

United Kingdom election 2005

The 2005 United Kingdom election was held on 5 May. In 2001, victory in 330 of 659 seats was required to gain a House of Commons majority. In 2005, with Scottish seats reduced to 59 (-13) as an offset for an increase in the size of the Scottish Parliament, victory in 324 seats would give a party control of the new House of 646 members.

The state of the parties

More than 3500 candidates from 170 parties nominated. Tony Blair's Labour Government held 408 seats; a loss of 85 would put it in a minority position. The Conservatives, under Michael Howard, needed to double their 162 seats to gain control of the Commons. The Liberal Democrats led by Charles Kennedy held 55 seats. Other parties held 34 seats.

There seemed little doubt that Labour would win the election, for the party could withstand a swing of up to 6.5 per cent to the Tories and still retain power. Opinion polls suggested that Labour was likely to lose seats, with the other two parties increasing their representation. If the Liberal Democrats could hold or increase their numbers and the Conservatives win at least 230 seats, there was a chance of a minority government emerging from the election. The last minority government was that of Harold Wilson (Lab), elected in February 1974.

All parties were concerned about voter turnout. In 2001, turnout had been only 59 per cent, 12.1 per cent less than in 1997, and the lowest figure since the post-war election of 1918 (58.9%). Polls suggested even fewer would participate in 2005, meaning that the parties would have to work harder than ever in persuading people to vote.

An Australian element

In October 2004, Lynton Crosby, former Australian Liberal Party federal director, was appointed as the Conservative Party's campaign director. His services were said to have been paid by a £250 000 donation from a British businessman.¹ Not all British observers were impressed: the *New Statesman* referred to Crosby, a friend of the Conservative leader, as Howard's 'Aussie bruiser'.²

The party battle

Labour

Labour had won two large majorities in 1997 and 2001. During most of its first five years in office the party's monthly average in the opinion polls remained comfortably above 45 per cent, with Prime Minister Blair's approval rating also high. This gradually changed, however, until the party was struggling to reach 40 per cent during 2004. Part of the decline could probably be put

down to the normal difficulties of a government remaining in power for a substantial time. Early in 2005, David Sanders of Essex University calculated that the Government had lost 0.06 per cent each month it had been in office.³ It was clear, however, that an important factor was the decline in Blair's standing. By early 2005, only 32 per cent of those surveyed by a MORI poll said they trusted him.⁴ The *Sunday Times* assessment was blunt:

For many voters smiling, fresh-faced Blair Mark I has been replaced by a soapy-looking, swivel-eyed purveyor of untruths.⁵

Related to this was the increasing tension in the Labour Party caused by the deterioration in the relationship between Blair and Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. Prior to the start of the campaign, Blair had appointed Alan Milburn to co-ordinate the campaign effort in preference to Brown. This soon changed, however, following Brown's strong Budget performance in March 2005, and the popular Scotsman was soon returned to the helm of his party's campaign. Polls quickly suggested that this was something that many voters preferred. YouGov, the internet-based opinion poll, suggested that this move actually broke a poll deadlock between the two parties.⁶ In addition, Blair intimated that he would serve a full term but would not be leading his party at the next election.⁷

One opinion poll indicated that a low turnout was likely to hurt Labour more than their opponents.⁸ The Prime Minister showed the concern felt by his party in a personalised email sent to supporters, in which he said he would 'fight for every seat and every vote'.⁹ Despite this, a Labour loss seemed inconceivable. The party led the Conservatives on seven out of the eight key issues voters ranked as important to them when considering their likely vote. Apart from substantial margins in its heartland issues of health and education, Labour even led in traditional Tory issues such as law and order and the question of the United Kingdom's relationship with Europe. Above all, though, the key policy area was economic management, where the government enjoyed an encouraging 17 point lead.¹⁰

Conservatives

The Conservative Party entered the election as a more unified force than it had been under its previous leader, Iain Duncan Smith, who had been replaced by former Home Secretary, Michael Howard in October 2003.

The Conservative problem centred on how to change voters' minds, for the party's polls performance had been anchored in the low 30 per cent range—or worse—for

over a decade.¹¹ It needed to persuade Labour voters to make the switch to them, while working to ensure that their own core voters would turn out to vote. To achieve these ends the party conceived a two-part strategy that was designed primarily to reduce the size of the Labour majority, rather than winning office.¹²

For much of the month prior to polling day Michael Howard spoke of honouring 'five commitments', under the slogan: 'Are you thinking what we're thinking?'. The commitments included promises to reduce taxes, to clean up the hospitals, to provide more police on the beat, to improve school discipline and, most controversially, to put tougher controls on immigration. The party's research had shown that these 'commitments' coincided with many voters' key priorities, and needed emphasis, although some in the party would have preferred a wider policy offering.¹³

