

## THE "QUALIFIED" VOTE.

By A.P. O'DOIM.

Once Cecil Rhodes was asked to define in a sentence his policy for South Africa. Without thinking about it very much, he replied, "Equal rights for all white men south of the Zambesi". If or someone pointed out that the African voters of the Cape would not like the use of the phrase "white men", so Rhodes, or someone acting on his behalf, amended the slogan to read, "Equal rights for all civilised men south of the Zambesi". Thus originated the slogan which has since come to be regarded as epitomising the Cape Liberal tradition. It is often described as Rhodes' policy, but if Rhodes ever adhered to it at all, which is doubtful, he did so as a temporary election manoeuvre which he soon forgot about.

What was the concrete expression of this famous Liberal tradition? It was the carefully regulated "qualified franchise" by which African and Coloured men who passed certain tests were allowed to be voters. The tests did not remain always the same. They were raised from time to time in order to ensure that there should always be a comfortable white majority. The qualified franchise was in fact a rich man's franchise, and due care was taken to see that the rich remained mostly white.

The Cape Liberal system was merely a chapter in the history of white supremacy and white exploitation in South Africa. It was a less grim chapter than others and its closing was a matter for regret. Nevertheless it was not different in kind from the other systems of white rule which existed then and have existed since.

There is to-day a movement afoot to revive the slogan of "Equal rights for all civilised men" and to replace the "qualified franchise" which once existed in the Cape. This movement is finding some support among Europeans who have been taught by the events of the last few years that some change in South Africa's political set-up is necessary.

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Its supporters raise a number of arguments in favour of their policy as against the non-European liberatory movement's demand for full equality.

Firstly, they say that it is impossible to grant the franchise to uneducated people because such people do not understand how to vote or what issues are at stake in an election. This is an argument which, thirty years ago, would have had to be refuted by elaborate theoretical answers. Today, it can be very briefly disposed of. The franchise was granted to illiterate people in the early years of the Soviet Union; it has since been granted to illiterate people in India, Nigeria and the Gold Coast. In none of these countries has chaos resulted. The fact is that uneducated people often display more common sense about politics than semi-educated ones.

Then it is said that the qualified franchise must be adopted as an immediate objective because European opinion will not countenance anything more radical. There are two answers to this argument. Firstly, European opinion will not support even the qualified franchise until it is forced to do so. Secondly, Europeans will have to reconcile themselves in the end to the universal franchise, and the sooner they are familiarised with the idea, the better. The time is past when the Europeans, merely by saying "We do not wish it", could permanently hold up the progress of South Africa.

Lastly the fear is expressed that if large numbers of Africans are immediately enfranchised, they will vote as an African nationalist bloc, with the result that racial hostility will be increased. This is certainly a real danger, but the only way to combat it is to abolish discrimination as quickly and completely as possible. The danger of African Chauvinism will remain and increase as long as the legitimate national aspirations of the Africans are thwarted. If we do not wish to see African nationalist blocs operating in our political life, the most obvious step to take is to deprive such blocs of their reason for existence by ending national oppression.

It is not out of stubbornness or impractical idealism that the non-European peoples' movements demand full equality.

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and reject any lesser concession. Their demand is based not only on democratic principles which are accepted the world over, but also on the hard facts of South African history. We have had qualified franchises before. While they lasted, they did little to improve the lot of the mass of the people. They did not last permanently because they created a privileged minority which was able at any time to take such steps as it saw fit to entrench its position more strongly. Power in the hands of a minority is usually abused. So it proved in South Africa before and so it is likely to prove again. The only way to build a real, stable democracy in South Africa is by adhering simply and honestly to democratic principles.

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