

A Qualified Franchise or Votes for All?

A SPECIAL commission comprising some of South Africa's leading public figures began in February this year to work out the conditions of a qualified franchise. The results of their labours are awaited with extreme interest.

The necessity to extend the franchise in South Africa on a common roll basis is accepted in principle by a constantly growing number of people, but they differ among themselves about the basis on which it should be extended. There are a number of possible franchise systems, ranging from the simple one-man-one-vote — usually referred to as adult suffrage — to complicated arrangements involving multiple votes. The main dispute, however, is between those who believe the vote should be subject to qualifications, and those who do not.

Simply a Device

It is necessary to make several points clear. Firstly, the vote is always subject to certain qualifications: it is restricted to persons above a certain age, and is not available to lunatics — or, rather, certified lunatics. Secondly, it is usually assumed in discussions about the franchise that qualifications would apply to all people irrespective of race, provided that those who already had the vote at the time of change-over would not be deprived of it because they failed to meet the qualifications laid down. The points at issue, then, are firstly, whether all sane adults have a right to the vote; secondly, if not, on what grounds certain persons should be excluded.

The supporters of a qualified franchise argue their case on a number of grounds. Their main negative argument is that the vote is not a basic human right; it is simply a device for electing a particular kind of government. Every citizen should have his basic human rights protected through constitutional entrenchments that are guarded by the courts, thus the fact that a man does not have the vote should not deprive him of anything material to his wellbeing.

This view is contested by supporters of adult suffrage. A man without a vote, they say, is at a disadvantage which cannot be justified on the grounds

"Now you can prove it, son — you're sane, alive, White, out of gaol and over 18. They've registered you as a voter."

—Courtesy
Cape Times.



that he has been unfortunate in not having the necessary education or other qualifications required for the vote. The vote, on this argument, is a necessary protection against discrimination, and no one should be deprived of it.

Many supporters of a qualified franchise take it as self-evident that people who lack a certain standard of education or who live in relatively primitive conditions cannot exercise the vote intelligently and should therefore not participate in elections. The idea of giving the vote to the raw African, to be exercised on an equal basis with a University professor, is too ludicrous, in the opinion of many, to bear serious examination.

The Raw African

Yet a number of quite intelligent people dispute this argument. One of their grounds for doing so is that in their opinion the "raw African" is not as raw as many Whites imagine: he is quite capable of choosing someone to represent him. The fact that he may not understand how modern society works is quite irrelevant — in most societies the average voter knows very little about the complex machinery of government, but that does not prevent the government of the country from being conducted efficiently by those who are trained in the various skilled jobs of administration.

Supporters of adult suffrage also reject the view that if "uncivilized" people are given the vote, the government will tend to be "uncivilized". They say it is impossible to define "civilized" and that a sophisticated, educated body of voters is just as likely to adopt obnoxious policies as a mass of illiterate peasants: Hitler's Germany is cited as an example.

It is not possible to dispose of these arguments lightly. Let us assume, however, that the principle of a qualified franchise is accepted. The problem then arises, where should the line be drawn? A very low qualification—say a Standard III education—coupled with an intensive educational programme, would mean a rapid extension of the franchise to a very large proportion of the population. On the other hand, a high qualification—say a Standard VIII education—would confine the vote to a relatively small number of non-white people.

Here two conflicting considerations emerge. On the one hand, if one accepts the premise that an educated electorate makes for better government, then presumably, the stiffer the qualifications, the better the results. On the other hand, if the white community genuinely desires to share political power with non-white people, a system that excludes all but a handful

of non-white people from participating in elections is likely to be an unsatisfactory basis for future co-operation. Recommendations for reform should not attract the imputation of hypocrisy, and that is one of the dangers that white South Africa faces.

In whatever way the franchise is extended in South Africa, there is no escape from the ultimate end result: a majority of non-white voters. Stiff qualifications for the franchise would merely delay that result for a time; but there may be a good case for delay in order to provide a transitional period and to ease the change-over.

Finally, one should note the existence of two divergent attitudes to the whole franchise question among liberally-minded Whites. One group approaches the matter with the idea of giving something to the non-Whites—this is the "concession" school. The other, smaller group does not think in terms of concessions: it identifies itself more closely with the unfranchised and visualises a situation developing in which the franchise will take the form desired by the broad mass of the people themselves. The former group tends to support qualified franchise, the latter group adult suffrage. But there are exceptions in both camps.

— W. B. W.

The Franchise — Voices from the Past

From "Nineteenth Century Opinion"—
An anthology by Michael Goodwin

WHEN the county franchise was talked of in 1873, there were many who thought the subject ill-timed—that the rural workman was an unfit subject to be invested with political power. The idea in many minds was that those hard-working men in the rural villages of this England of ours had no aspirations or desires above working, eating, drinking and sleeping—that they were content to let their more favoured and better educated superiors think for them, make laws for them, administer those laws; and no matter how unjustly those laws, which he, as a poor man, had no voice in making, might be administered, he, the working man, was expected to sit quietly down and tamely submit to the decision of his rich superiors. . . .

For years the unenfranchised state of farm labourers has been felt to be a grievous wrong inflicted upon them. Their position in life during the past has been such as has to a very great extent prevented them from making their grievances known beyond themselves. A public meeting in a rural village ten years ago, composed of

and got up by the working men to petition for household suffrage, would have caused considerable alarm among the well-to-do people of the village. The village clergyman and the well-to-do maiden ladies would have wondered at the audacity of the village rustics; but, although ten years ago their voice was not heard from the public platform, yet none the less did they feel they were wronged and injured by being denied the vote.

— George Potter — January, 1878.

ONE thing we need to learn is the necessity of limiting individual freedom for the general good; and another, that although decision by a majority of votes may be as good a rough-and-ready way as can be devised to get political questions settled, yet that, theoretically, the despotism of a majority is as little justifiable and as dangerous as that of one man; and yet another, that voting power, as a means of giving effect to opinion, is more likely to prove a curse than a blessing to the voters, unless that opinion is the result of a sound judgment operating upon sound knowledge.

— T. H. Huxley — January, 1890.