

# Ann Clwyd MP

March 2004

## Iraqi Election Day - 30 January 2005 “I have waited all my life for this”



**Voted! Election Day in Basra**

I visited four polling centres in Basra that day. There were separate queues of hundreds of men and women. It was obvious that the people of Basra could not wait to get out and vote. By the afternoon, because of the rush to vote in the morning, the centres were almost deserted except for the election officials.

In the first polling centre, we walked past tight security up the long drive to the school. Under Saddam, election centres were based in Ba'athist headquarters, to further intimidate the voters, and there was only ever one name on the ballot paper!

This school, like the others I visited, was decked out in ribbons with the colours of the Iraqi flag: black, white, red, and green. Two long queues had formed, one of men and the other of women. The queue of women stretched down the road almost as far as I could see. They were all smiling, chatting and waving. Sweets, which had

**Election Day in Basra City was exhilarating. Men and women streamed down the main streets in the bright sun. They waved an inky finger in the air to show us proudly that they had already voted.**

been left by the first person who had turned up to vote at that centre, were being handed out.

Outside and inside the polling centre, the Iraqi election officials were working efficiently. The Iraqi security services were a discreet, but reassuring, presence. Voters could vote in one of three or four stations within the centres. The process was very orderly. Posters with pictorial instructions were on all the walls for those needing assistance. But officials were in place to guide first-time voters (which of course were everyone) through the process, from collection of the ballot paper to the dipping of the voter's finger in ink to after they had voted. Dyed purple fingers were held up everywhere with pride and as a symbol of election day in Iraq.

In each polling centre I saw evidence or heard reports of the determination of the people of Basra to get out and vote. Early on in the day, one of the centres was shelled as it was opening. A group of women queuing apparently responded with 'songs' of defiance, to show that they would not be deterred from voting. Elderly and disabled people were brought in, sometimes on makeshift wheelchairs. Whole families turned out to vote, and many told me that it was a day of celebration for them, like going to a wedding or Eid.

The elections have certainly been a great boost to the confidence of the Iraqi people, not least because of the bravery and professionalism shown by the Iraqi security services. I myself saw no British troops in



**First-time voter, Basra**

Basra the whole of election day – it was obvious that the success story of elections belonged to the Iraqi people. The overall turnout of 58 per cent, although in Basra the turnout was 80 per cent, is, I believe, remarkable, and reflects the determination of

Iraqis to defy the terrorists, and vote for their future.

I am sure that all of us as MPs wish the newly elected members of the Transitional National Assembly (TNA) well. Democratic elections, where one in three of

all candidates who stood were women, are a first for the region. I hope that we will be able to support the TNA and the new government in building a democratic, federal and inclusive Iraq for everyone, regardless of ethnicity, religion or gender.



Women voters in Basra, January 30 2005

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## Political prisoners: the legacy of suffering

**While in Basra I met with several ex-political prisoners. Many were tortured, and lost years of their youth, imprisoned without trial in one of Saddam's prisons. Families shared in their fear and suffering. There are many hundreds of thousands of people, killed by the regime, in mass graves all over Iraq. Again all of these have left grieving and perhaps dependent relatives. So much more needs to be done for these people as they are suffering both psychologically and materially.**

A recent Human Rights Watch report into the Basra Massacre of 1999, which followed the assassination in March 1999 of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq a-

Sadr, shows once again that the persecution in Iraq did not stop in 1991, as so many people believe.

Human Rights Watch has a list of 120 men who were arrested, and the dates of their executions in the months following the uprising. They believe there are likely to be many more. Human Rights Watch also interviewed local survivors of the massacres. They report the arrests of hundreds of young men who were rounded up and transported to the Basra Ba'ath Party Headquarters after the uprising. One former prisoner describes how "there were over fifty people there. Some of them were shot on the spot right there.

I heard gunshots and people screaming". Most of the massacres, however, took place in remote locations near Basra. Eyewitnesses report seeing truckloads of men unloaded next to trenches and shot, before bulldozers shovelled the earth over them.

I was able to meet with the representative of the Ministry of Human Rights in Basra, as well as the local representative of the Free Prisoners Association. Both are committed to helping the families of ex-political prisoners. They are receiving some assistance but much more help is needed from the international community.