

English for Life in the UK: Episode 4, History of Democracy

Hello, welcome to episode 4 of English for Life in the UK. English for Life in the UK is a podcast for intermediate level learners of English, produced by a group of volunteer teachers from the St Augustine's Centre in Halifax, Yorkshire. It is intended mainly for students attending the course of this name at the centre, however we hope it will also be of use to anyone wanting to improve their English and learn more about life in this country. We believe that one of the most important ways to learn a language is to listen to a range of native speakers of that language talking about a subject of interest and importance. In this podcast episode you will hear 3 people with different English accents. Christine is Scottish, John is from Yorkshire, and Mark - that's me - I was born near London. We are currently studying some aspects of British history and in this episode we will be focusing on the history of democracy. And as you will hear we chose a rather interesting day to record this episode.

[1:45 minutes. Music]

- C: So this is a significant date for us today to be discussing the history of democracy in this country because today is the 12th of December 2019 and of course it's General Election day. So each one of us who are 18 or over can go and vote for an MP to represent us in Parliament. There are different political parties and whichever party gets the most Members of Parliament will form a government. At least that is what usually happens in this country. So it was very timely that we chose today to talk about the development of democracy in the UK. And also it led on well from Last week's topic which was the Industrial Revolution. John would you tell us some more about how these are linked?
- J: Yeah, we talked today about a group of people called the chartists who were - especially in the north of England - were campaigning in the early part of the 19th century to extend the franchise. So by the franchise we mean the right to vote, to cast a ballot and to send representatives to parliament and Westminster. So the chartists set out a Charter - that's why they were called the chartists, which would have given the right to vote to every man in the United Kingdom over the age of 21. And the idea was to hold yearly parliaments with a secret ballot to elect people to that Parliament, so they thought that this would be a way of exercising their democratic rights and the yearly parliaments would act against corruption so that people were answerable to recall the people who were able to vote for them.
- C: And so how does that link with the change in society and the development of industry?
- J: Previously political power rested with people who were landowners, for example. Whereas the growth of cities like Manchester, Bradford, places like Halifax and Huddersfield, Yorkshire and Lancashire in the Industrial Revolution, meant that working-class people were coming together in these big new cities that were emerging and as they became better educated and more conscious they moved for political power.
- C: And so Mark, could you tell us something about how the laws changed at this time? Because the chartists did have an effect, they may not have got everything they wanted but there were some major changes.
- M: Yes that's right. So really the first big Reform Act - it's often called the great Reform Act - was in 1832. At this stage the chartists [5:00 minutes] hadn't really got going at that stage but there was still a move to increase the number of people who could vote prior to the 1832 act. Really the vote was very restricted, largely to people who were rich but also to particular areas of the country, particularly the countryside, so the

1832 act increased the number of people who can vote and it did start to give the industrial cities that John was talking about MPs in Parliament for the first time. So then we get the chartists with their series of acts of protests and campaigning through – over a number of years. And then we get in 1867 and again in 1872 and then 1884 three further Reform Acts which increased the number of people who are able to vote, particularly the skilled working class for example, by the end of this period were able to vote and the other thing that was very important was it introduced a secret ballot.

C: So what do you mean by secret ballot?

M: OK well prior to this when people went to vote everyone knew how they voted. It was an open process in that sense and that led to a lot of corruption. It led to people - the rich landowners - knowing how the people who lived in their area were voting and insisting on them voting for them.

C: And they could check, they would know.

M: And they could check, they would know. So the secret ballot was an important part in the development of democracy and the idea is that you are able to keep how you voted secret to yourself, so you knew how you voted but nobody else knew how you voted. And the way it works, and it's still that way today, is you get a piece of paper known as a ballot paper with the names of the candidates - the people standing for Parliament in your area - and you put a cross in a box next to the person that you want to become your MP and you do that in secret. You actually go into a little booth, a little box where nobody else can see what you're doing so they can't see where you've put your cross, you fold your bit of paper up and it's put in a ballot box so that's a box where all the votes are put and nobody knows how you voted so it's called a secret ballot. And that's an important dimension an important element in any democracy really.

C: So, John, I know who the political parties are today because I've been out and voted for them - well for one of them. What about in earlier in the 19th century can you tell us how?

