

# Britain: Calls mount for Blair to delay general election due to foot and mouth crisis

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After more than one month, the spread of foot and mouth disease throughout the UK shows no sign of abating. Following weeks of press debate on the issue, pressure is mounting for Tony Blair to rule out a general election on May 3. On Thursday, Conservative Party leader William Hague said the prime minister should not go ahead with any May poll.

Constitutionally, a British government's term in office is set at five years, which would enable Labour to rule until 2002. However, the prime minister has the right to call an election at any time, enabling the ruling party to choose a date it considers most politically advantageous. In 1951 Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee called an election after just one year in office.

Blair has not yet called a general election, but it is an open secret that he favours May 3, 2001. He hopes that an early election would enable Labour to capitalise on its current 20 percent lead over the opposition parties, and return a majority Labour government for a second term. If May 3 is chosen, Blair has until Monday to make the announcement, as general elections require four weeks notice.

By any objective criteria, there is no need for Blair to postpone an election. In evaluating the issues posed by the foot and mouth (FMD) crisis a sense of proportion is necessary—something woefully lacking in the mass media. Television reports about the cull of livestock taking place in some parts of the country warn viewers that they "may find some scenes distressing"—advice not even given during coverage of NATO's bombing of civilian areas in Yugoslavia and Iraq.

Other reports, picked up by those supporting a postponement, describe Britain as "plague nation". But although highly contagious in animals, FMD presents no risk to public health, and 95 percent of the animals infected recover within weeks. Less than two percent of the country's livestock has been affected so far. Although 76 percent of Britain's total land surface is set aside for farming, moreover, agriculture accounts for under two percent of GDP, employs two percent of the national workforce and comprises less than six percent of all exports.

The primary impact of FMD is on the profits of agribusiness. Meat and animal products from a country with FMD are banned for export; animals that have recovered from the disease have reduced milk yields and weight gain. Labour has so far delayed implementing a vaccination programme, because, although it would help prevent the virus spreading, meat from vaccine-treated livestock is also subject to export restrictions.

For much of the last century the disease has been dealt with by quarantining farms where FMD is discovered, and carrying out a mass cull of infected animals and those in the surrounding area. So far, some 800 separate outbreaks have been identified in the UK, and more

than 764,000 animals are awaiting slaughter on the farm. The army has been moved into affected areas to help with the slaughter, and building the pyres needed to burn carcasses.

The Conservative leader's demand for the general election to be postponed has nothing to do with defending democracy, as Hague claims. No one would be disenfranchised by an early poll, as even the handful of people currently quarantined on farms would automatically receive postal ballots. On top of this, postponing the general election would also mean cancelling local elections due on May 3. As the dates for local elections are fixed, this would require parliament to pass emergency legislation extending the period local councillors can remain in office.

Nobody believes that the Tories have any chance of winning a May 3 general election. One image consultant advised Hague that his party was "hated" across the country due to its association with the Thatcher years. Poll forecasters predict the Conservatives will lose even more seats, placing Hague's leadership on the line.

That is not to say that FMD presents no problems. It is certainly a crisis for those whose livelihoods are seriously affected. The government has agreed to pay farmers compensation of 90 percent of the pre-FMD price for each animal destroyed—at an estimated cost of £200m. However, the tourist sector in areas of Scotland, Wales and southwest England faces far greater losses, but has been promised only minimal government aid.

For some farmers, however, FMD is one crisis too many, following on from BSE or "mad cow" disease—which is fatal to humans—and an outbreak of swine fever last year. According to a survey published last week by accountancy firm Deloitte and Touche, farmers' incomes have fallen by nearly 90 percent over the past five years. The National Farmers' Union said that total farm incomes in real terms are at their lowest since the 1930s.

These figures mask wide variations. The giant agribusinesses that dominate British farming are by no means poor, but small farms are in serious trouble. The survey estimated that income for a typical 500-acre family farm has fallen to £8,000 per annum, meaning that some small operators are dependent upon welfare benefits to supplement their incomes. It is these layers that have condemned the NFU for supporting the government's mass cull measures and have threatened to barricade their farms to prevent Ministry of Agriculture vets from destroying their stock.

Such statistics have fuelled allegations that Labour is "insensitive" to the countryside, and only represents "out of touch townies". The deliberate cultivation of divisions between town and rural areas can appear bizarre in what is one of the most urbanised countries in the world. But invocations of England's "green and pleasant land" have

traditionally played a central role in right wing politics. Previously the preserve of the Conservatives, this type of mythologizing is being taken up by rurally based ad hoc "countryside" bodies—expressing the degree to which the Tories are regarded by many of their former constituents as politically impotent. The newly formed Farmers for Action, active in last year's fuel tax protests, declared "all-out war" on the government over its handling of the FMD outbreak. The far-right anti-European UK Independence Party and the Countryside Alliance, combining Conservatives, wealthy landowners, aristocrats, and impoverished small rural businessmen, have also demanded a postponement of the general election.

