

Britain: Prime Minister Blair abandons plans for May elections

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Prime Minister Tony Blair announced Monday that local government elections set for May 3 are to be postponed due to the foot and mouth epidemic presently affecting Britain's livestock. It is the first occasion in peacetime that elections have been delayed.

An emergency bill will be rushed through parliament on Wednesday evening to allow local councillors to continue in office beyond the fixed four-year term. Whilst Blair indicated that the elections would then take place on June 7, the emergency legislation will be open-ended, making a further postponement possible. The bill covers elections in 34 English counties, 11 unitary authorities in England and 26 district council areas in Northern Ireland.

The decision is a victory for the Conservative Party, farming organisations and various right wing ad hoc "countryside" bodies, which have been the most vociferous in their call for postponement. Although the prime minister referred only to the local elections in his remarks, it is common knowledge that Labour had hoped to hold a general election on May 3 and that it has now abandoned these plans. In Britain, a government's term of office is limited to five years, but the prime minister may call a general election at any time within that period.

Blair's term in office ends officially in May 2002. Whilst he had not announced the date for a general election, it is common practice for it to be held concurrently with the local elections, thus requiring only a single polling date. It was clear that Labour favoured a general election on May 3 this year, when it hoped to capitalise on its 20 percent lead in opinion polls. Election advertising had already begun appearing.

For the Conservatives, an early general election would be disastrous. Many pollsters predicted that the party—whose dwindling vote is mainly concentrated in the English Shires—could lose even more seats, throwing William Hague's leadership into question.

That is why Hague seized on the foot and mouth (FMD) epidemic to demand a postponement. For Labour to proceed with the elections under such conditions would show gross insensitivity towards the countryside, Hague claimed, demanding Blair put the "country first" and party politics second.

The farming and rural areas have traditionally formed the bedrock of Conservative support. Even here, however, the Tories are increasingly regarded as ineffectual. New organisations have sprung up, such as the Countryside Alliance—an alliance of conservatives, wealthy landowners, aristocrats and small to

middling farmers—and Farmers for Action.

These bodies have placed the emphasis on building up extra-parliamentary action against the government, organising vocal demonstrations against the proposed ban on fox hunting and the fuel tax protests that paralysed much of Britain last year. Hague hoped that by making a call for postponement, he could both buy time for his party and reinvigorate its support amongst these layers.

Hague's call for the elections to be delayed also had the support of the right wing Tory press, such as the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles had also indicated their support for a postponement. The Liberal Democrats—a large proportion of whose support is also rurally based—came out in favour of a later poll. The farmers' plight also appears to have caught the public mood, with more than 50 percent of those polled indicating their preference for deferment.

In contrast, however, the majority of the press, including the leading business daily the *Financial Times* favoured a May 3 poll. These newspapers, led by Rupert Murdoch's News International group, expressed concern that any delay to the elections would send out the message that "Britain was closed for business", further damaging tourism and trade. The tourist trade contributes at least three times more to Britain's gross domestic product than farming, and highly sensationalist coverage of the foot and mouth crisis had already hit visitor numbers.

In Monday's announcement, Blair admitted that there were no real grounds for cancelling the local elections, and that "free and fair elections" could just as easily take place in May as in any other month. But he had to take into account "the feelings and sensitivities of people in communities most severely affected by this appalling disease", and place the "national interest" above the elections.

His attempt to strike such a Churchillian pose is ridiculous. This is the first occasion in more than 50 years that elections have been postponed, and the first time that the decision has been made by reference to "people's feelings". As the *Independent* newspaper noted, general elections were held in 1923 despite a foot and mouth epidemic and even in 1945, while Britain was still formally at war with Japan and millions of soldiers stationed abroad required a postal ballot.

Almost 1,000 outbreaks of foot and mouth disease have now been confirmed nationally and around a million animals have been or are awaiting slaughter in a bid to stop the virus spreading. But

FMD is not a modern day variant of the plague. Although highly contagious, the virus is not dangerous to public health and some 95 percent of infected animals recover. Currently less than two percent of the county's livestock are affected, in an industry that accounts for less than two percent of Britain's GDP. The reason for the slaughter policy is economic, as meat and livestock from a country with FMD are barred from export. For this reason, most farmers have so far resisted a policy of vaccination to contain the disease.

