



Politics Informed

what we see is what others miss

Rebels with a cause

Stephen Edwards considers whether Tony Blair's mission to secure his place in history will be scuppered by a growing gang of Labour rebels.

With majorities of well over 100 in the 1997-2001 and 2001-2005 Parliaments, the Labour leadership has long been in a position of being able to survive rebellions with relative ease. This was combined with a renewed sense of party unity, fuelled by the nectar of government after eighteen years in the political wilderness.

In this environment, it was possible to secure policies that would in the past have been unpalatable to the Labour left, including tuition fees and wide-ranging public service reform. Indeed, the largest rebellion of the 1997 Parliament over incapacity benefits – where 67 Labour MPs voted against the party whip – was still not sufficient to defeat the government.

Treading carefully

Labour's shrunken majority of only 64 following the 2005 general election has changed this situation. Blair's hopes of a radical third term in office before his retirement could be endangered by a hard core of Labour rebels who now have the potential to inflict lasting damage.

This has been accompanied by the diminution of other factors that previously allowed the leadership

to keep backbenchers in line. Eight and a half years after 1997, the power of patronage means little to MPs who have no hope of promotion and means nothing at all to disaffected ex-ministers. This leaves a section of the parliamentary Labour party a lot more willing to express its mind with a fine line between ideological objections to certain policies and a more base desire to give Blair a bloody nose.

First defeat

The rebels have certainly caused problems over the last few weeks. The first defeat was over the ninety-day period for detention without trial, with MPs forcing the adoption of a 28 day limit as a compromise measure. This was Blair's first parliamentary defeat since 1997, although it certainly didn't mark the end of his problems. Defeat on banning smoking in public places was only avoided when the government realised it couldn't win and introduced a free vote on the subject. Evidence suggests that the government's whipping operation is breaking down in places with some Labour MPs not even following the long-held tradition of notifying the whips in advance of voting against the party line. The confusion surrounding the government's defeat on incitement to religious hatred, where Blair himself was told he could go home without voting, is evidence of this.

continued overleaf

Education, education, education

Education has recently dominated the political landscape with the government proposing reforms that many in the Labour Party find hard to support. Our front page story deals with Labour's growing band of rebels and how the Education Bill is setting the stage for the next showdown. On page 2 we describe the measures contained in the Bill.

Talking of education, *Politics Explained*, our public affairs training course starts again on 11 May. A modular course, you can attend all or some of the sessions. The enclosed brochure explains more.

On page 3 we assess the various candidates for the LibDem leadership and on the back page describe the various groups that the Conservatives have convened in order to help set their future policy direction. On page 4 we examine transport in London.

The forthcoming Budget is previewed on page 5. On page 6 we outline the increase in politics on the internet, encompassing both official sources and unofficial blogs. We profile the Austrian EU presidency on page 7.

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The substance of the reform programme remains on a political knife edge. Will Blair be left wishing yet again that he'd gone further?

Continued from the front page

The government's record has improved since, with victories on ID cards (only twenty rebels) and the offence of glorification of terrorism (seventeen rebels). However, both required careful negotiation.

Difficult times ahead

The next big challenge for Blair will be over educational reform, with the second reading of the Education Bill imminent. There has already been fierce reaction to the government's proposals to set up new "trust schools" with a degree of autonomy on admissions policy. The gang of hardcore rebels who have been in regular revolt – the likes of Bob Marshall-Andrews, John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn – can all be expected to vote against the government again, but may well be accompanied by other Labour MPs. At the last count, there were at least 50 rebels and it remains to be seen whether the latest round of government concessions will prove sufficient to quell the revolt.

Causing Blair further headaches, the opposition has shown signs of reinvigoration since Christmas, with David Cameron's election as leader boosting the Conservatives' fortunes. Talk of the demise of the LibDems also seems premature in light of their victory in the Dunfermline by-election.

The local government elections on 4 May will provide the first proper electoral indication of the impact of Labour's legislative defeats and the opposition's new leadership teams. Tony Blair will be increasingly concerned about his legacy; whilst his likely successor, Gordon Brown, will be worrying about exactly what will be passed onto him when the time finally comes.

