

Inter American Commission of Women  
Pan American Building

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DORIS STEVENS RETURNS FROM THE HAGUE

Resume of speech delivered by Miss Doris Stevens, chairman of the Inter American Commission of Women, at garden party given in her honor, Sunday afternoon, May 18th, by the National Woman's Party at their headquarters, 144 B Street, N. E., Washington, D. C.

Miss Stevens arrived in Washington today (Saturday) from The Hague, where under her leadership the campaign for equal nationality rights was directed. Miss Stevens was welcomed back today at the Pan American Union by Sra. Manuel de Oliveira Lima, Brazilian Commissioner, and warmly thanked her on behalf of the women of South America for her resolute stand for women's nationality rights at the First World Conference for the Codification of International Law.

"We have just come from The Hague, in Holland. The Hague during the last few weeks was the scene of an exceedingly valiant struggle by women from all over the world to prevent a new world law from being launched containing discriminations based on sex in the matter of nationality. It was an heroic, almost desperate struggle, made against great odds.

"On one side were the delegates of 45 nations armed with the full powers of their governments. On the other side were women leaders whose only weapons were their own convictions and their belief in the justice of their demand.

"The men plenipotentiaries had gathered there to endeavor to launch a world code of law. There were ambassadors, ministers, jurists, judges of the world court, government experts, eminent professors of international law, and even some

admirals, - an imposing array of statesmen from China to Brazil, from Iceland to South Africa.

"Part of the world code which these distinguished gentlemen proposed to launch concerned the nationality rights of women. This was far and away the most important question before the conference, for it was the only one which clearly affected the rights of human beings as such. Now there are five nations in the world where men and women have completely equal nationality rights. Four of them are on this hemisphere. This side of the world - the Americas - has gone much farther in this matter than has Europe or Asia. A majority of the countries of the western hemisphere give the father and mother an equal right to transmit nationality to their child at birth. A third of them give a woman an equal right with a man to keep her own nationality upon marriage. Almost as many give a woman an equal right to change her nationality after marriage and to influence the nationality of her child by her own change of nationality. And finally, four countries of our hemisphere have complete equality between men and women in all matters relating to nationality. Now the enlightened course, one would think, would be to pitch the standard of this proposed world law to the best national laws now in existence - the laws which give men and women complete equality in this matter.

"But that was not what the men at The Hague set out to do. Even before the conference met, they had drawn up proposed drafts which sanctioned the existing laws containing discriminations against women. They did not repudiate the Old World standard of one law for man and another law for woman. It was to prevent these proposals from being crystallized into world law that women went to the Hague. It was a straight issue between justice to women and injustice to women.

"Ever since preparations for this conference were begun by the League of Nations six years ago, the great international women's organizations had been making plans to combat this danger. During this time meetings were held by the organized feminist groups of the world in London, Paris, Berlin, Washington, Havana,

Madrid, Geneva, and elsewhere. Always the demand was the same. Women wanted equal treatment and security with men in their nationality.

"After all this working, hoping, and planning, we women arrived at the conference. We of the Inter American Commission of Women, a juridical body created by the last Pan American Conference, went immediately upon arrival to the eminent Greek diplomat, Chairman of the Committee in charge of nationality, expecting him to welcome us as collaborators in this ambitious adventure to write new world law. He told us frankly that nothing we might say would influence a solitary vote in the committee. This was our first shock. After all, our nationality rights were at stake, not men's. But it was simply inconceivable to an old world diplomat that men should not know best how to guide our destinies. And so he explained we would be heard for one hour, merely as a matter of courtesy.

"On the following day, with lightning speed, the nations proceeded to vote on these clauses which were unjust to women. More than twenty sessions were devoted to men's nationality. Part of two sessions were devoted to ours, What is known as the test vote, - that is, the first vote, - in the nationality committee, showed preponderant majorities in favor of these clauses. Every hour was precious from then on. We had to interview individually the delegates of 45 nations. We had to urge negligent ones to be present to record their votes: we had to stiffen the morale of wavering ones: we had, finally, to try to dissuade hostile ones. The deliberations you understand were secret. However, every morning you would have seen these devoted and persistent women going to the Peace Palace - to struggle on with the delegates, however, and wherever we could find them.

