

# WOMEN AND THE NEW YORK CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

IT is very earnestly to be hoped that the delegates elected to the Constitutional Convention to be held next year in New York State will contain a number of women. Those who make the Constitution are engaged in making the fundamental law of the land; law which should not be lightly changed, although I very strongly believe that it should be easier of change than is the case at the present time, and that when in any given case it is changed by the courts the people should have the right to say whether or not they approve of such change. This fundamental law of the State applies to women just as much as to men, and, as regards many of the matters most intimately concerning ordinary people, it really applies even more to women than to men. Surely in these matters women should be entitled to speak with the authority that comes only if action can follow speech. They are entitled to be heard as a right, not as a favor.

There are other matters which nowadays are increasingly often the subject for legislation in which the interest of women as women, although scarcely as great as the interest of men, is nevertheless very great. This is the case as regards the whole body of our wage-workers. Nearly one-third of the wage-workers of New York State are women. Of late years it has become increasingly evident that the State must concern itself with many matters affecting wage-workers under penalty of seeing the conditions of life and labor grow evil. Where this is the case it is surely wise that women who have first-class knowledge should be called upon for their judgment and aid in making the Constitution, just exactly as men of similar type should be called upon.

In the vital matter of the schools the interest of women is exactly as great as the interest of men. Our public school system is already good, but it must be made much better. It must be kept as a free, absolutely non-sectarian system of governmental schools for all the people, without regard to whether they are rich or poor, and without in any way favoring or discriminating against any

reputable creed; for there must be no connection between Church and State in this country, and in particular no grant of public money to aid sectarian schools of any kind. But while this fundamental feature must be kept, we should greatly enlarge the work of the schools along the line of industrial training: the training that will make the average boy better able to be a home-keeper by being a better worker and earner, whether on the farm or in the shop; the training that will fit the average girl for the most essential part of the average—and best—woman's work, that of the housewife and mother, while also giving her the full chance to develop her faculties in other directions if she wishes.

What is most needed in our Constitutional Convention is not the orator, nor yet the conventional type of politician, but the intelligent man or woman keenly interested in the welfare of the people of New York; the man and woman who to theoretical and practical knowledge of the problems before our people add the two vitally important qualities of integrity and common sense. It is not of very much consequence what their nominal politics are compared to the question whether they do or do not have these particular virtues, so fundamentally necessary if the task they are to do is to be done well.

It has been urged by the opponents of the course I advocate that women are not eligible to the Constitutional Convention. It seems to me that the decisions of the courts and the practice of the community have definitely established the reverse of this proposition. There is no prohibition in the law against their being members; such prohibition would have to be read into the law by a process of reasoning which would also prohibit them from being holders of public office. The courts have again and again refused to question their right to hold such office. Women already occupy and for years have occupied public positions, both State and municipal. Other women who are not in public position have nevertheless been just as actively engaged in rendering public service as if they held office—precisely as is the case with so

many men. As instances of office-holders, past or present, take the following :

MISS JULIA CLIFFORD LATHROP, whose first official position was as a member of the Illinois State Board of Charities, 1893-1909; she was appointed by President Taft as Chief of the Children's Bureau, Federal Department of Labor.

MISS LILLIAN D. WALD; in 1909 she was appointed by Governor Hughes a member of the New York State Commission of Immigration; she had already been appointed a member of the Mayor's Push-Cart Commission in 1906 by Mayor McClellan.

MISS KATHARINE BEMENT DAVIS; she was appointed Superintendent of the New York State Reformatory for Women in 1901, and is now Commissioner of Correction in New York, having been appointed by Mayor Mitchel, 1914.

MISS FRANCES A. KELLOR; she was a member of the New York State Probation Commission, appointed by Governor Higgins, 1906; a member of the New York State Immigration Commission, 1908, appointed by Governor Hughes; she was appointed Chief Investigator of the New York State Bureau of Industries and Immigration by Governor Hughes in 1910 (being the first woman executive in charge of a New York State Bureau).