Many a slip...

In September 2005, a mere month ahead of the publication of education secretary, Ruth Kelly's white paper Higher Standards, Better Schools for All, Tony Blair famously said "Every time I've introduced a reform, I wish in retrospect I'd gone further". David McGahey reports how that white paper is now being transformed into a bill.

Its journey thus far has not been without incident! How true the bill will remain to the government's ambitions as it moves through the parliamentary process remains to be seen. We will see if Blair and Kelly manage even to hold on to the reforms set out in the white paper, let alone go further.

In his foreword to the white paper, the prime minister maintains that its appearance "marks a pivotal moment in the life of this Parliament and of this government. The reforms will create and sustain irreversible change for the better in schools." Its main and most contentious policies would enable every school to link to a trust involving external partners such as parents' groups, voluntary organisations and businesses, and would cast local authorities as commissioners, rather than providers of schools. Indeed trust schools would be independent of

local authorities, own their own land, appoint their own staff and, most contentiously, control their own admissions.

Brewing up a political storm

It is around these central elements of the reform programme that the political storm has raged – freeing up schools, whilst redefining (or is it constraining?) local authorities. The passage of this legislation has become one of the crucial tests of Labour's third term, drawing together within Labour personal antipathies to Blair and principled opposition to a perceived breaching of the comprehensive model of schooling, all stirred up by the Conservatives' "support" of the government line!

This dangerous political mix has caused the government at least to tweak its proposals. Ruth Kelly has conceded that local authorities would continue to build schools too, and that schools would not be able to use interviews to select pupils. Yet will this be enough to placate the reforms' opponents on the government's own benches and to neutralise the opposition? The substance of the reform programme, therefore, remains on a political knife edge. Will Blair be left wishing yet again that he'd gone further?





Follow my leader

As new Conservative leader David Cameron settles into his role and Labour leader-in-waiting Gordon Brown moves ever closer to centre stage, the Liberal Democrats are in the midst of choosing a new leader of their own. Ben Ruffels looks at the party's intriguing contest to replace Charles Kennedy.

Following Labour's general election victory in May 2005 and the recent reinvigoration of the Conservatives under their new leader, senior figures within the Liberal Democrats had begun to openly question whether Charles Kennedy was still up to the task of leading his party as 2005 drew to a close.

Resigned to his fate

A matter of days into 2006, Kennedy had publicly admitted to a widely-suspected drinking problem. He called a leadership contest to give party members rather than MPs the final say over his future, but was eventually forced to stand down as support within the Liberal Democrat parliamentary ranks ebbed away.

Kennedy's resignation flushed out the leadership ambitions of his parliamentary colleagues who had given him their public, if not private, backing since his admission, marking the start of a colourful campaign.

The initial list of contenders comprised LibDem heavyweights Menzies Campbell and Simon Hughes, the deputy party leader and party president respectively, along with home affairs spokesman Mark Oaten and the relatively unknown Treasury spokesman Chris Huhne, an MP only since May 2005.

Controversy never far away

More controversy marked the early stages of the contest as Oaten, who withdrew from the race having failed to garner support from fellow MPs, admitted to an affair with a male prostitute and resigned from the shadow cabinet. This was followed soon after by Simon Hughes' admission of past gay relationships, despite his previous public denials, reawakening interest in his bitter 1983 Bermondsey by-election victory over the openly gay Labour candidate.

Three-horse race

Menzies Campbell emerged as an early front runner, casting himself as a unifying influence. The former Olympic sprinter, who is well respected inside and outside the party, has argued for the need to defend civil and individual liberties whilst applying fresh thinking to core liberal values. Hughes, however, has remained confident of victory, campaigning around the values of freedom, fairness and sustainability. Despite his lack of Commons experience, Chris Huhne has amassed considerable support throughout the parliamentary party, basing his campaign on localism, social justice and the environment. Initially viewed as an outside bet, he believes his experiences as an MEP, city economist and journalist give him the necessary attributes to lead the party.

