



Wednesday 20th January 2021 - Community Assembly

Democracy



With the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States of America taking place today, with Kamala Harris as the first woman of colour elected as Vice-President, there has been much interest in and attention to the concept and practice of democracy – and far more than usual, given the recent shocking events in Washington DC.

When it comes to elections in our own country, whether local or national, there are too often disappointing reports about low voter turnout, voter apathy and general disengagement. As a teacher of History, through my studies, reading and reflections, I have a profound interest in the notion and operation of democracy, as well as a deep respect for those who seek to make the world a better place for more of its inhabitants.

I have been drawn back to a text I read last year: *'Hearts and Minds: the untold story of the Great Pilgrimage and how women won the vote'*, by Jane Robinson. As Robinson notes:

This is a book about ordinary people doing extraordinary things for the sake of democracy. At its heart is one of the most inspiring and neglected episodes in British history: a six-week protest march undertaken just before the First World War by thousands of suffragists, or non-militant supporters of votes for women, which changed their world and ours. They called it the Great Pilgrimage.

Robinson provides a detailed account, including bringing to life the importance of very many inspiring women, who committed themselves to broadening the conception and practice of democracy, both through their political engagement and their daily lives, including:

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836-1917). Although best remembered as the first woman to be admitted – grudgingly – to the Society of Apothecaries (in 1865), the first to be entered on the Medical Register in Great Britain – essentially, the first to qualify as a doctor – and for her establishment of a women’s hospital in London, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was also a committed feminist. She presented the first mass petition for women’s suffrage to John Stuart Mill in 1866 and went on to play a prominent part in the campaign for the vote...Her commitment to making the medical profession more accessible to women informed her suffrage activities. In 1908 she became the UK’s first female mayor.

As I noted in the introduction to a previous assembly, as a School community, we are proud to work in partnership with parents and families to support our students on their journeys to citizenship – valuing democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs.

Mr Lawlor