

Political Thinking Meeting Report No 36

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 36 Monday 17th June 2019

Topic; Gender and Politics.

Summary

The discussion ranged over gender in politics and other aspects of modern life, including ideas about balance and equality between genders, about recognition of diversity of gender, and the role of women in society.

There was little enthusiasm for the suggestion of quotas or all-women short-lists as a means of addressing the issue of balance in political institutions; the notion that selection procedures for every type of job in politics and elsewhere should aim to identify the best person for the job irrespective of gender found more favour.

It was recognised that opportunities for women had broadened and would continue to do so, but that the balance between parenting and work continued to be elusive.

Discussion

With respect to gender balance, there was no support for the notion that committees and other institutional organisation arrangements should have a balance of gender in their composition.

Nor was there support for ethnic or age balance. The concept that only a person of the relevant ethnicity or gender or age group could be an effective representative was not supported. Qualities required of representatives were empathy, experience, understanding and similar.

The difficulties in defining gender, especially in those sports where physique is a major determinant of success were noted, without any clear solution. The development of women's sport generally, for example in the traditional team sports of football, rugby and cricket were recognised as an advance. There seemed no answer to the commercial fact that mens' sports

currently attract more paying spectators and therefore more money is available to the players and provider organisations. So that equality in financial aspects does not result.

Where it is possible for men and women to compete on equal terms, eg chess or bridge, this should be the norm.

Differences between varying professions in the composition of the workforce were noted. Modern industries such as IT tended to have a reasonable balance of genders, in contrast with some more traditional workplaces, train driving, working in the docks or mining. Educational opportunities had the consequence that occupations such as law and accountancy had become much more balanced in recent years as recent entrants were much more gender balanced.

The representation of males in the traditional female occupations such as teaching, nursing and social care remains low; despite extensive advocacy of the importance of a more balanced workforce, for example in schools.

The impact of social policies which support shared parenting responsibilities such as joint paternity / maternity leave were considered to be beneficial in the sense of reducing the bias against women when being considered for appointment or promotion. Financial support through the state for families through the welfare system, which is prevalent in Europe and Scandinavia, was not favoured. Parents are responsible for their own children seemed to be the view.

Increasing participation by women in employment was generally considered to result in an improved quality of life for women, though that this was now necessary in order for a family to have the basic necessities of life, including housing, was seen as retrograde.

Full participation in all aspects of life irrespective of gender was considered to be a sound objective from personal, national and indeed international perspectives, leading to full attainment of personal potential and consequentially supporting of human endeavour and achievement generally. To some the challenge of the 21st century is to ensure that progress continues.