

Britain delivers damning verdict on Blair's 10 years

by Gaby Hinsliff via rialator - *Guardian Sunday, Apr 8 2007, 1:11pm*

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A remarkable picture of the way Tony Blair has lost the faith of British voters over his 10 years in power is revealed today by a comprehensive study of public attitudes towards the Prime Minister.



As Blair prepares to leave office, the poll of more than 2,000 adults shows that people believe the country is a more dangerous, less happy, less pleasant place to live. There was a negative response to nearly all of more than 40 questions the public was asked about trust in politics, how they felt about their own lives and whether public services had got better.

Despite some independent evidence that services have improved and the economy has performed well compared with other industrialised nations, the poll shows how damning the public's verdict is on Blair and his government.

The poll, carried out for The Observer for a special supplement on his decade in power, will increase concerns among Labour's high command that the party is facing electoral defeat in the crucial national elections in Scotland and Wales and the local elections in England next month. It could also mean that Gordon Brown, if he wins the subsequent leadership election, will be handed an almost impossible political legacy to deal with.

The poll reveals that almost half of voters consider the outgoing Prime Minister as out of touch, untrustworthy and overly concerned with spin, while 57 per cent think he has stayed in office too long. And despite the billions of pounds poured into health care, more than half rate the government's performance on the NHS as poor or very poor in a sign that even Labour's traditional strengths are becoming dangerously eroded.

The harsh verdict appears to quash hopes that Blair could bow out with the 'crowds wanting more' - as a now infamous leaked Downing Street memo suggested only last autumn - and will renew some Labour MPs' fears that anger with him is contaminating the image of the whole party. It will reopen questions about whether he should be fronting the current election campaign.

Friction is already setting in between supporters of Blair and Brown over who should carry the

blame for predicted heavy losses in the Scottish Parliament, Welsh assembly and English town halls on 3 May, with Brownite MPs warning that opposition parties are exploiting anti-Blair feeling on the stump.

'The big problem we have got on the doorstep in Scotland is the SNP and the Lib Dems, and the Tories going round hammering home the message "This is your last chance to give Tony Blair a kicking",' said one senior Brown ally.

The BPIX poll, giving the Tories an 11 per cent lead over Labour, was commissioned to test voters' overview of the Blair years and their impact on national life. It suggests voters remain unimpressed by years of public service reform and convinced, despite his controversial focus on antisocial behaviour, that Blair has been too soft on crime. Forty per cent considered him 'tired' and running out of ideas.

While just over a quarter rated the government's general performance under Blair as good or very good, 61 per cent disagreed that Britain was 'a more pleasant place to live' now than in 1997, 69 per cent thought it was more dangerous and 58 per cent disagreed that it was happier. On education, 45 per cent rated the government's performance as poor or very poor while 60 per cent thought the same on transport.

The poll holds little cheer for those hoping an alternative successor would do better than Brown in reviving New Labour. Asked who would best carry on Blair's work, the Chancellor came top with 35 per cent, with the young Environment Secretary David Miliband on 4 per cent and Charles Clarke with 1 per cent. Both potential rivals were less popular than the Tory leader David Cameron on 13 per cent, with even Labour voters preferring Cameron to Clarke.

Blair will campaign prominently this week in Wales and Scotland, signalling the party believes he is still an electoral trump card. 'At this election the key thing is to get your core vote out and the view is that the person who is able to get the core vote out in Scotland is him,' said one senior aide.

Loyalists also hit back. 'I have never heard anybody talk about the years before 1997 as the good old days,' said Alan Milburn, the former Labour party chairman. 'The story is no longer about leaking classrooms, falling standards, lengthening hospital waiting lists or a Britain unique in lacking a minimum wage. Prosperity is being spread, poverty being eroded and services have been improved. I have no doubt history will smile kindly on Tony Blair's 10 years.'

The poll suggests voters do think some communities benefited under Labour, with 51 per cent believing Britain is now a better place for ethnic minorities and 61 per cent that it is better for gays and lesbians. However, political scientists David Sanders and Paul Whiteley, analysing the poll for today's Observer, argue that for some this could actually be a negative, reflecting 'a belief that New Labour has "looked after them but not after people like me". Women, who were critical to sealing Labour's last three victories, were more likely than men to think Blair untrustworthy and say they liked him less than they used to. The Iraq war is seen as Blair's nadir, with 58 per cent judging it his biggest failure: almost two-thirds thought he had just followed America. His biggest success was the Northern Ireland peace process, followed by Bank of England independence.

The BPIX poll of 2,034 adults was taken from 16-19 March.

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