

Universal Suffrage

There has been much coverage in the media this week marking the centenary of the passing of the Representation of the People Act on the 6th of February 1918. For the first time in this country women were given the right to vote, though only to about 40 percent of the women in the country. The 1918 Act also gave the vote to all men over 21 without any property restrictions. It was not until ten years later in 1928 that all women over 21 were given the vote.

It seems so obvious to us today that there should be no distinction between men and women regarding the right to vote in elections. It is thus difficult for us to understand the resistance to women's suffrage and the need for campaigners to have to persuade the powers that be to make that momentous change. Perhaps it was a combination of fear of change and a desire to resist any challenges to existing power.

There are now only a few countries in the world where there is not universal suffrage, where not all adult men and women can vote. However, that does not mean that everyone does or is free to vote as they wish.

There are those who for one reason or another choose not to vote. For example the turnout in last year's general election was 68.7 percent, which meant that just over 30 percent of those eligible did not vote.

In other countries the electoral process is affected by intimidation and other pressures, not to mention vote rigging, which means that voting is not representative or fair.

In a democracy it is thus all the more important that people should exercise their civic duty by voting at elections. That is both as a recognition of the struggles of those who fought for that right and as an example to those other countries where the process is clearly unfair.

The concept of voting at elections was of course unknown in the ancient world. Even in democratic Greece only a very select few men had that right. For that reason it is not surprising that the Bible does not provide any specific guidance. In our reading just now (1 Timothy 2.1-6) Paul urges supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings for those in high office, that life might be marked by peace, godliness and dignity. And that should still be our prayer today: for integrity in public life, so that all may live in peace and with well-being. One means for ensuring that is the ballot box. And so we give thanks for those who helped to make that right a reality.

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