

To vote or not to vote: it was not always an option

History tells us why we should not take voting for granted

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FRIDAY, DEC. 14: The battle to achieve full voting rights in Bermuda was much less dramatic than in other countries.

No blood was spilled, no heads were bashed in with billy clubs, but the fight to abolish the property vote and bring about universal adult suffrage was a hard struggle just the same.

Bermuda traditionally has a high voter participation rate, but with talk of potential voters staying away from the polls on Election Day on Monday, it's worth a look at how full voting rights for Bermudians were achieved.

Election Day May 22, 1968 was historic for several reasons. It was the first election held under a new Constitution, the two-party system and with full universal adult suffrage.

There had been a significant development in the June 1963 election, when people who did not own property were allowed to vote for the first time in the island's history.

But the powerful white businessmen who dominated Parliament back then and were resistant to change successfully won a major concession — an increase in the voting age from 21 to 25 and an extra "plus" vote for property owners.

In the May 1968 election, the voting age was lowered to 21 and the property vote was abolished altogether.

This political turn of events had come about more than 40 years after universal adult franchise was adopted in the United Kingdom and Canada and nearly 25 years since its adoption in France and Jamaica.

The right to vote had been the preserve of male property owners from the earliest days of Bermuda's settlement — although this was in line with other western counties.

The idea that all adults should have the right to vote, rather than just a select few — was a principle that took root in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In Bermuda, black men who owned property enjoyed voting rights even prior to Emancipation. Pilot James Darrell, who was born a slave and freed because of his sailing prowess, was the first known black person to own property in Bermuda.

But barriers were placed on blacks at Emancipation in 1834 to limit their voting power when the threshold for the value of property for qualified voters was raised from £40 to £100.

In his book *Heritage*, author Dr Kenneth Robinson described the act that increased the property qualification

as a "cold-blooded retrograde piece of legislation".

In Bermuda, the first push to challenge Bermuda's restrictive voting system came from women, first from Anna Maria Outerbridge in 1895 and from the indomitable Gladys Misick Morrell, who as founder of Bermuda Woman Suffrage Society, led the 30-year campaign for voting rights for women.

Bermudian women won the right to vote in 1944. But because of property qualification, political power remained in the hands of Bermuda's white elite.

Black parliamentarians, who were then a minority in the House, withheld their support from the women's campaign because they believed black Bermudians had little to gain.

Black parliamentarian and physician Dr Eustace Cann broke ranks with his fellow black MPs to vote for the women's voting bill, which helped ensure its passage.

Following passage of the bill, however, black MP David Tucker, a lawyer and editor of the Bermuda Recorder, said in an editorial: *"We must offer our congratulations to the Suffrage Society for the dignified way in which they have waged their fight."*

"Less than 300 ladies were powerful enough to alter our franchise. Surely 20,000 people, if united, should be able to bring about universal suffrage and, thereby give every adult in the Colony an opportunity to have a voice in the affairs of Government."

Historian Colin Benbow wrote in *Gladys Morrell and the Women's Suffrage Movement in Bermuda*: *"This victory for propertied women set the stage for another political development, the 20-year-fight for Universal Adult Suffrage conducted in the main, by black citizens who had wanted it and the abolition of the property qualification all along."*

Besides Gladys Morrell, key figures in the campaign for women's suffrage were Sir Stanley Spurling, Henrietta Frith Tucker and Edith Heyl.

Taking up the gauntlet for universal adult suffrage were Dr Cann, W L Tucker, who introduced the suffrage bill in Parliament, and future National Heroes Dr E.F. Gordon and Roosevelt Brown (Dr Pauulu Kamarakafego).

Dr Gordon's push for universal adult suffrage was part of a broader battle for social and racial justice in Bermuda.

As president of the Bermuda Workers Association — forerunner of the Bermuda Industrial Union — he took a petition to London in 1946, asking the UK government to investigate racial and social inequities in Bermuda.

He painted the picture as it related to voting rights in stark terms. Only seven per cent of the population could vote, and there were more votes cast than actual voters because a property owner could vote in every parish where he owned land. (In fact, elections in Bermuda were held over several days so that voters could vote in every parish where they owned land.)

There were also voting syndicates where one property could be owned by multiple owners with each having the right to vote. (To make their voices heard during a time of limited power, black voters used a practice called "plumping". With each parish represented by four MPs, black voters would select the candidate most sympathetic to their cause and vote for him alone.)

In his petition, Dr Gordon said the system gave "the monied classes a distinct and definite control over the election results".

He also pointed out that while the UK and its dependencies had undertaken voting reforms, Bermuda had operated under the same system since 1620.

Gordon's petition brought about only minimal reforms. The push for changes to the electoral system gathered steam in the late 1950s.

In June 1958, W L Tucker brought a bill to the House that called for the extension of the franchise. The bill was passed in Parliament and Mr Tucker was elected chairman of a parliamentary committee that was established to examine the issue.

For the next four years however, the franchise committee faced a wall of resistance from MPs.

It was Roosevelt Brown, home from college studies in the US, who in September 1960 established the Committee for Universal Adult Suffrage and organised a series of public meetings.

At those meetings, Mr. Brown craftily lined up supporters and opponents of universal adult franchise to speak. As the meetings moved from parish to parish, they attracted larger audiences and broad public support. The arguments put forward by opponents seemed hollow.

There were negotiations as well outside of Parliament, much to W L Tucker's frustration, but he and his committee pressed on, and the franchise finally passed on December 1962.

W L Tucker, who became known as the 'Father of the Franchise', admitted the law fell short of what black MPs wanted.

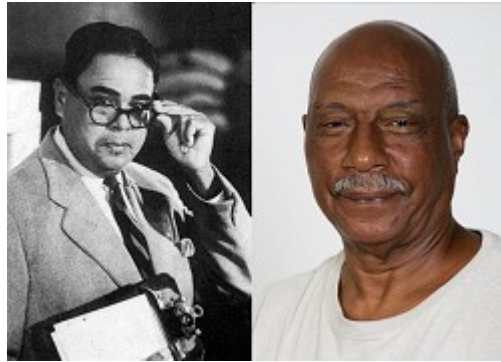
Still, it was a major step forward. The first election under the new electoral system was held in June 1963 — an election that saw a new party emerge, the Progressive Labour Party, with future National Hero Dame Lois Browne-Evans one of six MPs elected under the PLP banner.

The United Bermuda Party formed a year later.

In 1966, a constitutional conference took place, which laid the groundwork for the May 22, 1968 election that saw the plus vote dropped altogether. The UBP was elected by a landslide, winning 30 seats to the PLP's 10.

In the years since, more reforms would follow — but the last vestiges of a system that put in place in the 17th century had disappeared altogether.

Meredith Ebbin, Guest writer



Trailblazers: W L Tucker, left, and Roosevelt Brown. **Photos supplied*

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