The leadership result is being announced on 2 March, the day before the party's spring conference begins in Harrogate and only weeks before the May local elections. The successful candidate will therefore hope – and need – to hit the floor running.

Public affairs training

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"Politics Explained is both informative and enjoyable, and the trainers have real hands-on experience which helps make the course relevant to real situations. The in-depth modules build up so it is suitable for beginners and people with more experience. It has been good value for me and my organisation, and I would recommend it." Kate Winstanley, Portman Group

It could be the chancellor's penultimate, or even last, Budget before pitching himself as Blair's successor

Who's who in London transport

The capital's transport system is indispensable, ferrying millions to and from work every day. So, who are the people making decisions at the top? David Carnell investigates.

Peter Hendy, commissioner, Transport for London (TfL): appointed commissioner in 2006 as Bob Kiley's successor. Previously served as TfL's managing director of surface transport and held various senior positions in the bus industry. His role is to help devise and lead the implementation of the mayor's transport strategy.

Ian Brown, managing director, London Rail: responsible for overseeing major rail projects in London and implementing the mayor's strategy to integrate national rail services with London's transport network. Also chairman, and previously chief executive, of Docklands Light Railway.

Tim O'Toole, managing director, London Underground: joined TfL in 2003 from Consolidated Rail Corporation, one of America's most successful rail networks where he was president and chief executive. His role includes the oversight of PPP implementation and the extensions to the tube network leading up to the 2012 Olympics.

Roger Evans, chairman of the Transport Committee, London Assembly: His role is to examine and report from time to time on the strategies, policies and actions of the mayor, TfL, and the other functional bodies. He also has to negotiate with the mayor for London TravelWatch's annual budget.



Transport for London comes of age

The Rail Review, now completed, held up the prospect of a significant change in the way that rail services in London were specified and procured. As Stephen Bramall reports, Transport for London (TfL) made no secret of its desire to be made a Transport Authority not just for London but also for the South East.

The final legislative proposals emerging from the review suggested that TfL would be given some degree of additional control, but would be frustrated in its ultimate objective. But policy is moving on. It was generally recognised at the time of the rail review that TfL would need to prove that it could be trusted to manage the London aspects of rail policy without a significant call for additional increases in public expenditure.

Devolution of rail powers

The transfer of the North London Line / Silverlink Metro rail franchise to TfL perhaps represents the first step in the progressive devolution of powers over London rail to TfL. If TfL is able to deliver a cost-effective solution for Silverlink Metro, might the Department for Transport (DfT) be willing or tempted to trust it with responsibility for wider rail

franchise matters?

The Olympics in 2012, combined with the wider economic issues associated with the need for quality public transport serving London, are increasingly coming to the fore. The impending competition for the South Western rail franchise – arguably likely to be the most sought-after franchise in the industry – will be a further test of TfL's influence and ambition.

Gaining influence by stealth

TfL's powers and influence grow by stealth. Some would say, rightly so, but the train operating companies will be nervous. Nonetheless, if London mayor, Ken Livingstone, is able to deliver a cost-effective franchise for Silverlink Metro – and he might, if the rolling stock is procured via TfL directly rather than the ROSCOs – then the DfT might well be willing to increasingly cede authority to TfL.

What lessons does this provide for the Passenger Transport Authorities and Executives (PTAs/PTEs)? In London, power over rail is being devolved. In the PTAs, power has in some respects been removed, and the PTAs are losing their battle over quality contracts for bus services. Enough said.



Budgeting for succession

On 22 March, Gordon Brown will deliver his tenth consecutive Budget statement. His speech will be particularly interesting given the growing speculation that he is preparing to take over from Tony Blair as prime minister. Ben Ruffels considers.

Typically, the chancellor's Budget statement contains the Treasury's forecasts for the UK economy and public finances, possible decisions on taxation, and announcements of investment in specific programmes or reviews of particular issues. Gordon Brown's forthcoming Budget could have much broader significance if speculation surrounding the timing of Tony Blair's departure from No 10 is to be believed. It could be the chancellor's penultimate, or even last, Budget before pitching himself as Blair's successor.

