

## **The problem with voting**

Our democracy depends upon voting. King Demos (to whom we are all committed) works his wiles on the basis that in an election people will record their votes, and the biggest vote will decide the issue. That may raise problems about the protection of persecuted minorities, such as those devoted to the time-honoured sport of hunting with hounds. I am not now concerned with that aspect.

What I am concerned with is a mundane problem connected with the mechanics of voting, often overlooked. How, when collecting and counting the votes, can you be sure they are genuine? If a vote is not genuine it should not count, but exactly how do you check up on this?

Any system of voting must lay down voters' qualifications. If you are not qualified to vote, your purported vote should not count. The electoral system, for obvious reasons, must also disallow multiple voting. One person one vote is the principle. It is undermined if people get away with voting twice, thrice – or even more often. That does happen.

The fact that it happens is demonstrated by the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Bill, which received a second reading in the House of Commons on July 10. Vote today, vote often is an old chestnut about Ulster elections. This Bill confirms its underlying truth. Why should that be?

I studied closely the Hansard report of the debate on the second reading of this worthy Bill. It did not reveal the answer to my question. I never thought it would. Every speaker was behaving politely, which meant skating on the surface. Truth, which lies a little deeper, was not troubled.

The truth here is that dishonest voting in Northern Ireland elections, for long an object of scorn, is merely a minor product of the age-old tussle between north and south. People who, either in the name of holy Ireland or the defence of the union, think nothing of tossing a petrol bomb through an old lady's window, are not going to stall at electoral malpractice. To them it seems trivial, though in its small way useful. Obviously, given their moral principles, they will make use of it whenever opportunity serves.

The second reading of the Bill was moved by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr. Desmond Browne MP. He said that the turnout at elections had been historically higher in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. "That suggests that the electorate in Northern Ireland are more politically active and more politically conscious than elsewhere in the UK." Of course they are. We knew that already, if we had any sense. We also knew the reasons. What do you take us for?

Mr Browne went on to criticise "vote stealing" and said there had been growing concern about the perceived level of electoral malpractice in Northern Ireland, though he did not specify in which quarters this concern was felt. Mr Browne added that electoral abuse was an affront to democracy. He went on-

"If there is a high level of abuse, or even if people only fear that that is the case, the democratic process will be under threat. We do not want voters in Northern Ireland to become disillusioned with politics because they fear that elections are unfair."

Of course, as we all know, the answer to this electoral malpractice is a return to the wartime system of universal identity cards. If you are privileged to live in the world's best democracy, which refugees from all over Europe and elsewhere constantly risk their lives to reach, then you should be willing to place your identity on record. What, unless you are the sort of person no state would want, have you got to lose?

In this Bill, as always, the Government was too timid to advance this obviously right solution. Instead Mr Browne resorted to the usual waffle. It is, he said, proposed to introduce, for Northern Ireland only, a photographic electoral identity card. It will apply only to elections. Why should this be? Why not seize the opportunity and introduce what is obviously required, an all-purpose identity card?

Of course no one in this pedestrian debate raised that central point, so brainwashed are we all on such matters. Instead, Mr Browne waffled on.

“We have given the chief electoral officer extra resources to provide additional staff in both his headquarters and his area electoral offices. We have also recently commissioned research to quantify with more certainty the scale of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. The results of the research should be available in September. They will enable us to be better informed about the level of abuse and the form that it takes.”

Do let us be better informed. About what we are fully informed on already. What is needed is action not waffle.

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