

# British general election announced for May 5

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Prime Minister Tony Blair has announced Thursday, May 5, as the date for the UK general election. The same day, elections will also be held for 34 county councils in England, three unitary authorities, local councils in Northern Ireland, and four mayoral contests in English towns.

A May 5 ballot date had been long expected, although Blair's announcement was delayed by 24 hours due to the death of Pope John Paul II.

The election campaign will officially begin on Monday, April 11, after the Queen has dissolved Parliament. The tight schedule means that the government has just days to try to push through some 28 outstanding parliamentary bills. Almost half are expected to fall to the wayside in the rush, including government plans to introduce identity cards.

Labour is hoping that a third-term in office will enable it to remedy such setbacks, however, and to reinforce its role as the preferred party of big business. Blair has spoken of his "driving mission" to secure a third term, but has said that the election should not be considered a referendum on his past eight years in office. Labour's campaign slogan, "Forward, not back," whilst presented as a progressive and dynamic catchphrase, is indicative of the party's wariness of any examination of its record.

Blair's desire to avoid any genuine discussion on the issues confronting working people is no surprise. It is less than two years since Labour took the country into a pre-emptive war of aggression against Iraq, in defiance of popular opposition and international law. By supporting the US in its efforts to militarily enforce its unchallenged hegemony in the oil-rich Middle East, Blair hoped to secure a share in the spoils of war for British capital and to legitimise a renewed turn to imperialist conquest.

After having reduced Iraq to rubble and installed a bitterly resented occupation force, killing tens of

thousands in the process, all Labour's justifications for war—that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and constituted an immediate threat to Britain—have been exposed as lies.

By any democratic criteria, Blair should be facing charges of war crimes alongside his co-conspirator US President George W. Bush, not running for another term in office. But none of the official opposition parties will raise such a demand. The Conservative Party backed the war, whilst the Liberal Democrats quickly fell into line.

Similarly, they have all signed off on the so-called "war against terror," which has been used to abrogate longstanding civil liberties. On the pretext of possible involvement in terrorism, any British citizen can now be held incommunicado under unlimited house arrest without charge on the say-so of the home secretary or a judge.

To divert from these fundamental questions, the general election will be run as a right-wing contest between the parties, focussing largely on law and order, anti-immigrant measures and plans to expand the creeping privatisation of essential public services.

Whilst opinion polls forecast a Labour win on May 5, this cannot cover over the widespread alienation of millions of working people from the electoral process. The announcement of the election, together with the "phoney campaign" that has been conducted in the past few weeks, has been met with general disinterest.

Turnout on May 5 is already predicted to fall below the 59 percent mark of 2001, itself an all-time low. In some inner-city areas, which in the past provided the bulk of Labour's vote, just half of the voting age population have even registered to ballot. According to Electoral Commission research, just 3 percent of voters "strongly agree" that they have a say in how the country is run.

None of the major parties can address this situation

because their policies are dictated by the requirements of a financial oligarchy, whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of working people.

As a result, the general election campaign will be targeted at a select group of so-called “swing” voters in key marginal constituencies and the editorial offices of the major newspapers.

Such is the narrow basis of the election process, that a slight shift in opinion by any of these can introduce unprecedented swings in political fortunes. The April 5 front-page declaration by Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* that its “mind has still be made up” over whether to back Labour or the Tories, will see both parties move even further to the right as they compete to satisfy the billionaire owner’s demands and prejudices.

Symptomatic of the disconnect between official politics and the broad mass of the population is the proliferation of protest campaigns. Although the full list of candidates has yet to be announced, the Electoral Commission has reported an unprecedented increase in the number of new parties registering to stand.

Under new rules, parties must be registered with the commission or their candidates can only run as independents or with the space for the party’s name left blank. To register they must provide a written constitution, financial records, the names of two party officials and pay a £150 fee.

Despite these hurdles, a total of 61 new UK political parties registered in 2004, with a further 28 signing up since January 2005. Almost half of these focus on a single issue, such as local residents’ campaigns.



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