

## Signs of the times

A year-long trip across Russia helped former editorial photographer Simon Roberts forge a new career in the art world before he attempted a similar approach to capturing his own country in *We English*. With hindsight this work captures the calm before the economic storm that followed, a subject his latest project addresses, obliquely capturing the changing landscape of recession-hit Britain. **Diane Smyth** meets the photographer at his Brighton studio.



**1** Protestors occupy Leeds City Council Chamber on the day the annual budget was due to be agreed, 23 February 2011. The meeting was delayed by 90 minutes while protestors were removed by police and the budget was finally agreed behind closed doors, with cuts of £90m and the loss of 1500 council posts. All images © Simon Roberts.





2

Although *We English* took a consciously Elysian look at his countrymen, photographing people enjoying their leisure within the landscape, Simon Roberts had a sense “that something was unravelling” while he was shooting it. Having bought a camper van to go on the road, he started work on the project just as Northern Rock hit crisis point in 2007, the first clear warning that all was not well with the British economy. He finished it a year later, just after the crash of Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch, by which time it was obvious that we were entering a major recession of global proportions.

*We English* was published as a book the following year, and an exhibition has just finished at Light House in Wolverhampton, having toured 16 venues across Europe and the Americas, enhancing Roberts’ reputation following the success of his career-changing project shot in Russia, *Motherland*. It also helped win him a commission from the House of Commons, shooting the campaign for public votes as the official Election Artist in 2010. The economy, of course, dominated the political campaigning, and the period that followed has been characterised by harshly felt austerity

measures and public funding cuts. So, having chronicled the state of the nation with *We English*, Roberts went on to train his camera on the visible manifestations of change – from the sales signs in shop windows, to protests and burnt-out buildings and the council meetings in which cuts are agreed.

**Language of recession**

The resulting project, *Let This Be A Sign*, isn’t solely photographic, also encompassing economic graphs, slogans, placards and videos of people voicing their dissent. “I’m trying to interrogate it from a number of different angles, one being photography, but another is semiotic; it’s about the language,” he explains.

“Up until now I felt very constricted about what it means to be a photographer. But now that I’m more established, I feel I can be more expressive in using different media to talk about the things I’m interested in. The photograph is still a major part of that – the visual image – but why not use other elements if it helps the work, and try to bring them together in one coherent piece?”

“It’s quite difficult to visualise the cuts – it’s not like the Depression in America in the 1930s

with its breadlines, although it’s certainly going to get worse. And it’s not like Paul Graham [and his images of dole offices in 1980s Britain], because you can’t get into a Job Centre. Poverty is a very hidden thing now, and quite difficult to visualise without falling into clichés, plus a lot of the recession is about the middle class – people losing child tax credits, losing a few thousand pounds a year. It makes a difference but it’s very difficult to visualise.

Roberts has collected a lexicon he has collected takes phrases bandied about in political speeches and the media, for example, including choice samples such as “Death spiral of interdependency”, “Militants itching for a fight” and “Gloomier than expected”. For Roberts it’s indicative of both the new economic language we are all learning and the hyperbole that surrounds the current economic malaise. “What’s interesting when you collect it together is how contradictory it is,” he says. “One week it’s, ‘Five days to save the euro’, then two weeks later it’s, ‘Four days to save the euro’. It’s this kind of over-inflated language that I like [to use and highlight].”

Words are also a key part of the images he has taken because nearly every one includes



3

text, whether it’s a hand-made placard reading “Pooheads, where’s our future?”, slogans at a Trades Union Congress-organised rally or “Store closing” sale signs. The title of the project, *Let This Be A Sign*, comes from a placard, and Roberts likes it for its Biblical ring, but also for its sense of uncertainty. As he points out, nobody really knows what this period will mean for Britain; that will only come with hindsight. He’s more interested in recording various viewpoints and how they are expressed both directly and in the media.

