

## Labour's biggest opponent this time is the Won't Vote Party

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**13 April 2005**

Far from being the cruellest month, for some sad anoraks these first days of April are the best. For it is just about now that this year's chunky little daffodil-yellow volume of Wisden's Cricketer's Almanac peeps shyly forth in the bookshops.

And the stats fetishists can gorge themselves on all those gorgeously useless facts: the fastest century by a left-handed New Zealander, the most run-outs by anyone fielding at long leg, the oldest player to keep wicket for Leicestershire.

For us political anoraks, the calling of a general election stirs just the same juices. Our nostrils quiver at the prospect of measuring differential turn-out and tactical unwind. We are oblivious of the fact that normal voters give no more thought to these things than they do to the innards of their washing machine.

But this time it is different. For the first time since the flappers got the vote, the statistical quirks and vagaries of the system are a crucial election issue and may yet turn out to be the determining factor in the result.

Before the campaign is a week old, we have woken up, rather belatedly, to the fact that the way in which the nation casts its votes has altered overnight with scarcely any public debate. Allowing people to opt for postal votes on demand has increased postal voting dramatically, from a trivial two per cent to a highly significant 15 per cent. In Wakefield, for example, the number has gone up from 3,000 to 45,000.

The possibilities for fraud were made shatteringly clear by Mr Justice Mawrey in the case of Birmingham council, the most flagrant piece of ballot-rigging since the war. The Government was warned about the dangers, but rushed ahead, not for the public-spirited reason it claimed - to reverse the collapse in general election turn-out, from 78 per cent in 1992 to 59 per cent in 2001 - but to forestall any collapse in Labour's vote this time.

Internal Labour Party documents are quite frank: "Postal votes - Labour's best friend", one was headlined. Another asserts that Labour supporters who have a postal vote are four times more likely to vote than those who have not.

This tactic is not foolproof. Postal voters may be a self-selecting group who are keener on voting anyway, just as people who answer sex questionnaires are liable to be keener on sex than those who do not. And the Tories can play at that game, too.

But what these shenanigans do show beyond doubt is that Labour's most feared opponent in this election is not the Tories or the Lib Dems but the WVP - the Won't Vote Party. Jonathan Powell, Blair's chief of staff, was quoted last week as saying: "If only 50 per cent turn out, we'll lose. If there's a 60 per cent turnout, we'll win." Philip Gould, the maestro of the focus group, briefed the Cabinet recently that Labour had lost a quarter of its 2001 supporters.

These bleak prognostications have not yet been echoed by the professional pollsters, who continue blandly to forecast an overall Labour majority of 70 or thereabouts - though if you look closely they usually throw in a hedging phrase such as "if normal voting patterns are reproduced across the country".

But then it is not so long ago that the pollsters failed to pick up crucial voting shifts - the tactical voting in 1992 that took the Lib Dems up from 20 to 46 MPs while their share of the vote actually declined, or the last-minute switch to the Tories in that same election, by some three or four per cent of the voters, according to a temporarily chastened Bob Worcester of Mori.

For all Peter Snow's undimmed enthusiasm, his swingometer is beginning to look as antiquated as Asterix's catapult. Can it really capture what is happening in today's gusty, swirling atmosphere? Yes, the constituency boundaries are now as unfair to the Tories as they once were to Labour, but how far will this outweigh other factors like tactical voting (or the lack of it) and the rise of the WVP?

I tend to think that Mr Powell has a point. If the WVP leads the field, with 45 per cent of the vote or more, the result looks much more open.

For the past six months, I have been sitting on an inquiry into political participation, the Power Inquiry, which is chaired by Helena Kennedy and financed by the Rowntree Foundations, the Cheeryble brothers of British politics. And what has struck us is not so much the apathy as the active and passionate distaste for politics and politicians which has engulfed large parts of the British electorate.

Not only do the polls show plummeting levels of trust. The belief that there is a civic duty to vote has plummeted, too, especially among young voters: from 79 per cent under Macmillan to 70 per cent under Callaghan and Wilson, 53 under Thatcher and only 41 per cent under Blair.

Professor Paul Whiteley of Essex University argues that these figures may be even worse than they look. In the old days, young people did not vote much either, but as they grew older, they took on the voting propensities of their parents. These days, it seems, they go on not voting into their 30s and 40s. They are permanently switched off.

This is not only deadening for democracy. It is also bad for Labour in particular, which has always counted on the young. True, the prospect of a tight finish might entice voters back into the booths, as it did in the Bush-Kerry contest, but there a polarised electorate wanted desperately to keep the other guy out.

In the British campaign, by contrast, the WVP has been doing pretty nicely so far. Tony Blair did send me (and about a million other people) a personal e-mail promising to fight for every vote. Michael Howard, giving evidence in Cardiff to the Power Inquiry, told us that he would fight for every vote, too.

All baloney, I'm afraid. In fact the party strategists on both sides are frightfully proud of their techniques that allow them to concentrate on a mere 800,000 voters in the marginal seats. If your name is not recorded in their Voter Vault, you don't count.

Ordinary people cannot help noticing how weirdly elusive and exclusive the campaign is. The party leaders chopper about the country, briefly descending to meet party workers in some airport hotel or in front of a billboard in a car park. Anything to avoid feeling the hot breath of the public down their necks.

The whole business looks as furtive as a Ukrainian gang master assembling a task force of illegal immigrants. Gladstone's Midlothian campaign it is not.

There are a dozen ways in which politicians could begin to reconnect to the voters: by turning over to some form of proportional voting, so that every vote counts towards electing an MP, by putting council tax rises to the vote each year, by allowing voters to demand a referendum on contentious national or local issues, and so on.

But until the politicians are forced to appreciate how flabby and listless our democracy is becoming, these will, I fear, remain issues for anoraks only.

The Power Inquiry is at [www.powerinquiry.org](http://www.powerinquiry.org)

Article available online on 13 April at:

<http://www.opinion.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2005/04/13/do1302.xml&sSheet=/opinion/2005/04/13/ixopinion.html>