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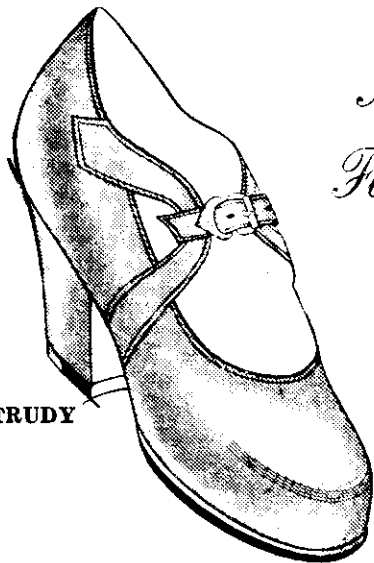
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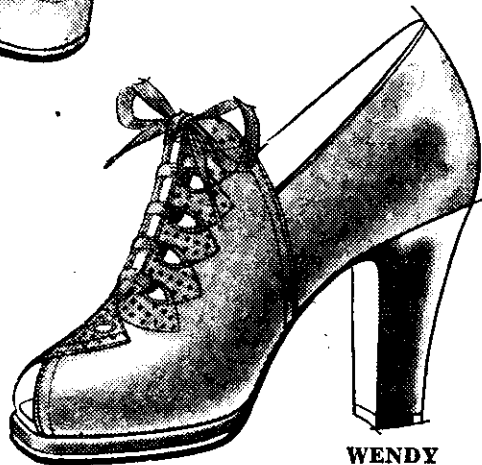
People's Day in Politics

THE election campaign is now entering its last days, and most people will be glad to close it in the polling booths. Party politics may be interesting, and sometimes exciting; but familiar themes are made a little stale by repetition, and only enthusiasts are able to stay on tip-toe until the end. Elections, however, are not won by faithful minorities; and as polling day draws nearer the party leaders will look thoughtfully about them at ordinary people who next week will give their verdict. Nobody ever knows what these people are thinking. Ingenious methods have been devised for testing public opinion; but they are not much practised in New Zealand, and the confusion of the prophets at the last Presidential election in the United States gave further encouragement to sceptics. The strength of public interest will not be known until the size of the poll is revealed. It is always unwise to assume that the silent voter is apathetic. New Zealanders are not volatile by nature, but they understand their rights and privileges, and they like to make full use of the opportunity which comes to them once in three years. There are some who say that the opportunity is too narrow. They point out that they may have to vote for candidates in whom they have little confidence as individuals, or that the parties in the field do not express in their policies the ideas and beliefs which they (the voters) would prefer to endorse. This is a mistaken view of the democratic process. Political issues are not placed suddenly before us on polling day, or in the lively weeks which precede it: they are shaped during the years by public and private action. Casting a vote is not, or should not be, an isolated tribute to democracy. Our society is active in the management of its own affairs. Unions, associations, clubs, boards, councils, committees and other bodies have become so numerous that there can be few persons who do not at some point touch the wider life of the community. Men and women who learn to work together, for common aims, can scarcely fail to reach an educated interest in national affairs. They are better able to judge the value of a policy and the qualifications of a candidate than are critics who stay at home. Even the man who clings to private life must feel the currents of opinion around him, for in our small communities it is eccentric to be isolated, and there is much discussion among neighbours. Indeed, the personal motive must always be strong in the political life of a small society. Our beliefs grow out of what happens to us as workers and householders. Private conflicts and successes are transformed into national issues, or are linked to them by feelings too strong to be changed by argument. The scene around us takes a dark or smiling look from what we inject into it of our own experience. We do not change our ideas when for a few moments we stand in a booth with a somewhat blunt pencil and a voting paper. There is room in a democracy for many different ideas, but on polling day they have to be narrowed to a rough expression of opinion. Few supporters of any party can approve everything that is offered them. Yet voting is rather like living: we have to do the best we can with the situation in which we find ourselves. We do not stop living (unless we are sick in mind) because we cannot have all that we want. Nor do we stop voting (unless there is a sickness in democracy) because policies and candidates fail to meet all our private requirements. On election day the people take sides and vote accordingly; and afterwards, when the verdict has been accepted, the real work of democracy is resumed.

N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 25, 1949.



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