IDA M. TARBELL

Is Woman’s Suffrage a Failure?

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Ida M. Tarbell (1857–1944) was one of the most famous muckraking journalists, male or female, of the early twentieth century, known especially for her exposé of the Standard Oil Company published in McClure’s magazine in 1902. She was also one of the most prominent women to speak out in opposition to women’s suffrage. In some ways her close association with the antisuffrage cause made her an unlikely choice for a commission from Good Housekeeping to reflect on the impact of the Nineteenth Amendment as the 1924 election approached. Or maybe what was so unlikely was how positive Tarbell’s assessment was. Now that women had the vote, she concluded, it was their duty to use it widely. And from the evidence she saw while crisscrossing the country, women were doing precisely that. Rather than simply declare women’s suffrage a success or a failure, she took the long view, arguing that political experiments should be judged “not by decades, but rather by centuries.”

One of several dismal refrains, more or less popular at the moment, celebrates the failure of woman’s suffrage. Four years and the world is no better—possibly even worse. There is often a note of real despair in the chorus, for those who chant it staked large hopes of speedy social betterment on the giving of suffrage to women, and these hopes are unfulfilled. Their disappointment is as deep as their expectations were high.

The lament is more serious in its effects than many realize. It is probably the strongest of present deterrents to women’s voting—lethargy aside. It chills the ardor of that group which acts vigorously only when stimulated by a new panacea; it gives a welcome excuse to women who are so busy with their personal affairs that they find it difficult to inform themselves about issues and candidates—“Why should I vote? A man who knows says suffrage is a failure.” It is used, too, by not a few women who opposed suffrage and who still are glad to find proofs that they were right.

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Now anything that hinders the general exercise of the franchise by women deserves attention. The vote is an obligation—a duty the state asks of us. To plead that we are “not interested,” “did not believe in suffrage,” are “too busy,” is skulking. It is our business to vote as wisely and unselfishly as we are able—if only to counteract the mass of feminine unintelligence and selfishness certain to be mobilized by the always active forces of self-interest.

But has the conclusion that woman’s suffrage is a failure any sounder base than the early hope that it would cure all our ills? That certainly was delusive. “The world do move,” but it “do move” with exceeding deliberation and always according to laws. Votes never yet have stirred its pace to one faster than the laws laid down, and the claim that in woman’s hand they would was always a cheat; but it is equally a cheat to declare that because woman’s suffrage has not proved itself in four years the miracle-worker certain of its advocates fooled themselves into thinking it would be, it is therefore a flat failure. Both are jumped-at conclusions, ignoring the most important element in human enterprises—time—something that hasty-wits delight in scorning. “Do this and we will fly” they tell us. We do it and crash to the ground. Therefore all is lost. But is it? On the ground we can do what wisdom tells us we are, after all, condemned to do—crawl.

But is woman’s suffrage even crawling? We find those who contend it is not—“Nothing has happened.” And they despair—or exult—according to temperament or their historic attitude toward suffrage. Are they right? Has nothing happened? As one who has ever been lukewarm toward suffrage and who regarded the argument that quick and drastic remedial results were sure to come from it as mischievous and dishonest, I want to say that I believe something has happened—something rather more in the time than I at least thought probable—and that something is spreading. I base this judgment entirely on observation of things heard and seen.

Early in the present year I spent upwards of three months zig-zagging from Massachusetts to Texas, across twelve or fifteen states, and everywhere I halted, listening to more or less querulous discussion by women of what women are doing in
the realm of public affairs. My eyes as well as my ears were open on this journey looking over exhibits the women were showing of their four years’ experience with the ballot.

How about it? What conclusions can one draw from such a set of observations, bolstered as they are by similar experiences running back for several consecutive years? Is woman’s interest in public matters more general and natural than before suffrage? Is she studying political measures more seriously? Has her faith in suffrage held out? Have the “antis” undergone a change of mind? What actual betterment of local affairs is due to woman’s initiative and activity? What fresh vigor and illumination has she brought into state and national affairs?

