

# Address from Carrie Chapman Catt to U.S. Legislatures about Women's Suffrage Movement, 1919

## An Address To The Legislatures of the United States

Woman suffrage is inevitable. Three distinct cause make it so.

**1. The History of Our Country and the Theory of Our Government.** Ours is a nation born of revolution; of rebellion against a system of government so securely entrenched in the customs and traditions of human society that in 1776 it seemed impregnable. From the beginning of things nations had been ruled by kings and for kings, while the people served and paid the cost. The American Revolutionists boldly proclaimed there heresies:

*“Taxation without representation is tyranny”*

*“Government derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.”*

The Colonists won and the nation which was established as a result of their victory has held unflinchingly that these two fundamental principles of democratic government are not only the spiritual source of our national existence but have been our chief historic pride and at all time the sheet anchor of our liberties.

Eighty years after the Revolution Abraham Lincoln welded those two maxims into a new one:

*“Ours is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”*

Fifty years more passed and the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, in a mighty crisis of the nation, proclaimed to the world:

*“We are fighting for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts — for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government.”*

All the way between these immortal aphorisms political leaders have declared unabated faith in their truth. Not one American has arisen to question their logic in the one hundred and forty-one years of our national existence. However stupidly our country may have evaded the logical application at times, it has never swerved from its devotion to the theory of democracy as expressed by those two axioms.

Not only has it unceasingly upheld the THEORY whenever men made application.

Certain Denominations of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and non-land holders, workingmen, Negroes, Indians, were at one time disfranchised in all, or in part, of our country. Class by class they have been

admitted to the electorate. Political motives may have played their part in some instances but the only reason given by historians for their enfranchisement is the force of the logic of these maxims of the Declaration.

Meantime the United States opened wide its gates to men of all the nations of earth. By the combination of naturalization granted the foreigner after a five-years' residence by our national government and the uniform provision of the State constitutions which extend the vote to male citizens, it has been the custom in our country for three generations that any male immigrant, accepted by the national government as a citizen, automatically became a voter in any State in which he chose to reside, subject only to the minor qualifications prescribed by the State. Justifiable exceptions to the general principle might have been entered. Men just emerging from slavery, untrained to think or act for themselves and in most cases wholly illiterate, were not asked to qualify for voting citizenship. Not even as a measure of national caution has the vote ever been withheld from immigrants until they have learned our language, earned a certificate of fitness from our schools or given definite evidence of loyalty to our country. When such questions have been raised, political leaders have replied: "What! Tax men and in return give them no vote; compel men to obey the authority of a government to which they may not give consent! Never. That is un-American." So, it happens that men of all nations and all races, except the Mongolian, may secure in the Union, and even the Mongolian born in this country is a citizen and has the vote.

With such a history behind it, how can our nation escape the logic it has never failed to follow, when its last unenfranchised class calls for the vote? Behold our Uncle Sam floating the banner with one hand, "Taxation without representation is tyranny," and with the other seizing the billions of dollars paid in taxes by women to whom he refers "representation." Behold him again, welcoming the boys of twenty-one and the newly-made immigrant citizen to "a voice in their own government" while he denies that fundamental right of democracy to thousands of women public school teachers from whom many of these men learned all they know of citizenship and patriotism, to women college presidents, to women who preach in our pulpits, interpret law in our courts, preside over our hospitals, write books and magazines and serve in every uplifting moral and social enterprise.

Is there a single man who can justify such inequality of treatment, such outrageous discrimination?

Woman suffrage became an assured fact when the Declaration of Independence was written. It matters not at all whether Thomas Jefferson and his compatriots thought of women when they wrote that immoral document. They conceived and voiced a principle greater than any man. "A power not of themselves which makes for righteousness" gave them the vision and they proclaimed truisms as immutable as the multiplication table, as changeless as time. The Hon. Champ Clark announced that he had been a woman suffragist ever since he "got the hang of the Declaration of Independence." So it must be with every other American. The amazing thing is that it has required so long a time for a people, most of whom know how to read, "to get the hang of it." Indeed, so inevitable does our history make woman suffrage that any citizen, political party, or Legislature that now blocks its coming by so much as a single day, contribute to the indefensible inconsistency, which threatens to make our nation a jest among the onward-moving peoples of the world.

**2. The Suffrage for Women Already Established in the United States Makes Woman Suffrage for the Nation Inevitable.** When Elihu Root, as President of the American Society of International Law, at the eleventh annual meeting in Washington, April 26, 1917, said, "The world cannot be half democratic and half autocratic. It must be all democratic or all Prussian. There can be no compromise," he voiced a general truth. Precisely the same intuition has already taught the blindest and most hostile foe of woman suffrage that our nation cannot long continue a condition under which government in half its

territory rests upon the consent of half the people and in the other half upon the consent of all the people; a condition which grants representation to the taxed in half its territory and denies it in the other half; a condition which permits women in some States to share in the election of the President, Senators and Representatives and denies them the privilege in others. It is too obvious to require demonstration that women suffrage, now covering more than half our territory, will eventually be ordained in all the nation. No one will deny it; the only question left is when and how will it be completely established.

