

# SIMON ROBERTS

In response to The Election Project  
by Ian Jeffrey



Gordon Brown (Labour Party), Rochdale, Greater Manchester, 28 April 2010

Looking at Simon Roberts' Gordon Brown photograph taken in Rochdale as part of The Election Project series I was reminded of a picture by Giovanni Bellini, of the death of St. Peter Martyr, stabbed by armed soldiers on the edge of a wood (Fig.1). In the background a group of men are felling trees. Perhaps Bellini is suggesting that the noise of the tree cutting drowns out whatever sounds stem from the assassination, or he is suggesting some degree of continuity between the different kinds of handwork on show. Bellini was always alert to continuities of this sort.

I was reminded, too, of Pieter Bruegel's paintings. There is often an important event in a Bruegel painting although it can sometimes be hard to find. Gordon Brown at the gate is more or less where Bruegel would have put him, amongst a lot of others staring this way and that. Bruegel grants all of his participants expressive quality, right down to the most infantile bystanders. Sometimes he painted scenes, as in the 'Suicide of Saul' (Fig.2) where armies mill about and clash in a mountain pass, but he liked to distinguish between individuals. Roberts' bystanders remind me very much of Bruegel's personnel: those men in large shoes in the right foreground, the cameraman in lavishly crumpled jeans, the keen lady with the dog and the district nurse standing next to her. Everyone on site is portrayed, especially the man in the red tie who turns away.

The Rochdale photograph shouldn't be taken for granted as 'an election picture'. Portraits of this kind are hard to find – indeed I would say that they are impossible to find. It is candid and it is collective, at a time when portraits are often strained and exceptional.

Roberts' Rochdale group also shows people spread about, in their own spaces and groupings: the citizenry to the upper right, for example, and then the tree functionaries in suits to the lower left. If a photographer takes pictures at ground level amongst the crowd the result will be a display of fragments and minor moments. The big picture implies, to me at least, the possibility of collective life, candid and spontaneous. It gives me a chance to reflect on the variety of people and on their inter-relationships. I don't see everything together, a cosmos, but I see enough to remind me of the world at large made up of all its disparate pieces: people who are curious, disinterested, uninterested, distracted, unsighted.

In front of the Rochdale picture, I know that I am looking at 'a turning point in history', which puts me at liberty to notice everything else: the demeanor of the payback squad, the footwear of all concerned, those metal gates, garden sheds, fencing and brickwork. What Roberts does, I think, is to attach the Election to the fabric of Britain, even if that fabric is sometimes enigmatic and mute. It looks, at times, as if the electorate has vanished or chosen to remain indoors- or been encountered by accident. The pictures give a good impression of a country, which has, to some degree, retired into itself, where pedestrians are a rarity.





Fig. 1 Giovanni Bellini, *The Assassination of Saint Peter Martyr*, The National Gallery, UK, 1507



Fig.2 Pieter Bruegel, *The Suicide of Saul*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Austria, 1562