



Women and the State

by Esther Clark Wright

In the days when a vigorous campaign was being carried on for extension of the right of suffrage to women, there was published a cartoon which showed two workers in the cause attempting to enlist the interest of a woman bending over a washtub, quite evidently supporting herself and husband and family by such exertions. In answer to the pleas of the canvassers that she support the movement for votes for women and for their right to take part in politics, she answered: "If there's any one thing the men can manage to do by themselves, I say let 'em do it."

We have, in the democracies, achieved universal suffrage, and for some years women have been exercising the right to vote, and to a very limited extent the right to sit in parliaments and legislatures; but they have not been taking any very great part in determining the policy of the state, and have left that matter largely to the men. Should they be content to do this? Is this one of the spheres in which men are so compe-

tent that the women should 'let 'em do it?' Or is there some contribution that women could and should make in the determining and shaping of the policy of the nation, and in defining the goal or goals towards which the activities of the state should be directed?

To answer these questions, we must consider first of all the function of the state, and secondly, what special characteristics in women's outlook or interests may entitle them to claim the right to assist in determining the policy of the state.

The answers to the question regarding the function or purpose of the state have been as numerous as the writers on the subject, but there have been two or three lines of development in political theory which are pertinent to this discussion. The first may be traced back to John Locke, who set out to defend the revolution of 1688 against the champions of the divine right of kings. To understand

Locke's theory, it is necessary to go back to the leading spokesman among the defenders of the divine right of kings, Thomas Hobbes. In The Leviathan, Hobbes had set forth his theory that originally men were in a state of nature, without any government or organized state, but were forced to unite and set up a government in order to put an end to constant warring--which is a very delightful explanation to read in this year of grace, 1939.

In his own quaint words:

The finall Cause, End, or Designe of men (who naturally love Liberty, and Dominion over others) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves (in which we see them live in Commonwealths) is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of Warre, which is necessarily consequent (as hath been shewn) to the naturall Passions of men, when there is no visible Power to keep them in awe, and tye them by feare of punishment to the performance of their Covenants, and observation of those Lawes of Nature. . . .

Locke, like Hobbes, postulated a state of nature before the rise of organized governments, but a less warlike one, peopled by more rational beings who laboured for their subsistence, and appropriated the produce which resulted

from their labours and the land on which they expended their labour. In this state of nature, according to Locke, every man "hath by nature a power not only to preserve his property --that is, his life, liberty and estate, against the injuries and attempts of other men, but to judge of and punish the breaches of that law in others, as he is persuaded the offence deserves, even with death itself, in crimes where the heinousness of the fact, in his opinion, requires it." When men give up their private judgement to the community, then a political society or state is set up. The chief function of the state, according to Locke, is the preservation of property, and although he includes life, liberty and estate under property, his discussion shows that by property he means chiefly landed property.

Needless to say, the owners of property seized upon this doctrine and translated it into law and into policy; since the owners of property were almost the only people who had votes and the only people who had seats in parliament, the chief function of the state was in fact the preservation of property. During the nineteenth century, a strong humanitarian movement arose, which protested against this conception of the function of the state, and with increasing vigor demanded that the claims of persons have priority over the claims of property. The struggle against the Combination Laws and the fight for the Factory

Acts, indicate how severe and bitter was the contest against the established rights of property.

One reason for dwelling at some length upon this phase of political thought--the doctrine that the state existed for the preservation of property--is that it had a very special bearing upon the relation of women to the state. During the time that this doctrine held sway, women were still regarded as a form of property, and the only attention the law paid to them was to make their owners, their husbands or fathers, more secure in possession of this kind of property. It would be impossible to go into the question of all the disabilities and injustices they suffered in consequence but it is important to emphasize the difficulties of the task that the pioneers for women's rights had to face, and the relation of the women's movement to the humanitarian movement in general.

I mentioned that Hobbes was one of the champions of the divine right of kings, and that his theory was superseded by that of John Locke, the apologist for the revolution of 1688, which marked the end of absolutism in England. The doctrine of absolutism reappeared in Germany in the teachings of Fichte and of Hegel, clothed in strange, metaphysical language, but exerting nonetheless a profound influence. In one of the simpler formulations of his theory, Hegel said that the state "is the realization of Freedom, i.e., of

the absolute final aim, and that it exists for its own sake. It must further be understood that all the worth which the human being possesses--all spiritual reality, he possesses only through the State. . . . The State is the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth." Just what Hegel intended by that doctrine we do not know but seized upon by the people who have gained control of a state, it becomes one of the most dangerous philosophical doctrines ever uttered. To maintain that the state exists for its own sake, and that all the worth which a human being possesses, he possesses only through the state; to hold further that the state "is the self-certain absolute mind which recognises no definite authority but its own: which acknowledges no abstract rules of good and bad, shameful and mean, craft and deception" is to erect a Moloch, a Juggernaut, which demands human sacrifices beyond anything pagan deity ever exacted from its worshippers.

