

Tony Blair reshuffles Cabinet after Labour's local election debacle

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Prime Minister Tony Blair carried out a major Cabinet reshuffle Friday in the wake of local elections that saw his ruling Labour Party's vote fall to a historic low.

Labour lost more than 300 seats and control of some 18 local authorities in the May 4 election. The party dropped to third place in terms of the national share of the vote, behind the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

The vote was widely seen as a referendum on Blair's government, which has provoked mass hostility with its participation in the Iraq war, ceaseless corruption scandals, and social policies that benefit Britain's financial elite at the expense of the working class majority.

Losing their posts in what the media has dubbed Labour's "night of the long knives" were two of Blair's most important ministers and closest collaborators: Home Secretary Charles Clarke and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who was demoted to leader of the House of Commons. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, whilst continuing in his post, was stripped of many of his departmental responsibilities in housing, local government and urban planning.

Voting in Thursday's elections took place for 4,360 council seats, almost half of them in London. Overall turnout was estimated at 36 percent, three percentage points down from 2004.

The Conservatives made the main gains. But despite achieving its best results since 1992, talk of the Tory Party's revival as a significant national force under new leader David Cameron fell wide of the mark.

The majority of Tory gains were in the southeast, where the party is now almost exclusively concentrated. It failed to make any breakthrough in northern cities

such as Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle, despite Cameron and other leading Tory politicians targeting their campaigns in these areas.

The Conservative gains in the south were largely at the expense of the Liberal Democrats. Under their new leader Menzies Campbell, the Liberal Democrats have sought to move away from the party's left image (it had opposed the Iraq war). This meant it was unable to consolidate its previous gains at Labour's expense in working class areas, whilst losing out to the Tories in others.

Some of the smaller parties made gains. Media reports largely focussed on those made by the fascist British National Party, which is now being portrayed as a serious opposition party despite standing just 350 candidates. Labour MP Margaret Hodge had significantly raised the BNP's national profile when she claimed that 80 percent of the "white working class" in her Barking and Dagenham constituency in east London were considering voting for it. The BNP had thanked Hodge for her remarks with a bouquet of flowers while its London organiser told the press, "If I had paid her a million pounds I couldn't have asked her to do more."

Hodge's claims and the saturation media coverage the party subsequently received helped the BNP to double its council seats to 44 and to take 11 seats in Barking and Dagenham. However, the party's actual vote in east London remained largely unchanged from 2004 and it made only small progress elsewhere. Its increase in seats was largely brought about by the collapse in Labour's support and a significantly low electoral challenge mounted by the Conservatives in many of the areas targeted by the BNP.

In contrast to the coverage afforded to the gains made by the far right, the 11 seats won by George

Galloway's Respect party in Tower Hamlets, also in east London were barely reported. The antiwar party also won a seat in Birmingham, with 55 percent of the vote, and came in second place in several areas where its 150 candidates stood. The Green Party also gained 13 seats nationally.

Labour's electoral meltdown forced Prime Minister Tony Blair into the earlier-than-expected reshuffle of his Cabinet on Friday morning.

Having recorded the worst electoral result of his leadership, many news commentators forecast that Blair would have to act soon to make good on his pledge to hand over office to Chancellor Gordon Brown.

But the Cabinet reshuffle gave little sign that Blair would heed popular sentiment for him to stand down, much less organise the "orderly transfer of power" demanded by some of his backbenchers.

In the fortnight leading up to the elections, several Labour ministers had become embroiled in public scandals. The tabloid press made hay with revelations Prescott's affair with his secretary, whilst Home Secretary Clarke was accused of incompetence for not acting vigorously enough to deport foreign nationals convicted of criminal offences.

The scandals were engineered for the most part by sections of the media and the political establishment, with the aim of pushing Labour further to the right.

This was underscored by the fact that Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt, who had been forced to abandon her speech at a conference of the Royal College of Nurses in the face of boos and catcalls over Labour's cuts in the health service faced little censure by the media. The BBC cited Labour Party canvassers being told, "I'm a nurse, go away," on the campaign trail.

But Hewitt had only offended a section of the working class, to which the media, like the Labour Party, is overwhelmingly indifferent, if not hostile. She kept her Cabinet seat.

Of more importance for Blair, newspapers such as those published by Rupert Murdoch's New International have long demanded the Home Office toughen up its anti-immigrant measures and make further inroads against human rights legislation that protect asylum and other civil liberties.

The attacks on Prescott seem largely aimed at

humiliating and undermining the man regarded as the powerbroker between Brown and Blair, and credited with holding Labour's warring factions together.

The sacking of Straw replicates the demotion of Robin Cook in 2001. Cook later came out as an opponent of the Iraq war. Straw had reportedly antagonised Blair earlier this year after he categorically ruled out any possibility of military action against Iran.

Through the reshuffle, Blair has sought to salvage his hold over the Cabinet in the face of mounting criticism. Straw is known as a Brownite, whilst Blair's ally, Alan Johnson, who is regarded as the prime minister's preferred choice for Labour leader, has been promoted to education secretary.

Blair's power base is extraordinarily narrow, however. The absence of any popular support for his government, combined with growing factional tensions within the party apparatus itself, points to a systemic crisis for the government. Clarke made plain his displeasure at being removed from his post, letting it be known that he disagreed with the move and had decided to leave the government rather than face demotion.



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