Criticism from Europe

Having had to downgrade his estimates for GDP growth and increase his borrowing estimates in last December's pre-Budget report, Brown will therefore be hoping to present a Budget that staves off any further scrutiny of his handling of the economy. This will not have been helped by recent criticism of the chancellor by the European Commission when he breached the government's commitment to keep the UK's Budget deficit below a ceiling of 3 per cent.

But it has not been all bad news for the chancellor in the run up to the Budget. Official UK statistics released in February indicated a record surplus in the public finances in January driven by larger than expected increases in business tax receipts, which

should help him meet his borrowing targets.

A number of key announcements are expected. Final technical detail applying to companies joining the new UK Real Estate Investment Trust regime will be set out, along with the tax rates that will apply to remote gambling, which is being brought within the scope of gambling taxation following the government's reforms of gaming legislation.

It is speculated that the chancellor may seek to tighten public finances through further anti tax avoidance measures. New targets for reducing administrative burdens in the tax system are also expected, and it is possible that changes to the R&D tax credit regime could be announced to help sustain the development of small innovative businesses. Brown may also comment further on how the UK economy needs to adapt to compete more effectively globally.

Succession in mind?

But commentators will be paying as much attention to what the Budget says about the chancellor's preparations to succeed Tony Blair. It could give an insight into the kind of long-term challenges Brown wants to tackle and the economic legacy he would like to inherit as prime minister.

Furthermore, since Brown will be tackled by David Cameron over the dispatch box following his statement, the Budget debate will give MPs and commentators alike a glimpse of what exchanges during prime minister's questions might be like in the post-Blair era. Brown will no doubt be hoping he scores well with the gallery.

Under budget

As the chancellor dusts off his red briefcase for the annual Budget day, he may wish to reflect on some unusual facts about the big day.

- Apart from discreet sips of water drinking in the House of Commons is forbidden. There is one exception to this rule. The chancellor on Budget day may fortify himself with an alcoholic drink. Whilst Benjamin Disraeli enjoyed brandy and water, William Gladstone was famed for consuming sherry and beaten egg from his pomatum pot.

Recently, Kenneth Clarke was partial to neat whisky; but conversely Gordon Brown was congratulated by opposition leader William Hague, *"on his fortitude in delivering his speech with only the assistance of water"*.

- Gladstone's sherry and egg beverage may have come in use during the longest ever continuous Budget speech which he gave on 18 April 1853. It lasted a parching 4 hours and 45 minutes. Disraeli, however, holds the record for the shortest Budget speech, that of 1867 which took just 45 minutes.

- In the 1950s former chancellor, Harold Macmillan, described the Budget as, *"Rather like a school sports day, a bit of a bore, but there it is"*.

- Budget was the name of Geoffrey Howe's dog whilst he was chancellor (1979-83).

- The name Budget derives from *bougette*, the French for a "little bag" which came to mean a little stock or store in the 18th century.

**Not only does blogging enable the minority to have a voice,
but it allows all and sundry to tell them just what they think of it**

Westminster wired The new commentariat

*Researcher for an MP?
Journalist? Inquisitive member of
the public? If you are on the hunt
for news and information relating
to the government and the world
around Westminster but don't
know where to look, David
Carnell tells you the best places
on the web to find it.*

The great British institution that is the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk) is probably the best place to start. Not only are they on the ball for breaking news but enable the thorough researcher to dig deeper with the external links listed with each story. High quality journalism and a near perfect record for factual accuracy means the BBC will never let you down.

For more politics based news, ePolitix (www.epolitix.com), is run by Dods information services and is very comprehensive. Email based mailing lists allow for 24 hour updates and every sector of government is covered.

For those short on time, the Government News Network (www.gnn.gov.uk) is a very handy tool that amalgamates virtually all departmental press releases into one handy page. It's not foolproof but for the time-constrained researcher, it's invaluable.

Parliamentary records can be mind-boggling and it is often difficult to find specific data without knowing precise dates and names. Subscription-based search engines are available, but for those on tight purse strings, Parliament's own website (www.parliament.uk) offers its own free search engine. Never again will you be unable to track down that elusive debate on local government funding regulations... should you so wish!

