

WOMEN MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT.

(By Mrs Fawcett in "Daily News,"
October 23rd, 1918.)

A question will to-day be discussed in the House of Commons which is of supreme importance to the nation, and has for me personally a special interest, since it is closely connected with a cause with which I have for a great number of years been associated. That is the political equality of men and women. I look upon the question of the eligibility of women, not so much from the point of view of women's rights, but from the point of view of the rights of constituencies to have as wide a choice as possible of suitable persons to represent them in Parliament. While hoping I might live to see the day when women could not only elect but be elected, yet I confess I am surprised to find how rapidly public opinion has advanced on this subject, and is in Great Britain to-day not only resigned to, but actively in favour of, the admission of women to Parliament.

It is amazing how rapidly the support of women's claim to seats in Parliament has grown since the passing of the Representation of the People Act, and still more amazing to me how far this support is founded on the recognition of underlying principles of justice—the only sure foundation. I confess to some envy of the younger generation of women who are to find their claims met with a first query: "Is it just?" instead of the old query—of which veteran Suffragists like myself have grown so heartily sick—"Is it expedient for our party?" But even in this age of enlightenment there remains as the worst obstacle to any advance towards the emancipation of women, an attitude of mind which says: "Yes, I know that your claims are just and reasonable. Still I cannot get rid of the feeling that women ought not to be concerned with politics. After all, their interests are well safeguarded under the existing order."

WOMEN AND RECONSTRUCTION.

This argument of false sentiment can only be effectively countered by an argument of necessity; and here I feel that fifty years' close connection with the Women's Suffrage movement enables me to speak with some author-

ity. Fifty years' careful study of women's politics has convinced me that women's interests are not and never will be properly safeguarded under the existing order, not only because men are not sufficiently willing and interested—though that has sometimes proved the case!—but because they have not, and cannot have, the specialised knowledge which enables them to legislate satisfactorily on problems chiefly affecting women.

This lack of knowledge has proved serious in the past; it is vital to-day. We are on the threshold of a new era; and the reconstruction which the war has necessitated has for its work to set aright not only the dislocation caused by the war, but the faults of an unsatisfactory condition of things dating back hundreds of years. It is in this reconstruction that I feel woman's point of view must be fully represented, nor do I believe that this can be adequately done unless women are allowed to sit in Parliament.

WHAT WOMEN CAN DO.

Consider for a moment the situation with which a Reconstruction Parliament must deal. Industrial questions will primarily occupy its attention. The Government is pledged to restore trade union conditions; but the restoration of these conditions means the exclusion of women from the countless trades in which they have reached such proficiency during the war, and on the modification of these conditions depends the industrial future of women. Then the nationality laws will come up for revision; and the experience of the war has shown how important to women these may prove. Such panic regulations as D.O.R.A. 40D, which legalises a different moral standard for men and women, must be withdrawn; and surely women should have a voice here. There are many other questions, too, such as housing, the pros and cons of a Ministry of Health, etc., where women's experience will be directly useful, and cannot be really utilised through the medium of a House consisting of one sex only.

I believe that the political instincts of Englishmen recognise the soundness of the constitutional principle that those who elect should also be capable of election. Experience shows that where (in the case of women) this principle has been accepted and acted upon, the results have been satisfac-

tory, and have not been attended by any of the dire calamities which are apt to haunt the anti-suffrage mind. Women have sat as members of School Boards and as Poor Law Guardians and on other locally elected bodies in our own country for close upon fifty years, and have fully justified their position; and in other countries they have taken their places in national diets and parliaments, and have done to quote a leading statesman of the last generation, "much good and no harm whatever." Even in down-trodden Bohemia a Czech lady in 1912 was returned to the Diet; but the German Governor would not allow her to take her seat. Surely the British Parliament will not put itself on a level with this irresponsible autocrat.

WATER VERSUS BEER.

The liquor superstition that a man cannot do a hard day's work without booze has received another death-blow. Rev. H. C. Hill, a well-known Methodist minister of this State, answering a statement that "abstainers were no good for solid work," which was made by the strongest and toughest hay-pitcher in the district) challenged the man to a day's hay-pitching on the following day. This he declined, but accepted for the following Friday, ostensibly because he had been celebrating "Peace Day," and wanted to recover. A great deal of interest was evinced, and the conditions were that work was to be commenced at 6 a.m., continue all day, and pitch on loads, the parson to work on water, his opponent to have as much drink as he desired. The water-waggoner was in his place at the appointed time, but "the disciple of liberty" (?) did not put in an appearance. However, the defender of sobriety went ahead and pitched about twenty tons of hay, and could have pitched another ten or fifteen if his opponent had been there. Many persons, including the local constable and town clerk, inspected his hands, but not a blister did they find. The local Red Cross benefited to the extent of £1 5s as the result of the day's work by this valiant Christian, who is already famous for his leadership during a recent bush fire, with no stimulant excepting a lemon. Bravo!—"Patriot."