It is a relief to turn from Hegel to the Greek thinkers, and to regain perspective, proportion, balance, sanity. Aristotle, following Plato, says that the state comes into being in order to satisfy the bare needs of life, and then adds (and on this point he is more explicit than Plato) that the state continues in existence for the sake of a good life. By a good life, Aristotle meant not so much a virtuous life, as a well-rounded or fully-developed life. That puts the

relationship between the state and the persons who compose it in the correct perspective, that the state, like any other institution, exists for the sake of mankind, not mankind for the sake of the state. Modern political thought has extended Aristotle's conception of citizenship to include all the inhabitants of the state, men, women and children, regardless of status and contribution, or lack of contribution, to the community; it has also defined the limits of the authority and service of the state, and explained its relationship to other organizations and associations and institutions which have a part in the promotion of the good life.

If we accept this principle that the state exists to promote the good life, for all the inhabitants of the country, we can readily perceive that women are as much concerned as are men with the way in which the state fulfils the purpose for which it exists; we can further maintain that they have an even greater concern, since it is generally admitted that the welfare and upbringing of children is particularly women's interest and task. What reason is there for women not having had a share in the policy-making of the state? One reason which I have already pointed out is that, until comparatively recently, women were looked upon as the property of fathers and husbands, and were supposed to have all their interests looked after by their possessors. (We have by no

means passed beyond the "Woman's place is in the home" idea: if you don't believe this, try running for the town council in Wolfville!)

It is not my intention to recapitulate here the arguments for Women's Rights, but I do desire to call attention to several arguments against women's capabilities, which men are certain to bring up if it is suggested that women should have a part in determining the policy of the nation. In the first place, we are sure to hear that women are illogical, for that is a favourite charge. If we examine carefully the actions and springs to action in men and women, we find that this charge results from a difference in the use of logic by the sexes. Women use their logic before they act: men use it after they act. Women reason out a course of action which will bring them to the goal they are seeking, and follow it, relentlessly, which is one of the reasons why, as Kipling pointed out, the female of the species is more deadly than the male. The woman knows what she is doing and why, although her reasons may be so deep-seated as to be almost instinctive, and although she may be so inarticulate as to be totally unable to state them. Men are far more likely to act on impulse or under the stress of emotion, but they can always rationalize their actions; they can always explain them at great length and with much use of formal logic.

Let me illustrate from my senior year in college. The men in the class, who were very much in the minority because of the war, came to us to explain that one member of the class should be dropped from the class. He was holding several offices that should be held only by men who were going to graduate and he, on account of not paying sufficient attention to his studies, was not graduating with us. Their argument seemed reasonable, and we consented to support them in voting the offending member out of the class. Unfortunately, in telling the man of the decision of the class, the men bungled the job, and were forced to admit defeat in the verbal fireworks which ensued. A second class meeting was called which rescinded the motion of the previous day, although it seemed to some of us that the reasons why we had voted the man out of the class still held good. They were just as cogent: what had broken down was the men's rationalizing afterwards.

Women reason before they act and men rationalize after they act. Take this home and try it on your piano; don't try it on your husband or your male colleague, for he will tell you it is all nonsense. But leave it lying on the piano, or somewhere handy, and see how useful it is.

Another objection that men sometimes bring up against us is that women see through a brick wall to what isn't on

the other side. That is very different from the masculine aptitude, which is not to see the brick wall until they bump into it. All this means that men deal with a situation when and as it arises, but they are impatient of women's visualizing of future contingencies and making preparations to deal with them. I recall an amusing instance of this difference in outlook. A friend in California came to me almost in tears, because her husband declined to consider her proposition that their son, then aged one year and a half, must have a year in France in his teens so that he would have a good grounding in French. A great deal of women's time and effort is given to foreseeing possible contingencies and preparing to meet them, but they soon learn that, although the men are quite willing to profit by the women's forethought in having clothes clean for a journey, provisions ready for a picnic, winter clothes in order for the first cold weather, they do not wish to take any part in the preparations, nor even to hear about them. Preparedness is second nature to women: for men it has to be a special slogan.

