

# Britain: Labour fails in attempt to repeal anti-gay legislation

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The Blair government conceded defeat July 26 after its attempt to repeal the anti-homosexual “Section 28” legislation was voted down 270 to 228 in the House of Lords.

Section 28 was introduced under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher as part of the 1988 Local Government Act and outlaws the “promotion” of homosexuality by local authorities. Pro-Section 28 campaigners have made much of the bogus argument that the legislation “protects” school children. In the House of Lords, Conservative Baroness Young appealed to peers to save youngsters from the “appalling material” on gay and lesbian lifestyles that would “inevitably” find its way into classrooms if the law were repealed.

Although no one has been prosecuted under the legislation, it has been used as part of a right-wing offensive to promote “family values” and to establish the right of the state to intrude on matters of personal sexuality. The legislation has been used on at least 30 occasions to threaten legal action against local authorities for providing basic services to homosexuals—such as health and medical information and counselling.

The Conservative Party mobilised cross-party support, including 16 Labour peers, to defeat the government by 42 votes. Baroness Thatcher was on hand to add her support.

After the vote, a spokesman for Blair said that the prime minister remained convinced Section 28 was “a piece of prejudice”, but its repeal would be postponed so as to rescue the local government bill, of which it was a part. This is pure dissembling. In truth, the Lords, who have twice voted against the repeal of Section 28, have only limited constitutional powers to delay legislation and the government could force it through if

it so desired. Blair's decision not to take this action is bound up with Labour's own political orientation.

The Labour government came to power after 18 years of Conservative rule that had gutted welfare and social provisions, slashed wages, trebled the number of people living in poverty and attacked civil liberties. Blair pledged to reverse this situation, but having abandoned Labour's previous policy of social reformism and adopted a big business agenda, his only claim to being a “progressive” was on issues such as sexual and racial equality and “modernising” Britain's political institutions. This won popular support. Almost two decades of Conservative rule—in which anti-working class measures were intertwined with open displays of prejudice and discrimination—had convinced many people that changes to promote a more tolerant, fairer atmosphere were needed.

Having broken with its former constituency in the working class, however, and lacking any significant social base, Labour is dependent upon the favours of the media, business and the establishment to an unprecedented degree. Hence Blair has proven incapable of making any real challenge to the status quo, even when it comes to the limited measures of democratic change he promised. One of the great ironies associated with the failed campaign to repeal Section 28 is that an institution Blair claimed to have made democratic and accountable scuppered it. In reality, by reducing the number of hereditary peers and increasing the number of appointees to the House of Lords, Blair merely assured its preservation and bestowed an air of legitimacy upon it.

On virtually every issue—from anti-fox hunting legislation through to anti-discriminatory measures—the right has only to threaten Blair and he dances to their tune. A secret memo from the prime minister was

leaked to Rupert Murdoch's newspapers last week revealing just how in thrall Blair is to the right wing. In it Blair complains that on a number of issues his government was perceived as being “out of touch with gut British instincts”. The instincts he identified were “family values”—where he said “gay issues” meant the government “are perceived as weak”—and “asylum and crime, where we are perceived as soft; and asserting the nation's interests where, because of the unpopularity of Europe ... we are seen as insufficiently assertive”.

Labour needed “two or three eye-catching initiatives that are entirely conventional in terms of the family” to dispel the notion that the government was too concerned about gay rights, Blair continued. It should also publicise the increase in asylum-seekers being expelled from Britain. On crime, he said, “We should think now of an initiative, e.g. locking up street muggers. Something tough, with immediate bite that sends a message through the system.”

Blair's memo is cynical and self-serving. He makes no mention of the increase in poverty or the continued decline in health and education that have caused support for his government to plummet in working class areas.

A surreal atmosphere now exists in British politics, in which parties and institutions that were deeply discredited and widely hated can parade as if they are masters of the situation. Conservative Lord Strathclyde even claimed after the vote on Section 28 that the Lords had spoken up for “British opinion”.

This reversal is not the outcome of any increase in popular support for the Tories, but is because the right feel they have gained the upper hand thanks to the impotence of New Labour. The more Blair dances to the right-wing tune, the more assertive they become and the more they demand from him.



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