

Womens' Day

by Alan Townend

One of the most famous and indeed important books of the last century was written by George Orwell and is called «Animal Farm». It is a sort of allegory — a story where characters or symbols represent a deeper meaning underneath. In this book it is the animals who are substitutes for humans and their activities reflect what happens in the human world. In the story the animals have a revolution and throw out the farmer. Gradually the animals organise their own society and as so often occurs in the real world, the revolution turns bad and the «new» society becomes worse than the original one. At the beginning the slogan — words used by the leaders to show their beliefs — «All animals are equal» is created by the pigs and repeated endlessly by the sheep. Then slowly this changes and the new slogan becomes: «All animals are equal but some are more equal than others» This question of rights, equality and fair shares for all — where everyone is treated the same and employees of both sexes doing the same job get equal pay came to mind when I was thinking of International Women's Day celebrated this year on March 8th because it has been women, certainly in Britain, who've had a very hard struggle to reach equality (sometimes called parity) with men.

Suffrage or the right to vote in national political elections was a big issue at the start of the 20th century. «Campaigners» (supporters of) for women's right to vote were called suffragettes and carried out all sorts of demonstrations to pursue their case. One of the most common acts was for them to chain themselves to the iron railings (fences) outside public buildings. Probably the most dramatic was the woman (Emily Davison) who in 1913 attended «The Derby» (a big national horse race) and threw herself in front of the King's horse and was killed. Many of the suffragettes went to prison because of their actions and then while they went on hunger strike (refused to eat), which resulted in their being force fed (food was sent into their mouth through a tube). Eventually in 1918 women with property (who actually owned a house or land) aged 30 had the right to vote and it wasn't until 1928 that this right extended to all women so that in terms of suffrage they had equality with men. But this was only the beginning.

Other problems have arisen particularly over the matter of pay. It wasn't until 1953 that there was equal pay for women teachers. Other milestones (important dates) in women's history are: 1948 Cambridge University admits women to full degrees (before that they could attend courses but they couldn't take the final examinations!);

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1970 Equal Pay Act (Parliament said both men and women should get the same pay for the same job); 1979 first woman Prime Minister (Margaret Thatcher, who ironically wasn't particularly interested in women's issues); 1997 election of highest number of women Members of Parliament.

Mind you, the law may say what should and must be done but it's another matter whether the «public attitude» (what people think personally) changes also. An expression that comes to mind found in employment is «glass ceiling», which means a sort of invisible barrier that stops people (particularly women from reaching higher levels of management. People are often accused of being sexist or believing in sexism. If you are sexist, it usually means you think that men are superior to women and the belief is called sexism as for example typified by the comment: «A woman's place is in the kitchen». «Modern Man» is a title given to those who believe in equality — a description I'm happy to say has been given to me by my wife although my cooking is really only done in emergencies. It is obviously important especially in education not to overload examples with the pronoun «he» but strike a balance between «he» and «she». I have tried at www.english-tests.net to put this into practice in the sentences I've written. A problem occurs in English because in a sentence beginning: «When a child first goes to school ...» technically to be non-sexist it should continue: «he/she sometimes finds ...» This of course can sound strange and the tendency is to continue: «he finds ...» This is where sexism comes up. It seems to me the best solution is to continue: «they find ...» which may upset the «Grammarians» (serious followers of grammar) but will not upset the «Feminists» (serious followers of women's rights).

I'll leave you with two final thoughts as we remember March 8th: women usually live longer than men and there's one thing a man can never do but which a woman can and that is give birth to a child — at least that's true to the best of my knowledge.