

CHAPTER 13

WOMEN IN THE CIVIL SERVICE

IN the year 1874 one of many Royal Commissions expressed itself in the following guarded terms:

“Experience shows that women are well qualified for clerical work of a less important character and are satisfied with a lower rate of pay than men similarly employed. . . . As regards the ordinary clerical work of an office, however, we are not prepared to recommend their employment unless they can be placed in separate rooms under proper female supervision.”

That burst of candour almost seventy years ago sheds a lot of illumination on the economic reasons underlying the grudging and partial concessions made from time to time to the general principle of sex equality. But it didn't get the women very far in 1874, because forty years later another commission still held that “in regard to the power of sustained work, in continuity of service and in adaptability to varying service conditions, the advantage lies with men”. War, however, as we have seen, sweeps away a lot of archaic rubbish and by 1920 women had caught up to such an extent that it was possible for a Reorganization Committee set up at that time to agree that “within parallel classes of the Civil Service women should be given a status and authority identical with that accorded to man”.

The same committee recommended equality of training and opportunity for promotion and regarded segregation as merely a matter of departmental expediency. In general it looked favourably on the idea of men and women working side by side on duties of a similar character, whereat the Grundys of the Service, apart from an obstinate few, lay down and died. But as it happens, that was only the beginning of the real fight for the application of the principle herein enunciated in economic terms.

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It is true that the Tomlin Commission in 1929 recommended “a fair field and no favour” as the guiding principle for the employment of women in the Service and the opening of all sorts of doors hitherto closed to them, but on the question of equal pay to match equal opportunity the commission was hopelessly divided.

In actual fact the principle of equal pay for men and women had already been accepted by the House of Commons, which, in the Sex Disqualification Act of 1920, laid it down that “women should have equal opportunity with men in all branches of the Civil Service and under all local authorities . . . and should also receive equal pay”. The value of this gesture was however completely destroyed by the addition of a proviso which permitted regulations by Order in Council providing for the conditions under which women should be admitted to the Civil Service. This has the effect of limiting the sphere of opportunity by excluding women from certain administrative posts. The equal pay provisions were similarly held in abeyance and the issue was again revived during the Baldwin administration in 1936, when the government was defeated but did not resign. And again nothing was done about it.

Harking back to the Royal Commission of 1929 it will be of interest to note some of the arguments brought to bear against the claim for equal pay.

The Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Labour for instance said that “the effect of granting equal pay would be regarded by trade and industry as tending to embarrass them”. Readers of this book will be now be familiar with this attitude of tender solicitude displayed by government spokesmen towards private enterprise. It was also urged that women were in the long run incapable of giving quite the same service as their male colleagues and that equality for women might result in injustice for men since it would probably be determined by reference to the women's scales. Women, it was urged, were more often incapacitated and the continuity of their service was broken by marriage, a fact which reduced their value to the state. This argument is of course wholly inconsistent

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with the attitude adopted by the state towards the retention of women in the Service on marriage to which we shall come later.

The beginning of the war brought the claim for equal pay for equal work very little nearer fruition.

An agreement with the Treasury in 1937 had the effect of closing the gap to some extent. It provided that women civil servants should enjoy a maximum of not less than four-fifths of the corresponding scales for men and conceded equality at the minimum for all openly recruited grades. The agreement was without prejudice to the claim of the staff unions for complete equality, and that claim is still being pressed. Meanwhile the position becomes more and more indefensible.

The war has once again increased enormously the area of female employment. In many of those areas, notably in transport and certain engineering operations, equal pay for men and women engaged on similar work is the rule. The case against it no longer rests therefore on a comparative basis. In every government office, women are sitting side by side with men, performing duties of equal responsibility and complexity and getting paid less for them. The men, in the long run, like it as little as the women and every Service union, on the Executive Committees of which there are still many more men than there should be, are pledged to fight for equality. It is only necessary for that fight to be waged in the complete realization that it is only one aspect, though an important one, of the general struggle for a change in productive relationships and for a socialist economy for it to become more vigorous and successful. The purely feminist approach gets us nowhere and no one realizes this more than the majority of the women themselves. There is nothing naïve in the assertion that the attitude of the Treasury towards equal pay and the conditions under which women are employed in the Civil Service are largely influenced by the fact that monopoly capitalism still depends upon the maintenance of the family as an economic as well as a social unit. That position they would fight to the last ditch to defend, and although within the sphere of state employment breaches have been made, and the principle of equal pay

