

Admiration of their courage and delight at their joy: those were my feelings as I watched the Iraqi people vote at the weekend.

It is surely impossible not to be impressed by the bravery of the voters and the election staff, especially in the Sunni areas of the country where the threat of violence and reprisals was so great.

Yet, it is concern about those Sunni areas that temper the joy felt at these elections. Turn-out appears to have been low and some polling stations failed to open in Sunni districts where resistance to the occupying forces has been greatest.

Some Sunni political leaders believe that it is impossible to hold fair elections while the country is occupied by US-UK forces and many Sunnis boycotted the elections on principle while others stayed away out of fear.

With so many Sunnis not voting, the outcome of the vote will be seriously skewed and the parliament that emerges from it will be flawed. As one Sunni said: "It is like making a table with only three legs. It will never stand up."

However, the man - a Baghdad shopkeeper - who offered such an apt analogy, did himself go to vote and it must also be remembered that the assembly that was elected at the weekend is a temporary parliament. It has to write Iraq's constitution and form a transition government that will sit until elections to form a permanent government are held in December.

My hope is many more Sunnis will join that shop-keeper then and a more representative government can be formed after December 15.

In the meantime, the transition government can try to include the Sunnis - who form a fifth of the population - in its work - a point made by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

I was opposed to the invasion and remain so, but support the UN's pragmatic approach. Annan declared the invasion illegal, but the UN has helped the Iraqi election commission organise the elections. Flawed though those results may be, the clock cannot be turned back and it has to be recognised that democracy itself is evolving.

We in this country do not live in a perfect democracy. Although everyone aged over 18 can vote, votes in marginal constituencies are worth more than others - and there are other defects.

But we work with what we have got and at the weekend, the Iraqi people chose to do the same. Good luck to them.

The imminent release of Kenny Richie, who spent 18 years on death row for a crime he did not commit, is an indictment of the death penalty and a remarkable testimony to the power of the human spirit.

Richie could have plea-bargained and been released after ten years, but refused to confess to a crime he didn't commit. Now a combination of witnesses admitting they lied and forensic evidence means that he will be freed.

Society cannot in general be held responsible for the actions of murderers, but I believe that the execution of another human being - above all an innocent one - leaves blood on everyone's hands.