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I Constance Markievicz, *Women, Ideals and the Nation*¹

I take it as a great compliment that so many of you, the rising young women of Ireland, who are distinguishing yourselves every day and coming more and more to the front, should give me this opportunity. We older people look to you with great hopes and a great confidence that in your gradual emancipation you are bringing fresh ideas, fresh energies, and above all a great genius for sacrifice into the life of the nation.

In Ireland the women seem to have taken less part in public life, and to have had less share in the struggle for liberty, than in other nations. In Russia, among the people who are working to overthrow the tyrannical and unjust government of the Czar and his officials, and in Poland where, to be a nationalist, men and women must take their lives in their hands, women work as comrades, shoulder to shoulder, with their men.² No duty is too hard, no act too dangerous for them to undertake. Many a woman has been incarcerated in the dungeons under St. Peter and St. Paul – to sit in the damp and mouldy gloom and watch – perhaps for a week, perhaps for a year – the little gate high up on the wall, where one day or other, sure enough, she would see a little stream of dirty water

¹ Constance Markievicz, *Women, Ideals and the Nation: A Lecture Delivered to the Students' National Literary Society, Dublin, by Constance de Markievicz* (Dublin: Inginide na hÉireann, 1909).

² The 1905 Russian Revolution led to the establishment of the State Duma, a multi-party system, and a national constitution. The Polish Revolution of the same year was triggered by a series of struggles focused on independence from Russia as well as workers' and peasant rights.

Constance Markievicz

begin to trickle through, which would tell her that soon that which once had been her would drift out into the world again.³

Many another woman has dropped exhausted on the long, weary march through the snow-covered steppes to the land of exile. Weighed down by her chains, unable to stir herself, scarcely a groan escapes her, even under the lash of the knout – freely applied by the soldier in charge – she has sunk down hopeless and helpless, alone on the dreary plain, to watch for a few short hours the big black birds circling nearer and nearer, borne up and sustained by the knowledge that ‘no sacrifice is ever in vain’, and that as the death of Christ brought a new hope and a new life to an old world, so the blood of each martyr shed in the cause of liberty will give a new impetus to the comrades who are left behind to continue the work.

Now, England in this twentieth century is much more civilised, and much more subtle than Russia in her methods for subjugating a nation; therefore, more difficult to fight; and much more difficult to realise as an enemy. She deals out pennies liberally and noisily with her right hand, shouting into our ears all the time how good and how liberal she is to the mere Irish, while her left hand is busily engaged in feeling in our pockets and abstracting as many as she can of the few gold pieces we have earned by the sweat of our brows.⁴ She trumpets her own praise loudly through the world – John Bull’s bluntness, honesty, truth and bravery, his nobleness in dealing with his enemies – all this has been sung, shouted and declaimed throughout civilisation, so that Irish people, being very simple and honest themselves, have often taken a very long time to realise that we are being governed – not as we are told for the ultimate good of the Irish nation, but as an alien province, that must be prevented from interfering with the commerce of, and whose interest must always be kept subservient to, England.⁵ She has systematically overtaxed us – for our own good; she has depopulated our country – and it is for our own good; she has tried to kill our language – for our own good; she entices our young men into her armies, to fight her battles for her – and still it is for

³ The reference is presumably to the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, which incarcerated numerous political prisoners, including Peter Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin, and Leon Trotsky. The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul is located in Vilnius, a baroque masterpiece of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

⁴ Originally ‘mere’ Irish meant pure (native) Irish, unmixed by Norman stock or on account of subsequent colonial settlement. Here the term denotes the Irish as being of lesser status in relation to Britain.

⁵ John Bull, created by John Arbuthnot (1667–1735) as a satirical character in the early eighteenth century, was commonly used thereafter to personify England.

