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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK EQUAL SUFFRAGE IN AUSTRALIA \*\*\*

## Political Equality Series

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### Equal Suffrage in Australia.

Lady Holder, the wife of Sir Frederick W. Holder, K. C. M. G., Speaker of the House of Representatives of Federated Australia, contributed the following article to the N. Y. Independent, of June 9, 1904. Lady Holder has taken a leading part in philanthropic work in South Australia. She says:

"The women of South Australia were placed in a position of political equality with men several years ago. Accordingly, everybody has become accustomed to the arrangement, and it seems perfectly natural. It has not produced any marked effect on female character, or made any particular difference to domestic life. Women are more interested in public affairs than they used to be, and politicians deal more earnestly with home and social questions, but no neglect of private duties on that account can be laid to the women's charge. We are well supplied with high-class newspapers, the same sources of information are open to women as to men, and the questions that arise are not by any means beyond the scope of their intelligence. At election meetings there is commonly a good sprinkling of women voters in the audiences. It is said that their presence tends to prevent disorderliness, and I have never heard of a lady at any meeting being rudely treated.

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"Voting, with us, is one of the simplest things in the world. When an elector's mind is made up, there is less difficulty in expressing it through the ballot-box than in matching a ribbon, and the one act is not considered more unfeminine than the other. Our freedom has not developed a class of political women, we have no "shrieking sisterhood," but we know and use our power. We can do a great deal toward securing members of good character in the Parliament and influencing their votes, and are generally content with the results of our enfranchisement.

"I have described the conditions in my own State thus fully because, though it is one of the smaller States in the Australian Commonwealth, in this matter it is further advanced than most of the others. When federation came, adult suffrage was the law only in South Australia and Western Australia; it has since been adopted in New South Wales and Tasmania, but it has not yet been granted, so far as the State Legislatures are concerned, in the other two. The Federal Parliament, however, had to make its own electoral laws, and to establish uniformity was obliged to adopt the broadest existing basis, because the constitution forbade the outrage and anomaly of disfranchising persons by whom some of its members had been elected. Accordingly, the women of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, and Tasmania were somewhat suddenly placed in the same position of political equality, so far as the Commonwealth is concerned, as their South Australian and West Australian sisters. They were legally qualified to act in the Federal elections of last December, and as they had not been allowed a similar privilege at elections for their legislatures, of course the event produced considerable sensation and wore an air of strangeness

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and novelty. The newspapers gave special attention to the new voters, and teemed with exhortations as to the way they should go, and it was amusing to observe how some candidates who had fought against woman's suffrage with all their might tried to show their supreme regard and esteem for the voters whose rights they had previously refused. By the time polling day arrived, the average woman was probably as well prepared to discharge her electoral duty as the average man.

"Three women offered themselves as candidates, Mrs. Martell and Mrs. Moore, in New South Wales, and Miss Vida Goldstein in Victoria. The candidature of the two former was not unanimously approved by the Women's Association of their own State, and their defeat was a foregone conclusion; but Miss Goldstein was indorsed by the Victorian organization to which she belonged, and, though unsuccessful, the fact that she received 51,497 votes proved that she had many sympathizers. She did not ally herself with either of the great political parties. Her object was avowedly to show that home interests ought to be represented in Parliament and by women, as well as manufacturing, mining, farming, and other interests, by persons who were engaged in them. Next to the votes she received, the most significant thing was the considerate and respectful treatment she met throughout. It showed that the political woman who respects herself may trust for protection to the chivalry of men."

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Australian experience has conclusively disposed of the objection that women have no aptitude for politics or interest in public affairs. They have proved that they possess both, and while they have no general ambition or desire for parliamentary honors, and display no sex antagonism, they regard their right to vote for representatives as a responsible trust. It is rendered equally clear that they can and do exercise a salutary influence on the political life of the country without sustaining in the slightest degree any of the injuries or disabilities that have been supposed to follow. They are as good wives, mothers, and sisters as ever, and better companions for their men folk because of their widened interest and the truer equality in which they stand.

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