Blair's decision lacks any internal consistency. There is no reason to suppose that the FMD epidemic will have ended in 10 weeks time. Indeed by June the disease could be at its peak, with large numbers of carcasses still awaiting burial or destruction.

The same reasoning that led to May's elections being deferred could also be applied in June, with the situation in some rural areas becoming increasingly tense as time goes on. In Wales, farmers have mounted protests against the government's handling of FMD and at least one has blocked his farm to stop ministry of agricultural officials gaining entrance to his premises. On Tuesday, a 27-year old man was charged with the attempted murder of a police officer, after he drove a 50-tonne bulldozer over a police van at an FMD protest in Wales.

Nothing that the government is currently doing will provide any solution to the more fundamental problems of Britain's agricultural sector—especially among the smaller farmers who are being squeezed out of the industry.

To appease the pro-May 3 lobby in Britain's business circles, Blair had taken care to brief the press—particularly Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper—about his decision even before he had informed most of the Cabinet. According to reports, the *Sun*'s political editor Trevor Kavanagh was told on Friday of the prime minister's decision to postpone the elections, enabling it to lead with the “exclusive” news that the poll would now be held on June 7.

Last month, the right wing daily, which prides itself on having the prime minister's ear, announced another “exclusive,” splashing the news of a May 3 general election across its front page.

Explaining the reason Blair had decided to delay, the *Financial Times* quoted one Labour minister stating, “It's important not to repeat the Thatcher experiment of the late 1980s and early 1990s. She ignored the concerns of part of the country, and it was then that the Tories lost their one-nation mantle”.

The example is flawed—Thatcher never claimed to be a “one nation” Tory. Famous for her statement that “there is no such thing as society”, she openly championed the interests of big business, attacking workers' jobs, living standards and democratic rights (the “part of the country” cryptically referred to by the *FT*). Although Labour has largely continued Thatcher's economic policies, it has sought to blur their social character. Blair's amorphous “Third Way” mantra sought to project his government as being above class differences—which he denies exist—and answerable only to “the people”.

In this way, he has sought to avoid the type of open class conflict that had characterised much of Thatcher's rule. So important is this image for Labour—without it there is little to distinguish the present government from its Tory predecessors—that Blair is extremely vulnerable to any expression of social and political discontent.

This is even more the case when it comes from those former Conservative supporters that the Labour Party has worked so hard to woo, as part of its effort to distance itself from its former connections with the working class.

Blair hopes that an extra month will enable the government to damp down disquiet, enabling Labour to go to the polls as the “people's party” once again.

In his speech on Monday, Blair said that the main purpose of the delay was to put in place strategies to deal with FMD. “But equally we cannot, should not and will not indefinitely suspend the democratic process. A short postponement for the reasons I have given is one thing. An indefinite delay is quite another.”

No comfort should be drawn from such assurances. Blair may believe he has pulled off a clever manoeuvre, but the right wing are well aware that he is dancing to their tune and will press their advantage. Within minutes of his announcement, the Conservative Party insisted that elections might have to be held off for several months at least.

In its efforts to appease the right, Labour has shown a cavalier indifference to democratic rights. So too have the press, who have largely ignored the broader implications of Blair's actions postponing the local elections.

The last days' events have also shown that provisions exist for the suspension of constitutionally mandated elections and the imposition of what amounts to rule by decree in Town and City Halls. For the prime minister to declare, as if it were a badge of honour, that he will not suspend “indefinitely...the democratic process” speaks volumes about official attitudes towards civil liberties in Britain. Blair has set a precedent for the suspension of the democratic rights of working people to vote, when this conflicts with vested commercial interests, articulated by a highly vocal but unrepresentative right wing lobby.

See Also:

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

[31 March 2001]

Britain: Foot and mouth disease “an epidemic waiting to happen”

[23 March 2001]



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