

British government rushes through legislation postponing elections until June 7

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Emergency legislation postponing local authority elections due on May 3 was rushed through parliament on Wednesday evening. It is the first time since the Second World War that elections have been delayed, yet there was little coverage of the parliamentary debate—let alone its implications for democratic rights—in the media and official political circles.

Prime Minister Blair had announced Monday that local elections in most of England and Northern Ireland would be suspended "in the national interest"—a reference to the continuing foot and mouth epidemic in Britain's livestock.

As the timing of local authority elections are constitutionally fixed, the emergency legislation was necessary to enable councillors to continue in power beyond their allocated period of office. MPs also agreed that parties will not have to pulp election leaflets due to be distributed to individual households and to allow extra finance to cover unforeseen costs caused by the delay.

The Elections Bill, presented by Home Secretary Jack Straw, rescheduled the local polls to June 7. Discussion on the measure was severely curtailed, after the government set a 10pm deadline, or guillotine, for voting on the legislation. Conservative MP Eric Forth complained that Labour was "breaking new parliamentary ground by having the gall and the arrogance to say the law of the land should be made with one hour's consideration".

Defending the time limit, Straw said it was essential to move quickly in order to provide "certainty" for everyone involved in the elections. A Conservative Party motion opposing the time restriction on the debate was defeated by 320 votes to 185. The Elections Bill now passes to the House of Lords for voting next Monday and the government intends for it to become

law by Tuesday.

There is no guarantee that the legislation will pass through the Lords, however. The Conservative Party are demanding that it should allow for the elections to be postponed indefinitely, on the basis that the foot and mouth epidemic may not be under control by June. Conservative shadow home secretary Ann Widdecombe argued in parliament that the June 7 deadline was "illogical". "They have not allowed for the possibility that the foot-and-mouth outbreak may not be under control. We don't believe on these benches that the government should be working towards the arbitrary date of 7 June," Widdecombe said. The Liberal Democrats also favour an open date for elections.

A Conservative amendment that would enable further postponement of the elections was defeated by 336 votes to 120 Wednesday evening, but afterwards Conservative leader William Hague indicated he would not cooperate with the government. The Conservative Party commands a sizeable number of peers in the Lords and is warning Blair that the bill would be defeated until its amendments are accepted.

A spokesman for the Conservatives in the Lords said, "there is no guarantee" that the party would not vote against the bill. "We have four amendments which we have added to the Bill which we want to see acted upon." Until the four tests were agreed, cooperation was "up in the air", the spokesman said.

The Tory amendments stipulate that no elections should be held until all animals suspected of being infected with foot and mouth are being slaughtered within 24 hours, the geographical spread of foot-and-mouth is reversed, restrictions on movements at most farms are lifted, and the trend of new infections shows a significant decrease.

The timing of local elections has become a code word for the date of a general election, which Blair had been anticipated to also call on May 3. Hague, backed by the farming lobby and various right-wing "countryside" groups, argued that proceeding with any elections at this time would show that the government was "insensitive" to the countryside. Those areas affected by the disease would effectively be disenfranchised, Hague argued, because people would not be able to concentrate on the election.

Conservative complaints are dictated by fears that an early general election would see their parliamentary representation reduced still further. Claims of disenfranchisement are bogus. There are currently 1,000 reported cases of foot and mouth disease and one million livestock are awaiting slaughter. Notwithstanding the distress caused to those farmer's affected by the outbreak, the numbers of animals involved represent less than two percent of the UK's livestock. As the disease is not contracted by humans or hazardous to public health, no one would be prevented from voting. The tourist industry, which stands to lose at least three times as much as the agricultural sector due to sensationalist coverage of the virus outbreak, had called for elections to proceed as scheduled to show Britain was "open for business".

Instead Blair caved in to Hague's right wing lobby. Local elections have even been postponed in Northern Ireland, where there has so far been only one reported case of foot and mouth disease. Having accepted that the epidemic warranted suspending May elections, Blair will have difficulty arguing against a postponement in June if the disease continues.

See Also:

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