

The Life and Influences of Frances Perkins

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Frances Perkins paved the way into politics for many women as the first woman to be appointed to a presidential cabinet position. In 1933 the newly elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt named Perkins Secretary of Labor where she served for 13 years. Perkins was born in 1880 in Boston Massachusetts and went on to be the most influential women of her time (Trout, C. T., 1980). She was a trusted Roosevelt advisor and was influence in shaping the social welfare policy that defined his presidency and restored trust in the nation.

Perkins was born into a conservative middle class family. It was expected that she would always act like a proper young lady and be seen but not heard. Her parents were republicans and devote Congregationalists. As a young woman Perkins valued her education and pressured her father into allowing her to attend college. She pursued an education in teaching because it was an acceptable profession for a women (Magnil, 1995). She enrolled into Mount Holyoke College in western Massachusetts and graduated with an A.B. in 1902. While attending college Perkins began to realize that not everyone grew up in a safe and comfortable environment. Perkins was a very bright young girl who particularly enjoyed her science classes. However, in her senior year Perkins took an American colonial history class that would have a profound impact on her life. Students were required to visit a factory to view the working conations. Perkins gained her first glimpse at the filthy and often unsafe working conditions of the poor when she toured textile and paper mill plants (Berg, 1989). She was deeply concerned when she realized that there were women and children who were forced to work. Anna May Soule, Perkins professor, also required that the students read Jacob Rins *How the Other Half Lives*. This experience combined with a speech given by Florence Kelley,

the general secretary of the National Consumers League (Trout, C. T., 1980) was the beginning of Perkins social consciousness. These experiences influenced the rest of her life. Perkins once “recalled that it was (Kelley) who first opened my mind to the necessity for and possibility of work which would become my vocation” (Trout, C. T.1980).

Following her graduation Perkins moved to Chicago to seek a teaching position. She was hired at Ferry Hall, a girl’s prep school. In her free time Perkins continued to explore the factories that women and children were working in. She began to understand the need and importance of social reform. Perkins spent time at the Chicago settlement houses especially Hull House and the Chicago Commons. It was in the settlement houses that Perkins continued to be effected and influenced by those suffering around her. Dr. Graham Taylor, who head the Chicago Commons took Perkins under his wing and taught her “the social meaning of trade unionism” (Berg, 1989). She would also meet and spend a great deal of time with Jane Adams, Ellen Gates Star and Grace Abbott (Berg, 1989).

These experiences changed Perkins forever and she was determined to make a difference. From this point on Perkins would spend the rest of her life in public service advocating for social reform. Perkins headed east in 1907 and took a job as the secretary of the Philadelphia Research and Protection Association. The association helped young immigrant girls, new to the city, find safe places to work. Young girls were the targets of employers looking to take advantage of those who didn’t know any better. Perkins would gather information that would be used to convince the city to legislate changes in employment practices (Magnil, 1439). Perkins learned skills that would aid her social

work career for the rest of her life. She learned that gathering facts and presenting them to those in power would go a long way toward making change.

Perkins returned to New York in 1909 to study at the New York School of Philanthropy, the predecessor to Columbia School of Social Work and in 1910 she earned a masters degree in political science from Columbia University. Perkins education both in school and on the streets prepared her for the advocating for workers rights. She also published her first article “*Some Facts Concerning Certain Undernourished Children*” in the Magazine, *The Survey* (Trout, C. T., 1980).

While studying for her masters Perkins worked with Pauline Goldmark, the head of New York School of Philanthropy, surveying the Hells Kitchen part of the West Side of New York. Perkins learned a valuable lesson during her work. While seeking assistance for a family living in Hells Kitchen, she went to see the state senator and mob boss Timothy J. McManus about a family that was having problems with a slumlord. McManus eventually helped the family and taught Perkins “machine politics could be helpful in enacting social welfare legislation” (Berg, 1989). Perkins went to the stakeholders involved and began to see how the making political contacts would be beneficial.

Perkins succeeded Goldmark as Secretary of the New York Consumers League, a position which she would use to bring attention to the horrible working conditions faced by the poor in New York. During this time she worked tirelessly bringing attention to the sweatshop conditions in bakeries other harmful industrial conditions. She would spend long hours lobbying in Albany for industrial reform (Trout, C. T, 1980.). Kelley, the national director of the Consumers League also took Perkins under

her wing and taught her to be an expert on “industrial conditions by assigning her to make extensive surveys of unsanitary cellar bakeries, unsafe laundries and overcrowded textile sweatshops” (Berg, 1989). These experiences continued to strengthen Perkins understanding that more social legislation was needed to protect workers.

Perkins personally witnessed the event that had the most impact on her need for social reform. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire, which occurred on March 25, 1911, killed 146 people, mostly young women (Berg, 1989). They women died because the doors were locked and there were no fire escapes. Perkins watched these young girls leap from the eight floor to their death. Perkins vowed that this would never happen again.

