

Reaffirm equality for women by ratifying ERA

"Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

A simple statement; the Equal Rights Amendment. Simple, reasonable and just, but 76 years after it was first proposed by feminists the guarantee is still not part of the U.S. Constitution.

Today, American women are doctors, lawyers and engineers. They sit in the U.S. Congress and on the Supreme Court bench. They hold cabinet posts, govern states and are mayors of large cities.

Women are entrepreneurs and university presidents. They edit newspapers, author books, compose music and paint masterpieces.

Women pilot ships and planes, climb mountains, compete in the Iditarod and wear Olympic gold. They are carpenters, plumbers and electricians, and, yes, they are still teachers, nurses, secretaries and homemakers. They have inched their way onto center stage in a centuries-old, male-dominated society.

Before the new century ends, a woman may hold the most powerful job in the political world, that of president of the United States. Despite all this, the U.S. Constitution does not recognize women as "persons."

Our Constitution, when written, was based on English common law, which held that women were chattels, the property of husbands or fathers. They had no rights of citizenship, no control over their own destinies, and the new Constitution granted them none. The 14th amendment, added in 1868, guaranteed all persons the full protection of the law, but defined "persons" solely in terms of male voters.

The 19th amendment, adopted in 1920 after an intense 72-year battle by the suffragists, did give women the vote, but that was only a beginning. Dis-



Virginia Nicoll

Although the deadline for ratification of the ERA is long passed, recent action by the Congress indicates that it could be extended.

crimination on the basis of sex was still not outlawed by the Constitution.

To correct that omission, in 1923, the National Women's Party proposed the Equal Rights Amendment. After a second lengthy struggle, it was approved by Congress in 1972 and sent to the states for ratification.

Immediately, a volcano of criticism erupted, spewing dire predictions, like lava, in all directions. Protests came from everywhere, some of the most heated from women themselves.

The ERA will lead to unisex toilet facilities! It will mandate the drafting of women into the armed forces, sending them into combat! It will free deadbeat husbands and fathers from alimony and child support obligations!

Prophecies of gloom and doom

came from nay-sayers of all descriptions, many of whom profited from the second-class citizenship of women.

Today, the ERA remains unratified, requiring the approval of three additional states, but the gloom and doom prophecies have been fulfilled. We have unisex toilets and unisex hospital rooms. Women don't wait to be drafted; they enlist willingly, carving careers out of service in all branches of the military, and deadbeat husbands and fathers remain, as always.

Although the deadline for ratification of the ERA is long passed, recent action by the Congress indicates that it could be extended. This has led to renewed vigor on the part of ERAmerica, principal proponent of the amendment, which is still needed to save women from struggling, issue by issue, to attain equality with men.

Attention is being focused on three states which appear amenable to ratification: Missouri, Oklahoma and Virginia.

Of late, the women's movement has become diffuse and lacking in momentum. As we celebrate Women's History Month in this first year of the new millennium, ratification of the ERA could become the challenge that will unite and inspire us once again.

Societal change comes slowly, sometimes following the law, sometimes preceding it. Whichever, it always meets with opposition from the ignorant, the obtuse and the myopic.

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." The time is ripe now to affirm the full equality of women, both in fact and in law, through final adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Virginia Nicoll is past president of the Farmington and Michigan OWL chapters.

Maybe Ben had right idea: Don't pay government chiefs

Remember how our legislative masters in Lansing finagled themselves a 36-percent salary increase?

First, the State Officers Compensation Commission recommended raising salaries for both representatives and senators from \$56,981 to \$77,400 per year. That caused a storm of protest.



Phil Power

disingenuous — representatives promptly filled the fax machines of newspapers statewide.

Finally, the Senate — wanting the pay hike but put fully in the bag by the House vote — managed to convene for at least 20 minutes on the last day it could vote to reject, but somehow never managed to hold a vote. Result: The gigantic pay increase went into effect.

