

ELECTION 2

Floating voter

I'm having nightmares about the polling booth. My greatest fear? Choosing a candidate

Edward Docx

I am suffering from a terrible condition: acute pre-election stress trauma, or Pest. Where once I floated, now I sink. The only other documented cases occurred in 1974, my psychoanalyst tells me, when parliament was last hung. In those days, it was called ballot anxiety disorder: Bad.

"Tell me about your mother," my psychoanalyst murmurs. I try to breathe. "My mother was very strict, doctor. She said that whatever happens I must always vote. She said that it is the one absolute duty in a democracy. She said millions died for this. She said those who do not vote must live in exile or silence."

"And how does that make you feel, Ed?" he asks. "I feel a tremendous sense of my own importance." "Go on." "Everything—the whole election—it's all about me." He makes a steeple with his fingers. "How so?"

"Come on, doctor, isn't it obvious? Because I'm the one that they're all talking to—it's me, me, me." I raise myself from the mauve Persian rug. "I am the only constituency that matters. I am the floating voter. I am the key marginal. I am the undecided. I am the swing. In these hands... the fate of the nation."

There is silence. Dust—possibly from a recent volcanic eruption—floats through the air. "But?" he prompts, softly. "But I can't do it," I say, collapsing back, "I can't vote." "Why can't you vote?" I am close to tears: "*The candidates.*"

"I keep seeing the names, doctor," I say. "I read the reports. I watch the clips. I endure these endless tweets. But whenever I fix upon a man, or a party, all I hear is this voice in my head saying 'NO FUCKING WAY.'"

"You hear voices?" "I do. I hear derisory laughter. I hear men and women from other countries jeering at my choices in foreign accents." He nods slowly: "So you feel a tremendous responsibility, you feel that you are the deciding factor, but that you cannot decide?" "Yes," I return his nod. "And sometimes, in the dead of the night, I hear Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair performing this beautiful aria together—it's Mozart,

from *Don Giovanni*. They sing of love." My voice falls to a whisper. "And I miss them."

After a while my doctor clears his throat. "Let's try some cognitive behavioural therapy. What happens when you imagine yourself in the voting booth?" "I can see the ballot paper, doctor, but I cannot put my cross by any of the names. I feel obscurely depressed. I feel bewildered by a loss that I don't quite understand. I want to put different names on the list."

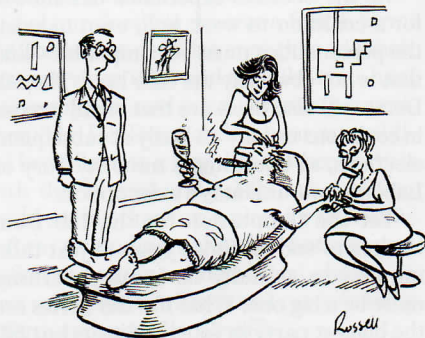
"Which names?" "Winston Churchill. William Gladstone. Clement Attlee." "Why don't you just do it?" "Only cowards spoil their ballot paper." "Why don't you leave then—forget the whole thing, and go home?" "My mother won't let me exit the booth until I cast my vote." "So what happens?" "I stay in there. I dare not come out. Hours pass. I stare at the plywood and the pen. I hope nobody notices. I try to imagine what Ray Mears would do in my situation."

He makes a note. Then briskly: "What do you think of when I say... Gordon Brown?" "I think of a schoolboy in 1950s-style shorts. Very swotty; a little autistic. He collects toy Daleks and keeps a chart of all the school marks he has received in all the different subjects so he can demonstrate that he has come top of the form over all."

"And David Cameron?" "A private gynaecologist." "Nick Clegg?" "British Airways short-haul pilot of the year, 2010."

"OK." He leans forward. "Now, if I said that, for the next five years, one of these people as you have imagined them is going to be sitting underneath your local cash-point seeking to engage you in absurd conversation before asking for all your money, which one would you choose?"

Edward Docx is a journalist and author. His second novel "Self Help" (Picador) won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial prize



"Why does the philosophy department need all this? Well, dean, you ask a profound question"