Lynton Crosby devised the second element of the strategy, the so-called 'dog whistle' tactic, designed in an effort to make sure the Tories retained a tight hold on their core voters. This involved talking about controversial issues that might upset some people, but would hopefully remind loyal Conservative voters that the party stood for traditional values. The party thus attempted 'to reach out to core Tory voters in a manner that does not alienate middle ground voters'.¹⁴ A controversial example was Howard's promise to do something about illegal traveller camp sites, including making trespass a criminal offence for the first time, and giving local authorities the power, retrospectively, to reject planning permission for such camps. This was seen as a subtle cry for the need to keep 'foreigners' out of the country.¹⁵

Despite its hard work, the Conservative Party was hamstrung by voters' perceptions of its policy weaknesses, with its campaign opinion poll standing showing a consistent vote of 30–32 per cent. Professor Anthony King likened its efforts to a duck swimming against a strong current: 'Under the water, the legs are paddling furiously. Above the water, the duck is scarcely moving...'.¹⁶

Critics suggested that the major problem was that the Conservatives had not done the policy work necessary to regain office: 'the Tory party has not rethought what it wants to offer the British people', according to the *Guardian*.¹⁷ The *Daily Telegraph* believed the party lacked a basic blueprint: 'People need to know that the Tories have a plan—not merely to expel undesirables, but to transform the country'.¹⁸

Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats campaigned confidently. Their 2001 vote (18.9 per cent) was likely to increase, and they had hopes of winning a substantial number of new seats. Some critics attacked their relative paucity of policy detail, but as the only significant party to oppose British participation in Iraq, they were confident of picking up voters disenchanted with the major players.

Iraq ... and Blair

The issue of Iraq dominated the campaign, and the Labour Party was well aware of its vulnerability on the issue. The issue was intimately connected with the trustworthiness of the Prime Minister, and he persuaded former Foreign Minister, Robin Cook, to campaign for the party in an effort to lessen the issue's impact. At one point Blair claimed that other parties were talking about Iraq because they had nothing to say on other matters, but it was clear that they did so because many voters felt strongly about the issue.¹⁹ The Iraq issue had motivated a significant number of the 155 independent candidates to nominate. Reg Keys, the father of a killed serviceman contested Blair's seat, and it was believed that Muslim voters in north London electorates would hurt the chances of Labour and Conservative candidates alike. On election-eve the widow of a recently killed soldier blamed the Prime Minister for her husband's death.

Eventually, Blair was forced to acknowledge that many saw the election as a personal popularity poll on his Iraq performance: 'I am not going to stand here and beg for my own character. People can make up their own minds whether they trust me or not.'²⁰ On the eve of the election, he asserted, 'I did not lie or mislead the country' over the Iraq invasion, a reminder of a similar claim he had made in early 2004 concerning the leaking of the name of Dr David Kelly over the weapons of mass destruction controversy.²¹ David Sanders' analysis suggested that the Iraq invasion cost Labour at least three percentage points in the polls.²² The Conservatives also had difficulty with the Iraq issue as they had supported British participation, something that Howard was not prepared to resile from during the campaign.²³ Their attempt to make use of the invasion was therefore linked to the general public unease regarding the character of Blair: 'If he's prepared to lie to take us to war, he's prepared to lie to win an election'.²⁴ The argument did not seem to impact in their favour, as polls suggested that people deserting Labour on the Iraq issue were more likely to vote Liberal Democrat than Conservative.

The result

Despite fears about a reduction in voter turn-out, there was a slight increase to 61.3 per cent (+2.1%).

The Labour vote fell by 5.5 per cent with a loss 47 seats, but the party still won a comfortable majority of 67 seats of the 645 electorates contested:²⁵

House of Commons	Lab	Cons	Lib Dem	Other
Votes won (%)	35.5	32.3	22.0	10.2
(change)	(-5.5)	(+0.6)	(+3.7)	(+1.4)
Seats won	356	197	62	30
(change)	(-47)	(+33)	(+11)	(+2)

Source: Election 2005 <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

This was the first time Labour had won three elections in a row. In achieving re-election, the Government succeeded despite gaining the lowest vote recorded by a victorious party since the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill. Whomever is leading the Labour Party at the next election will be aware of the precarious position facing the party.

Labour's 67-seat margin rests largely on 43 'supermarginals', each of which would be lost on a swing of 2.5 per cent.²⁶

The Conservative Party picked up 36 seats, but lost three. The Liberal Democrats' performance in winning 16 seats was partly offset by the loss of five others. In Northern Ireland the Ulster Unionists lost five of their six seats, including that held by their leader, Nobel Peace Prize winner, David Trimble. By contrast, the Democratic Unionists led by Ian Paisley won nine seats, making that party the fourth largest in the House of Commons.

The fall-out

Labour lost seats to the Conservative Party in London and the South-East, and to the Liberal Democrats in London and regional cities, including Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, Cardiff and Bristol. It lost 11 seats in London, and five seats in each of Scotland and Wales. There was a significant swing from Labour to Liberal Democrat in most of the 40 seats with a large Muslim population.

