

Fac-simile of the Notes of a Speech by John Bright.

THIS month we present our readers with a curiosity—the fac-simile notes of John Bright's famous speech on Women's Suffrage, in the House of Commons, April 26, 1876. Mr. J. A. Bright, M.P., to whose kindness we owe them, believes that no others by his father are extant, so that the interest of the present is unique. To allow the reader to compare the speech, as spoken, with the notes, we add an abstract of the *Times* report next morning.

MR. BRIGHT said it was with extreme reluctance that he took part in this debate. . . . The Bill seemed to him based on a proposition which was untenable, and which, he thought, was contradicted by universal experience. (Cheers.) In fact, it was a Bill based on the assumed hostility between the sexes. (Hear.) . . . Men were represented as ruling even to the length of tyranny, and women were represented as suffering injustice even to the length of very degrading slavery. (Hear.) . . . This was not said of women in savage nations, but it was said of women in general in this civilised and Christian country in which they lived. If he looked at the population of this country, that which struck him more than almost anything else was this—that at this moment there were millions of men at work, sacrificing and giving up their leisure to a life of sustained hardship, confronting peril in every shape, for the sake of the sustenance, and the comfort and the happiness of women and children. (Cheers.) . . . The avowed object of this Bill was to enable the women of this country to defend themselves against a Parliament of men. (Hear.) . . . There might be injustice with regard to the laws which affected the property of married women; but was there no injustice in the laws which affected the property of men? Had younger sons no right to complain? (A laugh.) . . . But there was another side to this question. He would take the question of punishment. There could be no doubt whatever that, as regards the question of punishment, there was much greater moderation or

reluctance. 1867. Mill's Book. Doubt. Confirmed.
Bill based on proposition. untenable & condemned }
of all experience. }
on assumed hostility between sexes - speeches }
& conversation }
men. seeking to rule to length of tyranny.
women. suffering injustice to degree of slavery.
This sort of savage nations. or savages in civilized }
nations. where passion & hate bore supreme }
but of this nation. where millions of men work - }
sacrifice - give up leisure. health. sustenance }
hardship. & comfort every hour for wife & children }
Bill. to enable women to defend themselves }
against injustice & tyranny of Parli^t. of men! }
Facts. Property laws. not women only. but men. }
younger sons & daughters suffer. }
If married women wronged. from times when law }
was weak. & possession & defence vested in men. }
On this point. Debates. measures. temper shown }
but another side. Punishments highest to lowest. }
Judges. Juries. Breach of promise - men Juries }
Verdicts & damages. Taxation of servants. }

mercy dealt out to women than to men. (Hear.) . . . In all cases of punishment judges and juries were always more lenient in disposition to women than they were to men. He would point out to some of those ladies who were so excited on this matter, that in cases of breach of promise of marriage the advantage on their side seemed to be enormous. (Laughter and cheers.) . . . They almost always got a verdict, and very often, he was satisfied, when they ought not to have got it. (Laughter.) . . . Women servants were not taxed, and men servants were taxed. . . . There was an argument which told with many, and that was the argument of equal rights. . . . He supposed the country had a right to determine how it would be governed—whether by one, by few, or by many. Honourable members told us that unless this Bill passed we should have a class discontented. . . . But the great mistake was in arguing that women were a class. (Hear.) Nothing could be more monstrous or absurd than to describe women as a class. They were not like the class of agricultural labourers or factory workers. Who were so near the hearts of the legislators of this country as the members of their own families? (Cheers.) It was a scandalous and odious libel to say women were a class, and were therefore excluded from our sympathy, and Parliament could do no justice in regard to them. (Cheers.) . . . Unfortunately for those who argued about political wrongs, the measure excluded by far the greatest proportion of women—viz., those who, if there were any special qualification required for an elector, might be said to be specially qualified. It excluded married women, though they were generally older, more informed, and had greater interests at stake. Then it was said that the Bill was an instalment, that it was one step in the emancipation of women.

If that were so, it was very odd that those most concerned in the Bill did not appear to be aware of it, because last year there was a great dispute on that

no case for accusation. ² But claim equal rights
not discuss question of rights. Nation determining }
one - few or many. }
intelligible. experience - opinion decides where
power shall rest. & franchise be conferred.
But excluded class injured & discontented.
True. Landowners - Farmers - Laborers - } might
Merchants; Manufac^{rs} & Laborers suffer }
But women not a class. our mothers, wives }
sisters & daughters. }
as near to hearts of men as electing & legislators
as in our homes & families.
Scandalous & odious libel to say the contrary.
If any fact seem to contradict. spring from ignorance
of ancient custom. which discussion & advancing
civilization, & Christian feeling will correct.
So much for political wrongs of women & reasons
for bill based on those wrongs.
But look further. Bill excludes married.
older - more informed - greater interests at stake.
An instalment - one step in leading ^{the} redemption
path ^{of} women.