Women, Ideals and the Nation

our own good. She began this policy in 1800 when – entirely for our own good – our Parliament was disbanded, and we were given instead the great privilege of sending to Westminster a small band of representatives to make the best fight they could for Irish rights against an overwhelming majority; which, of course, while causing but a small annoyance to England, brought there with the representatives of Ireland, their families and the whole of the society in which they moved.⁶ In fact the wealthiest and most influential section of the Irish nation was, at one fell swoop, transferred to London, there to spend its money, and to learn to talk about the ‘Empire’. The immense privilege of belonging to the ‘greatest Empire in the world’, of being one with ‘the greatest people in the world’, has since been shouted and preached and sung to us, till many of us have been beguiled into believing this story of fairy gold only to be lost – lost to our country in her direst need!

In this desertion our women participated quite as much as our men, they abandoned their Dublin mansions, to hire or buy houses in London, they followed the English Court about and joined the English ranks of toadies and placehunters, bringing up their daughters in English ways and teaching them to make English ideals their ideals, and when possible marrying them to Englishmen.

Of course this could not go on for ever, and the Irish nation, at last realising that they and their interests had been sold for years, refused to be represented by them any longer ... but it was too late – the rich and the aristocratic section of the men and women of Ireland had been lost to their country for years, if not for all eternity.

Now, I am not going to discuss the subtle psychological question of why it was that so few women in Ireland have been prominent in the national struggle, or try to discover how they lost in the dark ages of persecution the magnificent legacy of Maeve, Fleas, Macha and their other great fighting ancestors.⁷ True, several women distinguished themselves on the battlefields of '98, and we have the women of the *Nation* newspaper, of the Ladies' Land League, also in our own day the few women who have worked their hardest in the Sinn Féin movement and in the Gaelic League, and we have the woman who won a battle for Ireland,

⁶ The Acts of Union were passed in 1800 and came into force on 1 January 1801, creating the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The Acts are frequently referred to as the 1801 Act of Union, which abolished the Irish parliament, with Irish representatives henceforth elected to the Westminster parliament.

⁷ Irish female mythical characters.

Constance Markievicz

by preventing a wobbly Corporation from presenting King Edward of England with a loyal address.⁸ But for the most part our women, though sincere, steadfast Nationalists at heart, have been content to remain quietly at home, and leave all the fighting and striving to the men.

Lately things seem to be changing. As in the last century, during the sixties, a strong tide of liberty swept over the world, so now again a strong tide of liberty seems to be coming towards us, swelling and growing and carrying before it all the outposts that hold women enslaved and bearing them triumphantly into the life of the nations to which they belong.

We are in a very difficult position here, as so many Unionist women would fain have us work together with them for the emancipation of their sex and votes — obviously to send a member to Westminster. But I would ask every Nationalist woman to pause before she joined a Suffrage Society or Franchise League that did not include in their Programme the Freedom of their Nation.⁹ ‘A Free Ireland with No Sex Disabilities in her Constitution’ should be the motto of all Nationalist women. And a grand motto it is.

There are great possibilities, in the hands and the hearts of the young women of Ireland — great possibilities indeed, and great responsibilities. For as you are born a woman, so you are born an Irishwoman, with all the troubles and responsibilities of both. You may shirk or deny them, but they are there, and some day — as a woman and as an Irishwoman — you will have to face the question of how your life has been spent, and how have you served your sex and your nation?

The greatest gifts that the young women of Ireland can bring into public life with them, are ideals and principles. Ideals, that are but the Inward Vision, that will show them their nation glorious and free, no longer a reproach to her sons and daughters; and principles that will give them

⁸ Referring respectively to the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland; the weekly newspaper, *The Nation*, published between 1844 and 1849 and edited by Young Irelanders Charles Gavan Duffy (1816–1903), Thomas Davis (1814–45), and John Blake Dillon (1814–66); the women’s auxiliary wing of the Irish National Land League between 1881 and 1882; the Gaelic League, founded in 1893 by Douglas Hyde, who served as its first president, and who promoted the use of the Irish language in everyday life; and King Edward VII’s 1903 visit to Ireland.

⁹ The Irish Women’s Suffrage Society (originally the North of Ireland Women’s Suffrage Society) was founded in 1872 by the unionist politician and campaigner Isabella Maria Susan Tod (1836–96). The Irish Women’s Franchise League was established in Dublin in 1908 by Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (1877–1946), Francis Sheehy-Skeffington (1878–1916), and James H. Cousins (1873–1956).