Now it turns out that the bill is going to have to be paid. It comes to \$2.8 million just for everybody's \$20,400 salary increases this budget year, not counting increases in future legislative pensions that run on and on. The question is how?

There are two options. Either the legislature can find \$2.8 million in savings by cutting other areas of legislative spending or it can pass a supplemental appropriation bill that amounts to taking the money directly out of the pockets of taxpayers. Guess which they'll do.

Legislative leaders are putting up a brave front. Dan DeGrow, the Senate Majority leader, is quoted in newspaper reports as saying he's confident the money can be found without legislative staffers being laid off. (The 38-member Senate's share of the bill is around \$750,000.) House Speaker Rick Johnson is also quoted as saying there's enough in the House budget to cover the expense. (The 110-member House faces a \$2.1 million bill for the pay increase.)

Don't expect members of the Senate to be wildly enthusiastic about bailing out the House. The nicest word I heard from senators about the House vote was "grandstanding."

On top of this, Gov. Engler's budget for this year calls for all state departments to trim expenses, not increase them. (Observant readers should note, before Engler starts thumping his chest on this one, that his budget for the next fiscal year that starts on Oct. 1 calls for a 6.6-percent increase for the Legislature, a jump of nearly \$12 million that easily will cover the legislative pay increases.)

While all of this has been going on, I've been reading a wonderful new biography of Benjamin Franklin by H.W. Brands, "The First American." In addition to telling the rich and admirable story of Franklin's life and times, the book includes telling excerpts from Franklin's own writing. In the context of big legislative salary increases, I was particularly struck by this passage in which Franklin argues that government leaders should receive no compensation other than expenses:

"There are two passions which have a powerful influence on the affairs of men. These are ambition and avarice: the love of power and the love

The bill is going to have to be paid. It comes to \$2.8 million just for everybody's \$20,400 salary increases this budget year, not counting increases in future pensions.

of money. Separately, each of these has great force in prompting men to action; but when united in view of the same object, they have in many minds the most violent effects. Place before the eyes of such men a post of honor that shall at the same time be a place of profit, and they will move heaven and earth to obtain it."

Sure, I realize Franklin was wealthy and could afford to argue such. And I am also aware that paying salaries to all who serve in government makes possible contributions from able people, both rich and poor.

But I certainly wish members of the State Officers Compensation Commission and our legislative masters had come across Franklin's wisdom before the House voted and the Senate did not.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net.

We take tips. Call 248-477-5450.

**With Flagstar
OnLine Banking...**

**Pay all your bills
FREE
for 6 months!**

With OnLine Banking you can:

- Monitor your accounts.
- See what checks cleared.
- Transfer funds between accounts.
- Apply for loans.
- See everything that a teller can see.

**Sign up for OnLine Banking
during February 2001 To
Receive FREE bill payment!**

Visit Our Website For A Demonstration.

WWW.FLAGSTAR.COM
ONLINE BANKING

Say Goodbye To Stamps!

**FLAGSTAR
BANK**

For The Banking Center Near You Call:

800-642-0039

Member
FDIC

Limited offer. Restrictions may apply. After a month bill payment period ends, a small monthly fee of \$2.95 will be charged to checking account. Offer expires 03/01/01.

Go ahead, beautiful...
live a little
Get a handle on spring and beautiful gifts!
Thursday, February 22 through Thursday, March 1,
during our fabulous spring beauty event

Receive this chic bag with any cosmetics or fragrance purchase of \$50 or more.

SAKS FIFTH AVENUE

*This offer is good February 22 through March 1, 2001 only while supplies last. One per customer, please.
Fairlane Town Center, Dearborn (313) 336-3070. Monday through Saturday 10 to 9, Sunday 12 to 6.
The Somerset Collection, Big Beaver at Coolidge, Troy (248) 643-9000. Monday through Friday 10 to 9, Saturday 10 to 7, Sunday 12 to 6.
VISIT SAKS.COM 24 HOURS A DAY.