

Britain: Blair's majority cut to five in vote on tuition fees

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The Blair government's plans to introduce variable university tuition fees of up to £3,000 per year scraped home last night, with a slim five-vote majority in Parliament.

By 316 votes to 311, the government's education bill passed its second reading in parliament. But given that Blair commands a notional majority of 161 in the Commons, the narrowness of the vote only widened speculation as to the prime minister's future—especially as it appeared that he had been rescued at the eleventh hour by his main leadership rival within the Labour Party, Chancellor Gordon Brown.

For the education bill to have fallen required the votes of all the opposition parties, plus a total of 82 Labour MPs. The final tally saw 71 Labour MPs oppose the bill, and three Conservatives voting with the government, enabling it to pass on to its second reading.

The vote had been preceded by weeks of tense wrangling and horse-trading, as the government sought to quell a rebellion by its backbenchers.

Last December, some 150 Labour MPs had signed a motion opposing the introduction of what amounts to a graduate tax on university students. Under the government's plans, starting in 2006, universities will be able to levy variable fees of up to £3,000 annually on degree subjects. Repayable upon graduation, the measure will burden most students with debts of up to £35,000, but universities have already made clear that they intend to raise the cost further as soon as possible.

The government had promised several cosmetic changes to the bill in an effort to buy off potential rebels. But it insisted that there would be no retreat on the fundamentals of its reform, which were aimed at further opening up education to the free market and privatisation.

Big business and the media had rallied to back the measure, warning that a defeat would throw the government's plans for the entire public sector into jeopardy. Although the immediate sums raised by the introduction of variable fees is minimal compared to the sums required by universities, the introduction of variable fees is regarded as critical in establishing the principle that people must pay for services previously regarded as a universal right.

Blair's main weapon in insisting his party must back the measure—which Labour had specifically ruled out at the last general election—was to threaten backbench opponents that a defeat on the bill would significantly weaken his government on the eve of Lord Hutton's report on the findings of his inquiry into the death of Dr. David Kelly—the whistleblower credited with BBC reports that the government “sexed-up” intelligence dossiers to justify war against Iraq.

Lord Hutton's report is made public today, January 28. Although the prime minister is widely expected to escape any direct criticism of his role in leaking Kelly's name to the press, a government majority for the education bill was regarded as crucial in shoring up his position against any damaging fallout from the inquiry, especially given widespread public opposition to the war against Iraq and the ongoing occupation.

As Blair held a series of meetings with backbench MPs to win them over, the press was filled with apocalyptic talk of a potential “civil war” in the Labour Party should the bill fall, and of the prime minister “going down in flames”.

Labour dissenters would be voting with the Conservatives, government ministers warned, whilst Blair spoke of the “catastrophic” impact of any defeat.

In reality, there is little difference between the Conservatives and Labour over plans for higher

education. Tory leader Michael Howard faced criticism from within his own party for opposing the government bill, with several threatening to support the government or abstain. Just hours before the vote, Conservative spokesman Tim Yeo came under attack from his own backbenchers for going against a measure that Margaret Thatcher would have been proud to call her own for “opportunistic” purposes.

Whilst Blair’s threats were enough to cut the size of the rebellion in half, it was not enough to ensure the government emerged unscathed. In the end, the bill was saved by a deal apparently stitched up between supporters of Gordon Brown and the prime minister. On Tuesday morning, former cabinet minister Nick Brown, a close supporter of the chancellor and leading opponent of the bill, declared that he had switched sides and would be voting with the government.

Nick Brown claimed that his conversion was the result of an important last-minute concession by the government—an agreement that there would be a review of the measure within one year. But Blair supporters denied that any retreat had been made, and with some justification. According to reports, all that has been promised was an internal review of the possible effect of fees on student numbers, which will do nothing to prevent their introduction. This fudge had been offered up as a face-saving measure, to enable Nick Brown to come back into the fold and thereby strengthen the chancellor’s position against the prime minister.

Although Gordon Brown had made clear his support for the bill, his ability to “save Blair’s bacon” at such a crucial time—as BBC reporter Nick Assinder put it—led to “renewed speculation that the chancellor has been offered a new pledge from Tony Blair that he is ready, at some point in the not-too-distant future, to hand him the reins of power.”

Blair has undoubtedly emerged from the battle much weakened. His policies for universities are as deeply unpopular as his other social and economic measures, and he has built a well of opposition to his government over Iraq that even the most servile apologia by Lord Hutton will do nothing to placate. He can cling to power only because of the unprincipled character of his opponents, none of whom—whether Labour rebels or Tory stalwarts—disagree fundamentally with Blair’s pro-big-business policies. It should be noted that while the government warned repeatedly that Blair’s future was

at stake, even those MPs who maintained their opposition repeatedly stressed that this was a dispute purely about fees and not a leadership battle.



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