is handed round, while the audience discuss among themselves the new ideas that have just been suggested to their minds. Lastly, members are enrolled and subscriptions collected.

Meanwhile an attractive programme of monthly meetings for the enrolled members of the Association has been drawn up. These Meetings are held for the present at the Suffrage Office, and are open to all members irrespective of the Ward from which they come. They are held alternately in the afternoon and evening, tea being served at the afternoon meetings. Our first Provisional Programme is as follows:—June: Business Meeting. July: Account of the Women's Suffrage Pilgrimage to London. September: "The Work of the City Council for Public Health." October: Business Meeting—The Municipal Elections. November: "The Children of the City." December: "The Treatment of widows and children under the Poor-law in Liverpool." January: "The work of women on Boards of Guardians."

It will be noted that the subjects for discussion are distributed so as to bring the various objects of the Association into prominence one by one. It is assumed, however, that during the period immediately preceding the November elections, the minds of members will naturally be occupied with Municipal issues, while in the period before the elections of Guardians in April, they will as naturally turn to Poor-law problems. At each meeting, ample time is allowed for general business, which can include the discussion of any practical reform in civic matters desired by members, the passing of resolutions on civic questions or on Women's Suffrage, the signing of Friends of Women's Suffrage cards, the sale of the "Common Cause," etc. It is the duty of the Honorary Secretary of each Ward to take round in person reminders of the next Monthly Meeting. Thus she is brought into necessary personal touch with her members once a month, and has plenty of opportunity for distributing leaflets and collecting or imparting information concerning any of the objects of the Association.

Such is the *modus operandi* of the new organization. So far, it has amply justified the hopes of its promoters. It is very obvious that it is succeeding, as we expected it would, in kindling the interest of large numbers of women who have hitherto remained cold to the appeals of purely Suffragist propaganda.

As every experienced worker knows, the chief difficulty which we have to overcome is not Anti-Suffragism, but Apathy, and the reason why so many women are apathetic on the subject of the Suffrage is that they have never really awakened to a sense of citizenship, and therefore the ideas of which the vote is the symbol mean little to them. Adult persons have much in common with children and this among other things: that their minds proceed naturally from the concrete to the abstract, from the narrower human relations to the wider. A woman whose interests have hitherto been limited to her home and her neighbours finds it difficult to extend them all at once to the wide issues of national politics. The questions of Local Government which touch her home and her neighbours in ways she can see and understand form the natural stepping-stones. Problems of administration interest her first; problems of legislation come later. No impatient Suffragist need fear that sooner or later, in nine cases out of ten, she will make the transition, and from desiring to influence for good the administration of her city or parish will come to desire the means of influencing the legislation which limits and marks out the lines upon which that administration shall be carried on.

It is encouraging to find how quickly the members of the new Association are forming just the connections of ideas and drawing the conclusions that we hoped they would draw. Thus, after the Inaugural Meeting in one Ward, a clergyman's wife wrote:—"Since your Meeting this afternoon, Women's Suffrage is to me no longer a vague term connected mentally with hunger strikes, etc. I feel it means that there are good, able women who spend themselves in endeavouring to right wrongs that are troubling the lives of other women."

It will be seen that the primary object of the Association is educational and propagandist. But it has another aim to which its promoters attach no less importance. *For political purposes, it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of having in all our towns a strong ward organization of suffragist women, mostly Municipal voters and wives of voters and trained in working together politically, but on non-party lines.* As a means of bringing pressure to bear on party wirepullers and of disseminating influence and distributing literature among the mass of the electorate, such an organization would be invaluable. *In case of a Referendum being forced upon us, as will most probably happen within a few years of the next return of the Conservative party to Parliament, it will be simply indispensable.* At least I can personally think of no other machinery by which it would be possible for the National Union to push its tentacles simultaneously into every working-class house in Great Britain. Certainly the Suffrage Societies as at present constituted could not do it, though no doubt it is the Suffrage Societies which will have in most instances to supply the brains which will direct the movements of the new Association.

A few purists have objected to the formation by a Suffrage Society of a body which is to work for other objects as well as Suffrage. The idea of the Association, these critics say, is excellent, but why not let it be started independently of the L.W.S.S., and confine itself to its first three objects? This criticism misses the whole meaning of the Association, which is based on the principle of the association of ideas as well as of individuals. Surely the best kind of Suffragist propaganda is that which converts most people to the necessity of the Suffrage. If under some circumstances that end can be best accomplished by treating the Parliamentary vote, not as an isolated desideratum, but as that which it really is a part of a general scheme for the improvement of the status of women, what more is there to say? Every one recognizes the importance of preventing the National Union, or any Society of it, from identifying itself with either side of any controversial issue. But the objects of the Women Citizens' Association are not controversial, and there is probably not a Suffragist in the world who does not approve of every one of them. The National Union is treading on much more delicate ground when it undertakes, as it has done in the present Autumn Campaign, to organize, or promote the organization, of instruction, covering nearly the whole field of social reform as it affects women and children, and touching on an infinite number of more or less controversial questions. It has taken this step because experience has shown that it is impossible for speakers to present to the public the whole case for Women's Suffrage, unless they are able to show the bearing of Women's Suffrage upon the various practical issues which specially interest women.

Another possible objection may be answered by pointing out that this new scheme is in no sense a rival to the forms of Suffrage propaganda which are already in the field, but should on the contrary give a stimulus to them. The enrolling of Friends of Women's Suffrage, the circulation of the "Common Cause," the organization of classes and social study circles on the subjects of the Autumn Campaign all fall naturally into place as part of the activities of the newly enrolled recruits and of their Ward Secretaries. But it is safe to say that only a very small percentage of these would have responded if approached for any one of these objects by itself.

A good deal of Suffrage work in the past has been ineffective because it has been undertaken without enough previous consideration of the psychological conditions of the human material with which it had to deal. Experience is teaching us how to avoid this error.

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