

Grace Abbott delivered the following speech in May of 1931 in acceptance of the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Social Sciences. Her speech describes the difficulties of winning government support for women and children.

Excerpted from:

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Sometimes when I get home at night in Washington, I feel as though I had been in a great traffic jam. The jam is moving toward the Hill where Congress sits in judgment on all the administrative agencies of the Government. In that traffic jam there are all kinds of vehicles moving up toward the Capitol. There are all the kinds of conveyances¹, for example, that the Army can put into the street—tanks, gun carriages, trucks, the dancing horses of officers, and others which I have not even the vocabulary to describe. But they all finally reach the Hill, and they make a plea that is a very old plea—one which, I find, in spite of the reputation for courage that they bear, men respond to rather promptly. The Army says to them, "Give lest you perish"; and fear as a motive is still producing results on a scale which leaves the rest of us feeling very envious of the kind of eloquence² the Army and Navy can command.

But there are other kinds of vehicles in this traffic jam—great numbers of them which, coming from Nebraska as I do, do not seem to me to get the attention they should as they move down the streets. These are the hayricks and the binders and the ploughs that the Department of Agriculture manages to put into the streets. When the drivers get to the Hill they have an argument which Congressmen understand. They say to them when they ask for appropriations³ for research in animal husbandry, "Dollars invested on this side of the ledger will bring dollars in geometrical or arithmetical progression"—depending on the enthusiasm with which they speak—"on the other side." And if there is one thing that a Congressman, and for that matter people in general, understand it is a balance on the profit side of the ledger; and when the drivers of these agricultural vehicles demonstrate that they will be able to show a balance on the profit side, there is a very generous appreciation of their argument . . .

I am not going to describe all the vehicles in this traffic jam tonight. I am not going to tell you about the barouches in which the Department of State rides with such dignity, or the noisy patrol in which the Department of Justice officials sometimes appear. Without my saying more you will agree that it seems to be a traffic

¹ vehicles

² persuasive speech

³ spending budgets

presenting special hazards. It seems so to me as I stand on the sidewalk watching it become more congested and more difficult, and then—because the responsibility is mine and I must—I take a very firm hold on the handles of the baby carriage and I wheel it into the traffic.

There are some people who think it does not belong there at all. There are some who wonder how I got there with it and what I think I am going to be able to do. And there are some who think the baby carriage is the symbol of bolshevism⁴ instead of the symbol of the home and the future of America.

. . . When I get to the Capitol after much difficulty and begin to state the case for the Children's Bureau, I discover a serious handicap. Those men in Congress are really just as fond of children as I am. They are fond of their own children and their friends' children, but they are usually not familiar with what is happening to many American children, and they often lack the imagination to translate the facts and figures which are presented to them in terms of actual children.

I suggest to them that money invested on one side of the ledger brings—what? Well, we can show results, but how shall we measure these results? What is the life of a baby worth? What shall we put down as the value of the life of a mother?

. . . There are statisticians who have tried to figure out what those things are worth, but I have never found these statistical estimates very helpful. They have tried to determine the life-value of a man or a woman. They arrive at the conclusion that a man is worth very much more than a woman, since the test of worth is earning capacity, and as most mothers are not wage-earners, they must be rated at zero in this scale of values. You and I understand these human values, and we know that they cannot be expressed in that commonly used denominator of value—money. For this reason it is difficult to state the relation between the expenditures recorded on one side of the national ledger and the results as expressed in terms of better health and better social outlook for children. We have learned that the value of an educated citizenship cannot be estimated in dollars, and the public is gradually coming to an understanding of the value of the newer social services.

⁴ socialism or communism, in reference to the Russian bolsheviks