

Labour's voice sings for vote-swapping

Left-wing tunesmith and activist Billy Bragg isn't voting New Labour this time. Jamie Walker finds out why

SAY it ain't so, William. The raspy-sounding singer who gave voice to British Labour's long and bitter struggle to regain power has — in his own words — a new spell.

Billy Bragg is to vote Liberal Democrat on June 7, a watershed for a man whose political anthems are synonymous with both the Labour movement and rallying against its 1980s nemesis, Margaret Thatcher.

The old country's True Believers needn't worry, though. Bragg hasn't gone mellow in his middle age.

At 43 he has emerged as a leading advocate of tactical voting, an informal form of ballot swapping between Labour and the left-leaning Liberal Democrats that is thought to have cost the Conservative Party as many as 35 seats when Tony Blair won office four years ago.

If Bragg has anything to do with it, the Tories will suffer even more this time round. He has set up a "voting valentines" website (www.votedorset.net) to pair LibDem and Labour supporters in seats where their own candidate doesn't stand a chance of toppling the incumbent Conservative MP with another who does.

"I ain't doing anything I did not do in the 1980s," Bragg told *The Australian* yesterday. "I am just reflecting what I see around me."

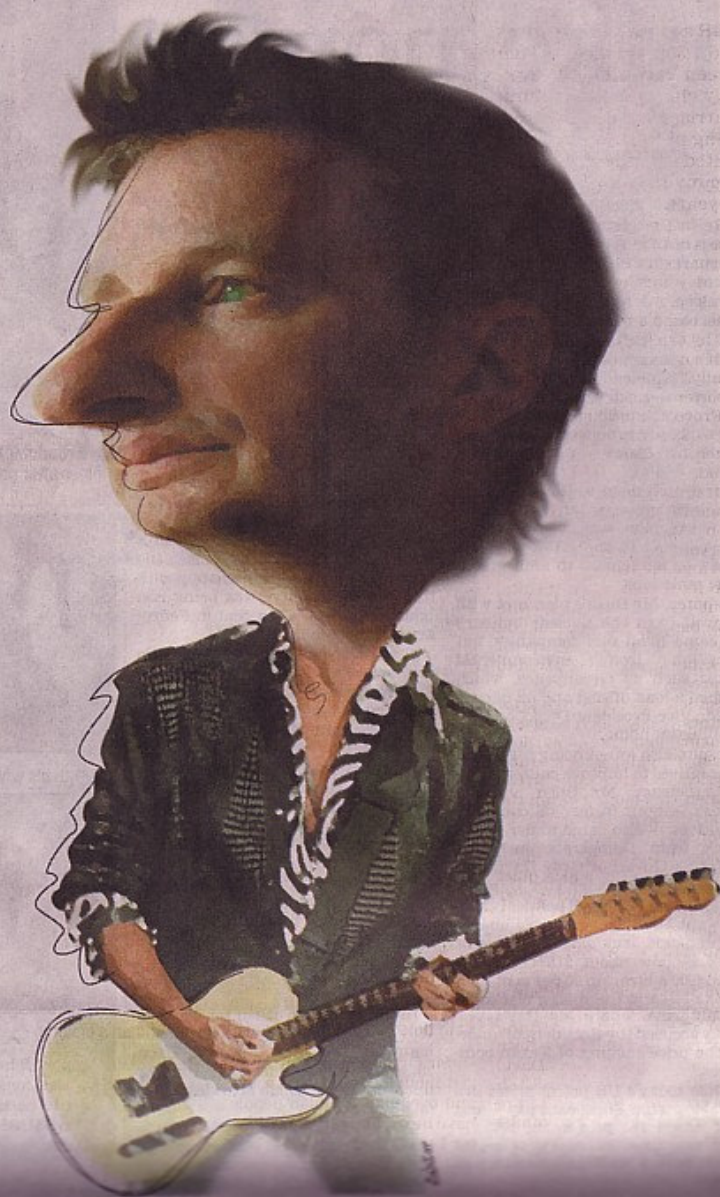
Tactical voting, of course, is nothing out of the ordinary in Australia, where political parties and individual candidates habitually do preference deals, especially in the Senate. But it is new for Britain, with its first-past-the-post electoral system.

The Bragg website, one of several set up to match voters who want to vote tactically but are keen that a compensatory vote for their party of choice should be cast elsewhere, pairs Labour supporters in his constituency of Dorset West with Liberal Democrats in neighbouring Dorset South.

It works like this: Bragg predicts that the Labour candidate in Dorset West will poll no better than a distant third to the front-running Conservative MP, frontbencher Oliver Letwin, so it makes more sense to vote LibDem and push that party's candidate across the line.

In return, the redirected Liberal Democrat vote in Dorset South might just get the better-placed Labour candidate up, again over the sitting Tory. Either way, the Conservatives lose.

Predictably the Tories are



cries foul, claiming that tactical voting is undemocratic if not illegal (any binding commitment to swap votes by the parties would be in breach of British electoral law).

Prime Minister Blair and company aren't too impressed either. Because voting in Britain is optional, Labour is desperate to get its own voters out and party headquarters in London has instructed all can-

come into play. So this tactical voting campaign is to make the system proportional without waiting for the politicians to do anything about it. It's like spontaneous electoral reform."

Bragg might be a father who swapped bustling West London for leafy West Dorset, but the political fires burn brightly as ever.

Mr Blair, he said, was a big

'This tactical voting campaign is . . . like spontaneous electoral reform'

Billy Bragg
Singer and activist

didates to steer clear of tactical deal-making, even when it's clearly in their interest.

"There's been all sorts of criticism," Bragg said. "The truth is if we had some form of proportional system, like you do in Australia . . . even though it's limited, then we could nominate a second choice when voting and that could

disappointment. "I feel as if for 18 years vandals smashed all the windows in my house . . . and the rain and the wind and the cold was coming in and now after four years all that the new people have done is to put the frames in."

"They have not really come up with the glass."
Having just worked his way

through the 44-page manifesto Mr Blair released on Wednesday, Bragg went on: "They had a lot to do and they have kind of half done it."

Take constitutional reform. If Labour really wanted more people to participate in the electoral process, then why didn't they do something about that stuffy House of Lords and make it elected?

And Europe: "Blair wants to be part of Europe, but he doesn't want to talk about it."

After the election, Bragg will return to his day job, completing his first album of original material in five years with a short tour of Australia in the offing in our spring.

Hopefully, his old songs will stand the test of time. One of them, *She's Got a New Spell*, goes: "The laws of gravity are very, very strict/And you're just bending them for your own benefit."

Jamie Walker is *The Australian's* Europe correspondent