

Mr Dickinson's bill for the enfranchisement of women was yesterday "talked out" in the House of Commons. It was feared by the promoters that this fate might befall it. With the exception, perhaps, of that militant body christened—most erroneously—the "Suffragettes," and a few other women, nobody will feel particularly disappointed. Only by a big stretch of the imagination can it be said that among women themselves is there any widespread demand for the franchise. At the same time, events would seem to be shaping in the direction of enfranchisement. Some people think the tactics pursued by the clamant "suffragists" have been more harmful than beneficial to the cause. It is argued that by their unseemly conduct the Amazons have brought the movement into disrepute. Among those even who are favourable to woman suffrage, it has been declared that legislation on the subject has been postponed for a dozen or a score of years by the disorders occasioned by the handful of women with glib tongues, much enthusiasm, and little modesty, who claim to speak for the whole sisterhood. Many, however, will probably be disposed to take the opposite view. However unlovely they may be, the methods by which the suffragists seek to attain their ends have had the undoubted effect of bringing the cause into a position of prominence it never before occupied. Woman suffrage has been advertised from Land's End to John o' Groat's; and the power of advertisement is great, as every business man who takes advantage of it can testify.

Politicians are being forced to consider the subject, and when it is considered in the abstract at least, there is difficulty in avoiding the conclusion that the demand the suffragists make is both logical and just. If it be a sound principle that taxation carries with it representation, and if it be right that male householders should have the Parliamentary franchise, it is not easy to conceive by what ingenuity of argument it can be contended that women who possess the double qualification of paying taxes and being householders should be deprived of the vote. It is not enough to say that the mass of women do not want it. Those of that mind, should the franchise be conferred on them, need be under no obligation to exercise it. But in any case the minority, both active and passive, may reasonably insist that it is unfair that those of the sex who are eager for enfranchisement should be prevented from realising their desires by the fact that others are indifferent or opposed to change.

Whether the political enfranchisement of women would be a good thing for the race or for women themselves is a totally different question. In matters of this kind, one must consider not only what in theory may seem right, but what in practice may safely be conceded. Do women require the franchise? The suffragists, of course, reply in the affirmative. Only thus, they argue, can women succeed in influencing political opinion, especially as it bears on their own sex and the young. This is not true; it would be a great reproach to women if it were true. Paradoxical though it may seem, there is considerable force in the assertion that women at present enjoy—or have the means, at any rate, of enjoying—greater political power than if their names were inscribed on the voters' roll. In the home circle women have an immense influence in the moulding of the male character. On them to a large extent depends the fact whether men may be good or bad citizens. Only let them inculcate in the young those moral maxims and principles which ought to govern a man's conduct, and they will have done far more to promote the common weal than the statesman who succeeds in placing a measure on the statute-book. They will be the hidden force, the "power behind the throne," by which statesmanship is actuated—the prime cause of the legislative evolution towards higher things.

Once they had the franchise women would next be claiming the right to sit in Parliament. In doing so they would be consistent and logical. It is to be feared, however, that were the claim conceded, a demoralising element would be introduced into electioneering and Parliament. The more beautiful, the more charming the female candidate was, the more would the poor male voters be attracted to her. In many cases good looks and a winning manner would gain the day. A great tribute would be paid to the candidate's powers of fascination, but the object of the election—the expression of an intelligent decision on questions of policy—would be unattained. The male voters ought to be saved from such a perilous temptation. At election times there are always side issues which obscure those larger questions on which the judgment of the electors is called for; but there would be no more obscuring side issue than the beauty of the female candidate. And just as lovely female candidates by their wiles might lead male voters astray, so they might convert the House of Commons into a scene of Gilbertian topsy-turvydom. Votes might be given, not on the merits of cases submitted for judgment, but in accordance with the inclinations of the female section of the House! But happily we are a long way off yet from the day of the female Parliamentary candidate and M.P., and the hope may be expressed—however ungallant it may be reckoned—that, in the interest of women themselves, it will never be reached. On certain local boards women are fitted to do, have done, and are doing excellent work; but to many it must appear that in the House of Commons they would be altogether out of their element. They will, in all truth, have gone far enough along the political road if they secure the Parliamentary vote. Yesterday's debate showed that, as was already well known, the Cabinet is divided on this question. While Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman is personally in favour of female enfranchisement, he stated that the bill would be left to the decision of the House, which is the safety valve when Cabinet differences exist. But woman suffrage is a matter involving an enormous change; and, whatever the opinions of the majority of the House of Commons may be, it cannot be pretended that the constituencies have given a mandate for its bestowal by the present Parliament.