

SIMON ROBERTS

Reality and Ritual in the Theatre of the Election

by Tristram Hunt

General Elections can be moments of great introspection for a nation—when the political temperature is taken and our elected representatives held to account. They can be moments of catharsis and anger, hope and longing. But they can also be meandering, ungovernable, haphazard affairs. What Simon Roberts' collection of general election photographs reveals—taken as part of his 2010 commission from the House of Commons Works of Art Committee—is the disparity which exists in our modern ritual of democracy between the 'air war' and the 'ground war': the often remarkable disconnect between a political struggle fought out over the national media about the 'choice' facing the country, and the practical, quotidian nature of campaigning and 'getting out the vote'. It shows electioneering as both curiously alien and deeply organic—but so often wrought with unexpected moments of drama.

The Rochdale image is, historically, the most significant. Photographing on a 4x5" view camera from atop of his motorhome, Simon Roberts captures all the paraphernalia of contemporary political campaigning—the press pen, the sound bite from the political leader, the security detail, the spin doctor, the anxious local candidate (Simon Danczuk), the iPhone-wielding members of the public, the camera crews. It could be a brief clip for the evening news, like so many other messages of the day, delivered in that short, staccato, slightly brutal style that Gordon Brown liked to use to address the British people.

And yet, there, on the pavement, lurking in the shadows like a Great White Shark, is something unexpected, profound, and (we would soon discover) deeply damaging for the Brown campaign. As Gordon finished up his soundbite, Gillian Duffy—an unscreened and frankly unwanted member of the actual public, eyeballed suspiciously by the security guards—wished to ask him a question about immigration: 'You can't say anything about the immigrants. All these eastern Europeans what are coming in—where are they

flocking from?’ Labour’s apparent reluctance to take a hard line on immigration, she said, had made her ‘ashamed’ to have been a supporter. It was not a subject Gordon liked to talk about and, in the cocooned comfort of his Prime Ministerial limo on the drive back, he petulantly dismissed Duffy as ‘that bigoted woman’. Only to discover his microphone was still on.

It felt to some as if the mask had slipped and the political class’s contempt and indifference towards everyday voters’ concerns about immigration and its impact on rapid social change was revealed. In that very moment, the 2010 General Election surged into life and the ever-present lingering sense of a distant, lofty political elite—unfairly personified in Labour leader Gordon Brown—was painfully exposed. In the coming hours and days, Gordon would have to perform a series of mortifying mea culpas to explain away his comments and publicly apologize to the redoubtable Mrs Duffy. But for the country it provoked a spasm of Hogarthian release; it was one of those bluff, awkward, and deeply revelatory moments which make General Elections come alive.

For what Simon Roberts’s other images reveal is both the foreignness and naturalness of the election process. In Stratford-upon-Avon, a battalion of canvassers have been deposited in the streets of Salford Priors, going door to door with logistical support in the Land Rover following up. In a new-build, pristine streetscape, some out of town canvassers have landed with 'Voter ID' clipboards, not there to have a conversation about politics or the direction of the country or a local natter, but to harvest data on pre-existing voter intentions to ensure a decent turn out for Tory candidate Nadhim Zahawi. Like a search and rescue platoon sweeping out across the streets of an unknown terrain, they have the suitably military demeanour of an occupying force with might on its side.

By contrast, the Captain Beany compound in Port Talbot beautifully reveals all the idiosyncrasy, absurdity, and local eccentricity of going to the polls. The charity campaigner and Director of the Baked Bean Museum, Captain Beany, stood in consecutive general elections in Port Talbot as a profile-raising gesture. But here we capture his street corner compound with friends and, perhaps, relatives passing the time of day on the sun-kissed, post-industrial streets of Port Talbot: the scene is intimate, parochial, bizarre, and gentle. It is wholly distinct from the camera crews and sound bites of Rochdale, and yet a part of the very same political ‘process’. In many ways, it is much more real than the real campaign.

But when all is said and done, both locally and nationally, what matters is the vote. On Victoria Road in Slough, a temporary polling booth has descended like a misplaced piece of shipping cargo, and, in an instant, the quiet practices of political life have built up around it. A line of smokers, a candidate on his phone, some tellers sitting quietly waiting for polling card information, and a woman voting. It is a scene of both the alienness and naturalness of politics: an outside imposition of democratic ritual, immediately subsumed into the habits of everyday life. It was Queen Victoria who oversaw the Second and Third Reform Acts, bringing working men into the franchise, and here, in Slough, the legacy lives on.

What these pictures manage to bring together are some of the seemingly awkward necessities of contemporary democracy. Over a four-week period, men and women will do remarkable and strange things in different parts of the UK as they seek to encourage fellow citizens to become political animals like themselves, and keep the polis functioning. Of course, the routines of democracy are easily subject to ridicule, accusations of politicians' personal vanity, and a whiff of the absurd—but it is the least worst system humankind has invented for the running of its affairs. And here is a very British chronicle of its particular habits.