

Britain: Deputy Prime Minister Prescott punches protester

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With the main parties having published their manifestos for the general election on June 7, political campaigning strayed briefly outside the confines of the media-managed circus to which it is largely confined. Labour's "meet the people" exercise on Wednesday turned into an unmitigated disaster, with angry scenes puncturing what has been an otherwise surreal campaign of soundbites and staged "photo-opportunities".

In the most notorious incident, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott attacked a protestor who threw an egg at him as he arrived to address a Labour Party rally in North Wales. Some 30 farmers and hauliers had gathered outside the meeting to protest at government policy in a number of areas, including the mass slaughter of animals during the foot and mouth epidemic. Last year, the same group had been involved in protests over high levels of tax on fuel, making the cost of diesel and petrol in Britain among the highest in the world.

As Prescott left his election "Battle Bus" to go into the theatre where the meeting was being held he was hit by an egg. The deputy prime minister immediately lashed out, punching 29-year-old Craig Evans, a farm contract worker, in the face and pulling his hair. In scenes one would normally associate with the wilder antics of Russian Mafia-style politics, the pair then grappled with each other and fell onto a wall, until police and party aides pulled them apart.

Earlier in the day, a cancer patient's partner berated Prime Minister Tony Blair as he visited the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. Blair had chosen the Midlands' city to launch the Labour Party election manifesto to show how in touch his government was with "ordinary" people. But in the middle of the carefully staged walk-about, Sharron Storer, a

postmistress whose partner is critically ill with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a form of lymphatic cancer, confronted the prime minister.

In the full glare of the national media, Ms Storer complained that no bed had been available for her partner Keith Sedgewick on Monday in the hospital's bone marrow unit. Despite being terribly sick, he had been made to stand for 30 minutes in the Accident and Emergency Unit, risking secondary infection, until a temporary bed was found for him in the casualty department.

Her partner had just had a terrible evening, she said. "He had a very distressful 24 hours. What are you going to do? He suffered terribly. Would you like to tell me how you are going to provide these people with better facilities?"

Fearing the delay had placed her partner at risk of infection, she continued, saying that the hospital was understaffed and had "terrible facilities. The toilets are appalling. You are not giving them the money to give them the facilities. All you do is walk around and make yourself known but you don't do anything to help anybody."

Anxious to move away from the cameras recording every word, the prime minister suggested that the two should talk inside. "There's no point... you won't do anything anyway," Storer said as she turned away, leaving the prime minister looking somewhat lost for words.

To make matters worse for Labour, in the coastal resort of Blackpool, Home Secretary Jack Straw was jeered and slow handclapped as he made a speech to the Police Federation conference, when he said the government had raised standards. One of Labour's main boasts is that it has replaced the Conservatives as the true party of "law and order".

Blair had decided to hold his walk-about on Wednesday after criticism that so far he had spent most of the campaign at carefully orchestrated events involving Labour members, focus groups and selected audiences. Advisers thought it was time that the prime minister met with some real people—albeit in controlled surroundings.

The result was that for the first time, briefly, the concerns of working people made their presence felt: The Welsh farmers were complaining that their weekly income had fallen to between £75 and £100, whilst Sharron Storer's distressing experiences with a cash-starved National Health Service mirrored the experiences of many.

At the same time, Straw's run-in with the police—who complain that the Home Secretary's pledges to be "tough on crime" have not been nearly tough enough—showed that Labour cannot rely on the backing of those sectors it has sought so assiduously to court.

Although their roots are in very different grievances, the public demonstrations of hostility towards Labour ministers express a common truth—showing just how divorced from reality the general election campaign is. The day's events came as a rude awakening for Blair, after the media has been complacently forecasting a new record majority for Labour in the election. On *Sky News* commentators also expressed their surprise. After several weeks of describing the public as apathetic, one TV journalist said, it would appear that they are very passionate about some questions. Another commented gravely that it seemed "some people face real hardship".

The love affair with the Blair government has always been largely confined to a narrow layer of the privileged upper middle class, who according to one poll by the *Observer* newspaper last Sunday, have moved en masse from supporting the Tories to backing Blair. Before the last election, 42 percent of professionals and business people supported the Conservatives compared to 40 percent for Blair. The figures are now 59 percent for Blair, compared to 17 percent for Tory leader William Hague. These layers, which also include senior journalists and media commentators, are every bit as distant as Blair from the financial insecurity faced by millions of ordinary families, and the continued decline of public services. They largely write about their own concerns, their

interests, what their social circle thinks, and in the main end up speaking only to one another.

The government had no response to the incidents other than to move into damage-limitation mode. Labour defended Prescott's pugilist attack, with Blair refusing to take action against his deputy despite being the first time on record a government minister had struck a member of the public.

Education Minister David Blunkett hypocritically expressed his sorrow for Sharron Storer, and then proceeded to try and blame her for her partner's plight since she had abstained in the last election. "I just wished she'd voted in '97 and I wish she would vote this time," Blunkett said.



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