Among the party's casualties were the ministers responsible for schools, health, and constitutional affairs. Oona King, a prominent Blair loyalist, lost Bethnal Green and Bow to an anti-war challenge from the former Labour MP George Galloway. Labour member of the Welsh National Assembly, Peter Law, was expelled from the party when he challenged a Labour candidate selected from an all-female shortlist for the seat of Blaenau Gwent. Law won the seat as an independent after a drop of 39.7 per cent in the Labour vote.

The Conservatives failed to clear five significant hurdles. Above all, they were unable to overcome the massive majority Labour had gained in the previous election, with the 6.5 per cent margin being too great to overcome. Two regional factors hurt them. Firstly, had they had been able to repeat their southern success in the Midlands and North of England, they might have wiped out Labour's absolute majority.²⁷ Secondly, the shift in regional and rural population had given Labour an inbuilt advantage in the distribution of electorates. One estimate was that the Tories needed to be six percentage points ahead of Labour on polling day to have a chance of winning a parliamentary majority.²⁸ Another factor was the gender gap, revealed by exit polling, which suggested that 36 per cent of male voters would support Michael Howard, but only 27 per cent of female voters would do so. This gave Labour an election-winning 12-point lead among female voters, 39 per cent of whom voted for Tony Blair compared with 37 per cent of male voters.²⁹ Finally, it was clear that the Conservatives were not able to persuade many voters to move to them, and their percentage of the vote barely increased. As predicted, most voters who shifted from Labour avoided voting for the Conservatives.

The Liberal Democrats performed creditably, but 22 percent of the vote was insufficient for them to be more than a distant third in seats won. In this result the party

achieved only marginally more seats than in 2001, though its 62 seats was the best result since its Liberal predecessor won 59 seats in 1929. For a third party to have any chance of splitting the two main parties it probably needs a minimum of 30 per cent of the vote. Unless the Liberal Democrats can achieve this, they will remain a political problem for the major parties, but no challenge to their dominance.

The political future

British politics during next 2–3 years promise to be full of interest:

- Will Tony Blair hand over the Labour leadership to Gordon Brown prior to the next election? If so, when will he do so? Will he be forced by public opinion to go earlier than he seems to be considering? Will he go at all?
- Michael Howard has said he wants to resign the Conservative leadership by Christmas 2005. The battle for that position within a revitalised party is already providing much press speculation.
- Howard has described his party's effort as 'a significant step towards ... recovery'.³⁰ Despite this optimism, the party still failed to gain as much as one-third of the vote, and will need to work hard to turn this performance into a victory at the next election. Tory strategists conceded that Blair's unpopularity, rather than their own policies, was the key to their gains.³¹ If the Prime Minister has resigned by the next election, the electoral fight might be no easier than in 2005.
- The politics in the House of Commons will alter. Although the Government appears to have a comfortable majority, its position has altered because of the likelihood that its 'rebel left' will have much more chance of blocking controversial policies such as university tuition fees, ID cards, or foreign activity such as Iraq: 'The house of poodles, the rubber stamp, is gone'.³²
- The Liberal Democrats will be working hard to reinforce in people's minds that they are now a serious force in British politics. As by-elections occur, the party will work hard to capitalise on the unpopularity of both major parties.

Electoral system concerns

In 2001, changes were made to the electoral law involving postal voting. The legislation, designed to increase turnout, allows an elector to apply for postal votes up to six days before a poll. However, the fact that postal vote papers can be sent to an address that is not necessarily the elector's address gave the opportunity for fraud. In Birmingham local government elections in 2004, there were so many postal votes that officials used unofficial means to ensure all were handled in time. At an inquiry into these events, an election court judge described the system as 'hopelessly insecure'.³³

As applications for postal votes for the general election rose by up to 500 per cent in some marginal seats, concern about the risk of electoral fraud, and a series of legal

challenges, began to worry election observers. One in six voters, about six million, were expected to opt for postal votes, and there were claims of a 10-fold increase in applications in some constituencies.³⁴ Would it mean that a result would not be known on the night of the election?³⁵ Despite these concerns, however, the counting of votes was not hindered. Labour's victory was confirmed by 5 am on 6 May.

The question of whether the United Kingdom should alter its First Past the Post voting method to a system that increases voters' feeling of participation in elections has been a matter of debate in recent years. In 2005, a combination of a slight rise in the Tory vote, a healthy Liberal Democrat vote, 10 per cent voting for minor parties, and 38 per cent of electors not turning out, meant that only 21.6 per cent of electors backed the winning party. This compares with a 30.8 per cent figure for the first Blair victory in 1997 and 39.6 per cent for the Conservatives in 1951, the highest in the last half-century. By comparison, the 2004 Australian figure was 41.8 per cent.³⁶

The Proportional Representation advocate, Polly Toynbee, responded to the 2005 results with the call: 'let's make this the last election with no choice'. Realistically, though, she also warned of 'much sophistry as the big parties find reasons not to give the people freedom to vote for someone other than them'.³⁷ The Labour Party promised a referendum on electoral reform prior to the 1997 election, a promise that it has failed to keep. The Conservative Party is no more enthusiastic about any change. It might be many years before any serious move is made to replace the First Past the Post system with any other method.

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