

The Right To Vote

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Today, in the midst of a great struggle, man longingly looks forward to a tomorrow,—to a new order of things when men will not be partly free and partly fettered.

He is looking forward for what an idealistic American calls "The Century of the Common Man." He does not envisage the "New Order" of the totalitarians where bullets are substituted for ballots. His "New Order" will be a true democracy—a process whereby he will be able to effect a peaceful transfer of power from one group to another representing different goals and objectives. This process implies that the minority of today has a chance to become the majority of tomorrow. Democracy may be said to be most fully realised when the largest possible number of persons share directly or indirectly in the determina-

tion of public policy. *True democracy depends upon a broader universal suffrage*

YESTERDAY AND—TODAY

Voting is a device used from very early times in the early Roman and Greek City states, the right to vote was regarded as attitude to citizenship. During the Middle Ages, however, property qualification began to appear. Voting came to be considered a privilege associated with the individual's status in society and more, particularly, ownership of property. This situation continued in English history from the Norman Conquest in 1066 down to the first Reform Bill of 1832. In British Guiana, this situation continues to the present day. To qualify as a voter, an adult, of 21 years, besides being sane and able to read and write in some language, has

to satisfy at least one property qualification. This takes the form of either landed property, land tenure, rent or income. It can safely be said that a large percentage of our population, especially in the country districts, although literate, cannot meet this property qualification, and consequently are disqualified from voting. Are we still living in the Middle Ages? We hear the familiar cry of conservatives "we are not yet ready. How can the people be ready when their economic status is so low—when they cannot muster an income of \$300 per year? How many married couples in rural districts receive an annual income of \$600 enabling both to vote?

"WEALTH IS NO PROOF OF MORAL CHARACTER"

Our leaders remind us of the U. S. Poll Tax. Let it be remembered that this tax exists only in a few Southern States, and even now there is an anti-poll Tax Bill in the U. S. Congressional Committee. The poll tax is a \$2.00 tax attempting to disfranchise the low income African population. Most enlightened Americans decry this obnoxious tax. Let us not look to the progress of our country by thinking backwards of reactionary measures such as these, but look forward to new progressive ideas.

With the ushering in of the democratic forms of government, property qualifications began to disappear. As one of the early American democratic thinkers, Thomas Paine, once said, "Wealth is no proof of moral character, nor poverty the want of it. On the contrary, wealth is often the presumptive evidence of dishonesty." All men came to be regarded as being free and equal and possessing certain natural rights, among which was the right to vote. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man stated, "The law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right of concurring personally or by representation in its formation."

Continued on Page 7

The Right To Vote

Continued from page 3

ILLITERACY ON THE SUGAR PLANTATIONS

We are all familiar with the background of the labouring people of this country. The Indians and Africans came here as cheap labour to produce sugar. Their wages are the minimum barely possible for existence. They spent their days working to earn enough to live. There was little time or opportunity for education. Their children were forced, because of the low wages, to follow the same pattern. One can still see the vestiges of child labour in the creole gangs of the sugar estates. The economic situation did not change. The money of the colony is still in the hands of the same people. The condition of the labourers, particularly on the sugar plantations, has improved but little since the first indentured workers arrived in the colony. What chance had they to become literate? It is only the present generation that is becoming literate, but how many of them in their present economic status can meet the property qualification necessary for voting?

HOW DOES THE COMMON MAN STAND?

The common man is today fighting on many fronts to prevent government by coercion and retain government by consent. To him the right to vote becomes a natural right. He does not regard it as a mere privilege to be granted or denied by the moneyed interests. There is no doubt that the moneyed interests here are afraid to franchise the people. To them it would mean the ultimate ruination of their power. Could they maintain their power with the labouring man, the majority, passing the laws? Public policy will then no longer favour only them but will be directed with the view towards the greatest good for the greatest number. Only then a true democratic Government is likely to endure