



TONY BLAIR'S ALLIANCE TO U.S. COULD COST HIM BRITISH ELECTION

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to support the United States by sending troops to Iraq is a top issue in Thursday's general election.

In the country's first general election since the Iraq war, voters will go to the polls to determine whether to keep Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party in office or elect the Conservative Party led by Blair's main opponent Michael Howard.

Blair has been trying to focus the nation's attention on issues such as the economy, jobs, health care and immigration, but lingering disapproval of his decision to back President Bush's invasion of Iraq keeps resurfacing.

"I think you have done a fantastic job of running this country, but foreign policy you need to look at really close up," Muslim voter Mohammed Jaffer told Blair during a campaign stop in the western city of Gloucester, the BBC reported.

"We have lost hundreds of lives, thousands of lives," Jaffer said. "We got the impression you were just following President Bush."

Blair's leadership

Tony Blair took office in 1997, when President Clinton was in the White House. He was re-elected in 2001 and has led the United Kingdom's government since. Queen Elizabeth is the official head of state of the monarchy, but her role is mostly symbolic.

As head of the Labour Party, Blair leads a coalition of smaller affiliated organizations including trade unions and other socialist groups that advocate government involvement in a democratic society. The party, similar to the Democratic Party in the United States, is considered to be slightly left of center on the political ideology scale.

The Conservative Party, sometimes referred to as Tories after the 17th-century political party from which it descended, and the Liberal Democrats make up the remainder of Britain's three-party system. Blair is the Labour Party's longest-serving prime minister in history.

But Blair's main Labour support base led mass protests against the war in 2003.

Blair's main argument for going to war, like President Bush's, was that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. That assumption was later found to be based on faulty intelligence, and some members of the Labour Party accused Blair of lying to the public.

One member of the British government called for Blair's impeachment and British cartoonists drew images depicting Blair as President Bush's poodle.

Blair denies lying to voters and has said his reasons for going to war were honest.

"I do not seek unpopularity as a badge of honor, but sometimes it is the price of leadership and it is the cost of conviction," Blair said at the height of the protests in 2003.

"And as you watch your TV pictures of the march, just ponder this: If there are 500,000 on that march, that is still less than the number of people whose deaths Saddam Hussein has been responsible for."

So far, 87 British soldiers have died in Iraq.

Thursday's vote

Despite the criticism, Blair is not expected to lose his seat. British polls show the prime minister's party ahead 42 percent to the Conservative Party's 29 percent. The Liberal Democratic Party has 21 percent.

But, a survey taken by MORI, a British market research company, shows the race tighter among registered voters who are expected to actually come out to the polls. According to the survey, Blair has a narrow 3 percent lead among definite voters.

On Monday, Blair warned that apathy could cost the Labour Party a third term in office. He unveiled a poster saying, "If one in 10 Labor voters don't vote, the Tories win."

-- *Compiled by Kristina Nwazota for NewsHour Extra*

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