

Britain: General election set for June 7

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Prime Minister Tony Blair yesterday confirmed the date for the general election as June 7, giving just four weeks of campaigning before the poll.

Labour had favoured holding a general election on May 3 this year simultaneously with the local government elections. However, with election advertising already booked, Blair capitulated to the countryside lobby and the demands of the Conservative opposition that the election be called off due to the foot and mouth crisis that hit farming. After passing emergency legislation to postpone the date for local council elections to June 7, it was widely anticipated that the general election would also take place on the same date.

Just prior to the deadline for today's announcement, the government's Chief Veterinary Officer had declared the foot and mouth crisis to be under control.

Following the archaic procedures of Britain's constitutional monarchy, Blair first visited the Queen at Buckingham Palace, to ask her to dissolve parliament. But following the 20-minute meeting, in a break with usual practice, Blair announced the general election during his visit to a south London school, rather than in a formal statement at Downing Street.

It is expected that parliament will be dissolved on Thursday or Friday, with Blair using Wednesday's weekly meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party to rally MPs before prime minister's question time the same day.

The four-week election campaign will then begin in earnest.

Appealing for Labour to be given a second term, Blair told reporters, "We earned the trust of the people in 1997 after 18 long years of opposition. Today we have to earn that trust again." He said a second term was essential to see through its programme and make a "brighter future" for UK.

His choice of venue was part of a carefully

choreographed launch to a campaign in which, despite Labour's massive lead in the opinion polls, Blair has said nothing would be taken for granted. According to the BBC, poll averages over the past few months show Labour at 50 percent, the Tories at 31 percent, the Liberal Democrats at 13 percent, with "others" sharing six percent of the vote.

Blair is concerned that unless Labour is able to mobilise its traditional base in the working class, and keep former Tory voters who switched to Labour onboard, it may lose many of the seats won in 1997. Other reports anticipate voter turnout could fall below 70 percent, and could be particularly low in inner-city areas, which would cost Labour disproportionately.

In an effort to combat this, Labour has pledged greater spending on public services; at the same time promising further "reforms" in the public sector, which throughout their first term in office was a codeword for privatisation and the abolition of universal welfare provisions in favour of means testing. In order to try and steal the thunder from the Conservatives, Blair has also promised to cut taxes and a clamp down on asylum seekers. Labour will warn voters that Tory tax cuts would be at the expense of public spending. Labour is particularly anxious to avoid any discussion on Europe, and the adoption of the single currency the euro, with increasing divisions on the issue emerging within its own ranks.



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