

WOMEN AND THE SINGLE TAX

By Dr. Constance Ellis

(Abridged from an Address reported in *PROGRESS*, Melbourne, September, 1914.)

Women's fight for the vote is an appeal for justice for one-half the human race—justice in that those obeying the laws and paying their share of the taxes should have a share in the making of the laws. Women ask for justice in the right to labour and to receive a fair wage for their labour—just treatment for and just rights to their children, and for themselves in all their humane relationships of person, property and divorce. In short, your true feminist is not fighting for the vote as a vote, but merely as a symbol and leading to the attainment of the ideal position of womanhood and through this the best considerations for the race.

But though we believe that through the vote much can be done, the method is yet to seek for the many—has the vote yet given to men what they hoped; nor will it to women, until that ultimate absolute justice is done which we who believe find in the Single Tax.

After outlining the advantages of taxing land values only, Dr. Ellis continued:—

There is much more to say on the results of taking the ground-rent for the community, but I want to go on to the more special points where it affects women.

The number of women of 18 and over in the Australian Commonwealth at the last census was 1,422,971. Of these, 792,871 are married and 488,191 unmarried, whilst there are 719,612 unmarried men over 18 years, so that there is not here in Australia that reason for women remaining unmarried that we find in older countries, viz., the excess of women over men. With the recent years the marriage-rate has gone up, showing that more prosperous times lead to more frequent marriages, though the age at marriage is somewhat higher now for women, giving a lessened fertility per marriage—also, as might be expected with the concentration in towns, the number of marriages in the urban area is much greater than in the country, so that women remaining in country districts have a less chance of marriage. The fact that since 1898 the marriage-rate has risen together with improved conditions shows how material welfare of the country influences this. Probably most young men and women if assured of a decent livelihood for themselves and their children would marry, and the age instead of going up with the present struggle for existence might reasonably fall slightly both for men and women, without physical harm to themselves or their offspring. I consider the marriage state the natural one for all women—with its consequent bearing and upbringing of healthy children. Whatever leads to increased marriages, with increase of population, provided there is equal opportunity for all, must be for good: population in our country is what we must look to for the development of its resources. At present the highest marriage-rate lies between the ages of 25 and 30 years—in previous period 20 to 25 years—so that the probable fertility of these marriages will be less.

While there has been a rise in the marriage-rate of recent years, the birth-rate has not gone up commensurately, showing that parents are restricting the size of the family. If we could be sure of a lowered cost of living, that £1 would buy a pound's worth of goods, and if opportunities for employment were practically unlimited, I believe that larger families would prevail than at present, when 1911 statistics show 5.46 children per family. The effect on infantile mortality of the improved conditions must be marked. The present death-rate in the first year of life in Australia is about 70 per 1000, varying in different States a little. In New Zealand it is only 60 per 1000. In the urban area, where it is much greater than the country, it is highest in the congested suburbs, viz.: In Prahran, 6.87;

Brunswick, 8.95; Collingwood, 10.29; Fitzroy, 9.15; South Melbourne, 8.07; as against St. Kilda, 5.70; Malvern, 6.62, &c. The variation is, of course, also a seasonal one, and showing the results of poor housing, crowding, insanitary surroundings and privation. Mrs. Pember Reeves, in a book, *ROUND ABOUT A £ A WEEK*, gives an interesting side-light on this point in regard to rent paid per week. The following is the result of an inquiry:—Families, 31; children born, 186; dead, 46; death-rate, 24.17. Arranged according to rent this table shows:—

Rent.	Families.	Children Born.	Children Died.	Death-rate per cent.
Over 6s. 6d.	12	72	9	12
6s. and 6s. 6d.	7	39	7	17
Less than 6s. 6d.	12	75	30	40

Poor conditions of living and the mother having often to go out to work militate against breast feeding—so essential to the health of the infant. In the summer here, fresh cow's milk is an enormous problem. Land is too expensive for cows to be kept near the city, and milk travels far in hot trains, stands on sunny stations, and is distributed in unroofed carts. Is it any wonder that it is too often the cause of diarrhoeal diseases, the deaths from which were 44.8 per 1000 births in 1912? What we want are herds near the city, properly inspected and tuberculin tested, ice cars, and proper distribution—all under the supervision of experts, with district nurses to help and instruct the mothers. Would not there be more money for such State and municipal activities if we only had a Single Tax?

Overcrowding too is rampant, where 10s., 12s., and 14s. are often charged for 3, 4, and 5-roomed houses, and in order to pay these rents more than one family joins together, with consequent overcrowding. A medical officer of one of our congested suburbs told me that whole streets have been condemned as unfit for habitation, but they cannot destroy them, or the people would have nowhere to go. It postulates something wrong that in a new country such as ours the hideous slum should develop in our midst. Surely some thought should be given to the reason why it is there, and why it exists in every big city the world over—so-called civilised and uncivilised—in comparatively Free Trade England and in Protectionist America or Germany. And together with the slum the other anti-social conditions, bad sanitation, want of all comfort, the lowering of moral tone, and a *laissez-faire* attitude, engendered more especially in the weary work-worn wife and mother. Is it much wonder that after a day of physical toil the man or woman who returns to a squalid room, with bad air, no conveniences of any sort, and the whole family herding together, seeks a little light and companionship and so-called pleasure at the nearest hotel? It is the slums that build up the drink bill of any country, and for any such dwelling a rent out of proportion to its value must be paid. Every poor woman dreads the rent, the drink, and the too frequent bearing and suckling of children.

In the sparsely settled country districts the woman's lot is not much better. Far from intercourse with her kind, very little of interest or amusement in life, the housing conditions the most primitive, food most monotonous, the thought of illness a nightmare, the coming of a child a time of suffering and danger. No help. The woman must battle through as best she can. Often the results are such as leave her an old woman before her time. Why should people have to go so far ahead of the sociabilities into our back-blocks while land is available for their labour nearer at hand? One will say the struggles of the pioneers and their womenfolk were greater, and so they were; but are they necessary now? Struggle is good, but let some result arise from the struggle. Don't keep hurling the struggler back and say in effect, "You have not done enough yet to obtain a reward for your labour."