

King Billy assumes tactical mantle

Euan Ferguson on the view from Dorset

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'The revolution starts here!' declared Billy last Thursday night, to tumultuous silence. Outside, it was so quiet you could practically hear the sun's rays set with a sizzle on the gorgeous Dorset stone. Inside, in the shoebox-sized Tolpuddle Village Hall, stirringly resonant with the history of a big idea begun small, 11 adults and two children listened in politely deafening silence.

It didn't faze Billy Bragg. He finished his speech, took the applause and then took the audience down to the Martyrs' Inn for a beer. This was a sweltering evening in the heart of Dorset, and people just don't want to leave home in good weather; he was happy to have got his message across to just a handful, happy that the power of his Big Idea is such that it doesn't need crowds cheering approbation. It simply needs its time to have come, and he is convinced it has.

Tactical voting is the usual phrase, but it's a bigger and more subtle game than that: it's an attempt to change the voting traditions, the entire political panoply, of the whole country. Bragg, who's urging his fellow-believers in Dorset West to vote Lib Dem, and his Lib Dem platform colleague Richard Denton-White, who's urging his like in Dorset South to vote Labour, talk of 'intelligent voting', or 'spontaneous electoral reform'. You could think of it, perhaps, as joined-up voting.

And it's moved on from 1997. It's not just about getting (or keeping) the Tories out, they insist; and Bragg argues passionately, that evening and the next morning, that this is hugely important.

'I don't want to see a full-blooded rout of the Tories, see them dip under the waves forever: there are many good One Nation Tories out there who have something to contribute to this country, and it's desperately unfair that their voice should be lost. It might give us lefties great pleasure to see themselves dash themselves to oblivion on the rock of the euro - but it shouldn't; it's not healthy for politics or for the country.'

It is, he insists, about letting more voices be heard, more fairly, by bringing in 'PR by the back door'. What he feels he has identified - and what seems to be felt by the many thousands who have logged on to his website, votedorset.net, and the bigger national tacticalvoter.net, and the increasing talk in the streets, throughout the past few weeks of campaigning, of tactical voting and tactical swapping, is a way to get round the 'bankrupt, discredited first-past-the-post system'.

Many votes are now being swapped daily, in marginals across the country, in what the Conservatives see as a cynical attempt to subvert democracy, and what Bragg and friends see as a celebration of it. There is an anti-Tory element, of course - almost all the website swappers are centre-left - but it's more complex than that.

Dorset is a fine example. In Dorset West, where Bragg lives, Shadow Cabinet Minister Oliver Letwin, he who leaked about the Tories' £20 billion spending cuts, took the seat by 1,840 votes last time around from the Lib Dems. Labour is about 10,000 votes behind; so lifelong socialist Bragg is campaigning for the Lib Dems' Simon Green.

If a fifth of last-time Labour voters switch to Lib Dem, Letwin will be, psephologically speaking, toast. In neighbouring South Dorset, Tory Ian Bruce has a tiny lead over Labour's Jim Knight, and the Lib Dems trail way back by about 10,000; a simple 77 Lib Dem souls need to switch to Labour.

So, on the face of it, it is a simple anti-Tory vote. Bragg shakes his head. 'No, it's not. I want you to look at the whole of Dorset. Last time round, the Tories took all eight seats, thanks to the first-past-the-post system. Under PR, or if we all voted tactically, you'd have a result of four or five Tories, three Lib Dems and one Labour, and - here's the point, the big point - that would be an acutely fair reflection of all the votes cast.

'That 's what this is about. We have to send a message to the Labour Party, to whoever will be forming governments, that the first-past-the-post system is bankrupt. A legislative body should directly reflect the will of the people, and our system doesn't.

'The important thing, to me, is to stop the unfairnesses of the present system. It was unfair that the Tories stayed in power for so long under it: and, although I'm a Labour man, it's equally unfair that they should currently have a 179 majority on only 43 per cent of the vote.'

It's hard to work out clearly how relevant is the trend Bragg feels he has identified. Website evidence is notoriously unreliable; the hits could be coming from 10,000 inspired young voters or 40 very bored anoraks. But he insists that talk of voter apathy is wrong.

'It's something different; it's voter antipathy . People - not just young people - are sick of the narrowness of the options of the main parties, sick of the fact that no one seems to speak for them. New Labour's made tactical voters of us all, with the way they've knocked the whole Left-Right argument out of sync.

'So if there's a voting revolution, which there should be, that's what it should be about, about fairer representation. It means intelligent voting, and vote-swapping, to subvert the mean unfairnesses of the current system, and to let in other candidates.

'It's about the Lib Dems having a greater voice, I suppose; about the Greens getting some say at Westminster and, if necessary, about the BNP being allowed to stand up and be counted. At least that would let decent Tories stand aside and say, "On you go then - and by the way can we have our fucking flag back, please".

'It's naive of people - friends - in the Lib Dems and Charter 88 to believe that this Government's going to bring in PR, so we have to try it another way. It's not about Tory bashing, I can't be clear enough on that.'

And his speech, that night, contained no Tory bashing; there were more references to his disappointment with Labour. It contained much wonkery, for which he apologised; there was detailed mathematical analysis of 'Wakeham One', the first of the three proposals for Upper House reform and the one which includes an element of PR, and which Bragg urges as the most feasible way forward for those who believe in a fairer system.

These are terribly early days or course, and nothing is clear-cut, and there are a host of problems. One of the simplest is getting people to change voting habits; Bragg has his head in his hands as he remembers leafleting for the Lib Dems - 'I can't believe I did it, because of course there are differences. I'm a democratic socialist, not a social democrat. The social democrats believe that capitalism should behave in a nicer way; a democratic socialist makes sure it does.

'But - look - a big problem is the other way round; it's much easier, here in Dorset, to get Labour voters to switch to Lib Dem than the other way round - the figures are generally two to one. Most Lib Dem voters resent being asked to vote Tactical Labour because it means they're moving to the right. Actually, I can't really say I blame them. But it comes down to a simple equation: they can't win in some seats, like Dorset West, without Labour, and Labour can't win in some like Dorset South without the Lib Dems.

'The country must remember that; the country must listen. We must start behaving more cleverly than our stupid electoral system.'

There are vast uncharted waters ahead, if any of this works; not least the forthcoming battles, and fast changing alliances if the Lib Dems ever did become the main party of opposition. And, despite a welter of anecdotal evidence from throughout the country, despite the turn-off this election campaign has been and the apparent

desire everywhere for something to change, something different from landslide victories and minuscule policy differences, people may still vote on Thursday with their hearts rather than their heads, and all the website clicks and all Billy's fine words will be for nothing.

There is a chance, however, that that evening in Tolpuddle will have changed things - not on Thursday, not even by the next election, but one day. 'We'll make this one fly, Euan,' he says, waving goodbye from his cliff-top home as the wind boosts up from the beach. 'We'll make it bloody fly. If it doesn't work this time we'll find another way.'

Billy Bragg, who believes politics is too important to be left to politicians. Waiting for the great leap sideways.

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