matter. . . . Last year he saw a letter, signed "A Married Claimant of the Franchise," in a newspaper, who said that a married woman could not claim to vote as a householder, but why should she not pay her husband a sum for her lodgings, so as to entitle her to claim the lodger franchise? (Laughter.) . . . If that Bill passed, how would they contend against further claims? (Hear, hear.) . . . And what were they to say to those women who were to have votes until they

married? The moment the woman householder came out of church or chapel as a wife her vote would vanish, and her husband would become the elector. (A laugh.) It seemed to him that if they passed that Bill and went no further, what Mr. Mill called "the subjection of women" was decreed by the very measure intended to enfranchise them, and by the very women, and the very party in that House, who were in favour of that Bill. (Hear, hear.) Then again, if all men being householders had a right to be elected, on what principle were women not also to have a right to be elected? (Hear, hear.) Those who opposed that Bill had a right to ask these questions, and to have an answer to them. If they were to travel that path, let them know how far they were going, and to what it led. . . . If they granted that every woman, married or unmarried, was to have a vote, the hon. member for Lincolnshire had referred to what would happen in every house where there was a double vote. If the husband and wife agreed, it would make no difference in the result of the election; but if they disagreed, it would possibly introduce discord into every family; and if there were discord between man and wife, there would certainly be discord between the children. . . . In that House they had one peculiar kind of knowledge—namely, of the penalties they paid for their constitutional freedom. . . . Was it desirable to introduce their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters to the excitement, the turmoil, and, it might be, the very humiliation which seemed in every country to attend a system of Parliamentary representation? (Hear, hear.) Women were more likely to be tainted in that way than men were. There had

3

Dispute last year - secession - real opinion & Agil
Examiner - Letter - Mill's view - he the Apostle
if passed, how contend against further claim?
Shall marriage disfranchise?
shall subjection of women be decreed if there are
are clamoring for her freedom?
if her right to elect is not equally as to the elected?
must ask these questions - who will answer them?
if to travel this path - how far & where am I to go?
must all what then? } many will
institutions doubled - expenses doubled - doubled }
if man & wife agree - double votes - a no result
if disagree - discord in every house - & children
divided }
impose heavy penalties for Constitutional Freedom
shall wives - sisters - daughters be introduced to the
excitement & turmoil of elections } Couraging &
Canvassed? }
said - if woman yields to what is degrading & corrupt,
she yields more & more irrevocably than men.
Some Boro's - Municipal - shocking scenes
partly feeling - make majorities - }

been some instances of it, ever since the Municipal Act gave them votes. He knew a place in his neighbourhood where scenes of the most shocking kind had occurred. . . . In another borough in Lancashire, at an election, women—by the hundred, he was told—but in great numbers—were seen drunk and disgraced under the temptation offered them in the fierceness and unscrupulousness of a political contest. . . . The hon. member for Warwickshire had referred to priestly

influence. On that he would only say that the influence of the priest, the parson, and the minister would be greatly raised if that Bill were passed. (Hear, hear.) . . . Well, they were asked to make that great change and to incur all those risks—for what? To arm the women of this country against the men of this country—to defend them against their husbands, their brothers, and their sons. To him the idea had in it something strange and monstrous; and he thought that a more baseless case had never been submitted to the House of Commons. (Hear, hear.) If all men and women voted, the general result must be the same; for, by an unalterable natural law, strength was stronger than weakness, and in the end, by an absolute necessity, men must prevail. Heregretted that there should be any measure in favour of extended suffrage to which he could not give his support; but women would lose much of what was best in what they now possessed, and they would gain no good of any sort, by mingling in the contests of the polling-booths. He should vote for that measure if he were voting solely in the interests of men; but he would vote against it with perfect honesty, believing that in so doing he should most serve the interests of women themselves. An honourable member who voted for the Bill last year, in a conversation with him the next day, told him that he had very great doubts in the matter, for he found wherever he went that all the best women seemed to be against the measure. (Laughter and cheers.) If the House believed that they could not legislate justly for their mothers, their wives, their sisters, and their daughters, the House might abdicate, and might pass that Bill. But he believed that Parlia-

4

not. I vote on other influences: Priest-Parson, Minister,
Ireland - women's vote. Priests vote. dependent
everywhere
and this change - for what? To Arm against men!
Against Fathers. Husbands. Brothers & Sons! :
To me. idea strange & monstrous. case baseless.
If all vote. general result same. Unalterable Law
Strength stronger than weakness. & men prevail.
women lose much of what is best among them.
& gain nothing good in contests at Polling Booth.
my sympathies for wide franchise. but not this
Bill.
that sympathy gives many votes for this Bill.
many vote. but dislike. Last year. Stamp'd, & pack
Club & Lobby. Confession of Doubt & Dislike.
Mistake. & not courage to retract.
I vote. not solely in interest of men. but even
more in interest of women.
Best women everywhere against it.
Believe
to men can legislate for wives, sisters & daughters
They who think otherwise. vote for this Bill -
They who believe they can be just. reject this Bill.

ment could not, unless it were in ignorance, be otherwise than just to the women of this country, with whom they were so intimately allied; and with that conviction, and having these doubts—which were stronger even than he had been able to express—doubts also which had only become strengthened the more he had considered the subject—he was obliged—differing from many of those whom he cared for and loved—to give his opposition to that Bill.