One objection that would inevitably be uttered if women were to suggest that they should have a share in planning the policy of the state, is that women do not understand business, especially big business. There are several answers to that. One is that men do not understand running a household or nur-

sing children--i.e., people understand the jobs to which they are giving their time and attention. Another answer is that big business does not wish to be understood by women or by anybody outside the circle of its own devotees. It wishes the rest of the world to accept the propaganda which it foists so generously and unremittingly upon a somewhat unsuspecting public, to the effect that it is valuable and efficient and all for the good of the community; it wishes to go on its way acquiring more and more money, power and authority, and to remain unchallenged. . . .

To understand big business is evidently to accept its right to go on acquiring more and more money, power and authority. There is a passage in Aristotle, which is of interest here; he says that there is a natural art of acquisitiveness or money-making which is a part of the art of managing a household--i.e., there is some sense in making money to provide for needs of the household, in other words for use--but to go on making money for the sake of piling up possessions is to let one instinct get out of control. There is increasing evidence that thoughtful people are seeking to call in question the right of big business to go on its way unchallenged.

This question of money-making brings me to the next step in my argument. So far we have been putting women on the defensive; now let us carry the

war into the opposite camp and put the men on the defensive. There are three characteristics of the typical masculine attitude, which make men unfitted for control of the policy-making of the state without the checks and balances which the cooperation of the women would effect. They are too much inclined to abstract thinking, too prone to consider money-making as an end in itself, too apt to concentrate on one phase or factor in a situation. Let me illustrate this by the development of the subject in which I am particularly interested, Economics. The term comes from two Greek words, meaning "house" and "management." Oeconomy originally meant the management of the household, the using of the resources available to the household for satisfying the needs of the members of the household. There were about it the connotations of careful stewardship, good husbandry, thrifty housewifeliness. It included the three factors of production, consumption, distribution, which were probably handled in a more satisfactory manner under the household system than they are at present in our muddled system of overproduction, underconsumption, maldistribution, with our highly organized marketing which breaks down under the slightest pressure, and our elaborate means of transportation which is too expensive to be utilized.

The concept of oeconomy first took shape in the households of the Greek

city-state, and it had about it that idea of thrift, resourcefulness, consideration of all the needs and persons involved, which was characteristic of the pioneer households of New England and which was exemplified in the use of the Saturday night baked beans and steamed brown bread. There had to be a big fire kept all day Saturday to heat the water for the Saturday night baths; the oven was utilized to bake the beans, which were grown in the garden, with the accompaniment of salt pork from the pigs of their own raising, and molasses from the West Indies, which was an important item in a three-cornered trade between England, New England and the West Indies; on the top of the stove was cooked the brown bread, made from the cornmeal, rye and wheat raised on the farm, with molasses to sweeten.

What happened to this concept of oeconomy? It became political economy, with some attempt to apply to the state this wise stewardship, this management of the affairs of the state, so that whatever was produced was either utilized to satisfy needs or exchanged for some product that was needed, so that the needs of every member of the state were met and each was doing his part toward the common weal. But this promising field of thought and endeavour, which had a solid background of achievement to give it reality and a commonsense goal to render it workable, was discarded

by the masculine intellect, which began to concentrate upon economic studies in the nineteenth century, and two developments resulted. Economic theory became an abstract science, which declined to have any dealings with the branches of knowledge which have to do with human behaviour, such as Psychology and Ethics, lest the strict purity of its theorizing be sullied. Economic theory has become as remote from real life and as remorselessly abstract in thought and language as Metaphysics; it has come to lean very heavily upon higher mathematics and is rapidly becoming unable to express itself except in mathematical symbols of so elaborate a character as to render its arguments absolutely incomprehensible to anyone without a knowledge of higher mathematics.

Practical economics, as distinct from this abstract theorizing, is a study of special phases of economic activity, finance, industry, commerce, salesmanship, advertising, with a view to making each a more efficient instrument for appropriating a larger share of the world's wealth, and with but scant attention to the effect of such activities on the community as a whole. The outlook is frankly money-making, and surprise would be expressed that any exception could be taken to that preoccupation.

