

British Prime Minister Brown prepares for snap general election: A sign of mounting crisis

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Gordon Brown's impromptu visit to UK forces in Iraq makes his calling a snap general election for November almost certain.

The British prime minister used a photo opportunity posing with soldiers to announce plans for a further 500 troops to be withdrawn from Basra by Christmas. With Parliament reconvening on October 8, Brown was already due to make a statement to the House on Iraq.

Telegraphing his announcement in advance is a crude piece of electioneering. Besides overshadowing the Conservative Party conference, the prime minister's visit was another attempt to distance his government from the Iraq debacle that has done so much to undermine Labour's electoral support.

Brown has also rescheduled major announcements, including moving the pre-budget report and comprehensive spending review to the start of next week. He is expected to make great play of additional money for health and education, further tax cuts for business and has also brought forward an interim review into the National Health Service.

Media speculation is that Brown intends to meet with the Queen on Tuesday, October 9, to seek the dissolution of Parliament the following day, triggering a poll just three weeks later on November 1. An alternative date of November 8 has also been suggested.

This would be unprecedented. Constitutionally, a general election does not have to be held until early 2010. Labour is less than two-and-a-half years into its term of office and still has a strong working majority in Parliament.

In many respects Brown has a great deal to lose by going to the country so early. There has been no recovery in Labour's support since Tony Blair's departure and by-election results suggest that the euphoria for Brown in newspaper editorial offices is not echoed in the electorate. In addition, several commentators have raised concerns that there could be a popular backlash against Brown if his snap poll is seen to be an opportunist manoeuvre.

The *Guardian* and the *Observer* have both made strenuous warnings of the danger of such an outcome. Martin Kettle noted how Labour's Harold Wilson had "got it so badly wrong in 1970," when he called an election while enjoying a majority of

96 that ended in a Tory majority of 30. "As Wilson and [Conservative leader] Ted Heath both discovered, voters punish those who call premature elections. And a 2007 election would be by some distance the most premature in British history," he wrote.

Should Brown ignore such warnings from Labour's media backers, it is because his advisors calculate that any delay—even until May 2008—would be even more calamitous.

The foremost consideration in holding a snap election is the state of the world economy. It is just weeks since savers queued on British high streets to withdraw their money from Northern Rock. Only a decision by the US Federal Reserve to lower interest rates and the Bank of England's promise to make £10 billion available prevented its collapse and a run on the entire banking system. However, this did nothing to address the underlying crisis that has led to an international credit squeeze.

Former head of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, has forecast that a downturn in the world economy will hit Britain particularly hard due to the global exposure of the City of London and its impact on the country's housing market. The tripling of house prices over the last years has been fuelled by the availability of cheap credit and mortgages at up to five times personal income. Any rise in interest rates and clampdown in monies lent would be disastrous.

UK consumers are already massively in debt. Britons now owe a record £1.3 trillion—a figure in excess of Britain's entire GDP. Almost one in five people are in "serious financial trouble," owing more than £10,000, and 2.3 million people have debts exceeding £30,000. Less than a quarter of consumers in the UK are debt-free at present.

Online home brokers Moneygate and the credit ratings agency Standard & Poor's warned this week that tens of thousands of home buyers coming to the end of their fixed-rate mortgage period could see their monthly payments surge by up to 60 percent. Someone with a £125,000 fixed-rate mortgage, paying around £600 a month on a rate of 5.7 percent, could see this rise to £750 or, if they are deemed to be a credit risk, to as much as £960. Home repossessions, which have already risen by a third this year, would skyrocket.

The credit crunch is already hitting business investment and economists are predicting that Britain's annual growth rate will halve in the coming period, with major implications for public spending.

As the *Times* economics correspondent, Gary Duncan, stated explicitly, "Prospects for the economy are fast deteriorating" and 2008 "could well be the roughest that the country has seen since the turn of the decade.... For Mr Brown, the darkening outlook can only be an intense motivation to go to the country as swiftly as he can."