Political blogging has recently risen in popularity to such an extent that mainstream media (or "deadwood media" to use the blogging colloquialism) has been found plagiarising various blogs for some of their more interesting stories. So just who are these "bloggers" and what are their motives? David Carnell finds out.

Blogs span the political spectrum

Probably one of the most popular blogs in the UK, Samizdata is also one of the most overtly political. Quoting from their site, they encompass "social individualists, libertarians, extropians, futurists, 'Porcupines', Karl Popper fetishists, recovering neo-conservatives, crazed Ayn Rand worshippers, over-caffeinated Virginia Postrel devotees, witty Frédéric Bastiat wannabes, cypherpunks, minarchists, kritarchists and wild-eyed anarcho-capitalists from Britain, North America, Australia and Europe". If some of those sound a little obscure then welcome to the world of political blogging – where every niche political belief is covered. Samizdata's intelligent and coherent approach to their work and devoted readers distinguish them from the crowd.

They also epitomise one of the purposes of blogging. Not only does it enable the minority to have a voice, but it allows all and sundry to tell them just what they think of it. Imagine Huw Edwards having a phone-in on the 10 o'clock news with no editing allowed and you're halfway there.

Political gossip is another area that is beginning to flourish in the "blogosphere". Bloggers such as Guido Fawkes and Recess Monkey pride themselves on sometimes churlish humour, sometimes dry satire, occasionally headline-grabbing stories, but on always being funny.

MPs join the blog bandwagon

Some political pros are now getting in on the act. MPs Austin Mitchell, Boris Johnson, Sadiq Khan and Sandra Gidley are just some offering their thoughts on topical issues (in accordance with party lines of course!) and updating readers with a sometimes less-than-fascinating account of their day-to-day activities.

Political blogging is now an established medium and one that will continue to grow and develop. The deadwood media had better watch its back.





Austrian Presidency: challenges ahead

Following the mixed results of the UK Presidency, the Austrian government took over at the helm of the European Union last month. Stephen Edwards explores whether Austria will fare any better.

2006 was a troublesome year for Europe. Years of work framing a new constitution were seemingly put to waste following the document's rejection by the voters of France and the Netherlands. The debate over European economic reform raged on, and little progress was made on major policy proposals.

The Austrian government, in charge until July, has found itself with a full in-tray. Much of its work will be dominated by the substantial institutional issues that have been engaging hearts and minds over the last twelve to eighteen months, particularly the future of the constitutional treaty.

Reviving the constitutional treaty

Two broad options are open to the Austrian government in this regard. On the one hand, it could abandon the treaty altogether, whilst on the other, it could try to renegotiate it by removing the more controversial clauses. The UK government seemed predisposed to the former path, no doubt motivated by domestic dislike of all things European. The Austrians, however, will take a different tack, with president Heinz Fischler already expressing his opinion that it would be a *"mistake to lie down meekly and allow the project of a constitutional treaty to perish"*.

Signs are that he may be able to make some progress as

ratification moves forward in other European countries. Whatever happens, the issue is likely to dominate the European summit of 15-16 June, although the Austrians will hope to have completed much of the preparatory work before this.

De-liberalising the Services Directive

The dominant policy debate over the last twelve months has been over the Services Directive. This proposal, which would in effect open up the internal market for the provision of services, has been the subject of heated discussion. This debate should be placed in the context of the long-running fissure between the Franco-German social model and the Anglo-Saxon neo-liberal tradition. The UK, falling into the latter camp, championed this dossier but to little effect; Austria, on the other hand, from its position on the other side of the spectrum, will be pushing for substantial amendments.

The European Parliament has already given the Austrians a helping hand, passing the proposal in February with substantial amendments, in effect removing many of the liberalising measures within the Directive and, in the words of the German rapporteur, turning it upside down. It will now fall to the Austrians to secure agreement on this new settlement both within the Commission and the Council.

So, a number of significant challenges lie ahead for the Austrian government as it begins its Presidency term of office. With the more eurosceptic Finns taking over in July, it will be hoping to make considerable progress.

