

HER SOCIAL SECURI-TEA: The unthankful issue was her gender. There were repeated demands for her resignation. Still, in 1929, as the first female cabinet member, thus, the first woman in the U.S. presidential line of succession, Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins co-authored much New Deal legislation. She was the chief architect of the Social Security Act and chairwoman of the President's Committee that wrote this legislation.

From her own words: The beginnings of old-age insurance came about largely, I think, by the crisis of the times. Where did the idea come from? I don't know. I must have picked it up in the general reading that one does; in the general conversation of other socially minded, intelligent, and educated people. (She had worked with the college-educated women at Hull-House in Chicago.)

Before I was appointed, I had a little conversation with [FDR] Roosevelt in which I said perhaps he didn't want me to be Secretary of Labor because if I were, I should want to do this, and this, and this. Among the things I wanted to do was find a way of getting unemployment, old-age, and health insurance. I remember he said, "Well, do you think it can be done?"

I said, "I don't know." He said, Well, there are constitutional problems, aren't there?" "Yes, very severe constitutional problems," I said. "But what have we been elected for except to solve the constitutional problems?"

"Well," he said, "do you think you can do it?" "I don't know," I said. But I wanted to try. "I want to know if I have your authorization." He looked at me and nodded wisely. "All right," he said, "I will authorize you to try and if you succeed, that's fine."

This was the way it all began...just a little committee to explore the subject. He didn't like the word "social" so we had a Committee on Economic Security. The greatest problem was the constitutional one. How could you get around this business of the State-Federal relationships? It seemed that couldn't be done. It had been really a tough fight in committee.

One day I went out to tea...In Washington you don't go to parties because you want to...I had to call on the wife of the Supreme Court Justice...I went to her house and presented myself. There were a lot of other people there and I met Mr. Justice Stone who had just come home from the Court and was getting his cup of tea. We greeted each other and sat down and had a little chat.

He said, "How are you getting on?" I said, "All right." And then I said, "Well, you know, we are having big troubles, Mr. Justice, because in this draft of the Economic Security Act, which we are working on--we are not quite sure, what will be a wise method of establishing this law. It is a very difficult constitutional problem." He looked around as if to see if anyone was listening, confidentially, he said, "The taxing power, my dear, the taxing power. You can do anything under the taxing power." I didn't question him any further.

I went back to my committee...and said I was firmly for the taxing power of the United States--you can do anything under it, I said...The whole system of taxation is the basis of the Social Security Act.

We did a great deal of educating, chiefly through hearings, public hearings in the Senate. I made over 100 speeches, practically every member made many speeches. The

result was a bill that finally was presented to Congress, debated briefly, and passed in August 1935 by an extraordinary vote. (371 to 33 in the House and 77 to 6 in the Senate.)

Then began the great problem--the administration of this Act. Thousands of problems arose, the Act had to be amended, and has been amended, and amended, and amended, until it has now grown into a large and important project, for which, I think the people of the United States are deeply thankful. [Rescinding the unthankful issue of her gender.]

At the time of her death, William Wirtz, Secretary of Labor said, "Every man and woman who works for a living wage, under safe conditions, for reasonable hours, or is protected by unemployment compensation or Social Security, is her debtor."

Sources: Complete text at: <http://www.ssa.gov/history/perkins5.html>, "The Roots of Social Security" by Frances Perkins; Delivered at Social Security Administration Headquarters--Baltimore, MD 10/23/1962;

<http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/perkins.htm>;

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frances_Perkins;

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