"Three days before the final vote on the convention, we had to face a new factor which greatly increased the already overwhelming odds against us. The delegates were failing to agree on the other two subjects of their program of codification. If we women should succeed in preventing adoption of the nationality convention, bad as it was, the men feared the world would consider the Conference

a failure. In what seemed to us, as well as to many delegates, unwarranted panic, the president of the Conference, the former Prime Minister of the Netherlands, issued orders to the Dutch police to forbid the women further access to the Peace Palace. This was as unprecedented as it was unnecessary.

"Despairing of breaking through the encrusted tradition of the Old World, we decided to concentrate all our efforts on the United States delegation. At least, we must make very sure that the United States did not sign the convention.

"While we were at the Hague the women here at home under the brilliant and devoted leadership of Alice Paul, beloved of women wherever in the world women struggle for equality, - Alice Paul and her co-workers were conducting a magnificent campaign. They had made known to President Hoover, to the State Department, and to the United States Senate, American women's insistence that our country support equal nationality rights or else demand that no action at all be taken at this conference. No law would leave us in our present position. Bad law might impose upon women throughout the world the continuance of our subjection. Enough senators declared themselves in support of our position to throw doubt on the Senate's ratification. And to the everlasting credit of President Hoover, he, as head of the nation, harkened to the appeals of the American women.

"The labors of our colleagues at home began to bear fruit at the conference. Whereas the United States delegation had not voted against all the discriminatory articles in the preliminary votes of the nationality committee, when the final roll was called the United States cast the solitary vote against the nationality convention as drawn up. The final roll call showed 40 nations to one. The United States was that one.

"That was one of the most beautiful and moving scenes it will ever be my good fortune to witness. The full delegations of the 45 nations were assembled, looking most impressive, in the great Riddersaal in the Hague. The Riddersaal is a

great simple mediaeval hall with high vaulted ceiling. In this hall knights once frolicked. The only modern touch in it was the excellent loud speakers which carried to us women sitting behind the iron railing in the high balcony, the overwhelming vote against us as the roll was called. It was eleven o'clock at night. The delegates had dined well and no doubt amply. They were in evening dress. There was exhilaration in the air. They were at the end of their labors. In a few days they would return to their distant lands and report their accomplishment to their governments. The nationality convention was, as we have already said, the only document to come out of the conference. For the delegates it was a festive occasion. For the tiny knot of women in the high balcony it was a sad occasion.

"Then of a sudden David Hunter Miller, head of the United States delegation went to the platform and announced that the United States of America would not sign. It would wait for another and more progressive moment. All eyes turned to the little knot of women in the high, far-away balcony. Spontaneous applause came from these women. A sharp rap from the presiding officer's gavel, - the same man who three days before had issued the orders which barred us from the Peace Palace. Then there fell upon the Riddersaal a profound silence. All this took only a few moments. But in that flash of time an immortal stand for the right had been recorded. From then on the festive air gave way to one of almost solemn melancholy. Our country alone amongst the civilized nations of the world had stood up to repudiate the ancient system of one law for man, another law for woman. A great and powerful nation had used its power on the side of liberty, of justice, of equality. That too is rare enough in history. Two days later when it came the appointed hour in the same great hall to affix their signatures to this document, only thirty of the 40 nations which had voted for the convention, signed. While one cannot know why 10 nations reversed their position it

may be that this solitary stand of the United States did quicken the consciences of some nations.

"This is a most inadequate picture of the dramatic events which took place at the Hague. While it is true that the world code, conceived in unfairness to women, was launched upon the world and is now open to ratification, we women of this hemisphere will do our utmost to prevent the New World from ratifying it. We shall try to keep the Western Hemisphere out of this code. We hope to succeed since so far less than a third of the republics of the New World have signed it.

"We are proud that the United States did not sign. We are proud that the great majority of the nations of this hemisphere have not signed. But the question will not be properly settled until women throughout the world enjoy the same rights in nationality as men."