Both my observations and my conclusions on these points are at variance with those of some of our most thoughtful women, women always to be listened to. There is George Madden Martin, who recently set down in print, after fourteen months journeying about the country, that she had made up her mind that American women in general lacked interest in public affairs, and what they had was rather in issues than in principles. I would not be justified in such a conclusion from what I heard and saw in the three months of which I am talking here, for in that time I was not in a single town in which I did not have ample evidence of lively concern in public questions. Everywhere the women I met as individuals and as groups—many of them formerly anti-suffragist—invariably soon turned the conversation to law enforcement, the oil scandal, the regulation of industry, the League of Nations, Coolidge, Smith, McAdoo, and there was always more or less appeal to principle—quite as much as in a similar group of men—and less acrimony—which surprised me.

Of course there have always been in every community women who followed political questions eagerly and who knew what they were talking about. Are there more of these now? That is the point. I think so. This shows in the immediateness with which political questions come up and in the attention all in a group give even if they can not contribute to the talk. It concerns them. They may be bored by the fact, but they feel the pull and obligation.

Law enforcement seemed to exercise the women I talked with more than any other matter. They are everywhere concerned about the boys and girls of college age whom they
believe to be drinking as they never did before in our time—if at any time. I failed to find a woman—though I did more than one man—who was willing to run the danger of despoiling at least a slice of the rising generation by defying the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act on the ground that they violate personal liberty. Every woman with whom I talked on the matter was rigidly of Lincoln’s mind:

“Bad laws if they exist should be repealed as soon as possible. Still, while they continue in force, for the sake of example, they should be religiously observed. Otherwise, you are bound sooner or later to come to mob rule.”

I will not say that there are no women who dispute this view—I know that there are—only that in these three months I did not meet one of them.

After law enforcement the greatest number seemed to be concerned over the Tea Pot Dome affair, obviously because of its bearing on their party candidates. Women, as a rule, are very personal in their partisanship, and it hurts them to have those who represent them splashed as badly as many have been in this scandal. Nevertheless, while I frequently met a man who would say: “Why fuss? These leases you scold about will make money for the Government”—which is still to be proved—women invariably countered with, “That’s not the question.” And it is something to be glad of that many see that it is a question of the integrity of officials and the upholding of honorable and fair dealing.

One heartening exhibit, from my point of view, was the almost universal conviction that the legislation which has been built up in the last twenty years or so for guarding women and children in industry must not be endangered by the proposed blanket equal rights amendment to the Constitution. That amendment sounds well, and I had been under the impression that, reactionary as it is bound to be in its effects on industry, it would catch the ear and the support of large numbers of women. I was amazed by finding practically no backing for it, although I frequently heard it discussed. The truth is that serious women everywhere are deeply interested and fairly well informed on industrial conditions and are thoroughly committed to the idea of improving them and particularly of protecting women and children.
Now, certainly all of this argues interest of a healthy kind. It is not proof that one hundred percent or even fifty percent of our women think on these things, but it is proof that many are of a kind and in a position to spread their views, and in most places they are mighty busy doing that.

And they are taking to office holding. “Meet Mrs. A.—member of our State Legislature”—“Meet Miss B.—candidate for Congress.”

For one born and reared as this writer was in hide-bound Pennsylvania, it is startling to find eight women in the legislature of that state. Moreover, to learn from their men fellow-members of the natural way they take their place and do their work. Alice Bentley, a representative from the northwestern corner of the state, seems to have particularly impressed herself. “Always feel at home with Alice,” a member of the legislature of the opposite party told me. “She’s educated, but that don’t make any difference—not a bit stuck up. And practical! You can’t fool her on graft, and she ain’t afraid of her own side any more than of ours”—which is about as fine a tribute, politically speaking, as a woman could ask for or a constituency desire.