### **3. The Leadership of the United States in World Democracy Compels the Enfranchisement of Its own Women.**

The maxims of the Declaration were once called “fundamental principles of government.” They are now called “American principles” or even “Americanisms.” They have become the slogans of every movement toward political liberty the world around; of every effort to widen the suffrage for men or women in any land. Not a people, race or class striving for freedom is there anywhere in the world that has not made our axioms the chief weapon of the struggle. More, all men and women the world around, with far-sighted vision into the varieties of things, know that the world tragedy of our day was not waged over the assassination of an Archduke, nor commercial but was a death grapple between the forces which deny and those which uphold the truths of the Declaration of Independence.

Our “Americanisms” became the issue of the great war!

Everyday day the conviction grew stronger that a world humanity would emerge from the war, demanding political liberty and accepting nothing less.

That prediction has proved true and in the new struggle emanating from the war, there is little doubt that men and women will demand and attain liberty together. Yesterday men and women were fighting the world’s battle for Democracy together — men in the army of the trenches, women in the supporting army behind the trenches. They paid frightful cost of war and bore its sad and sickening sorrows together. Tomorrow they will share its rewards together in democracies which make no discrimination on account of sex.

The war brought new times. In the words of Premier Lloyd George: “There are times in history when the world spins along its destined curse so leisurely that for centuries it seems to be at a standstill. Then come awful times when it rushes along at so giddy a pace that the track of centuries is covered in a single year. These are the times in which we now live.”

It is true; democracy, votes for men and women, making slow but certain progress in 1914, have suddenly become established facts in many lands in 1917. Already our one-time Mother Country has become the standard bearer of our Americanisms, the principles she once denied, and — cynical fact — Great Britain, not the United States, is now leading the world on to the coming democracy.

As an earnest of its sincerity in the battle for democracy, the government of Great Britain not only pledged votes to its disfranchised men and to its women, but the measure passed the House of Commons June, 1917, by a vote of 7 to 1, the House of Lords in January, 1918, and became a national law on February 6th, 1918 by the signature of the King. In consequence of this law the women of England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and all the smaller British Islands participated in the parliamentary elections in December 1918.

Canada, too, has enfranchised its women from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The great Island Colonies of Great Britain (New Zealand and Australia) and Finland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland have long had woman suffrage. Sweden and Holland have now extended the vote to women, while France and Italy

pledge votes to their women. The governments in process of formation amid the wreckage of the former empires of Russia, Germany and Austria, are promising equal suffrage for women.

No slogan of democracy is more worthy of immortality than that of the women of the New Russia, "Without the participation of women, suffrage is not universal."

Any man who has red, American blood in his veins, any man who has gloried in our history and felt the thrill of patriotic pride in the belief that our land was the leader of world democracy, will share the humiliation that our country has so long delayed action upon this question. Other countries have beaten us in what we have been taught was our especial world mission.

### **The Logic of the Situation Calls for Immediate Action**

It is not clear that American history makes women suffrage inevitable? That full suffrage in fifteen States makes its coming in all forty-eight States inevitable? That the spread of democracy over the world, including votes for the women of many countries, in each case based upon the principles our Republic gave to the world, compels action by our nation? Is it not clear that the world expects such action and fails to understand its delay.

In the face of these facts we ask you, Legislators of the United States, is not the immediate enfranchisement of the women of our nation the duty of the hour?

Why hesitate? Not an inch of solid ground is left for the feet of the opponent. The world's war has killed, buried and pronounced the obsequies upon the hard-worked "war argument." Mr. Asquith, erstwhile champion ant-suffragist of the world, has said so and the British Parliament has confirmed it by its enfranchisement of British women. The million and fifteen thousand women of New York; the two hundred and two thousand women of Michigan, the sixty-five thousand women of Oklahoma, the thirty-eight thousand women of Maine, the fifty thousand women of South Dakota, who signed a declaration that they wanted the vote, plus the heavy vote of women in every State and country where women have the franchise, have finally and completely disposed of the familiar "they don't want it" argument. Thousands of women annually emerging from the schools and colleges have closed the debate upon the one-time serious "they don't know enough" argument. The statistics of police courts and prisons have laid the ghost of the "too bad to vote" argument. The woman who demanded the book and verse in the Bible which gave men the vote declaring that the next verse gave it to women, brought the "Bible argument" to a sudden end. The testimony of thousands of reputable citizens of our own suffrage States and of our own suffrage States and of all other suffrage lands that woman suffrage has brought no harm and much positive good, and the absence of reputable citizens who deny these facts, has closed the "women only double the vote" argument. The increasing number of women wage-earners, many supporting families and some supporting husbands, has thrown out the "women are represented" argument. One by one these pet misgivings have been relegated to the scrap heap of all rejected, cast-off prejudices. Not an argument is left. The case against women suffrage, carefully prepared by the combined wit, skill and wisdom of opponents, including some men of high repute, during sixty years, has been closed. The jury of the New York electorate in 1917, the jury of the electorate in Michigan, South Dakota and Oklahoma in 1918 heard it all, weighed the evidence and pronounced it "incompetent, irrelevant and immaterial."