Perkins lobbied for the passing of a fifty-four hour bill that would legally limit the number of hours that people could be forced to work. She strongly believed that through the power of legislation working conditions in New York and across the country would improve. She gained the favor of state senator, Alfred, E. Smith during this lobbying effort. Smith taught Perkins the importance of understanding and working with the state legislature to accomplish her goals and Perkins taught Smith the need for social reform. “They joined forces, and their long and fruitful relationship helped change the course of American Social History” (Berg, 1989).

Perkins moved on from the New York Consumers League and joined the Committee on Safety for the City of New York, an organization that was designed by the state legislature to help the New York State Factory Commission. During time Perkins would testify numerous times while New York became a leader in protecting workers. Perkins also insisted that the Commissioners who served on the New York

State Factory Commission see for themselves the horrible working conditions that the poor were forced to endure. Perkins insisted that this grassroots approach to change would be effective in persuading those in power positions. She brought the commissioners to a pea cannery at 4:00 am where they saw children shelling peas and at dawn they watched women who had worked all night leave their job at a rope works factory. Perkins also brought legislators to the homes of workingwomen to hear their stories. This approach helped lead to changes being made in the work environment including reducing the fifty-four hour workweek to forty-eight and requiring that workers get one day off in seven. The reforms made a huge difference in the lives of the poor in New York City because one woman was not afraid to push for what she believed in. She felt that safe working conditions; reasonable work hours were "basic human rights which society should guarantee through practical, morally sound legislation" (Berg, 1989).

Perkins married on September 26, 1913 to Paul Caldwell Wilson. She chose to keep her own name despite concern from others. She felt that she had earned a reputation with her name and felt that she would lose the respect that she had gained by changing it. In December 1916 Perkins gave birth to a daughter whom she named Susanna. Perkins marriage to Wilson would be very difficult for her. He suffered from severe depression and would spend a great deal of his life in the hospital. Perkins was successful in keeping her husband's illness and their family life private from the very public life she led. Perkins spent time following her marriage volunteering and in the home, however her husband's illness made it necessary for her to return to a paid position (Magnil, 1995).

Perkins spent time working on her first political campaign in 1918 when Al Smith ran for governor. He appointed her to her first public position at the New York State Industrial Commission. Perkins was the first woman ever to hold this position, which was the highest, paid state employed position in the United States. She made \$8000 per year. Her years of hard work and dedication to improving workers rights had paid off. She was moving into positions of power. Her social service and grassroots experiences would help her greatly in her new position. Perkins worked to increase “employment services, increased factory investigations and created data-gathering systems” (Magnil, 1995) that were designed to aid the state legislature in writing effective laws to improve work environments. Time after time Perkins created the link between government and the people. She continuously involved the legislature in her reform initiatives because she understood that value of strengthening the bond between government and the people.

Smith urged Perkins to join the Democratic Party and she attended her first convention in 1920 (Trout, C. T.1980). Perkins would remain an influential member of the Democratic Party for years to come.

Perkins continued to work closely with Smith until 1929 in her position on the New York State Industrial Commission until the newly elected Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her Industrial Commissioner of the State of New York. She would become the first women to serve on a Governors cabinet. Wirth the full support of Roosevelt, Perkins continued her expansion of social reform in New York. She would again be successful in decreasing the number of hours for women in the workweek,

introduce a minimum wage and create unemployment insurance (Magnil, 1995). Her work in New York would prepare Perkins for her work on the national level

Although, Perkins's family needs prevented her from taking a visible role in Roosevelt's Presidential campaign, he never hesitated when asking Perkins to be the secretary of labor. In 1933 Perkins became the first woman ever to be appointed to a cabinet position by the president of the United States. Initially Perkins was skeptical whether to accept the position. Two factors influenced her decision. The first was the women whom Perkins respected, such as Jane Addams, Grace Abbot and Mary Dewson was encouraging Roosevelt to nominate to nominate her. The second factor was a discussion that Perkins held with Roosevelt. She told him that if he nominated her she would expect the full support of the administration to dedicate itself to liberal social reforms. Perkins understood the power and influence that she would have holding the position and was not willing accept it if she couldn't use it to make a difference. She also told Roosevelt that she would be spending her weekends in New York with her family and not in Washington. Roosevelt accepted her conditions and urged her to say yes (Trout, C. T.1980). Perkins agreed and said that she "had been taught long ago by her grandmother...that if anyone opens a door, one should always go through" (Trout, C. T.1980).

Although many were skeptical whether a woman was capable of holding such an important office, Perkins performance soon won over many of her critics. Perkins was aware of the opposition to her nomination and appointment as secretary of labor. She used skills she learned as a social worker to overcome these barriers. Perkins worked hard to bring together the different factions of labor including workers and management

into many of her decisions. Through these approaches she gained the respect of many leaders.