**Point of view**

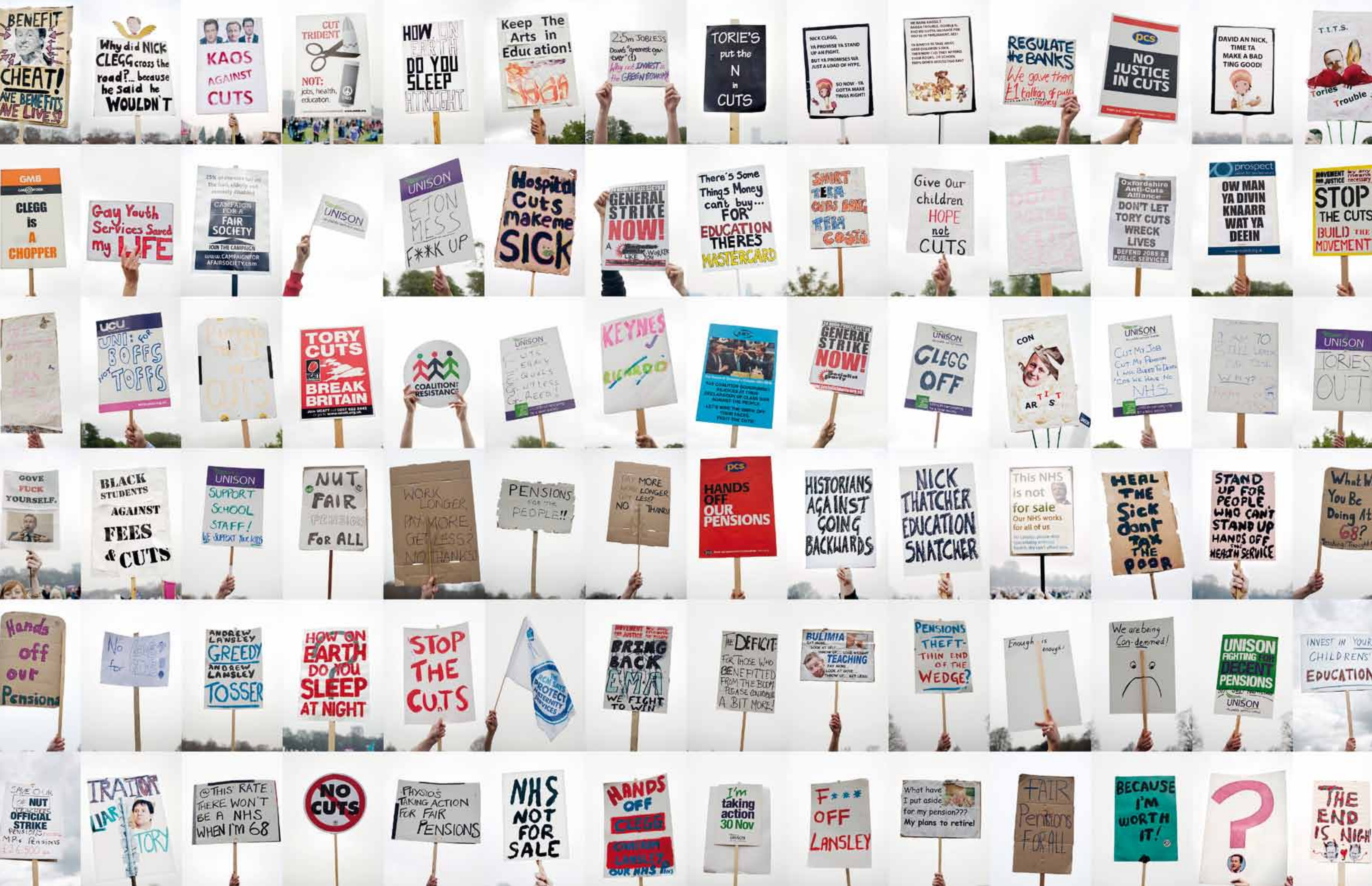
“The work is faintly political but it’s not overt – I’m not standing on my soapbox shouting out socialist ideology,” says the photographer who originally studied Human Geography. “I’m not trying to present a clear argument because actually none of us know where this is going to end up. One of the interesting things for me is how politics is being localised – there seems to be very little argument from Labour that is audible, and the Liberal Democrats are imploding. It seems people are becoming more disillusioned with the main political forces and are starting to look at the smaller parties.

“Historically what’s interesting about signs is that they were about the mass demonstration, the collective, and so you would see the same union poster held by everyone. Now it seems to be much more about the individual, so you’ve got people writing personal messages [4]. They’re identifying themselves with an opinion in that they’re joining the crowd, but they’re personalising their messages. Even the terminology ‘Pooheads’ has something a bit middle class about it; it’s quite soft and even jokey compared to the demonstrations in Spain or Portugal or Greece. Over there, there’s a lot more anger and frustration; we’re still verging on this display of politeness.”

Roberts has shot a series of videos that also play with this idea, recording movement within a single frame and showing the action both before and after a key moment. One video shows a protestor shouting at a council meeting, for example: after her outburst she turns to a friend and giggles. Another shows a man standing outside a branch of Natwest Bank, part of the 81 percent state-owned Royal Bank of Scotland, who makes a powerful speech, then chats to a well-wishing friend.

- 2 Photomontage of bank traders and brokers during the 2008-2011 credit crunch. Taken from the website: [brokershandsontheirfacesblog.tumblr.com](http://brokershandsontheirfacesblog.tumblr.com).
- 3 Grid of photographs of sale signs in high-street shop windows across the country, 2011-2012.
- 4 Overleaf: Photomontage of placards held by protestors at demonstrations across the UK, November 2010 – February 2012. (This is an edited version of the final montage.)









