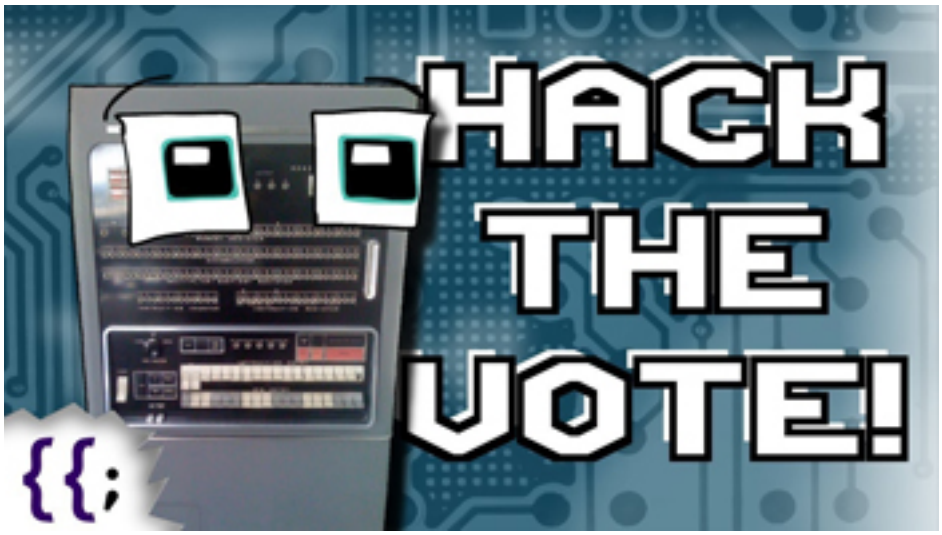

Voting for democracy

by Simon Belt

2018 marks the 100 year anniversary of the Representation of the People Act (1918), granting the franchise to women over the age of 30 who met a property qualification, whilst extending it to all men over the age of 21, but layin the ground for representation through voting to become universal and equally available to men and women alike. It's worth looking at the principles involved in voting, lest the efforts of the suffragette movement be lost.

The extension of the voting franchise with the 1918 Act began the process of women being on a par with men in being able to vote in Parliamentary and Local Council elections, and with the Re presentation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act in
1928, the franchise was put on an equal footing to men. These concessions were hard fought for by ordinary people, men and women, demanding that they play an equal role through political representation, in the determination of the political direction of the country.

Clearly, the class system still existed in 1918 and 1928, as it does now, but the argument that extending the franchise to the working classes, and men and women equally, was a distraction from more profound social change seems to denigrate the political change in expectations it helped bring about. Although the First and Second world wars may well have embodied the widespread destruction of sections of the international working class, they were also accorded more of a role alongside our 'betters' like never before.

Workers being more involved in the production process, and especially women workers during both wars, may have been to the benefit of extracting more surplus value during the war effort, but it also opened up a greater democratisation of society more widely. The extension of the voting franchise was a recognition of changes afoot in the in the older ruling order, and saw greater fluidity within a rigid class system. Once the genie of democratic involvement in our collective political direction is out of the bottle, it's not so easy to put back, not least because the moral authority of our erstwhile rulers is continually thrown into question.

And so, 100 years on from the 1918 Representation of the People Act, are we in a good place with our voting system. Well, there seems to be a continual process of trying to tinker with the first passed the post system in the UK, often by those in favour of various fixes to make sure the advocates of such systems can be involved in the system. I do think that this usually comes across as bad faith towards the electorate - as being incapable of being convinced of a worthy proposal and supposedly just cannon fodder for big parties with lots of money for advertising. Also, the desire to lower the age for the franchise, from 18 to 16, to include people with questionable maturity or worldliness, seems to again, avoid having a convincing argument with older, more mature and worldly people.

So, why raise this issue now? Well, the New Year firework display in London had a very interesting storyline as backdrop of ushering in a year of centenary celebrations of the 1918 Act, giving women the vote. Most interesting was that the music accompanying the Mayor of London's firework display was to be by female artists only - including Aretha Franklin, Annie Lennox, Ariana Grande, Dua Lipa and Florence Welch.

Sadiq Khan said of women only playlist, “As a proud feminist I am really encouraged to see so many Londoners supporting this campaign to say that behind every great city is equality, opportunity and progress – regardless of your gender. It is incredibly important to mark the centenary of this momentous time in history, but also to take stock of the huge inequalities women still face 100 years on from first winning the right to vote.” This is the same vote loving Sadiq Khan who wants to see Brexit overturned and with the stroke of a pen happily saw 30,000 Uber taxi drivers face termination of their contracts with 10 days notice, again championing women's rights as the reason for such actions.

It seems to me that women only playlists is not only demeaning to the women artists involved - that they're only being because of an accident of their conception, rather than their songs being the best fit for the show. It also undermines the campaign for the right of women to vote on equal terms as an example of women being treated equally in and across society. This tokenism guts the democratic and equality based demand for equal treatment and enacts a 'we know better than you' approach to the electorate. It's this elitism that denigrates the electorate and over-rides relatively recent and seemingly short-lived norms of meritocracy that is the problem here. And that no-one batted an eyelid over it, shows how disorientating the use of feminist language can be against an erstwhile liberal audience.

Another example of the same 'we know better than you' approach is the way the Royal Court

decided to ditch the performances of 'Rita, Sue and Bob Too', because of wanting to protect the feelings of some women. Thankfully, the outcry saw them have to reverse their decision.
There's an important point here about the way culturally, the electorate have been seen as a bit suspect, unable to make proper decisions for themselves, liable to react like a dog to a whistle. The response to the Brexit vote by those who've spent the last few decades trying to take decisions out of the hands of the electorate - for their own good - is likely to be a dominnnt theme of 2018, so let's bring out the real meaning of suffrage and demand our votes count for something, because they really were worth fighting for, for women and men alike.