Speech: Woman's New Relation to Public Affairs

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Outline of Talk
on
"Woman's New Relation to Public Affairs"

The subject on which I have been asked to speak before this Forum - "Woman's New Relation to Public Affairs" - would more exactly express what I want to say if it read, "Woman's Possible New Relations to Public Affairs." Whatever these relations are or may be, they have been born of new tools put into her hand in the last 75 years - the tools of education, professional and business opportunity, and, finally, the suffrage.

She has not had a long enough experience with any one of the three for us to decide whether or not there are changes resulting which go much below the surface of things. Historically speaking, the gradual acceptance of the democratic formula and the changes in the world's way of carrying on its life made it necessary and inevitable that she should have other tools than those she had been using.

Man is restless, adventurous, inventive. He is interested in the game rather than in the result of the game, and, driven by his own nature, he has in the last century and a half changed the entire technique of the world's life. He has substituted popular for aristocratic rule. He has added to his old agricultural
and commercial life an entirely new industrial civilization.

These changes have affected the woman materially — displacing her. Woman had, even no longer than a hundred years ago a stable place in the world’s business, with definite obligations, respected by man, respected by herself. The changes that man in his restlessness brought upon the world allowed her out of her old realm. Serious women saw not only that they were being displaced but that man in his wild career of changing things was tangling himself up in his own machinery.

It has become more and more evident in the last fifty to seventy-five years that man was building something that he could not run — too big for him to run. The War has been the most terrible exhibit of this. He saw it coming for years, but he could not prevent it. When it began he could not stop it. It ended through the practical exhaustion of the world. And when it ended, he could not recover from it. The most startling demonstration of the Great War has been that of the inadequacy of man to manage the civilization he has created.

Now, women have not liked their displacement; they have not liked the results to themselves and to their children of the machinery that man was building; and more and more, as the changes came, they resolved to take a hand.

But to take a hand in the thing he was building, they must have the tools he was using, and so the demand for education, which has gone on until today a woman has almost the
same educational opportunity in this country that the man has. She felt that she must get into professional and business life; and today we have the most extraordinary exhibit of business and professional activities. As for the last tool she has acquired, it is too early to say how generally she is using it. Yet the statistics, so far as we have them, seem to show that she is using it as freely as man - and in the event that an issue stirs her imagination or her indignation, more freely.

Are these new tools to be used as man uses them? Or is she going to use them like a woman? Upon the answer to these questions depends whether we are going to develop vitally new relations or merely duplicate old ones.

One of the most marvelous and fruitful elements in society has always been feminine instincts. Given a natural, normal woman and her judgments have a quality of rightness, the value of which cannot be overestimated. She may not know how she gets to her conclusion, but there she is. And ninety-nine out of a hundred times she is right. Because her instincts are mysterious, they are no less to be respected and heeded. I believe them to be one of the finest flowers of the sub-conscious mind.

Man is interested in the intellectual process by which he reaches his conclusion - his logic. He often becomes tangled in it, out of love of it. He forgets what he is after. Not woman. She is after a definite, useful thing - not after the road
by which she gets there.

Now, if women will, in the use of their new tools, give full play to their healthy instinct for direct action, we will get new and valuable relations. Let them follow their own nature, and women as a whole will not become to the same extent the slaves of party that men are.

The question as to whether women as a body are going to hold their parties to definite results for the public good rather than to results for party good is one of the most serious we have — serious because the opportunity is so tremendous. There are, I believe, some impressive exhibits to show that woman realizes the importance of not being ruled by partisanship. I look on the League of Woman Voters as a most hopeful expression of her conscious desire to keep her mind clear on this issue.

One tremendous contribution she can make, if she will, is to stand for simplification rather than complication in affairs. What an outrage to common sense is the including in our political machinery of the government of cities. The governing of a city has rightfully nothing to do with politics. It is purely a business affair. If women will bring their instinctive common sense to bear on this matter, they will render a service of the very first order to this troubled land.

We may very properly test the value of the woman's new relations — judge whether she is going to make anything that we