Women, Ideals and the Nation

courage and strength – the patient toil of the worker, the brilliant inspiration of the leader.

Women, from having till very recently stood so far removed from all politics, should be able to formulate a much clearer and more incisive view of the political situation than men. For a man from the time he is a mere lad is more or less in touch with politics, and has usually the label of some party attached to him, long before he properly understands what it really means.

We all know that when you get quite close to a rock or to a waterfall you lose the general effect of the mountain of which it is only a small part; and it is just the same with politics. Men all their lives are so occupied in examining closely, from a narrow party point of view all the little Bills ‘relating to Ireland’ – that all parties in the British Houses of Parliament are so constantly throwing them, to fight and squabble over – that they often quite lose sight of their ‘mountain’ and forget that – as the greater contains the less, as the mountain contains the rocks and the waterfalls, so does the lost nationhood of their country contain class legislation, sex legislation, trade legislation.

Now, here is a chance for our women. Let them remind their men, that their first duty is to examine any legislation proposed not from a party point of view, not from the point of view of a sex, a trade, or a class, but simply and only from the standpoint of their Nation. Let them learn to be statesmen and not merely politicians. Let them consider how their action with regard to it may help or hinder their national struggle for independence and nothing else, and then let them act accordingly.

Taking my simile from another point of view, as surely that a few stones, and a few pails of water, though improving our garden, are but a poor substitute for our great mysterious mountain, so these little Bills, though improving the conditions of our people, are at the best but a poor substitute for our Nation’s freedom, which in the meantime has been shelved and almost forgotten. Now, let our women come forward with the determination that we must obtain possession of the mountain itself – not contenting ourselves with buying or stealing bits of rock and pails of water.

Fix your mind on the ideal of Ireland free, with her women enjoying the full rights of citizenship in their own nation, and no one will be able to side-track you, and so make use of you to use up the energies of the nation in obtaining all sorts of concessions – concessions, too, that for

Constance Markievicz

the most part were coming in the natural course of evolution, and were perhaps just hastened a few years by the fierce agitations to obtain them.

Catholic emancipation must have come; it has come even in Russian Poland, where the whole nation was in arms against Russia as late as '63, and where it stands for a much greater thing than it does here.¹⁰

Catholicism is an integral part of a Pole's Nationality, the Orthodox religion an integral part of a Russian's, for all Poles are Catholic, all Russians Orthodox – and a Pole of the Orthodox religion would even now be regarded with suspicion in Poland and could not possibly enter any Polish National Movement; while a Russian who was a Catholic would find it difficult even to live in his country.

Tenant right and peasant proprietorship, extension of the franchise and universal suffrage, are all but steps in the evolution of the world; for, as education and with it the knowledge of the rights of a man or a woman to live, is gained by the masses of mankind, so gradually they push their way – individually and collectively – into the life of their nation, and being in the majority, the moment they realise their power, the world may be theirs for the taking.

But our national freedom cannot, and must not, be left to evolution. If we look around us, we will find that evolution – as far as Ireland is concerned – is tending rather to annihilate us as a nation altogether. We seem day by day to be brought more and more in touch with England, and little by little to be losing all that distinctiveness which pertains to a nation, and which may be called nationality. London seems to be coming nearer and nearer to us till quite imperceptibly it has become the centre of the universe to even many good Irishmen.

Of course all modern inventions have helped England in the task of submerging our interests in hers – trains, the penny post, the telegraph system, have all brought her nearer, and given her more power over us. More especially the daily papers, forcing England upon us as the headquarters of our politics, our society, our stock exchange, our sport, teaching us to regard her foreign policy and her wars from the point of view of one or other of her political parties – all this, I say, wears away the rock of our national pride, and little by little we drift nearer to the conventional English views on life.

¹⁰ The 1863 'January Uprising' was an insurrection within the Russian portion of Poland that sought the restoration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Catholic Emancipation in Ireland culminated in the 1829 Roman Catholic Relief Act.

