Britain: Labour wins general election but suffers major losses

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Britain's Labour government has won a third term in office, but on a massively reduced majority. The May 5 poll is being described as the "Iraq election" because of the millions who registered their disaffection and hostility to Prime Minister Tony Blair and his party.

Only Britain's "first past the post" system concealed what was in effect a rout for Labour. With just three constituencies still to be declared, Labour is expected to have a majority of 66 seats, down from 167 in 2001. But the haemorrhaging of the Labour vote is still regarded as a severe blow to Blair's personal authority and the government. Labour won only 36 percent of the popular vote, the lowest for any incoming majority government. And it did so under conditions where turnout was 61 percent, meaning that it won the support of only a fifth of the electorate.

The two percent rise in turnout in 2001 was largely the result of a trebling of the number of postal votes cast to six million due to electoral changes. Even so turnout in many inner city areas was less than 50 percent and the highest turnout was in the marginal constituencies, largely because of a desire to protest against Blair.

The main electoral beneficiary in terms of the number of votes cast were the Liberal Democrats, who successfully exploited their opposition to the Iraq war and support for redistributive tax measures to portray themselves as being to Labour's left. Still, the Liberal Democrats only won approximately 23 percent of the vote and their successes are more correctly seen as a reflection of Labour's travails.

The Liberal Democrats have so far gained 61 seats, up from 52 in 2001. In Scotland and Wales the party performed well to the detriment of Labour and the nationalist parties. In England they took constituencies such as Manchester Withington on a massive 17.3 percent swing against Labour and also unseated former Labour Minister Barbara Roche on a 15 percent swing in Hornsey and Wood Green. There was a significant swing from Labour to Liberal Democrat in each of the 40 seats with a large Muslim population. They failed, however, to make any headway against the Conservatives, because they are perceived as a left-wing party.

The Conservatives have hailed a recovery, after gaining 31 seats, but they remain hated and reviled by the bulk of the population. Their overall share of the vote barely shifted from 2001. The party's increased tally of seats was won as a result of its ability to mobilise its core supporters where Labour could not. The average turnout in Conservative constituencies was 65 percent, running seven points higher than in Labour constituencies. Party leader Michael Howard did this by running a campaign based on "dog whistle" issues, such as anti-immigration rhetoric.

This was mainly successful in southern England, particularly in the more prosperous areas. Despite picking up one or two seats in Scotland and Wales where it previously had none, it has barely any representation in the major conurbations. This will have the effect of deepening the fissures within the party over whether it should be making greater efforts to win the "centre ground" or more determinedly project its Thatcherite credentials. Howard has declared that he intends to stand down and make way for a younger successor, precipitating a leadership contest that will be a focus of divisions in the party.

A number of results were seen as epitomising what former Labour cabinet minister Clare Short described as the "Iraq effect". George Galloway, the former Labour MP who was expelled from the party and now heads the Respect-Unity coalition, won Bethnal Green and Bow in east London from pro-war Labour MP Oona King, overturning a 10,057 majority. The impoverished working class constituency is 50 percent Muslim. Respect candidates also came second in neighbouring East Ham and West Ham and third in Poplar and Canning Town.

Reg Keys, whose son Tom was killed in Iraq, stood as an independent in Blair's Sedgefield constituency and polled 4,000 votes, 10.2 percent of the ballot. Rose Gentle, whose son Gordon was also killed in Iraq, stood against Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram in East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, Scotland, polling 3.2 percent of the ballot.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw held his Blackburn seat, but the Liberal Democrats more than doubled their vote from 3,264 to 8,608. Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon retained his seat, but with a 9.5 percent swing against Labour.

There are now more small party and Independent MPs than in any parliament since 1945.

On the far right, the British National Party secured an average of five percent of the vote in the seats it contested by exploiting the anti-immigrant sentiment whipped up by the major parties. But it achieved some relatively high votes in target seats such as Barking in east London and Keighley, Dewsbury and Rotherham in Yorkshire.

A new period of political and social conflict

The aftermath of the election has occasioned widespread speculation as to Blair's future. A significant section of the Labour Party regards Blair as a liability and wants him to step down in favour of Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown. Their hope is that this will be enough to put some distance between the party and its hugely unpopular decision to support war against Iraq and to claim to be less "New Labour" than "Old Labour" on welfare policies.

Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee wrote May 4, "Even if Labour wins a sizeable majority Blair's time is over as the ground shifts fast beneath his feet; he is yesterday's man...

"Iraq was never parked, even among the non-political. It swirls about everywhere, either for itself or as a totem of rebellion against Blair who now takes the entire blame for anything and everything."

