

**If voting changed anything... it would be
illegal**

Ray Cunningham

Contents

Time for Real Change	4
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The ‘Payments to Politicians’ Tribunal is just the latest in a long line of examples (the Beef Tribunal, the tax amnesties...) that show just how deep in the pockets of the bosses our government really is. It’s not just Ireland. All over the world politicians are found to be corrupt, while others tell you that, of course, they receive large sums of money from business, but, naturally, this doesn’t effect their judgement in the slightest. What did we do to deserve this.

Over the centuries, thousands of people have fought and died for the right to vote in free elections. From wars of independence, to the women’s suffrage movement, to the struggle against apartheid, the right to vote has been seen as a necessary part of freedom and equality. Before we won universal suffrage, our lawmakers were chosen by the upper class, the rich and the church, or were appointed by the rulers of other states. So why, after winning such an important right, do anarchists say we should not vote in elections?

The vast majority of people, in every country around the world, are working class. We have to sell our ability to work in order to earn a living; we can’t survive on income from rent, or stocks and shares, like the rich minority. When the right to vote began to be extended, around the middle of the last century, the rich feared that the poor (i.e. everyone else) would use their much greater numbers to vote for a change in the distribution of wealth and move towards a fairer society.

Cobett, one of the leaders of the Chartist movement (who campaigned for universal suffrage), said that he wanted the working class to vote “that it might do some good, that it might better our situation ... and not for the gratification of any abstract ... whim”. This was why people fought for the right to vote. They wanted an equal say in the government of the land, so they would get a fair share of the goods of the land.

As it turned out, the rich needn’t have worried. Every time a so-called ‘socialist’ or ‘Labour’ party has come to power, they have been almost indistinguishable from their more right-wing opponents. Despite their promises to act for the working class, once in government they seem to be more concerned with being ‘respectable’ and ‘reasonable’ — in others words, not doing anything that would offend the rich, the real rulers. Now we have ‘progressed’ to the stage where parties don’t even pretend to campaign on the basis of representing the working class, but say they are more “trustworthy”, or are a “safe pair of hands” to control the economy. “Redistribution of wealth” is an embarrassment from the past.

It’s not just a question of having weak-willed leaders, or the scum rising to the top (though there’s plenty of that about). There is a real limit to what governments can do — its called capitalism. Now, more than ever, if the actions of a government are unpopular with business, those businesses will just leave. It’s the logic of the marketplace — if you can turn a bigger profit by moving your company to a country that allows child labour, you will — ask Nike why their production is based in Indonesia.

If you’re a director of a big company, you’ll want a guarantee that there won’t be any trouble from those pesky unions — Partnership 2000, anybody? Try being a union organiser in Korea, it’s really a barrel of laughs — otherwise it’s a case of “Thanks for those IDA grants, but now I really must be going.” Nowadays, politicians act as buffers, serving the interests of big business, and doling out a few crumbs to keep us quiet.

The important issue, though, is not just that we are left only with a choice between shades of grey, between Tweedledum and Tweedledumber. Even if we were faced with radically different candidates in the election, they would all have one thing in common, and that one thing should be enough to stop us from voting for them. Whether they are conservative or liberal, left-wing or right, they all want to make laws to decide how we live. They may promise to rule well, but they mean to be our masters.

Of course, this is the way it has always been, and we are told this is the way it always must be, which is why we accept it. But isn't it a crazy idea? That there are some people who can understand the millions of different lives we lead, and can tell what's best for every one of us? That there are only 166 people in the 26 counties with the brains to organise anything, and the rest of us have to be told what to do and how to do it, that we're too stupid to decide anything for ourselves? Why, if we can't be trusted to govern ourselves, can we be trusted to choose our governors?

Time for Real Change

There is an alternative. Society that is really ruled by all, and not just a few who claim to 'represent' the rest of us. That means deciding the issues ourselves, instead of letting others decide for us. Politicians are generally well-off, we are the ones who need the support of the rest of the community from time to time. When it comes down to it, we are the ones who will be using public hospitals and schools — would we have decided to give the rich a tax amnesty, when services like these are so underfunded?

Democracy doesn't stop there. Unless we actually run the places we work in, our safety, our work conditions, and our job security will always depend on how much profit our boss thinks he can make. And until we have control over our work, and over the economy as a whole, we will still be ruled. How can we make any real progress under a system which only exists to make the rich richer? Real democracy needs real socialism — anarchism is based on having freedom and equality, because you can't have one without the other.

So, when anarchists advise against voting in the general election, we're not just saying that politicians are a shower of liars and cheats (though most are), and that you should wait until some good and honest politicians come along (don't hold your breath) so you can vote for them. When you vote, you are choosing between rulers. Why not choose instead to rule yourself, to organise with others — in your workplace, in your community, everywhere — as equals, and make some changes yourself, instead of waiting for others to do it for you. Spoil your vote — and then go out and start making a real difference.

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