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Woman Suffrage

Mrs. Isabella Beecher Hooker's Address Before Congress

At the woman suffrage convention at Unity hall, Monday, Mrs. Hooker, by particular request, read the phonographic report of an extemporaneous address made by her before the House judiciary committee of Congress in 1871. It is as follows:

“We are told by men themselves that there are too many voters already; restriction is what we want, not enlargement of the suffrage. Let us see how this is, my friends, let us reason together on this point for a few moments. This one great propelling power of this government that moves the great political engine, and that keeps us alive as a nation on the face of the earth, is God's own doctrine of personal liberty and personal responsibility.

That is all we have to go upon. It is, in fact, fuel and steam. Liberty is the steam, responsibility puts on the brakes, and then what is the safety valve, I ask you? Is it not our election day? Look at it in this way. Every honest lawyer will tell you that the next best thing to settling a quarrel between two belligerents is to bring the parties into court. Because the court room is a great cooling off place, a perfect refrigerator. A man who has quarreled with his neighbor comes into court, and before the lawyers get through with him, he wishes he hadn't quarreled. How is it that our courts act in this way? What do we gain in this? Everything. In old times a dispute between man and man was settled by blows – fisticuffs – gradually superseded by the sword – at last by the pistol; and now we have thrown that out, and established a system of jurisprudence. Now all these petty grievances must be settled in court. Private violence must no longer be permitted, and that is a great march in civilization.

Now the parallel case is this: We in this country – we men, I mean, for women are nobodies and nowhere when you come to the discussion of great questions like these – but I use the conventional we -- we in this country are attempting to carry our ideas of liberty and responsibility into legislation; and we don't agree – we quarrel bitterly and almost come to blows again – but election days cool us off, acting like a court room itself

upon us. We accept their judgement, and go about our business quietly till next time. Now if we were all Americans, acting under an intelligent sense of responsibility, everything might be expected to run smoothly under this regime; but the trouble is when the foreigner comes in who does not understand our institutions, who is perhaps, ignorant, debased and superstitious. But the foreigner is, it seems to me, the very man who needs this safety valve of the election day more than any other on the face of the globe. We ourselves could run on our own nationality; but where comes this man from the principalities of the old world – from Europe we will say, to begin with – and he has an idea that he is going to be richer, smarter, happier – more on an equality with every other man than ever he was before. He comes here, and what does he find? He finds a ladder, reaching higher into the clouds, perhaps, but the lower rounds are just as near the earth as over there, and he is on the lowest round still. He sees his next door neighbor has more money than he has, is better educated, and commands the respect of the community, as he does not, and he is filled with disappointment, and sometimes with rage. What would he naturally do, with his old world antecedents and training, when he is thus aggrieved as he conceives himself to be? Why, burn your barn – break into your house – steal all he can from you. But what does election day do for him? On that

day he is as good as anybody. He goes to the polls side by side with the first man in the land, and he rides in a carriage there – if he is too drunk to walk – and he can vote the first man in the line, if he chooses. The richest man in the country must walk behind him and wait for his turn. He drops his ballot and he is cooled off. He soon begins to get hold a little of this idea of responsibility that I am speaking of, and after a while it will come into his head – very slowly, perhaps, for we are all slow to learn these things – that he has got to work himself up and get on a par with those intelligent and influential people who are so powerful in making laws and customs.

Now, friends, it seems to me if you could disfranchise every foreigner today, who was not intelligent, or if you could make intelligence the test of voting, you would have ten barns burned where you have one now. I believe it firmly. Being naturally conservative, as I think all women are, a few years ago I really thought that ten, even twenty years residence might be required of foreigners before they should be allowed to vote. I said they did not know enough, and so ought to be kept out as long as that. Today, I am inclined not to limit the time a moment longer than it is necessary for men to get their naturalization papers out, and go through the required legal formalities. If disfranchisement meant annihilation, selfishly, I might be glad to get rid of this troublesome question in that way – the task of ruling

this country would then be a far easier one than it is – but it does not mean annihilation. So when gentlemen talk with me, and say we have too many voters already, I reply – do not disfranchise these men – enlighten them, for God has sent them here for a purpose of His own. And I say to you, tonight, that the ballot in the hands of every man is the only thing that saves us from anarchy today, that keeps us alive as a republic, the ballot in the hands of these ignorant men, and the more ignorant they are the more they need it, and the more we need they should have it. And let me say, in passing, that reconstruction at the south is hindered today for the same reason, responsibility is taken away from a large class of citizens. A disfranchised class is always a restless class; a class that, if it be not as a whole given up to deeds of violence, will at least wink at them, when committed by men either in or out of its own ranks. What the south needs today is ballots, not bullets.

I leave out of the question the ultimate educating power of the ballot, though I would like to make you an argument upon that alone. But I say give the poor men, ignorant men, the ballot, for purposes of self-defense, and because we could not live in safety in our homes otherwise. New York is poorly governed, we say, today, and getting to be a pretty dangerous place to live in. But what would it be if every foreigner and every ignorant

man could not go out on election day, and prove that he was as good as anybody? That is human nature, and it is human nature, and plenty of it too, that we have to deal with.

And now, my friends, let me ask you, what are these men sent here for and who sent them? We have got all Europe and all Asia is coming, and who sends them? When God put into that good ship Mayflower those two great ribs of oak, personal liberty and personal responsibility, He knew the precious freight she was to bear, and all the hopes bound up in her, and He pledged Himself by both the greater eternities, the past and the future, that the ship would weather all storms and come safe to port with all she had on board. And what God has promised He will perform. So I beg of you not to think for a moment of limiting manhood suffrage. You cut your own throats the day you do it.

And if men cannot live in this country in safe homes, except their neighbor men are enfranchised, can they live without enfranchised women anymore? If you cannot live in safety with irresponsible men in your midst, how can you live with irresponsible women? Much more, how can you grow into the stature of perfect men in Christ Jesus, our Lord, how can you become perfect legislators, except your mothers are instructed on these great subjects you are call(ed) to legislate upon, that may instruct you in

their turn? You do not know any thing so well as what your mothers have taught you; but they have not taught you political economy. It is not their fault that they have not, or yours, perhaps. No man nor woman studies a subject profoundly except he or she is called upon to act upon it. What business man studies a business foreign to his own? What woman studies a business foreign to her own? In past ages, this woman, in the providence of God, we will say, has been shut out from political action, for, so long as the sword ruled and man had to get his liberty by the sword, so long woman had all she could do to guard the home, for that was her part of the work – and she did it bravely and well, you will say. But now men are not fighting for their liberty with the gun by the door, and the Indians outside. You are fighting for it in the halls of legislation, with the spirit of truth – with spiritual weapons – and woman would be disloyal to her womanhood, if she did not ask to share these heavy responsibilities with you. And she has really been training herself all these years she has seemed so indifferent; she has neglected her duty in part – (confess it, freely – it is not your fault alone, gentlemen, that we are not with you today. If we had been as conscious of our duty and privilege, years ago, as we are today, if we had known our birthright, we should have stood by your aide, welcome co-adjutors, long since. So we will take the blame of the past alike – we have

all been walking very slowly this path of Christian civilization. But in the greatest conflict of modern times you announced great principles and fought for them on the field, and we stood by there in the home and we stand by them still, there. And when we come to deliberate with you in solemn council, as to how these principles shall be carried into legislation, your task will be easier, our opportunity will be larger, and still our hearts will be where they have every been, in our homes.”