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Political passions swirl in Dorset

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By Katherine Baldwin

DORCHESTER (Reuters) - The sleepy country lanes, thatched cottages and quaint tea shops of this scenic corner of Dorset belie the fact an intense battle is reaching its climax.

Inspiration of novelist of Thomas Hardy, Dorset is the backdrop to the closest contest of the May 5 election.

Tony Blair's Labour party is fighting to hold on to its most marginal parliamentary seat in South Dorset -- snatched from the Conservatives by just 153 votes in 2001.

In another cliffhanger, in West Dorset, Conservative treasury spokesman Oliver Letwin is striving to hold onto his seat and spare his party a body blow in an area that has been staunchly Conservative for decades.

Adding a touch of rock and roll, singer-songwriter Billy Bragg is spearheading a tactical voting campaign he hopes will oust the Conservatives and reward the Liberal Democrats -- the third-placed party nationally -- for opposing the Iraq war.

"It's always a tough fight and I'm sure it will be again," the affable Letwin told Reuters while campaigning in Lyme Regis, a coastal village full of fudge and fossil shops where rows of pensioners sit looking out to sea, ice cream cones in hand.

Letwin is defending a majority of just 1,414 from a Liberal Democrat challenge.

Labour's solid lead in opinion polls has led the media to dub the national race "boring". In Dorset, it is anything but.

UNPALATABLE DEFEAT FOR LABOUR

There is much more at stake here than village post offices -- in south Dorset for example the deciding factor could be Iraq.

In 2001, locally based celebrity Bragg helped convince Liberal Democrats to support Labour in a tactical vote designed to oust the Conservatives from a long-held seat. It worked.

This time, Iraq has made it difficult for many Labour voters to support Blair, argues Bragg who is traditionally pro-Labour but opposed military action.

"Labour voters who are upset about the war and other issues have the opportunity not just to protest vote here but actually to unseat one of them," Bragg told Reuters from his home, perched on one of Dorset's rocky crags looking out to sea.

Blair visited South Dorset on the day he called the May 5 poll, to support Labour's Jim Knight who is seeking re-election.

Defeat for Knight would be particularly unpalatable for Labour given a series of blunders by his Conservative rival Ed Matts, who has been forced to make three public apologies over campaign gaffes, including the doctoring of a photograph.

Knight, who supported the Iraq war, says more voters ask him about pensions and housing than the war but he recognises many are disillusioned with their political leaders.

"Nationally, people's party loyalty is diminishing across all parties so therefore there is a lot more to play for in the local campaign," Knight told Reuters at his campaign office in the seaside town of Weymouth.

"In some ways all the brands are tarnished."

OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

Among the rolling hills of West Dorset there is just as much to play for.

Bragg says Liberal Democrat voters who pledge support for Labour in South Dorset can count on Labour supporters to back the Liberal Democrats in the west to unseat Letwin.

Labour barely enters the equation. Only blue Conservative placards and yellow Liberal Democrat posters peak from the neat hedgerows or adorn the teashop windows.

Letwin is a target of the Liberal Democrats' "decapitation" strategy by which the party hopes to topple Conservative big guns and, over time, become the second-biggest party in parliament.

Parliamentary members are elected via geographical area and its winner-takes-all system favours the two largest parties.

But Letwin, who blends in well in West Dorset in a green wax jacket, is liked here. Locals say "Olly" is a "very nice chap".

Julia Retallick, 57, whose shop sells local and imported fossils, says Letwin has her vote: "He seems fairly square and on the level -- basically honest."

Bragg hopes his head will roll, arguing such a fall would push the Conservatives into a fundamental rethink, give the Liberal Democrats more clout and force a Labour party he says has abandoned its socialist roots to move back to the left.

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