J: So we discussed that today in the class, in the 19th century parliament was dominated by two parties who initially were known as the Tories and the Wigs. The Tory Party went on to become the modern Conservative Party whereas the Wigs became what the modern Liberal Party. The Tories were more traditional, they looked to maintaining the status quo, as we say they were more conservative. The Wigs were a more – had a more liberal ideology, so they looked towards things like free trade, what we class as more progressive ideas. And until turn of the 19th into the 20th century these were the two dominant parties, again the rise of industrial working classes in the city's led to the development of trade unions. Initially the trade unions would have tended to back the Wigs for the liberal party but around the turn of the century the trade unionists got together and decided to send their own representatives to Parliament, so members of Parliament who would specifically represent the working-class population of the country. This led to the formation in Bradford around the start of the 20th century of the Labour Party.

C: Interesting, so at the turn of the century then, after the reform Acts, [10:00 minutes] the vote the franchise had been extended but not - only to certain people - proportion of the population would you like to?

M: It was still limited and in particular it was limited to men only at this stage. And so in the early part of the 20th century around the time when the labour party was forming,

there was also the formation of a campaigning group, a movement known as the suffragettes. And the suffragettes were largely women themselves who were campaigning for, arguing for the vote for women. And in the first 10 or 15 years of the twentieth century they took part in a number of protests, including some that were quite violent - activities to bring attention to the fact that women didn't have the vote and to campaign specifically for that. Amongst the things that they did was they chained themselves to railings, they also attacked some buildings and a number of them did end up being arrested and going to prison and there are some of them went on hunger strike, so they refused to eat, and they were force fed in there. And then we looked particularly in the lesson we did today at a video of a very particular event which was a horse race in 1913, a horse race known as the Derby. Christine do you want to tell us a bit about what we saw in that video?

C: Yes well it was a lovely old black and white video - silent film - accompanied by a piano. And we saw the gathering of the great and the good at the racecourse arriving in all their different vehicles - horse-drawn and motor vehicles. And the race starting and suddenly a woman - dressed as all the women were in their hat and long skirt - just running in front of the King's horse and being trampled and in fact trampled to death. And although, I mean that was in 1913, it took a long time for votes for women to be granted but significant events like that played an important part. But Mark you were saying also that the first world war was a significant factor?

M: Yes so the votes for some women - that was some women over the age of 30 - came in in 1918, at the end of the first world war. And what actually happened in the war of course is that most of the men, many of the fit and healthy men were fighting in the war and so what happened was that women took up very significant roles in the factories and in the variety of workplaces and offices across the country and so it was really not - at the end of the First World War the government was under huge pressure to recognise that women were now playing a very significant role in society and that they deserve the vote. And so the first votes were given to women at that stage it was another 10 years, 11 years in fact, before all women over the age of 21 and all men over the age of 21 were given the vote. But the beginnings of that process was undoubtedly both a combination of the work of the suffragette campaigns and the impact of the First World War.

C: So 1929.

M: 1929 when 21 – the vote was given to everyone, men and women over the age of 21. And then we go right forward to 1969 when we get the - reducing the voting age to 18. So today in the General Election that's happening on this day it's all British citizens over the age of 18 are the ones that have the right to vote.

C: Very good well thank you.

Language Support And Additional Material

I'm going to pick up on a few of the phrases used in this episode to explain them a little further and to provide a bit of additional information. First of all, early on, Christine referred to last week's topic being about the Industrial Revolution. In case some of you are wondering if you missed an episode, we did not in fact record a podcast last week because the course itself took place in a museum. In fact it is called the Industrial Museum, in Halifax. The Industrial Revolution was a period of about 100 years during which the United Kingdom moved from being a largely agricultural, rural based economy to an industrial one. It is a period when, as a result of inventions, and as a result of the natural resources available in England, particularly in the north of England, factories were developed, industry took off, and Britain became the richest and most successful and wealthiest country in the world. In

Halifax the Industrial Museum has collected together a fascinating collection of some of the machinery from this period and after. If any of you wish to visit the museum it is open on a Saturday and if you say that you are connected to the St Augustine's centre then they will be happy to let you have a look around for free.

The second issue I wanted to pick up with about the right to vote. this, after all, is what is episode with about. Christine at one point said that each one of us can vote in the general election. Sadly the "us" in this case refers only to those who are British citizens. We know some of our listeners are asylum seekers and refugees. Even after you have gained refugee status you will not have the right to vote in a general election until you have become a British citizen. It is partly to help those of you who would like to become British citizens, that we have developed this course. In order to become a British citizen you have to have been a resident here for 5 years, but you also will have to take a citizenship test. And this podcast and our course covers some of the areas that you would need to know for that test.

That's it for today we hope you have enjoyed our podcast and look forward to joining you again in the near future.