

In the air

## Voting rights, voting rites

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Elections. In a few days' time, my husband and I will be arming ourselves with the papers sent to us by our local authority and with some form of identification and setting off down the hill to the tall building on the corner of our street, formerly a school, now a cultural centre and converted for the day into a polling station.

He will be voting for members of the Luxembourg and European parliaments, I just for the latter.

As far as national legislative elections are concerned, I have no right to vote in either my country of origin or in the country that's been my home for the last 25 years. For the UK authorities, you are disenfranchised after 20 years of living abroad. In Luxembourg, citizens of other Member States can vote in local elections, can vote for the Luxembourg candidates in the European elections, but cannot vote in Luxembourg's legislative elections.

Though I miss the feeling of belonging, of taking part in the life of my adopted country that voting for its Parliament would bring, I accept the logic. As a European civil servant, I pay the same local taxes as Luxembourgers and have the right to elect the people who raise and spend those taxes. But our Community salaries are not subject to Luxembourg income tax and to misquote the famous (probably apocryphal) watchword of the American War of Independence, it's „no representation without taxation“. Since we pay European Union income tax, we are entitled to representation in the European Parliament. Fair enough.

Yet what of the thousands of people who live and work in Luxembourg, pay national income tax and still have no right to vote here? In James Otis' „real“ words: „taxation without representation is tyranny“. But that is another debate.

I treasure my right to vote Luxembourgers into the European Parliament – my right to vote in general. When I drop my ballot-paper into the box on Sunday it will be, as always, with a sense of humility, of gratitude. How could we women forget the debt we owe to those indomitable spirits who one hundred years ago rose up and threw themselves into the bitter struggle for women's right to vote, those fierce-faced women in their long skirts, brandishing „Votes for Women“ banners that we know from jerky old black and white films.

It was in 1903, at the age of 49, that Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union, and together with her daughters, Christobel



Emmeline Pankhurst (sixth from left) welcomes hunger strikers from prison, September, 1909

and Sylvia, and the other suffragettes joined battle with those who deemed women incapable of exercising so important a right. They used dramatic means to bring their cause into the public eye, chaining themselves to lampposts and railings, slashing pictures in art galleries, assaulting policemen, throwing themselves under horses' hooves and going on hunger strikes. Mrs Pankhurst herself was put in gaol eight times. Many lost their lives.

The opponents of female suffrage were numerous and powerful and it was not until after World War I, when women had more or less run the country while the men were away fighting, that women over 30 were given the right to vote. It was another decade before women finally achieved equality of franchise with men.

The courage and determination of all those who over the centuries have fought for the right to vote – not just for women – make it seem immoral not to exercise that right. Here, the vote is obligatory so the question does not arise, but in the UK for instance, you can elect not to elect. I have just read that a recent poll forecast that turnout for the European elections could be as low as 18%. If this happens, it will mean that 82% of voters just can't be bothered...

The right to vote, the franchise, means the right to be free – a fundamental tenet of democracy: freedom from arbitrary rule, power invested in the people. The exercise of this basic right involves moral responsibility on both sides. Political parties are meant to state their policies clearly, explain how they mean to put them into practice and then, if elected, do so. Voters for their part should take the trouble to read and listen and make their choice on a rational and well-informed basis. But serious debate is too often replaced by the sound bites, slogans and

wars of images of what amount to advertising campaigns – campaigns that are funded by the murky commercial interests that buy politicians into power to defend them, despite election promises...

Voting rights risk degenerating into voting rites, observed every so often for the sake of appearances.

The right to vote is sacred, in the sense of deserving protection from violation, and indeed the word has religious connotations. The English term (and those of most Romance languages) comes from the Latin for vow, or desire, as in „votive“ – the votive candles believers place before images of saints or the votive offerings made to gain the favour of some deity. And the word „suffrage“ also means an intercessory prayer or petition made by a priest, often for the souls of the departed.

We cannot let our voting rights, so hardly won, be reduced to mere ritual. We cannot accept that we turn out to vote just to provide an alibi for those who really control the levers of power. Those shadowy figures are quite happy to let that happen, so it's for us voters to stand up like Oliver Twist and demand more: more serious debate, more transparency, more accountability – in short, more real democracy. If we don't defend it, democracy will just shrivel and die – and for all its faults, it is still, surely, the best form of government humans can imagine. As Winston Churchill once told the House of Commons: „No-one pretends that democracy is perfect or otherwise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government...except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.“

He was speaking on Armistice Day 1947, two years after the end of the Second World War and the horrors of Nazism.

Photo: Dundee City Council (Internet)