

Nowhere else to go?

Billy Bragg weighs up John Harris's look at the alternatives to voting Labour, So Now Who Do We Vote For?

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So Now Who Do We Vote For?

by John Harris
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Those whose job it is to second guess the forces of nature are a hard-pressed bunch these days. Concerns about global warming have given climatologists a higher profile, yet the records on which they base their conclusions are being broken with alarming regularity. Psephologists, too, find themselves struggling to come to terms with the changes that the political climate has undergone in the past 25 years. The great ideologies that once bestrode the landscape have seen their habitat disappear. Utopian ideas that inspired societies around the globe now exist only in isolated pockets. A new politics has evolved in which parties offer to manage the world rather than to change it.

In the follow-up to his highly entertaining look at Blair 'n' Britpop, *The Last Party*, John Harris addresses this situation, setting out to answer the question that nags those of us who came into politics in opposition to Mrs Thatcher. Having worked hard for a Labour government as an alternative to Thatcherism, how do we feel about what has happened in the past seven years?

Harris has been a Labour supporter since his days as a 15-year-old party activist in Wilmslow in the mid-80s. "There was never any question of coolly scanning the options, weighing up the parties' respective standpoints and then mathematically making my decision. I voted Labour. That was who I was." Though his identification with the party has lapsed, it is to his credit that he is unwilling just to walk away.

Instead, he seeks out ministers and ex-ministers, backbench rebels and peers, expressing his doubts about the direction in which the party is moving. They are almost unanimous in telling him that, whatever his misgivings, he should vote Labour. You genuinely feel for him as he struggles with the implications of this advice. "Was the only permissible thing to do to obediently vote Labour and then kick up a stink about a great deal of what they did? Elect a Blair government and then carry on marching against it?" Ultimately, the changes in the political climate force him to think the unthinkable. He leaves his traditional stamping ground in search of an alternative repository for his progressive vote, but, before long, it becomes clear that the problem is not confined to New Labour.

Probing the frontiers of Liberal Democrat thinking, he comes across the embodiment of the new politics in the shape of Mark Oaten, the party's home affairs spokesman. Oaten stuns Harris by unashamedly revelling in the fact that he developed a philosophical attachment to Liberalism only after he became the Lib Dem MP for Winchester. "About three years ago", he witters, "I suddenly clicked that if you have a philosophical belief that being Liberal is being laissez-faire and not wanting a nanny state, you can suddenly start to impose that on a whole load of political situations." At which point Harris makes his excuses and leaves.

Moving outwards from the centre to explore what he describes as "The Great Beyond", he considers the arguments of the SNP and Plaid Cymru - the latter a serious prospect as the author lives in Hay-on-Wye. He has a brief encounter with the Green party before coming across the Respect Coalition in the person of George Galloway - a good man fallen among Trots. As ever, Gorgeous George has all the best lines. "My flag is red, my country is the future!" he declares. So who do you support in the World Cup then?

Along the way Harris encounters people who are still practicing the old politics in defence of their corner of the welfare state. In Doncaster, a group of concerned parents take on the Labour council and a multi-millionaire Christian fundamentalist car dealer who wish to turn a good and improving local comprehensive into a creationist city academy. In Cumberland, members of the public service unions struggle to combat cost-cutting in a new hospital built under the private finance initiative.

Rather than focus on the Iraq war, Harris rightly highlights these two public sector issues as the true source of the dilemma facing traditional Labour voters. Until the Tories came to power in 1979, the welfare state had been reasonably successful in narrowing the gap between rich and poor. The battle lines that Thatcher drew up in the 1980s - between efficiency and effectiveness in the public services - remain in place 20 years later. No one today seems willing to make the case that, if the public want a more effective health service then they will have to pay for it through higher taxes. Instead PFI is wheeled out to convince voters that they can have their cake and eat it.

The government seems to be gambling that Labour voters have nowhere else to go. Even Roy Hattersley, no fan of PFI, offers up the same logic when Harris asks him what he would say to a lifelong Labour voter who was thinking of sending the leadership a message by voting Lib Dem. "They are wasting their time and their vote", he said. 'Because the next election, like every election in my lifetime, is between the Labour party and the Conservative party and you and a number of other people are going to have to decide who you want: Tony Blair or Michael Howard.'

That is an argument that we are going to hear a lot of in the next few months. It is one that I am not totally unsympathetic to, but it has a troubling flaw. Despite Hattersley's assertion, the last election was different to every other held during his lifetime in one very important way: it saw the lowest voter turnout since 1918. Those who argue that this is a result of people expressing their approval of the government's policies are ignoring other signs. Would voters in Labour's northeast heartlands have overwhelmingly rejected a regional assembly if they were happy with the way things are going? Elsewhere, council ward by-elections have seen disillusioned Labour voters migrating directly to the BNP.

John Harris has done Labour voters a great service with this timely book. The tribulations he undergoes will be repeated in households around the country in the coming months as people weigh up the best way to achieve the outcome they desire. His concerns should also worry the Labour high command. For, while it seems likely that they will retain power, if turnout falls for a third election in a row, the sense that our democracy has been diminished will be difficult to ignore.

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