The lure of office is strengthening, spreading. We shall wake up one of these days to find that there is no legislative or executive department in state or nation that has not one or more women in it. They come, as they ought to, naturally, like men, through the automatic working of the machinery opened to them—not because they are women, but because they are human beings, following the instincts and opportunities of human beings. As a rule they settle down to business at once, working steadily and well. This is particularly true in clerical offices. In the last three years I have spent many hours in court houses in different states, and I can bear testimony, based on experience, to the superiority of women over men as guardians of public records. Too often the men about court houses are cheap politicians. They neglect their work, are often disorderly, and usually much more interested in gossip than in service. Not so, women. They are diligent, neat, exact. They respect their records, take pride in knowing them and in guarding them—and they banish the spittoon!

One of the anomalies of this situation is that there are women who do not take this result as a matter of course! Not a few
old-style professional suffrage agitators seem actually to resent women coming noiselessly into public office and going about their business as other public servants do and not as women politicians vindicating their sex!

At a recent state convention of one of the great parties this attitude showed itself in a bitter attack on a woman for years an active worker for suffrage, who was filling a minor office in the state and filling it well. Her devotion to business, her determination to prove women fit for office by being herself fit, angered the women politicians. They insisted that she was betraying her sex because she would not use her office for feminine political purposes—a variation of the spoils system women were to uproot!

THE WOMAN REPRESENTATIVE

The clash with those who have not yet been able to lay aside the old struggle, now won, and accept their privileges and responsibilities in a logical and practical fashion, has led to an effort to define the model woman representative. What should she be? The few experiences with congresswomen to date have made dents, and one frequently hears Jeannette Rankin’s inexperience, emotionalism, and spirit of innovation contrasted with Alice Robertson’s experience, cool-headedness, and conservatism—generally to Miss Rankin’s advantage. She was more understandable and sympathetic to women generally, I gather; nevertheless there is a growing and sensible conclusion forming that women should not try to go into office from the top, that they should begin at the bottom in local affairs and grow into the service as in other professions, and as all our most useful men officials do.

But how high can they hope to rise? A group of college girls put the question to me, “If we go in for public life, can we expect ever to reach the presidency?” It was a poser. But, after all, isn’t the presidency the logic of what women have undertaken? It worked out so under the old régime—queens galore—and the public was as well off, sometimes better off, under them as under many men. A list of queens presents much ability, and no more craftiness, selfishness, cruelty, extravagance, unreason than men. Consider Catherine of Russia, Louise of Prussia, Maria Theresa of Austria, Elizabeth of England, Catherine di
Medici of France. And it was of Marie Antoinette that Mirabeau said she was the only man the king had about him. Down in Pennsylvania they are saying not exactly that, but a variation of it, about the Governor’s lady. “As good as any man next to Pinchot,” I heard a Democratic politician declare, “and away ahead of him as a politician!”—which is, I take it, close to the impression the onlooker is getting!

Training and experience ought to fit women in time for as sound statesmanship as the old régime did. Moreover, I am free to say that I know a half-dozen women in these United States that I believe would do better in the presidency than at least three or four incumbents since Lincoln, and nothing would be better for the country at this moment than to substitute this same half dozen for a half dozen senators I could name!

It is still too early to appraise the contributions of our women legislators, to say whether we shall get anything from them that we would not from men, to decide whether their methods will be more direct, frank, less devious and intriguing than those of men have proved. Are they going to see that regeneration does not lie in the making of many laws? Are they going to insist on loosening up the legal jam which holds up the free action of the country? Their value in legislative bodies is going to depend largely upon the common sense and straightforwardness with which they view the passing of new statutes.

