

Signal your opposition

Many left-leaning dissidents plan to vote Liberal Democrat. But that will send Labour a mixed message

Michael Howard could not have done a better job of proving people like me wrong. He has missed no opportunity to demonstrate that, however much they agree on economic, foreign and defence policy, there is still a real difference between Labour and Conservative. His campaigns against Gypsies and asylum seekers, his ghoulish opportunism in hijacking other people's misery, remind us that we do still face a choice in the forthcoming election: between the nasty party and the even nastier one.

Of course, this doesn't help us much. By voting in Labour to keep out the Conservatives, we would be exercising a positive choice as well as a negative one – or that, at any rate, is how the government would see it. We would be telling Tony Blair's people that we have accepted, as Peter Hain insists, that the government "acted in good faith" on Iraq; that we endorse its assault on habeas corpus and the right to protest; and that we approve of the private finance initiative and the endless expansion of airports. We might persuade ourselves that we can live with this, because there are some genuinely progressive measures in the current manifesto. But the Labour leaders will interpret our decision as they please. We will give them a mandate to increase foreign aid. They will use it as a mandate to sell arms to China.

There is no easy way through this. But the route chosen by many prominent figures on the dissident left is to vote for the Liberal Democrats. Some of those I admire, such as Richard Dawkins, Rosie Boycott, Anita Roddick, Steven Rose and Sir Richard Doll, have signed up to the statement published by the musician and smart political thinker Brian

MONBIOT | SIGNAL YOUR OPPOSITION

Eno. He argues on his website that “for the health of our democracy we need a real opposition. The Liberal Democrats are currently the only hope for that”. The first statement is true; the second statement might be. But neither addresses all the problems we confront.

Like the choice between Labour and the Tories, a negative choice for the Lib Dems is also a positive one. As well as voting for their superior policies on class sizes, taxation and the environment, you would be voting for the further deregulation of business and continued support for the private finance initiative. And, if past performance is anything to go by, you would be choosing a good deal of slipperiness as well. They opposed the Iraq war in theory, but supported it in practice. They have done the same with road-building, airport expansion and the incineration of waste.

The principal reason for these inconsistencies is that, while there are opportunities on the left, most of the constituencies they hope to gain or hold are contested with the Tories. They need to take their new votes from the right. A Labour government with a Lib Dem opposition would be pulled in both directions. And this introduces a particular problem for protest voters.

By choosing the Lib Dems, you are sending an equivocal signal. Are you voting for them because you think Blair is too rightwing, or because you fear old Labour might resurface? Are you choosing them because you are a liberal Tory who detests Howard, or is it because you can't make up your mind, and they represent the middle position? There are, in other words, too many reasons for voting Lib Dem. Your voice is lost in the noise of conflicting intentions, and your decision becomes unintelligible. Whoever takes power after the next election cannot be sure why the votes fell the way they did.

If, on the other hand, you were to vote Green, Plaid Cymru, Respect or Scottish Socialist, you would send an unequivocal signal about the kind of politics you are rejecting and the kind of politics you are embracing. The reason is that these parties, as far as Westminster is concerned, inhabit the political margins. It is precisely because none has the slightest chance of running the country that a vote for them is interpreted as a clear expression of intent: your choice must be ideological, rather than tactical. Paradoxically, a vote for a minor party can thus be far more powerful than a vote for a party with an eye on government. All four of them are solidly to the left of Labour. They have been consistently anti-war, anti-privatisation, pro-distribution and pro-environment. No one who has read their manifestos can doubt that a vote for one of them is a vote against the current deference to wealth and rank.

Will this let the Conservatives in? No. A radical's choice for one of these parties, unlike a radical's choice for the Lib Dems, would not be added to the tally of fence-sitters and disillusioned Tories. With our grossly unfair electoral system, moreover, we can exploit the

MONBIOT | SIGNAL YOUR OPPOSITION

prisoners' dilemma. Most people won't vote for the minor parties because they expect other people not to vote for them, and therefore consider such a vote wasted. As a result, it is beyond the wildest dreams of the Greens (the strongest of the leftwing parties in England) to top 7% or 8%. If, somehow, this column were to persuade all the leftwing readers of the Guardian to vote Green rather than Labour, that would still fall a long way short of handing the country to the Tories who (again because of the unfair electoral maths) would need a large majority of votes to gain a slim majority of seats. (Of course, the prisoners' dilemma could produce the opposite outcome: that everyone to the left of Labour assumes that everyone else will not be voting Green or Respect, so feels he can safely do so, thereby knocking Labour out of office. But in 2005 this isn't going to happen.)

A big vote for Plaid and an average of 7% or 8% for the other leftwing parties in the constituencies they contest would not tip Labour out of office. But it would send a clear signal to the party that it cannot afford to forget its manifesto promises on aid and the environment, that the war has not been forgotten and that it had better start shaking itself out on issues such as privatisation, taxation and corporate power. Though you would not be electing a new parliamentary opposition, you would still be pulling Labour to the left.

This choice, unfortunately, is available only to some of us. The SSP is standing for all the Scottish seats, and Plaid for all the Welsh ones. But the Greens, who are short of cash, have candidates in only 164 of England's 529 constituencies, and Respect in only 24. Infuriatingly, they are standing against each other in 15 of these. Between them they have wasted 15 opportunities for the public to register its discontent.

If you don't have an opportunity to vote for them, I would suggest taking the first step on the following line: 1) a strong radical independent, such as Reg Keys in Sedgefield; 2) an anti-war Labour MP; 3) a faintly credible micro-party; 4) Liberal Democrat. It's a far from perfect choice. But it recognises that electing a new opposition might not be the best way of building one.