

'Blue-remembered hills'? Not if UKIP has anything to do with it!

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To Ludlow where I visit Christopher Gill, UKIP's candidate and have a chance to revisit one of the most achingly beautiful parts of England.

It is said that A.E. Housman's 'A Shropshire Lad' was the poetry of choice of many who went off to the Great War, being a powerful reminder of the land which they loved and for which they were fighting. As luck would have it, the light is such as to produce, as if on cue, a perfect demonstration of why Housman used the phrase 'blue-remembered hills'. Add to this a bright late Spring day and you have a chance to see the Shropshire Hills at their very best.

Christopher Gill has a distinct advantage here for he was Conservative MP for Ludlow between 1987 and 2001. At that time he took the view, rightly, that the Tory Party had so completely departed from its roots and abjured the principles for which it has stood for so long that he could no longer, with honour, defend the party to the electors of Ludlow. Thus he stood down: indeed even before the election of that year he had allowed his membership of the party to lapse.

At the heart of this decision lay the Tory Party's policies over the European Union. That was not, though, the only basis for his departure. Like so many of UKIP's many recruits his view of the Tory Party was that it had left him and not the other way round. But undoubtedly the EU was fundamental to his choice.

On the other hand he had plainly become a trial to the Tory Whips and he left with the distinct sense of the leadership being perfectly happy to see the back of him. He has kept in touch with many erstwhile colleagues, though, and describes, more in sorrow than anger, a conversation with William Hague that was evidently full of promise but left him dubious of the degree of sincerity involved. He is not the first to have been left thus: the ranks of UKIP are filled with ex-Tory members who have inexorably been led to that conclusion.

Thus nothing had really changed with the Tory party on Europe. That is what we may look forward to come Monday: more fudge than a sweet shop from the arch-dissembler over Europe, David Cameron, especially if the latter finds himself beholden to former Eurocrat Nick Clegg up to whom he will have to suck if there is a hung Parliament.

Amazingly Ludlow has no less than seven candidates. As well as the main quartet of Tory, UKIP, Lib Dumbs and Labour (whose presence here is minuscule to the point of invisibility), there is a Green, a Monster Raving Loony (cue cheers for entertainment value!) and, astonishingly, a BNP chap. Looking about one finds it really quite impossible to see Ludlow as a place where the BNPs poisonous message might take root.

Christopher has, of course, one considerable advantage here: face and name recognition by virtue of his earlier stint of public service. Indeed as we speak a lady voter comes across to remind him of her name and assure him of her support come Thursday. That recognition factor will give him a substantial leg-up on day.

Inevitably one turns to the immediate problems facing the constituency. Though there is some industry at Bridgnorth, the area's focus is farming. Here one faces the inevitable fear of the farming community that departure from Europe would remove the safety-net of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). It is a factor which UKIP has to face squarely.

Designed primarily as a means of ensuring a permanent in-built bribe for small French farmers, the CAP has proved in the last thirty years or so to be a significant source of income for some farmers, though its effect has been less than even. Some areas of agriculture have, on the other hand been very hard hit: indeed a once-thriving sugar beet sector

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hereabouts has been trashed because of the CAP. Christopher cheerfully recounts the reaction of farmers to the Greens suggestion that this was 'a good thing' because the sugar beet industry was so environmentally damaging. By all accounts the reaction to this was deeply hostile as sugar beet had once been a solid earner for Shropshire's Yeomen.

We talk of agriculture's problems and how the sector has responded to the harm the CAP has brought about. Tourism has risen as many farms, as elsewhere in the country, have added a self-catering or B&B arrow to their quiver. There is a significant second-home problem here and the emigration of the young to the towns of the West Midlands promises significant problems for the future. Bizarrely some councils in the West Midlands have chosen the area into which to dump some of their dead-beat trouble families and some immigrants too: perhaps this is why the BNP has decided to stand here and lay some of its noxious spawn in this fair land.

UKIP, of course, would not and could not abolish overnight the support agriculture receives from the State. The industry is far too important for that and UKIP would rather introduce agriculture and farming-friendly policies that make the UK's farmers better able to stand on their own two feet and compete fairly with imported produce. Instead, of course, huge dollops of Britain's money go to keep Greek and Romanian goat farmers in the style to which the EU has helped them become accustomed.

So, yet again UKIP has the advantage of being represented by a candidate of confirmed principle. Add to this his recognition factor and his experience as an MP (and thus experience of how to run a political campaign) and you will find a doughty fighter for the cause of the independence of the United Kingdom. These factors are doubtless those which have left the local Tories running for cover on the matter of Europe. Again we discover that the local Tory candidate has suddenly discovered that he has, all along, been an avowed Eurosceptic.

This betokens a real concern that, at the very least, Christopher's efforts are beginning to threaten. In the circumstances where we are now at, with the polls suggesting the real possibility of an indecisive result, the Tories are playing the Eurosceptic card.

We here at UKIP can be forgiven if we look askance at such road-to-Damascus conversions. Frankly most of them are unbelievable. This is the second such that I have come across in the last few days. I no more credit this one than that: it is entirely bogus and will be seen for what it is: a bright shining lie.

This is a huge constituency: fifty miles from end to end. Christopher was out in the Clun Valley in his 'battle van', driven by Martin the Molecatcher. I reckon that makes him unique: if anyone else knows of a molecatching candidate's chauffeur, I'll be astounded! Luck shines on the campaign as the weather has kept largely fine and promises the same for the rest of the week.

I am left confident that the citizens of this beautiful corner of England might have a representative at Westminster with an intimate knowledge of the area who would be the most independent champion-in-arms for Ludlow. Freed from the bonds of the Whips thuggery, he would test the patience of a saint with the carefully placed barbs that he is minded to fire at any hapless minister who tries to duck the issue, for example, of the provenance of some new regulation which owes its birth not to Westminster but to Brussels.

I leave for a visit to Ludlow's excellent food centre. Christopher and his molecatcher head out once more to target the denizens of the Clun Valley. We wind our way back to Birmingham in the lee of the hills. Another inspiring visit is at an end.

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