It's party time

Aiming to promote a more eurosceptic image, David Cameron and the Conservatives intend to withdraw their party's affiliation with the EU's largest political grouping, the European Peoples Party (EPP) with 263 MEPs.

However, under Parliamentary rules, a European party must consist of a minimum of 19 MEPs from five different member states. So as they endeavour to promote policy of a less euro-friendly flavour, what other political forces are out there to welcome talks with shadow foreign secretary William Hague and his 27 Conservative MEPs?

The Civic Democratic Party (ODS)

Declares itself as "a liberal conservative centre-right party of a modern European structure". The main Czech opposition party, and arguably the most likely of the candidates, MEP leader Jan Zahradil met William Hague on 31 January in Brussels, although any serious talks are unlikely to occur until after the Czech elections in June this year.

Currently part of the EPP, they have 10 MEPs, are anti-constitutionalist, favour the common market and back reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

TB/LNNK and the Law and Justice Party (PiS)

A Latvian opposition party (four MEPs) and Poland's governing party (seven MEPs), are part of the right-wing "Union for Europe of Nations" (30 MEPs). Ideologically suited but perhaps politically untenable, the PiS support the death penalty and both groups have anti-gay policies.

Conservatives consult on future policy direction

Since becoming leader of the Conservative Party last December, David Cameron has set about re-branding it as a compassionate and modern Conservative party ready to lead a modern and compassionate Britain. Katie Wyglendacz outlines the measures he is taking to develop policy.

Part of this make-over requires policy development with deeper thinking in preparation for the next general election campaign. More substantial policies will replace the short sound bites that were the slogans of the last campaign which left people wondering exactly what they meant in practical terms.

Creative consulting

The start of this new policy development is the establishment of a range of policy groups. Headed up by leading party members, the groups will consult widely, engaging expertise from outside politics in a bid to develop sound ideas and will be free to think creatively about the vital issues that fall within their remit.

The **Social Justice Policy Group** aims to develop practical ideas to enable Britain's poor and underprivileged to climb the ladder from poverty to wealth. The group will be led by Iain Duncan Smith, with deputy chair Debbie Scott, chief executive of Tomorrow's People, a national charity with a 21-year track record of success in helping people experiencing a range of difficult social issues. This sensitive area of policy will be one where floating voters pay careful attention to party lines, so

developments here may prove crucial for the Conservatives in their bid to win more votes.

Sustainable growth

The **Quality of Life Policy Group** encapsulates key issues such as transport, housing, environment, energy and climate change. There is no hiding the direction of this group, headed by John Gummer, the former environment secretary, with his deputy Zac Goldsmith, the environmental campaigner and editor of the *Ecologist* magazine. Cameron, whilst acknowledging that there needs to be growth in the economy, insists that he is looking for sustainable growth.

The third group is the **Globalisation and Global Poverty Group**. This will be chaired by Peter Lilley, whose experience before becoming an MP was a decade spent working on aid and development projects mostly in Africa. Bob Geldof will be working in consultation with the group in an entirely nonpartisan role.



Baroness Perry, a former president of Lucy Cavendish College, vice-chancellor of South Bank University and chief inspector of schools, and former health secretary Stephen Dorrell MP are to head up the **Public Service Improvement Policy Group**, which will look at the whole of public service delivery in Britain.

In a bid to address the issue of **National and International Security**, there is a group dedicated to the subject, headed up by Dame Pauline Neville-Jones, a former chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee and one-time political director of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, whilst the deputy chair will be Lord King of Bridgwater, former Conservative defence secretary and ex-secretary of state for Northern Ireland, who also served as chairman of the Parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee.

Long-term thinking

Finally, the **Policy Group on Economic Competitiveness**, to be jointly chaired by John Redwood MP and Simon Wolfson, CEO of Next, will be undertaking long-term thinking to help Britain's competitiveness, improve productivity and look at whether Britain can benefit from a simpler tax system.

These groups will report in eighteen months' time and although they will not directly set Conservative party policy, the information gathered will be used to help inform the policy development process.

Watch this space for future party developments.

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