The language being employed against the government is indicative of the tensions building up in these social layers. Supporters of the Countryside Alliance have gone so far as to denounce Blair as a "class warrior" and even a neo-communist for his mealy-mouthed efforts at reforming the House of Lords and Labour's attempts to limit fox-hunting, the traditional pursuit of the rich.

One newspaper columnist toyed with the idea of pressing the Queen to overrule the prime minister on the election date, pointing out that constitutionally this was her right. Prince Charles' has donated £500,000 to affected farmers and abandoned a skiing holiday as a "mark of respect" for the beleaguered countryside. Along with the Queen's cancellation of the Royal Windsor Horse Show, these were interpreted as public signals that the monarchy supports postponing the election. On Friday, Britain's Archbishops joined the call for the election to be called off, but no one is saying for how long—the FMD crisis could run for months.

Whereas media support for Hague's call is currently confined to the hardline Tory press, such as the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, it is striking that postponement of the election has found a broader resonance in the general population. According to opinion polls, between 50-60 percent of British people support a later election. These are by no means all Conservative supporters, so how is this to be explained?

The *Guardian* newspaper favours postponement of the poll until June 7—a halfway house solution that is reportedly gaining support among Labour MPs. In attempting to justify this position, Anne McElvoy said there is such as things as "tone in politics". It was not only a question of being sensitive to the plight of the rural population, McElvoy indicated, but to broader public sentiments. "Foot-and-mouth is one more bloody thing that has gone wrong, when they told us things could only get better", she wrote, in a sideways reference to Labour's 1997 election promises to reverse the decades of destruction under Thatcher and the Tories, and rescue public services.

Four years on, the opposite is the case, as run down schools, struggling hospitals and all-too frequent crashes on the privatised rail network prove. The FMD crisis has tapped in to an underlying mood of unease and foreboding. There is a sense that things are terribly wrong, while the government is increasingly regarded as remote from the concerns of working people.

Last week, Blair announced that he was taking "personal" charge of FMD operations. The government has gone into wartime mode—with the prime minister pledging to "strain every sinew" in stamping out the disease and Cabinet meetings being held in the Special Operations Room.

Blair wants to show that the FMD crisis is under control, and to get on with the election. But his preferences are no more dictated by democratic considerations than Hague's. Blair has said that any delay would send out a signal that the country was "closed for business",

further hitting the economy.

A May election also has the support of big business and most of the press. Their concern is that a delay would create political instability at a time when the global stock market crashes and signs of developing world recession could have devastating economic consequences for the UK.

Writing in the *Observer*, columnist Andrew Rawnsley warned Blair not to delay the general election for too long. If it were held over beyond summer, he cautioned, "By the autumn—this is certainly what chills Gordon Brown—icy winds from across the Atlantic may be carrying the deadly virus of recession to Britain". He summarised the prime minister's dilemma as being "at the mercy of gyrating stock markets whose direction cannot be forecast even by those who claim to be masters of the financial realm and a virulently unpredictable cattle virus which confounds the experts".

A recent Mori opinion poll found that public confidence in the economy has fallen sharply. In the last month, the number of those who thought the economy would improve over the next year has dropped considerably against those who think it will deteriorate. As well as benefiting from an ineffective parliamentary opposition, a mini-boom in the economy has given Labour a relatively peaceful first term—obscuring the extent to which it has cut back public spending and further denuded welfare. But in the last week alone more than 6,000 job losses have been announced in retail and telecommunications, and steel giant Corus confirmed it will press ahead with the closure of its Welsh plants, with the loss of 6,000 jobs.

Referring to the "dramatic collapse in confidence" on the stock markets John Redwood, the right wing Conservative MP and former opposition trade spokesman, forecast, "Now is truly our spring of discontent". He added that "Labour looks as if it's heading back to the old horrors of the winter of discontent"—a reference to the mass movement against the Callaghan Labour government in the late 1970s, which opened the way for Thatcher to come to power in 1979.

Behind the differences over the timing of the general election are more fundamental considerations. What impact would a recession have on social and political relations? What type of government and what policies will be necessary to weather an economic downturn? The establishment parties and the media display a cynical disregard for the real democratic and social concerns of working people. The *Sun* newspaper's Littlejohn column was provocatively headlined, "We don't need an election, we need a military coup".

The living standards and financial security of millions are on the line, yet nowhere are these questions openly discussed. Instead the crisis surrounding foot and mouth has become an arena in which the contending establishment political factions are attempting to formulate a policy with which to defend the interests of big business in the turbulent period ahead.

*See Also:*

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