ONE THING ACCOMPLISHED

I have had but one experience which showed that possibly we might expect something from them in this direction. This was in a Northwestern state where women have been holding office for a good many years. To a member of the assembly, a sensible, thoughtful, humorous person, I dared to put the question: “Have you and your colleague”—there were two of them at the moment in that body—“been able to do anything that men would not have done? That is, have you contributed something of your own?” She was quite honest in her reply: “We have done one thing that would not have been done, and I think only one. I had not been long in office before I was amazed to discover the faith men have in the making of many laws. Every man seemed to feel that his value as a legislator depended upon the number of bills that he introduced and put
through. Moreover, I found these bills were often carelessly
drawn—some of them defeated their own purpose—others
were already on the statute books, others contradicted some-
thing we were committed to. So my colleague and I made up
our minds that we would examine quietly every bill proposed,
and if we found good reason for objections, we would make
them—to the proposer. We found plenty of work, and it has
turned out that there are few men in the assembly today, who
when they have a bill to propose, do not first submit it to us, to
see if there is anything the matter with it. We really have done
a good deal of cleaning up in this way.”

And then she chuckled. “After all, you know, all that it
amounts to is that we are picking up after the men, just as
women have always done.”

But is not that the essence of what woman promised to do—
prevent men making many of the mistakes which she thought
they were making as legislators?

The most disappointing feature in a rapid survey of the field
such as that on which I am basing these comments, is that one
almost never comes on fresh, stirring thought, free and inde-
pendent actions, illumination from the women who have gone
into public life. Generally speaking, it is the same old thing—
activity in party organization, fine party loyalty, faith in politics,
and politics alone; and this is serious.

Men and women who supported suffrage ardently believed
and promised that a wave of regeneration would follow its com-
ing, that we would see vice in hiding, graft shamed out of court,
chicanery in office and in administration rebuked; but none of
these things seems to have happened. As a matter of fact, the
only case that I have come across where women have broken
openly with the old way of doing things, used their wits and
their power to overthrow a local institution they considered
bad, and have carried on for upwards of two years now, was in
a Western town where there was a particularly sordid and par-
tisan administration of town affairs. The women saw that they
were not getting what they wanted in sanitation, in schools, in
suppression of vice. They saw that as much of their money was
going to support the party machine as to support the town,
and they decided, regardless of party, on a commission form of
government. There were men to back them up, and when they
felt they were strong enough they went to the leaders, who met them with familiar enough counsel:

“Very fine, delighted that you are so interested in public affairs, that is as it should be; but you are, of course, inexperienced; you should know more about these things before you undertake anything so revolutionary as this. You do not see what we know so well, that the managerial form of government takes the personal touch out of the running of the town.”

The women intimated that one of their ideas had been that they would save money by abolishing this “personal touch.”

When they found that nothing was to be done with the political leaders on either side, they resolved to make it a woman’s affair, and to the amazement of both party machines they succeeded. For two years now they have been, they claim, getting what they were after—their money’s worth in increased order, cleanliness, and decency, as well as in improvement of schools.

Perhaps they do not realize that not the least of their achievement is pulling a brick from that tremendous foundation on which parties in this country build their power. Nowhere is partisanship stronger, more unenlightened, more sordid than in the machines which run our towns and cities. State and national politics have not the least justifiable relation to the streets of New York, the railways of Cleveland, the sanitation of Chicago, the regulation of vice everywhere. These are affairs personal to the municipality, and yet municipalities all over this country must see schools, streets, water, light, vice manipulated to strengthen Republican and Democratic party machinery.

THE SOCIAL MENACE

If there is a ray of hope in the little story above, it is only one ray in a great darkness. Practically everywhere, so far as my observation goes, it is as yet impossible to get the women of the towns to act outside of their parties, no matter how flagrant the abuse with which they are confronted. Not far from New York there is an historic town, delightful physically and socially, numbering among its women two or three former suffrage leaders of ability, cultivation, and experience in public affairs. The man who has been mayor of the town for several years is a member of the local aristocracy, an educated, cultivated gentleman. He belongs to the ruling state party and is an
aspirant for a higher office. He is also the hope of county and district leaders. They expect him to deliver his town, and he has always done it. One of the ways in which he has kept himself strong since the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment has been to close his eyes to bootlegging and drinking. The town has become a safe refuge for bootleggers and a rendezvous for drinking parties from the whole country round. Most tragic has been the effect upon the working classes, of whom there is a large settlement, colored and white.

