

Britain: Brown retreats from snap general election

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Gordon Brown has performed one of the most dramatic U-turns in British political history. Whatever his denials, he had clearly intended to call a snap general election. Major political announcements had been brought forward, not least his photo-call in Iraq to announce a further withdrawal of British troops. Labour had recruited staff to help with its campaign, and official election arrangements had begun to be set in place for a November poll.

These feverish preparations came to an abrupt halt at the weekend, when Brown filmed an interview for the BBC's Andrew Marr show in which he stated that an early election would not take place after all, and one would probably not be held until 2009.

The interview was not broadcast until Sunday, with Brown claiming that he had decided that an election should only be held after he had time to demonstrate the practical outcome of his "vision for the future of this country." But he had already told the editors of Britain's major newspapers of his decision and his intention to announce it to Marr.

Consideration of a poll some two and a half years before it is necessary was primarily driven by the calculation that to wait any longer would risk holding an election amidst a global economic recession and an escalation of the war in the Middle East.

For some weeks, received political wisdom was summed up by the *Times*: "It is hard to escape the conclusion that, unless Mr. Brown is ready to dig in for the long haul to late 2009 or 2010, his safest course is, indeed, to go now, while the going is good."

Alan Greenspan, former head of the US Federal Reserve and an adviser to the government, had warned Brown that a downturn in the world economy will hit Britain especially hard. In particular, he drew attention to the devastating consequences of any downturn in the housing market.

Brown's appearance in Basra was intended to counteract the popular hostility to the government generated by the Iraq war. At the same time his electoral stunt was mounted, however, it was revealed by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* magazine that Brown has already given his backing

to a US attack on Tehran, which can only inflame public anger.

None of these fundamentals have changed. Chancellor Alistair Darling revised down his growth estimates on Friday, stating that the economic turmoil that begun in the US "has now spread to other parts of the world," and insisting on the need for restraints on wages and public spending.

Writing in the *Financial Times* the same day, Martin Wolf said that "the UK looks more exposed to a housing-induced correction than the US."

"If US households are sinking in debt," he continued, "UK households seem to be drowning in it."

Over the last 10 years, UK house prices have risen by more than 144 percent compared to 127 percent in the US, while UK mortgage debt was 126 percent of GDP last year as against 104 percent. Total household debt is 164 percent, compared to 140 percent in the US.

Goldman Sachs "concludes that house prices must fall by a good 20 percent" to correct the imbalances, Wolf noted. "Brown may not have all the time he wants" to avoid the "nightmare" scenario of "another Anglo-Saxon spending-and-debt machine" biting the dust, Wolf continued. "An election now might at least postpone his day of reckoning."

However, the problem for Brown—and what led to his volte-face—was that it became clear that a snap poll would only hasten Labour's "day of reckoning."

On Friday, US polling adviser Stan Greenberg had informed the prime minister that his government's majority would be slashed from 60 seats to 20 or so in a November election. Brown must also have been aware of polling conducted by Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World* in 83 key marginal constituencies, due the same day as his interview with Marr was to be broadcast. The survey revealed that some 50 Labour MPs would lose their seats in these areas, including the home secretary and other ministers, resulting in a hung parliament.

The possibility of Labour suffering such heavy losses has been attributed to a dramatic revival in Tory fortunes, which

saw them go from 11 percent behind Labour at the start of the week to a 3 percent lead. Peter Kellner for YouGov polling agency declared, “I can’t remember something like that happening since the Falklands war 25 years ago.”

But Labour can only be hit so hard by a slight recovery for the Conservatives because it competes for the support of the same narrow social layer.

The main reason offered for the Tory lead over Labour was the party’s announcement that it would raise the threshold on inheritance tax to exempt any estate worth less than £1 million.

That the inheritance tax assumes such significance is because government policy is dictated by a tiny section of the populace. Although there was a populist tinge to the inheritance proposals—it is to be funded by a £25,000 “levy” on wealthy foreigners registered as non-domiciled for tax purposes—the number of people affected is vanishingly small. According to the *Times*, just 25,000 would have benefited from it last year, and, “In terms of floating voters living in crucial constituencies, perhaps 3,000 individuals at most would have been enriched by it.”

Brown could never hope to secure a genuinely popular mandate for policies that are antithetical to the interests of working people. Instead, he hoped that a snap poll would allow him to siphon off enough support from disenchanted Tories to secure another four years in power. The first indications of a shift in the party sympathies of this narrow layer meant an election was ruled out.

In contrast, Brown was fully prepared to further alienate Labour’s traditional supporters—inviting Margaret Thatcher for tea at Number 10 while attacking strikes in the Prison Service, London Underground and Royal Mail and insisting on wage restraint.

Labour calculates that no matter how severe its attacks on working people, they have no political alternative.

In this the party is reliant on the efforts of the trade union bureaucracy, a dwindling number of Labour lefts and various “radical” groups—all of whom claimed that Brown’s premiership would be the beginning of a shift to the left in the party. Even the left’s failure to win enough support to stand a candidate in the leadership contest, and Brown’s love-in with the Tory right, has done nothing to cool their own ardour.

The trade unions had pledged millions to Brown for his election campaign, with just one union—Unite—reportedly offering up to £5 million, even while its own members are under attack.

For its part, the Stop the War Coalition led by the Socialist Workers Party and the Communist Party of Britain professed its belief that Brown could be persuaded to “break with George Bush’s foreign policy.” The movement’s titular

head, Tony Benn, had made his own preparations for a snap election by offering to come out of retirement to stand as a prospective Labour MP.

What is being obscured is that there are no differences worthy of the name between Labour and Conservative, which are both the political representatives of a financial oligarchy.

There can be no progressive and lasting social change outside of a political and organisational rebellion against the Labour Party. A new party of the working class is required, based on a socialist programme for the economic reorganisation of society to meet human need, not private profit.

Brown is now being ridiculed by the media and the Tories for his cowardice and lack of “bottle.” After his previous failure to challenge Blair for party leadership, his forced retreat has led to questions in ruling circles as to whether he has what is required to impose policies of economic austerity and imperialist militarism.

In response, Labour will do its utmost to prove its reliability to the powers-that-be.

The first demand placed on Brown following the election that never was has been for him to take on striking postal workers. The *Telegraph* insisted that “now his election is on hold, it is time for the Royal Mail’s owner to throw his weight around—to ‘go postal’ as the American’s would say...and convince us that he is serious about reforming public services.”

Right on cue, Brown used his press conference on Monday to state that the strike was “unacceptable”. Warning that the government would review funding for the post office, he insisted, “I want these people back to work.”

When pressed on the issue of Iran, Brown declined to repeat Jack Straw’s assertion, when he was foreign secretary, that military action against Iran was “inconceivable.” “I do not rule out anything,” he said.



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