Perkins' role in the administration that was looked upon by the entire country for help opened a window of opportunity for the types of reforms that she believed so strongly in. The stock market crash in October 1929 paved the way for widespread social reform. Perkins would play a key role writing the legislation that would effectively help put the nation back on its feet.

The economic prosperity during the 'roaring 1920's' made social welfare reform a difficult task. Government had never believed that it was their job to lend assistance to those in need. Political leaders believed that the poor were poor simply because they were lazy and that the poor lived in isolated pockets around the country and therefore did not need to be addressed. The depression changed these views. The widespread poverty led to a general consensus that it was ok for the government to get involved in the social welfare of its citizens (Segal & Brzuzy, 1998). In 1929 1.6 million people were unemployed, in 1931 8 million people were unemployed and in 1933, the year Perkins was appointed, almost 13 million people were unemployed. The existing social service agencies were not equipped to handle the dramatic increase in needy families.

Roosevelt's New Deal would become the single most important piece of social welfare legislation to be enacted of our time. All Americans would feel the impact of the policies that were created. Roosevelt would enlist the help of two key advisors, Perkins and fellow "social worker" Harry Hopkins, who served as the director of the

federal family relief agency, to help write and implement the plan that would return millions to work.

Perkins would draw on all of her social service experiences to write the legislation that would become the New Deal. Perkins worked hard to obtain the position of power that she held and she planned to use it to its fullest capacity. There were several pieces of legislation that Perkins worked on that paved the way for the social security act. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration took federal dollars and put them aside for use on basic human necessities including housing, and food (Berg, 1989). The Civilian Conservation Corps, employed young men ages 18 to 25, and paid them \$30 monthly to work on flood control programs, reforestation, soil conservation and highway construction (Berg, 1989). The National Recovery Administration, an administration of particular importance to Perkins, regulated minimum wage, maximum hours and child labor; and the Public works Administration and civil works administration which combined created 8 million new jobs including the Hoover Dam, and school and hospitals construction programs (Segal & Brzuzy, 1998).

Creating jobs and putting Americans back to work was the most important part of the New Deal. “The Social Security Program reflected Roosevelt’s New Deal efforts of providing relief in times of economic downturn while stressing employment as the key to economic well-being (Segal & Brzuzy, 1998). Perkins and Roosevelt shared similar ideologies on how to help the country recover from the Depression.

The Social Security Act consisted of two forms of social welfare aid, social insurance and public assistance. Social insurance was funded through payroll taxes gathered from every working American. It was an economic resources received by to

those who had paid their dues to society. Workers and their dependents would be entitled to a monthly check at the age of retirement, death or due to a disability. The measure was supported because it was not viewed as a handout, rather a payback of money that was collectedly deposited. Public assistance was the controversial part of the Social Security Act. It provided financial assistance to those who fell below the poverty line. It was controversial because it required that money be distributed to those in need without any direct payment in to the program. The creation of these programs has helped millions of individuals and families reach and maintain self-sufficiency. Although there have been changes made to the initial programs, and the controversy remains about the role that the government should play in supporting its citizens. Perkins influence is still being felt today.

During her tenure as Secretary of Labor, Perkins influence reached much farther than the Social Security Act. She is credited for overhauling the Department of labor. Perkins rid the agency of racketeering. She also expanded the bureau of labor and statistics and established the women and children's bureau.

During the depression, the labor standards complexly collapsed. Perkins used her influence to make the government take action. Many of Roosevelt's advisors were unsure if this was the best route to take, but Perkins stuck to her beliefs that government should work with labor to protect workers. Perkins felt that Federal standards were inevitable (Berg, 1989). She worked in collaboration with the stakeholders, including the state governments to create a standard body of laws that would protect both the worker and management. Perkins created the Division of Labor Standards and made a point to work personally with the states and their labor boards.

The Fair Labor Standards Act became law on June 25, 1938. This act covered 12 million workers. 300,000 people received immediate raises and 1 million people were able to shorten the number of hours they were required to work each week (Berg, 1989). Most importantly, child labor was not allowed in many dangerous industries. Perkins never forgot the images of the children in the triangle fire. She worked very hard and was eventually able to write the legislation that would make sure children no longer suffered.

Perkins retired as Secretary of State shortly following the death of her close friend and mentor, Franklin D. Roosevelt. She remained busy. President Truman sent her to represent the United States at the International Labor Organization meeting in Paris. Truman also appointed Perkins to serve on the Civil Service Commission where she remained for seven years. When Perkins left government employment, she taught at the University of Illinois and then went on to join the faculty at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. Perkins died on May 14, 1965, leaving behind her a lifetime of accomplishments.

Perkins brought with her years of front line work in the inner cities. She saw the devastating conditions that children and women were forced to work in. She understood the meaning of a living wage and having the ability to provide for your family. Perkins combined these experiences with a drive to make a difference. Her time in the settlement houses and working in New York taught her the value of utilizing the political system to accomplish her goals. Perkins was ahead of her time, both as a woman and a political social worker. She paved the way for many women to follow.

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