Women, Ideals and the Nation

The educational systems through the country have also been used to work for the destruction of our nationality, from the smart English governess who despised the mere Irish, to the village schoolmaster forced to train up his scholars in ignorance of Ireland's wrongs, in ignorance of Ireland's language and history.

The schools, too, were usually under the patronage of the priest or parson of the district, and therefore very naturally concentrated on developing strong sectarian feelings in the children, instead of the broader creed of nationalism.

Every right granted to us by England has been done in such a way that it helped to split us up into divisions and sub-divisions. That policy is being continued now. We have had landlords and tenants, Catholics and Protestants, North and South, besides the sub-divisions into the different sections of the English political parties. We are rapidly adding graziers and peasants, farmers and labourers, to the list of Irishmen who are all losing sight of their ideal, and sordidly scrambling for what they hope to get.¹¹ They are curiously blind and inconsistent, too, for no great and real prosperity can be ours, while our interests are always the very last to be considered in an Empire.

To prove this, take a glance at two of the Bills that are being very much discussed at this moment.

The Liberals are talking of Land Tax.¹² This may suit the needs of England very well, with her big, rich proprietors, who can well afford to pay it; but over here, where the land is at this moment gradually becoming the property of the farmer, big and small, through a system of paying a certain rent to the Government, it will mean that this rent has been raised, and nothing more, and that, in spite of England's promises. The rent goes into England's pockets, so also does the Land Tax. Therefore, except in the terms, where is the difference? And who cares whether the extra charge is called rent or 'Land Tax'? It will have to be paid, and that is the only point of any importance to the farmer.

¹¹ Markiewicz is referring to the series of land acts passed by both Liberal and Conservative governments since 1870, the most significant of which was in 1903 under George Wyndham. The Act bought out absentee landlords and facilitated the transfer of huge tracts of land to Irish tenants. She is also referring to the Labourers (Ireland) Act 1906, which granted state-funded rural social housing.

¹² Land taxes were included in a package of reforms introduced by the Liberal government in Britain between 1906 and 1914.

Constance Markievicz

Then take the great Conservative cry of Tariff Reform.¹³ We are all told that Cobden ruined Ireland's milling industry with Free Trade, and we are all familiar with the pitiful ruins of mills, great and small, through the country.¹⁴ Round Dublin, along the Dodder banks, one ruin after another, tells its sad tale of unemployment and emigration to the holiday wanderer. In Sligo – my own county – every little stream has the same tale to tell; and where, even the bleak walls have vanished, you often find a record of bygone prosperity in names such as Milltown or Millbrook.

But conditions, have changed all over the world since Cobden's day, and tax on flour now would only mean that the wheat-growing industry of Canada would benefit largely. 'Colonial Preference' would mean that Canada would get every advantage over Russia and other wheat-growing countries in our markets, while Ireland would possibly have to pay more for bread.

In the ready-made clothing trades, England with her Black Country, with her great manufacturing towns, has always been our worst enemy, and a tax on foreign ready-made clothes would tend to close the markets to all but English goods – the very ones (that once granted we require Protection at all) we require to be protected the most against. England's greatest rival in ready-mades is Germany. We, at present, count for nothing, and, of course, German goods excluded by a prohibitory tariff, England would do practically what she liked with the markets over here. Her firms would be in the position of a certain English boot factory which established a shop in Limerick in competition to a Limerick boot factory. Being a rich firm, they were able to sell their wares under cost price to the unsuspecting people of Limerick, till the day when the Limerick factory closed its doors, unable to stand up against the competition, and from that day the people of Limerick have had to pay through the boots they wear – the expenses of the fight, and a huge dividend to the English company, as well as having the unemployed from the ruined industry to support, unless they emigrate.

All this points to the one way in which the women of Ireland can help their country; and, indeed, many of them are already doing so; and it is a movement too that all creeds, all classes, and all politics can join in. We

¹³ Tariff Reform, associated with the national campaign by Liberal Unionist MP Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914) for an imperial preference on imports, became popular among Conservative grassroots from 1903.

¹⁴ Richard Cobden (1804–65) was an English manufacturer and statesman who supported the repeal of the Corn Laws and the introduction of free trade.