All this finally aroused the serious people of the community to active revolt, and a few months ago a candidate ran in opposition to the mayor on a platform of law enforcement. He was overwhelmingly defeated—defeated by the women of the town, who put their social and political relationships higher than they did law enforcement. To have voted against the lawless mayor might have injured the political prospects of themselves and their husbands and sons; it might have disturbed social ambitions and relations. The mother of the mayor, a distinguished lady of social power, let it be known that she would never speak again to anybody who voted against her son. And this is the way we are being “saved” by women!

LEADERS ARE NEEDED

It is not only that there is an absence of any free action by women in local or national affairs, but there seems to be no stirring new cry coming from the numberless conventions and assemblies that are crowding one another so fast. We have a great body of professional women convention followers in this country; they rush from state to state, from East to West, from North to South, thousands of them, almost feverishly active, determined and serious; but we are yet to hear from any one of these gatherings any call that catches the imagination, wrings the heart, arouses to righteous indignation. They are busy—oh, yes! The conventions are great successes, oh, yes! They go home to tell everybody how fine the meeting was, how much they got out of it! But somehow they do not succeed in stirring those of us who stay at home. I have a suspicion that these busy ladies are deceiving themselves about the real value of their excessive activity. It is not by conventions that the resolutions they pass—and let us call them always good—are to be made
realities. If they are to amount to anything the great body of us who never or rarely go to conventions, hardly know that they are held, must seize them, carry them on. And if we are to do that it will be only because those who aspire to be our leaders shall put a glow in our eyes, arouse our intellects, stir our hearts to consecration—and so far they have not done anything of that kind.

It is one of the tragic features of the case that women have got their hands on political machinery and formulas when a good part of the world is realizing that they are not the fundamentals of salvation. There has been a notable loss of faith in recent years in politicians and their methods and ends, a growing sense they can not save the world. The Great War and the awful chaos it brought about has demonstrated the inadequacy of political devices. There has even come something like contempt for them, and you see the thoughtful and the masses—where the soundest instincts always are to be found—falling back on old things, on education, discipline, character, hard thinking, hard labor. There lies the regeneration of things; not in conferences, elections, resolutions, legislation. These latter are useful only as secondary tools and then only in proportion to the genuineness of the fundamentals to which men now turn.

But put the suffrage down as a secondary tool, it is still a powerful one—for evil as well as good. It takes time and experience to use it effectively—to use it so as to frustrate the harm the selfish plan always to do with it. Constant exercise of the voting power as intelligently and disinterestedly as we are able, with thoughtful study of the effects, the mistakes made, is a part of a woman’s business. The only real failure at present in woman’s suffrage is the failure to exercise it. To denounce it because we do not yet see anything particularly helpful or illuminating coming from its exercise is foolish and unjust.

One handles a new subject shyly and awkwardly. One does not know the vocabulary, etiquette, principles. Watch a grown man or woman tackling a new science, learning to drive a car, setting up a radio equipment; there is fumbling, error, confusion of meanings. The majority of women are probably still booth-shy, still a little awed by their responsibility, often a little afraid to talk politics because conscious that they are amateurs.

Perfectly true that we have increasing numbers that do not
suffer from the limitations of shyness, of humility—numbers who are glib, often to their own undoing in the hands of experienced politicians. But this is not the majority. The majority are not yet at home in the new harness. Moreover, can we expect anything else than that they should be slow in accepting the harness, learning how to wear it, absorbed, as the great majority of them are, with their daily occupations, domestic, economic, social?

No, the hasty-wits are wrong. It is too early to cry “Failure!” in this matter. All things considered, as much has been done as could be expected. Nature in a thousand ways calls to us that growth, even if unceasing, takes time. Men and women accept this for everything outside of themselves, and yet they are just as much under these laws of nature as the tree. It has always taken time to change a habit, to reform a settled attitude toward life, to grow a political mind. Political experiments must be judged not by decades, but rather by centuries. In fifty years from now we may be able to appraise woman’s suffrage fairly—we certainly can not now.