

## WOMANS WORLD FOR THE TAKING



THIS is a remarkable day. And yet it took my daughter to make me aware of the unique simplicities which make it so special. Here I am, 45 years old and long in the tooth as far as political campaigning is concerned, but I was brought up sharp by my daughter's excitement about today's Euro Elections.

For a moment I was tempted to put it down to novelty - she is just 18 and it is the first time that she has had the right to vote - but I'd got it all wrong. "Don't you realise," she scolded, "it's not simply that it's my first time, but I can start off being able to vote for a woman?"

One glance around the House of Commons and the European parliament is enough to remind you how wide the gap is between women having the right to vote and then having the right to be voted

For. A quick journey through the national (and Euro) elections that I have been involved in made me realise that, for me too, this will be the first time I've been able to vote for a woman standing as a socialist.

In Labour's case, this is clearly a national phenomenon rather than simply a local one. It has more women candidates in this election than any other party. What's more, over half of the 23 women who are stand-are likely to be elected. This will be a large slice of the new European Parliamentary-Labour Party, and a sizable part of the 'of 62 seats that the UK has in the Assembly, border to move this beyond the level of sore tokenism I need to put my enthusiasm into the context of wider changes that I junk are taking place around us. My daughter is keen to point out to me that much of the mess that we are in - in Britain, in Europe, in the world - comes not so much from men, but from male ways of thinking.

We have become obsessed with taking kings apart to examine them in microscopic detail. Then we proclaim a great breakthrough. in our understanding of a single and or a new component, ignoring the fact that the machine is now in bits and we've forgotten how to put it back together or how it used to work. It is as obvious when you look at our policies on the environment as in those on health, transport, housing, the economy or the family.

The mess that we are in demands a different way of thinking as well as a different way of doing.

It is, as my daughter regularly reminds me, more of a woman's way of viewing the world than a man's - an understanding of how things interconnect rather than how you take them apart.

She tells me that this change in the way the world must see itself is an inevitable part of survival in the 21st century; that I can have a place in it, but I'd better not be standing in the way. I hope that she's right, because there is something terribly sad about a society which says that the problems we face are the beggars on our streets, without asking who put them there in the first place.

I've never come across a parent — proud or pestered — who looked at the child in their arms and proclaimed: "I want them to grow up to be a beggar". It is the denial of hopes and dreams and worth that consigns people to the streets, not the fulfilment of dreams.

So if there is a sea change taking place, let me try to catch the mood. Tomorrow morning, before the Labour Party has properly celebrated the elections of today, the succession race for its party leadership will officially begin.

It will be something akin to the start of the Le Mans motor race, with all sorts of hopefuls legging it towards their cars before racing off around the national track. At the risk of being a little early I would simply say this: There is a growing sense of anger within the Labour Party about the efforts of the national press to decide who should be Labour's next leader.

Papers which have never in their lives, supported Labour have been telling the country day in, day out, who Labour should have as their leader. They seem to want a coronation, not an election. And in all of the coverage you could be forgiven for believing that there were no women in senior positions in the Labour Party.

Margaret Beckett for instance, may as well not have existed as far as the tabloid press were concerned. And yet, the most important gap that John Smith's death leaves behind is the ability to get the Labour Party to work together in a collaborative rather than an individualistic way.

Virtually all of the press comment has been about contenders in an individual, stand alone context — whether they are pretty, would your gran like them, are they rough and uncouth, can they woo the South/North/Centre of the country?

The real questions facing Labour at the next elections are much simpler — what do we stand for and how will we deliver on the promises we must make?

The country won't be fooled by fragments and fripperies. It will look for the ability to address the issues as a whole. It will look for a womanised way of moving from simplistic lies to the more complex truths about the world we live in. It will want an ability to tie strands back together rather than tear them into separate pieces. I hope that, if Margaret Beckett has the courage to step in and address these challenges tomorrow, there will be enough people who have the sense to step up and support her.

The issues are simply too important to be left as little more than being the pin-up from the Men's Room.