Historians tell us that the battle of Gettysburg brought our Civil War to an end, although the fighting went on a year longer because the people who directed it did not see that the end had come. Had their sight been clearer, a year's casualties of human life, desolated homes, high taxes and bitterness of spirit might have been avoided. The battle of New York was the Gettysburg of the woman suffrage

movement. There are those too blind to see that the end has come, although they know it. These can compel the women of the nation to keep a standing suffrage army, to finance it, to fight on until these blind and stubborn one are gathered to their fathers and men with clearer vision come to take their places, but the casualties will be sex antagonism, party antagonism, bitterness, resentment, contempt, hate and the things which grow out of a rankling grievance autocratically denied redress. These things are not mentioned in the spirit of threat but merely to voice well known principles of historical psychology.

Benjamin Franklin once said "The cost of war is not paid at the time, the bills come afterwards." So too the nation, refusing justice when justice is due, finds the costs accumulating and the bills presented at unexpected and embarrassing times. Think it over.

## **Two Ways**

Women may be enfranchised in two ways.

*1. By amendment of the National Constitution.* This process demands that the amendment shall pass both Houses of Congress by a two-thirds vote and shall then be ratified by the Legislature of three-fourths of the States.

*2. By amendment of State Constitution.* This method sends the question from each Legislature by referendum to all male voters of the States.

## **Three Reasons for the Federal Method**

There are three reasons for choosing the Federal Method and three for rejecting the State Method. The Federal Method is best.

*1. Because it is the quickest process and the place of our Nation in the procession of democracy demands immediate action.*

In 1869 Wyoming led the way by extending full suffrage to women and 1919 will round out half a century of the most self-sacrificing struggle any class ever made for the vote. It is enough. The British women's suffrage army will be mustered out at the end of their half century of similar endeavor. Surely men of the land of George Washington the Third to discover that taxation without representation is tyranny no matter whether it be men or women who are taxed! We may justly expect American men to be as willing to grant to the women of the United States as generous consideration as those of Great Britain have done.

*2. Every other country dignifies woman suffrage as a national question.*

Even Canada and Australia, composed of self-governing states like our own, so regard it. Were the precedent not established our own national government has taken a step which makes the treatment of woman suffrage as a national question imperative. For the first time in our history Congress has imposed a direct tax upon women and has thus deliberately violated the most fundamental and sacred principle of our government, since it offers no compensating "representation" for the tax it imposes. Unless reparation is made it becomes the same kind of tyrant as was George the Third. When the exemption for unmarried persons under the Income Tax was reduced to \$1,000 the Congress laid the tax upon thousand of wageearning women- teachers, doctors, lawyers, bookkeepers, secretaries and the proprietors of many businesses. Such women are earning their income under hard conditions of economic inequalities largely due to their disfranchisement. Many of these, while fighting their own economic battler, have been contributors to the campaign for suffrage that they might bring easier conditions for all women. Now those contributions will be deflected from suffrage treasuries into governments funds through taxation.

Women have realized the dire need of huge government resources at this time and have made no protest against the tax, but it must be understood, and understood clearly, that the protest is there just the same and that disfranchised women income taxpayers with few exceptions harbor a genuine grievance against the government of the United States. The national government is guilty of the violation of the American principle that the tax and the vote are inseparable: it alone can make amends. Two ways are open; exempt the women from the Income Tax or grant them the vote — these can be no compromise. To shift responsibility from Congress and the Legislatures to the voters is to invite the scorn of every human being who has learned to reason. A Congress which creates the law and has the power to violate a world-acknowledged axiom of just government can also command the law and the power to make reparation to those it has wronged by the violation.

*3. If the entire forty-eight States should severally enfranchise women their political status would still be inferior of that of men since no provision for national protection in their right to vote would exist. The women of California or New York are not wholly enfranchised for the national government has not denied the States the right to deprive them of the vote. This protection can come only by Federal action. Therefore, since women will eventually be forced to demand Congressional action in order to equalize the rights of men and women, why not take such action now and thus shorten and ease the process?*