These two interests, which have

changed the course of economics, tend to dominate any sphere of activity which men control, and political life is no exception. The policy of the state or nation is in danger, on the one hand, of being directed toward the realization of some abstract idea, which may be excellent in itself (as for instance, justice, freedom, democracy, totalitarianism, communism, the empire, the reich) but which becomes an abomination when millions of men and women and children must be sacrificed to attain it, when the resources of the state, human and material, must be devoted to the realization of this idea.

On the other hand, the policy of the state may be guided by the other dominant masculine interest, money-making. Neither on the election platform, nor in speeches in parliament, do we hear much about the influence money exerts. Money talks, and it talks very persuasively, but it talks furtively, in lobbies, in legislators' offices, behind the scenes. The moneyed interests have representatives on the spot watching and influencing the course of legislation. I had some opportunity of seeing a little of this in operation a few years ago in Ottawa; and I heard a man who was very much "on the inside" express his dissatisfaction at the way in which certain big interests dodged taxation on their millions of dollars of profits, and held up the government by threatening to denounce them in the press of the country and to turn them out of office if they dared to increase

their taxation, and also influenced the framing of the platform of the opposition party. If you are interested in seeking further enlightenment on this subject, let me recommend the Beards' America in Midpassage, which sets forth plainly and fearlessly the ways in which the vested interests have influenced legislation and foreign policy in the United States in the last two decades.

As against men's interests in abstract ideas and in money-making, women's interests are practical and personal. Women can sometimes show their prowess in realms of abstract thought--e.g., the most outstanding exponent of mysticism at the present time is a woman, Evelyn Underhill--but for most women after a morning of dealing with the incidents of the home, the front door bell ringing, the telephone ringing, a knock at the back door, the bread burning in the oven, the dinner boiling over, the baby crying, Johnny pulling Mary's hair, there is not energy or desire to sit down and contemplate the Absolute or the relationship between Time and Space. There is an immediacy and a tangibility about women's tasks which makes for a practical outlook.

Again, women's tasks are largely concerned with personalities, with the bringing into existence of new persons, with the development of personalities and with the relationship of

persons to one another, and they do it all without making a song about it. If men have to do with personal relationships, they set up personnel departments and diplomatic corps, and surround them with great prestige. With women that is all in the day's work, and I contend that the amount of diplomacy required to run the average household, with two or three generations, and a maid, with all the various duties, rights, privileges and responsibilities of the different inmates of the house to be considered, would keep Europe out of war any year.

One other point about women's duties should be stressed here: women are used to being half a dozen things at once, to doing half a dozen tasks at once, to considering half a dozen persons' interests at once. Men are in the habit of concentrating on one occupation, one task, one person, at a time, and find difficulty in juggling with several interests at once. Text-books in economics point out with much solemnity that it is necessary to consider more than one factor in a situation, and the seriousness of their treatment of this lamentable fact used to amuse women greatly. If you have ever seen a man try to take over the running of a household, you will understand how helpless a man is when confronted with the multiplicity of women's duties.

This practical, personal, many-sided outlook of women, which is in large

part the result of the nature of their duties, is extremely valuable as a corrective to the masculine tendencies to exalt the abstract, the money-making, and the single feature. We would all agree that the time is out of joint and that the nation which has most seriously lost sanity and balance and sense of proportion is Nazi Germany. It is not irrelevant to point out that Naziism has most firmly relegated women to a back seat, has most emphatically refused to allow them any part in determining the policy of the state, has most explicitly demanded of them the exercise of their biological function as their sole contribution to the state. The leaders of the Nazi party stated very plainly that they were out to make Germany a great nation, a powerful nation, and warned the people that they must expect to live badly. Guns or butter? A career of conquest or the good life? A question was asked many centuries ago about what profit there was in gaining the whole world and losing the soul; in the twentieth century we may phrase the alternatives differently, but it is the same problem.

If the state, our own nation, any nation, all nations, are to exist for the sake of the good life, for the creation of "the optimum material environment in which to realize their highest potentialities of spiritual development," as one modern writer has put it, the women must be eternally on

the job to see that the policy of the state is rightly directed. Their reasoning before acting, their forethought, their refusal to allow property rights and money-making to dominate, their practical, personal, many-sided outlook, are all needed. When statesmen start talking about guns, we must remind them of butter. When the naval and shipping experts press for more battleships, we must urge better schools for our children. When the

commercial interests demand larger armies for the protection of their trade, we must insist on the provision of adequate public health services. When big business complains against the taxes laid upon it, we must point to the need for better housing, for increased recreational facilities, for old age pensions, for unemployment insurance. We, the women, must see to it that the state exists for the furtherance of the good life.