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# Billy Bragg: Rallying the troops



The Bard of Barking is a long way from home

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**Billy Bragg, who recently moved from London to Dorset, tells BBC News Online about his efforts to rally an online red-and-orange wedge against the local Tory MPs.**

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#### Billy Bragg

"This is what would happen if we had PR"

real **28k**

#### Billy Bragg

on the Labour Government

real **28k**

When Billy Bragg retreated to rural Dorset 18 months ago, he left more than the bright lights of the big city behind.

The ardent leftwing campaigner found himself in a Conservative stronghold. Although his constituency, Dorset West, is a marginal seat, his party comes in a distant third behind the Liberal Democrats.

Bragg immediately found himself keen to oust Tory frontbencher Oliver Letwin - but the thought of casting a ballot for the Lib Dems troubled the long-time Labour man.

“There are two words that'll stiffen me when I go to the ballot box: Oliver Letwin”

If the musician lived just a dozen miles to the east, his vote would be cast in Dorset South, where the Conservative candidate Ian Bruce won the seat in 1997 with a majority of only 77 over Labour.

Inspired by tactical vote-swapping websites in the United States and the UK's own tacticalvoter.net, Bragg decided to act locally.

He enlisted a couple of netheads to set up votedorset.net, which offers to pair Labour supporters considering voting tactically in Dorset West with Lib Dems in Dorset South.

"This way, my vote contributes to trying to get the Conservatives out, and I'm doing something for my party in the neighbouring constituency."

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- The Places
- The People
- The Scenery
- The Commute

#### Second stop: Huntingdon

- The Places
- The People
- The Scenery
- The Controversy

#### First stop: Dorset

- The Places
- The People
- The Scenery
- The Bard

#### Internet links:

- [Profile of Dorset West](#)
- [Profile of Dorset South](#)
- [Billy Bragg](#)

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"And there are two words that'll stiffen me when I go to the ballot box: Oliver Letwin," Bragg says.

"My decision to vote tactically came when he was promoted to the front bench as chief spokesman to the Treasury. I realised he was a big player, and that my vote wouldn't be wasted if I got him out."

Mr Letwin himself is open-minded about the tactics being deployed against him.



The MP went to ground after leaking Tory tax plans

"Everybody has a democratic right to vote as they choose. I believe that people should vote for the party which they believe will do the best for Britain," Mr Letwin says.

Bragg says he met his local MP when they guested on the same radio show.

"He's in favour of legalising soft drugs, but he's also in favour of poor people looking after themselves.

"That's too much of a price to pay for having a free spliff - that there's no national health service and nobody pays any tax."

### **Votemate**

In an area where internet access is somewhat lower than the national average, Bragg says the website has generated considerable interest.

But the initial format, which automatically paired up those logging on, proved too easy for Tory activists to exploit, says Bragg.

"I had a few complaints from people partnered with someone who turned out to be a Tory county councillor. Soon after, they'd get a letter from Ian Bruce urging them to vote tactically for the Conservatives."



His former holiday destination became home

The revamped site is more akin to a chatroom which facilitates vote swapping.

"It doesn't stop the Tories coming on, but my boffins have set it up so if anyone spams "We

love Letwin", I can wipe it off. Otherwise I just let them be and let the other pundits deal with them."

### Troubled Labour voter

When it comes to matching voters, Bragg has found it easier to find Labour people prepared to vote Lib Dem than vice versa.

"It's a little bit easier for Labour supporters because many of us are disappointed. They've put in good policies, but not followed them through."

“  
[Labour is] too much  
iron fist, not enough  
velvet glove

”

Bragg would like to see the minimum wage and pensions raised further, and he thinks the government's attitude to asylum seekers is "too much iron fist, not enough velvet glove".

But even if the Socialist Alliance or Green Party put up a candidate in Dorset West, Bragg says he'd only lend his support if the candidates had a chance of beating the Tories.

"Their supporters would be better to spend the next few elections backing the party that most wants proportional representation. Until then, it's a bit like p\*\*\*ing in the wind."

### Rural retreat

Keen to find a happier balance between his family life and his work, Bragg now calls a picturesque village on the Dorset coast home.

It is the land of cream teas and retirement cottages. Socially and geographically, the "Bard of Barking" is a long way from home.



"Why Dorset? Because it's not Devon or Cornwall - everyone from London goes to Devon and Cornwall. And because you have to go past Bournemouth to get past the social and cultural reach of London.

Days spent writing and walking on the beach

"I joke with people that I sold my house in London and moved to England."

This from the man who wrote, *I don't want to change the world, I'm not looking for a new England...?*

"Yes, I guess you could say I'm looking for a new England after all."



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