

Britain: Unofficial general election campaign underway

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With the date for the general election not yet announced, the establishment parties have already begun their campaigns.

The unofficial launch seems to confirm speculation that the election will be held on May 6. Its political content has underscored the right-wing consensus between Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats concerning austerity measures that will be imposed by the next government, whatever its composition.

On March 29, Channel 4 broadcast a televised debate between Labour Chancellor Alistair Darling, Conservative George Osborne and Liberal Democrat Vince Cable. The stage-managed affair took place before a select audience of 200 people.

None of the questions raised the bailout of Britain's banks by the Labour government, to the tune of some £1 trillion, or the unanimity between the parties on the need for draconian social cuts to cover the resulting deficit. The sole issue up for discussion was who could be trusted to implement austerity measures.

All participants agreed that the next government will have to make greater inroads into public spending than those of the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. This was the period that saw the decimation of entire industries, 3 million unemployed, and a policy of aggressive confrontation with the working class. Workers' wages and living standards were driven down while the City of London and the super-rich enjoyed a bonanza.

Labour pushed forward this agenda on taking office in 1997, overseeing an unprecedented rise in social inequality. Deregulation and privatisation were extended so as to encourage the most parasitic forms of financial speculation. When this finally imploded in 2008, Labour implemented its policy of "quantitative

easing," which has amounted to the largest transfer of wealth from working people to the rich in British history.

To the extent that there are any differences between the official parties as to the future, they regard only the timing and speed at which payment for this handout to the financial aristocracy is to be extracted from the working class.

During the debate, Darling insisted that it might be necessary to begin somewhat slowly at first, so as not to "impede the recovery," while ruling out any regulatory measures on the banks that were not agreed internationally.

Over the last period, the Conservatives have sought to portray themselves as the most determined advocates of spending cuts. As a result, despite widespread opposition to Labour, opinion polls show that their level of support is stagnant and even sliding.

Osborne's pitch was determined by the need to make a more popular appeal, while convincing the City of London that he could be trusted with its interests. This attempt to square the circle resulted in vague pledges to realise millions of pounds in "efficiency" savings, along with a one-line reference to the huge bonuses now being enjoyed by Britain's bankers at taxpayers' expense.

With polls predicting a hung parliament, Cable set out the stall for the Liberal Democrats as king-makers in any coalition. He did so by insisting that his party would be the most honest about the scale of the attacks that were needed, and that no area of spending would be "ring-fenced," including health.

Making clear his hostility to any efforts by workers to resist this assault, he spuriously compared the opposition of the banks and hedge funds to impingements on their profiteering with the struggle

waged by the miners in 1984 to defend their jobs and communities against decimation. Referring to the leader of the miners' union, Arthur Scargill, Cable said the banks were "pinstripe Scargills," holding the country to ransom.

The so-called "chancellors' debate" was followed on March 30 by what was billed as a keynote speech by ex-Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair in his former constituency of Trimdon, Sedgfield.

Many commentators considered Blair's appearance to lead off Labour's re-election campaign a huge gamble. Polls consistently show him to be one the country's most despised politicians—not least for the campaign of lies and disinformation that accompanied his support for the US-led war against Iraq. Popular hostility has been compounded by revelations that part of Blair's multi-million-pound earnings since leaving office comes from an oil company with extensive investments in Iraq.

Blair gave his speech amidst massive security. Even though the small audience was heavily vetted, the media were instructed to leave the venue before any questions could be put to him.

Blair's remarks were pitched to the City of London, big business and a privileged section of the upper-middle class—the social and political constituency on which Labour has relied for support throughout its 13 years in office. They were intended to squash Tory claims that Conservative leader David Cameron, rather than Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, was his true heir apparent.

From the moment of taking office, Blair said, his government had spelt out that there would be "no compromise with the essential manifesto of New Labour," i.e., with its repudiation of the party's previous social reform policies.

The Tories under Cameron were incapable of taking such a determined stand, Blair argued. "They look like they're either the old Tory party but want to hide it, or they're not certain which way to go," he said.

He continued: "On Europe, they've gone right when they should have gone centre. On law and order, they've gone liberal when actually they should have stuck with a traditional Conservative position. And on the economy, they seem to be buffeted this way and that," demanding deficit reduction one week and offering tax cuts the next.

Blair's criticism of Tory indecision echoes gathering complaints in ruling circles. In the wake of Osborne's Channel 4 appearance, traditional Conservative newspapers such as the *Times* have criticised the party for its inconsistency on economic policy.

A survey of 31 economists showed a consensus in favour of replacing Osborne as shadow chancellor with Kenneth Clarke, who served under Thatcher and her successor, John Major. Cameron has been forced to rule out such a switch, while insisting that Clarke would play a key role in any Tory administration.

It has emerged that contingency plans have been drawn up in the likelihood of a hung parliament. Under the proposals, Brown could remain prime minister and attempt to form a working majority, even if the Tories win the most seats. The period before parliament reconvenes after polling could also be extended to 18 days—from its current six—to facilitate this attempt. And for the first time, the civil service will be able to aid in talks on a coalition, giving advice to all parties.

The *Daily Mail* revealed that the Queen could "step in and block a second general election this year in the event of a hung parliament, to prevent Britain spiralling into an economic crisis."

According to the newspaper, "If the Queen is advised that a general election would be 'detrimental to the national economy,' she can refuse to allow one."

The newspaper added, "Her action would force parties to work towards a coalition government—rather than having to fight another election campaign."

Such a coalition would be portrayed as a "national government" or "government of national unity." The hope would be that this would provide a veneer of legitimacy to the austerity measures it would set out to impose.



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