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conceded, we are still a long way from its practical application. Nothing in the history of the struggle for complete sex-equality in the Civil Service stands out quite so clearly as the fact that the position outlined by Engels in his *Origin of the Family*, written in 1884, is still in essentials the one which determines the Treasury attitude towards women in 1943.

Another aspect of the same problem is the position with regard to the continued employment of women in the Service on marriage. Statistics presented by the official side to the Royal Commission in 1929 showed that of 10,000 women recruited into the Civil Service at the age of 20, approximately 2,200 resigned on marriage before they reached 25, and 2,700 before the age of 30. The figures in themselves prove nothing however since there is no means of ascertaining how many of these women would have elected to remain in the Service if the regulations had permitted. Another factor which makes for difficulty in getting at the real views of the women themselves is the dowry question. At present every established woman Civil Servant is entitled to a marriage gratuity after six years' service. As in the case of superannuation this too can be regarded as a form of deferred pay. In any case it acts as a sop to reconcile women to the interruption of an official career and causes many of them to hesitate before demanding a right of retention which they fear would only be conceded at the price of a sacrifice of a cash payment to which, quite understandably, those who go out feel they have a right. The women members of the C.S.C.A. voted for the retention of the marriage bar in 1937 mainly on these grounds.¹ Most of the Service unions however are in favour of its abolition, though it is true to say that there has been no real attempt on the part of some of them to examine the bases of a purely theoretical support. The Royal Commission recommended the retention of the marriage bar subject to the discretionary power of departments to make exception "where any disadvantage arising from the employment of a married woman would be outweighed by her special qualifications or experience". This proviso, apart from the fact that it has nothing whatever to do

¹ This decision was reversed at its last annual conference.

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with the justice of the case that a married woman has as much right to work as a married man, in practice limits the exceptions to the administrative and professional classes. For the bulk of the women in the Service it can only mean automatic resignation on marriage.

The war has again introduced the inevitable modifications of normal practice. Departmental expansion and the call-up have brought thousands of married women into the Service and have forced the Treasury to offer continued employment to those who have married 'on the strength'. But this has only been on a basis of re-engagement in a temporary capacity and the end of the war may very well see the automatic termination of service of a considerable number of able and experienced officers.

This is, indeed, inevitable if the sex war which followed upon demobilization in 1918 is allowed to break out again, and the demand goes forth from organizations which claim, very often on slender grounds, to speak for ex-servicemen for the dismissal of all married women from government service in order to make room for men. From the woman's point of view, the retention of the marriage bar is entirely a question of economic expediency. Freed from any fear that the marriage gratuity would be lost to all because a proportion desired to remain in post, the majority would vote for the right to decide either way. The attitude of the male opponent to abolition is equally dictated by economic factors and the general precariousness from which, as we have seen, even the Civil Service is not immune. In the all too familiar circumstances of the period between two wars with mounting unemployment as the inevitable corollary of scarcity economics, there could be no permanent place for married women in the labour market. Beveridge himself has postulated a full employment policy as providing the only sort of context in which social security can be achieved and maintained.

The same assumptions must provide the basis for any real advance towards the abolition of the marriage bar in the Civil Service. Meanwhile both men and women civil servants must get their own ideas on the subject straight. It is useless for

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them to agitate for the removal of restrictions on civil liberty while accepting without challenge a ban on the right to work except in circumstances of the government's own choosing. The nature and purpose of any state apparatus can in no better way be judged than by its attitude towards such questions as equal pay and the marriage bar. By that touchstone our own Civil Service again fails to measure up the standards adopted by the Soviet Union, where the right to work of every able-bodied man and woman is constitutionally guaranteed.