Toynbee hoped that "when Blair goes, his departure will cauterise the angriest of the war and much else... Labour has the chance to start again under Gordon Brown, but his honeymoon would be exceedingly short."

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There is nothing to suggest that such a smooth transition will take place, let alone that it would be enough to reverse Labour's loss of support. Blair shows no signs of being ready to move to one side and the struggle between the Blair and Brown camps, suppressed during the election campaign, could tear the party in two.

Moreover, Brown has far less support in the electorate than he does amongst Labour's apologists such as Toynbee. It is difficult to see how the election as prime minister of a man who supported the war will cauterise any wound over Iraq. And just as importantly, Brown is the joint architect with Blair of "New Labour's" pro-business policies and its rejection of its old reformist programme.

Iraq was a major issue in the election, but it was not the only one. In large measure the collapse in Labour's support is because its right-wing economic and social policies cannot secure a popular mandate. This was an election fought out almost exclusively on the right of the political spectrum, with little or no attempt to appeal to working people.

Though massively unpopular with the electorate Labour remains at this point the favoured party of big business—a fact which also explains the failure of the Tories to make any real breakthrough. A victory for Blair was endorsed by Rupert Murdoch's publishing stable, and by the *Economist* and the *Financial Times* (FT). In a candid editorial, "Why it is not yet time for change", on May 3 the FT spoke of a "new alignment" of politics, the "epicentre" of which is a common position on the centrality of the economy and business.

"It shows Britain has moved well beyond the old left-right disagreements about the economy, profit and the role of the market. All the main parties support the policy framework behind the sustained growth and stability of the past decade... Britain no longer has a 'business party' and an 'anti-business party'. Try as some might to point up the ideological distance between the parties, in fact the gap between Michael Howard's Conservatives and Tony Blair's Labour party is smaller than the one at the last US presidential election between Republicans and Democrats."

The reason why there will be no recovery of popular support for Labour goes beyond the fact that it shares the policies of the Tories, however. For having returned to power for an unprecedented third term, it will be beholden to its backers in the City of London and the financial oligarchy.

The FT and the *Sun* both complained that the main problem with the Tories was that they were too similar to Labour and had not embraced an aggressive policy of tax and public spending cuts like the Republicans in the US. And they also hoped that a reduced majority for Labour would make it easier to push the government in the same direction.

Far from being chastened by the losses Labour has suffered, the party leadership—whether captained by Blair or Brown—will be forced to the right and into social and political confrontation with the working class.

Labour's third term will be shaped by world developments. It will continue to govern as the representative of a financial oligarchy whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the vast majority of working people.

For this reason there can be no question of Labour putting the Iraq war "behind" it, because it was only the opening shot in a drive by all the imperialist powers, led by the United States, to redivide the world's markets and resources between them.

Even when he was pressed to make some token concession to antiwar sentiment, Blair refused to rule out Britain's participation in a military attack on Iran in alliance with Washington.

The dissatisfaction of the financial elite with Labour's taxation and privatisation policies will only deepen should the world economy swing into recession, as is feared. This would immediately expose the social chasm that has deepened under the Blair government and which has only been partially concealed by an unsustainable boom in housing prices and record levels of consumer debt.

A new party is needed

The extent of public hostility to Blair's government has manifested itself primarily as an abstention from voting and secondly in the form of a protest vote for parties perceived as left wing and antiwar. But this is not a conjunctural development that can be remedied by a change in leadership.

The relationship between the working class and its old party has undergone a fundamental, objective and irreversible transformation.

From the standpoint of the essential social and political interests of the working class, the Labour Party confronts it as a hostile force. The right-wing evolution of the Labour bureaucracy is a manifestation of how the global organisation of production has torn the ground from under the programme of national reformism.

This cannot be answered by hopes for a return to "old Labour", whether coming from within the party's own ranks or as represented by those such as Respect. No section of the Labour bureaucracy offers an alternative to Blair. Indeed, one of the most unedifying sights in this election was the way that Blair's nominal left opponents within the Labour Party and the trade unions, such as veteran Labourite Tony Benn, echoed the prime minister's insistence that differences over Iraq should be set aside for the common good.

As the Socialist Equality Party insisted in its election statement: "The fundamental question facing the working class in the May 5 general election is to formulate an independent political response to the Labour government's policies of imperialist militarism abroad and social attacks at home...

"It is not enough to register anger at the government. The drive to war and the attacks on workers' living standards and democratic rights can be successfully opposed only by tackling them at their root—in the capitalist profit system."

The transformation of Labour into the party of big business and the resulting disenfranchisement of the working class can only be answered by the building of a new party, advancing an internationalist and socialist programme, on which to mobilise an independent political movement of the working class against war, colonialism and the growth of social inequality.

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