The gamut covered by the activities of these women is very wide, and they have touched the problems of work and living among our people at their most vital points. Miss Davis, for instance, is at this moment an appointee of the Democratic Mayor of New York, Mr. Mitchel. Miss Kellor was an appointee of the Republican Governor, Mr. Hughes, at present a Justice of the Supreme Court of the Nation. The appointment of both gave the heartiest satisfaction to the men whose interest was keenest and most intelligent concerning the matters with which these two women as public officials were to deal. Miss Kellor's efficient interest in the immigrant has been such as to qualify her to do work such as hardly any man could do. Miss Davis is one of the most trusted members of Mayor Mitchel's excellent cabinet, one of the officials whose presence in office is a source of pride and satisfaction to our people. Now, any construction of the Constitution that would exclude women from the Constitutional Convention would, if fairly applied, make illegal the action of Governor Hughes and Mayor Mitchel in having appointed these women to office. Moreover, if these women are fit to render and have rendered great service to the citizens of this State in the offices they have held, surely in the interest of all our people we have a right

to say that they shall not be excluded from making that fundamental law of the State in accordance with which all such offices will have to be administered in the future.

As a matter of fact, it would be quite impossible adequately to deal with many of the subjects to which these women have devoted so much of their time within and without office unless by consulting them. If only men are elected to the Constitutional Convention, they will make a poor business of the Constitution unless on some of the most important matters they keep in close touch with women such as those I have named above. In other words, the Constitution will be badly made unless it is made after the makers have consulted with, and at least in part followed the judgment of, these women. The question is merely whether the consultation shall be held as a matter of favor and perhaps in secret in lobbies and anterooms, or whether it shall be held openly and as a matter of right on the floor of the Convention and in the committee rooms where the members meet. There is no question that these women, and women like them, will have to be consulted. Every rational man knows this to be the case. When such is the case, surely every argument against having them consulted as members by their fellow-members vanishes. It is a matter of simple straightforward decency and common sense to give them such place in the Convention that they can be consulted exactly as their fellow-citizens of equal character and knowledge who are men are consulted.

I very much wish that among the women delegates there could be, roughly, the same proportion of wives and mothers that there are fathers and husbands among the men delegates. The duty of the father to the home is his primary duty, precisely as is the case with his wife; and it is as foolish to assume that the performance of such duty bars the woman from the performance of public duty as to make the same assumption in the case of the man. As a matter of fact, women do more charitable, religious, and "neighborhood friendly" duty than men; and in all probability the average good woman at present spends more time in the performance of her social duties towards her neighbors and towards her fellow-citizens who need her care than the average good man spends in his political duties; and the one form of activity is precisely as compatible as the other with the performance of home

duty. A humorous feature of the situation is that the insistence that "woman's place is the home" usually becomes especially vociferous when the man who thus insists fails conspicuously himself in his own home duties. This is sometimes true even of the objecting woman. Miss Wald told me a delightful anecdote of the disapproval her views excited in the mind of one of the poor young women who are repeatedly sent to Blackwell's Island for the kind of conduct most incompatible with home duties. This poor young woman, a habitual offender, quite unconscious of the pathetic and ironic contrast between her conventional way of looking at her own life and her conventional way of looking at the movement for bettering woman's condition, expressed her shocked disapproval of Miss Wald's attitude on the ground that "woman's place was in the home." Miss Davis informed me that among the inmates of the woman's reformatory at Bedford, of which she was formerly head, there was the same disapproval of the proposal to give votes to women because it was so "unladylike."

Among the people of New York who know most of the labor problem without themselves being actually labor leaders are men like

Charles P. Neill, like Lawrence Murray, like James Bronson Reynolds, and women like Miss Carpenter. Exactly as I wish that we could have plenty of farmers, and some farmers' wives, in the Convention, so I greatly wish that some of the men leaders, and at least one or two of the women leaders, of the labor movement could be in the Convention: and I also wish that some of the men and women such as these three men and one woman could be elected so as to give the whole people the benefit of their point of view. I very earnestly hope that while the prime essentials of common sense, breadth of interest, and feeling of community citizenship will be treated as of the first importance in electing members of the Convention, yet that in addition representatives of the various interests in the State—practical farmers, for instance, practical business men, leading wage-workers and leading professional men—will all find their places in that body. It is important that all our people should be represented: and therefore it is important that the half of our grown people who are women, which half includes those who have most interest in the rest of our people who are children, should have representation.