5  
Peckham Peace Wall, London, 10 August 2011. Residents affected by rioting in London's Peckham neighbourhood posted their thoughts on a "Peace Wall" on a boarded-up window of the Poundland discount store.



“A photograph records that second, or that a 25th of a second; I was really interested in seeing what’s happening either side of that, what would happen if you keep watching,” says Roberts. “So in almost all cases the camera is in the same frame, but you just keep going. There’s this subtlety that you wouldn’t get with a photograph of someone with their hand in the air shouting their frustrations. There’s nuance, so it becomes more human, but you also wonder whether anything will change because there’s still a softness [about the people who are protesting].”

Elsewhere it’s the combinations of images that help generate meaning – most obviously in the grids of sales signs and protest placards, but also in a dystopian “street” created by stitching together several shots of empty shops. Roberts has also included images of stressed traders appropriated from a Tumblr feed called The Brokers With Hands On Their Faces Blog, which is devoted to gathering representations of the financial sector in the media. Collecting these

images creates a fiction, because no street has so many empty shops, and no brokerage so many head-clutching employees, but they also represent underlying truths and, perhaps, the narrative the media is creating from our era.

“Some of this is like a mirror,” says the former press photographer. “A lot of what I was trying to do in *The Election Project* was commenting on the media and photography. I was always photographing behind the press commenting on how most of us see the election, which is on TV.”

Elsewhere Roberts creates meaning through straight comparisons, using diptychs to contrast different scenes from the same geographical region. His shot of the Royal wedding celebrations in London’s Hyde Park is put with a TUC rally captured in the same place, for example, both showing crowds of people with flags and placards, but to very different effect.

As with *The Election Project* and *We English*, Roberts shot most of the landscape image from above, climbing a ladder with his 5×4 camera

(no mean feat at a protest), to a sociological slant to the work, emphasising the group over individuals. He says he’s “not really into equipment, it’s just a way of recording what I need” though, and has also used digital cameras and some 6×7 shots. That ad-hoc approach plus the mixed media he’s presenting make for a much less constrained aesthetic than in previous projects, which were presented in beautifully printed and framed exhibitions.

He’s exhibiting *Let This Be A Sign* as part of the London Festival of Photography this month (until 01 July), and is happy to have found a gallery for it in a public space at Swiss Cottage Library. Some of the images will be directly pinned to the wall – they’re “austerity prints”, he laughs – and he is including a mini-library of key economic texts visitors will be encouraged to use. As with his previous projects he wants to include the audience also, and is devoting a wall for visitors to stick Post-it notes recording their views – similar to the wall on the front of Peckham’s Poundland after last year’s

riots. In addition, he’s organising an event at the Working Class Movement library in Salford, allowing the public to make talking-head videos about the cuts, and their suggestions for alternative approaches.

“I want to give people a voice, recording the here and now, how the landscape changing, and these signifiers pointers to what’s coming next,” he says. “It’s a lot less about the perfect print in the perfect frame in the perfect gallery.”

This approach and his use of different media, means it’s probably less likely to result in the kind of print sales generated by previous projects, which is entirely self-funded. But Roberts believes it’s important to make the project for posterity, and will continue working on it through the London Olympics and the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. “I got accreditation from the IOC [International Olympics Committee] to do a leftfield look at the Olympics, and I want to do a street party [celebrating the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee],” he says. “You look at all of these books about the 1940s and 50s and

the Coronation and you always get these lovely photographs of a tea party on a street; I’d like to have a photograph like that for 20 years’ time,” he adds. “It’s looking at these major events taking place – the Olympics, the Diamond Jubilee, the Royal wedding, devolution, there are some really interesting things happening at the moment.

“*We English* was an exploration of the English landscape, then I did *The Election Project*, an exploration of the British landscape through the prism of politics. Now this work is questioning what is the direct consequence of these economic matters and how are they going to affect the landscape of Britain. Taken all together, this is a huge project made at a hugely significant time. It is about creating a piece of work that will have some significance in 20 or 30 years’ time recording this era.” *BJP*

Let This Be A Sign is on show as part of London Festival of Photography until 01 July at Swiss Cottage Gallery, Swiss Cottage Central Library, 88 Avenue Road, London NW3 3HA. [www.lfph.org](http://www.lfph.org) [www.simonroberts.com](http://www.simonroberts.com)

- 6 *Trading floor*, Lloyds Banking Group photographed on the “Day of Action” strike, London, 30 November 2011.
- 7 *Media and technology tent*, Occupy London Finsbury Square camp photographed on the “Day of Action” strike, London, 30 November 2011.



6



7