

The Right to Vote

The calling of General Elections in Barbados on 19 January, 2022, comes seventy-one years after the first General Elections were contested on the island in 1951. The historical significance of the 1951 elections, resides in the fact that it was the first to be held on the island following the granting of universal adult suffrage. Prior to this, the colonial British Government had limited the right to vote to members of the wealthy merchant class and property owners. Participation in the political process which was primarily a reserve for whites, was opened up to persons of colour after the 1937 riots in the Caribbean and the subsequent findings of the Moyne Commission in 1938. History records that it was in the 1940's and 50's, that Britain granted universal adult suffrage to most Caribbean Countries. The right the vote came out of the struggles and agitation of labour and working-class people.

The granting of universal suffrage by the British Parliament to Trinidad & Tobago in 1945, limited the voting age to persons 21 years and over. This also applied in the elections held in Barbados in 1951. This as it stood was a constraining factor and one which was subsequently challenged. Barbados took the decisive step in 1964 to reduce the voting age to 18. The 1976 Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago extended the franchise to persons on attaining the age of 18 years of age.

Throughout the Caribbean, universal adult suffrage is granted to every citizen of the country, who generally are eighteen years and over. This means that all Barbadians who are employed or unemployed whether male or female, are entitled to vote. The right to vote is an entitlement by law which ought not to be denied to citizen of Barbados. It is however important that citizens are aware that they are eligible to vote in a constituency where they have been registered for at least three months prior to the qualifying date.

From the records of history, women have every right to be offended on having initially discriminated against and excluded from participating in the voting exercise. In the pre and early post-colonial period, some women were granted the right to vote on the condition that they were literate or were property owners. This came to an end after World War 11, following the promotion of Woman Suffrage by the United Nations. With the identification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979, by 189 countries globally, women now enjoy the basic right to vote on having attained the age of eighteen. It is a matter of interest that in Brazil, the 1988 Constitution there, provided for the lowering of the voting age for women from 18 to 16 years of age.

Voting is known to be a voluntary act. No one is to be forced or subject to vote buying, bribery or any act of soliciting by politicians and their campaign personnel. Trade union members should not allow themselves to be influenced by trade union representatives regarding the party for whom they should vote. The casting of a vote is based on individual conscience, one's support for a

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political party or an individual politician. This is always a matter of personal choice or preference. In making a determination, workers as voters, should always be mindful of the agenda of the labour movement; remembering always that emotions are usually short-lived, but labour challenges remain constant.

The votes of labour play a big part in the outcome of any election results. Dating back to the 1951 elections, there were 95,939 registered voters, in which the elections were contested by three political parties. These were The Barbados Labour Party, Barbados Electors Association and the West Indian National Congress Party. According to the Barbados Statistical Service Survey, October 2021, the labour force numbered 136,100. In the Barbadian system of elections, trade unions have traditionally not aligned themselves with a party in the contest. This ought to remain the same in a day where there is a wider choice in the number of political parties in the contest. In following the traditions of democracy, this approach can be considered as fair and non-partisan. It does not mean that there is no interest in the likely outcome, but reason will dictate that the representatives of labour will have to press their demands regardless of whichever party forms the government.

By taking this approach, along with the encouraging of individual members to vote according to choice and conscience, hopefully this could eliminate the sometimes accusation that labour representative(s) are sitting in bed with the government of the day. Those individuals who occupy leadership positions within the labour movement, and who exercise the right of choice to be a member or candidate of a political party, are not to be condemned or overtly criticized. It is for those who they represent, to ensure that there is accountability in the execution of decisions taken by the membership, that good and quality leadership is provided, and that their actions are not inimical to the interest of the individual trade union and by extension, the labour movement.