The cynicism that animates Labour's calculations in going for a possible snap poll also finds expression in the second major issue facing Brown—an impending war against Iran.

Brown's posturing in Basra and his pledge to cut troop numbers are meant to reinforce claims that Britain has been successful in training Iraq's own security forces as part of a handover of sovereignty to a purportedly democratic government. In reality there is no end in sight to Britain's involvement in Iraq. Some 3,000 troops will continue to be stationed at Basra airport for at least two years and defence chiefs have made plans for a continued presence until 2011. Brown himself again stressed that any troop reductions are conditional on the situation on the ground and can be reversed.

More fundamentally, what happens in Iraq is now bound up with the plans of the Bush administration for military hostilities against Tehran. A large number of whatever troops are withdrawn from Basra will be redeployed to one of the Gulf states, probably Kuwait, where they will be ideally positioned in the event of war against Iran. Britain also has mine-sweepers based in the Gulf of Hormuz.

It is absolutely certain that Brown—who backed the invasion of Iraq—would support any US military action. According to Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* magazine, he has already given his backing to a Washington plan to launch surgical strikes on Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. Such air strikes could only be the start of a wider war. Phillip Giraldi, a former CIA counterterrorism officer, said that the Pentagon has drawn up plans for a "large-scale air assault on Iran employing both conventional and tactical nuclear weapons."

By calling an early poll Brown is not only seeking to avoid the danger of possibly losing an election at a later date, he needs a victory in order to claim a mandate for policies that are antithetical to the interests of the broad mass of working people.

A snap poll would in reality provide no such popular mandate. It would take place under conditions in which neither Labour nor any other party have issued a manifesto and smaller parties will be largely excluded from any significant participation by the huge amount of finances needed in short order to stand candidates.

Far from consulting the electorate on the major issues of the day, by mutual agreement with the Tories there will be no discussion on foreign policy and no disagreement over

economic measures designed to impose the full burden of an economic downturn onto working people.

Both the major parties are courting the support of big business and a narrow layer of the prosperous upper middle class in a handful of key marginal seats in the southeast.

Since becoming prime minister, Brown's every pronouncement has been framed as an appeal to disillusioned Tories. His campaign kicked off last month with his invite to Margaret Thatcher for tea at Number 10, praising her as a "conviction politician" like himself. It was followed by his Labour Party conference speech that stole virtually every one of the Tories' policies, earning Brown the soubriquet of Thatcher's "natural heir" by none other than Norman Tebbit.

This is part of Brown's "Big Tent" strategy, in which he has recruited yet more Tories, Liberals and leading businessmen into government. Portrayed as a commitment to inclusiveness, upholding Britain's national interests and standing above narrow party politics, its real purpose is to consolidate the political monopoly of big business as exercised through Labour.

The section of the population firmly excluded from Brown's big tent is the working class. Only last month, Brown denounced workers striking against his imposition of a public sector pay freeze, insisting that "disciplined" pay awards are "an essential part of maintaining economic stability, and we will do nothing—nothing—to put that at risk."

This week it was announced that a Stop the War Coalition demonstration called to coincide with Parliament's reconvening on October 8 has been banned by the Metropolitan Police.

Labour's contempt for democratic rights is also evidenced by its indifference to the implications of calling an election at such short notice. Up to one million voters could be denied a vote because they are not yet registered on the 2007 electoral roll, which is not due to be completed until December 1.

In the event of a general election the Socialist Equality Party will intervene in order to alert working people, students and youth to the essential political issues that Brown is seeking to conceal. The central focus of our campaign will be to insist that the disenfranchising of millions of working people—by a "Labour" government that serves as the political weapon of the corporate elite—necessitates the building of a new and genuinely socialist party. Only in this way can the ongoing offensive against jobs, social conditions and democratic rights and the intensifying threat of war be combated.



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