

Wheels coming off

Gordon Brown is flailing as cabinet ministers quit.



One by one they fall. Ahead of local and European elections on Thursday June 4th, in which Britain's ruling Labour Party is expected to fare dismally, the cabinet of the prime minister, Gordon Brown, is cracking up. On Tuesday Jacqui Smith, the home secretary, said that she would resign, along with a pair of junior ministers. She was followed on Wednesday by another cabinet minister, Hazel Blears, who is responsible for local government. It seems almost certain that the chancellor of the exchequer (the finance minister), Alistair Darling, may also be gone from his job within days. During parliamentary questions on Wednesday the prime minister repeatedly refused to say that the chancellor would stay. All three ministers have been tainted by accusations of abuse of parliamentary expenses, but the government's unpopularity runs far deeper.

Might the prime minister be swept aside in their wake? Mr Brown is certainly in deep trouble, even if the resignations this week have largely brought forward news that was expected anyway. He had long planned to reshuffle his cabinet at the weekend, when the full extent of Labour's battering in the elections will become clear. Ms Smith was expected to leave soon, but the particular timing (just before the elections) and the nature of her resignation, even more so of Ms Blears, seem designed to cause Mr Brown the greatest discomfort. Ms Blears pointedly refused to say a good word about the prime minister as she resigned.

Mr Brown faces a dire situation. Opinion polls show the Labour Party to be less popular than at any time since polling began, in part because of rising unemployment and spreading economic gloom, in part because of weariness with a party that has been in office for a dozen years. It is possible that voters, using local and European elections as an easy way to punish the government, will push the ruling party into a historic fourth place on Thursday, behind the opposition Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP, a single-issue, anti-European party. Mr Brown himself is widely unloved in Britain, where voters consider him indecisive and a poor communicator, even though he has won some plaudits abroad for his response to the financial crisis and the global economic downturn.

To some extent the problems that Mr Brown faces this week are the fallout from failed earlier attempts by disgruntled Labour MPs to unseat him. Mr Brown took over from Tony Blair in 2007 without facing an electoral test, either in the form of a general election or in a party leadership contest. His star quickly waned and few thought that he could lead Labour to a fourth successive victory (the next election must be held by May 2010). But the economic crisis in 2008 temporarily bolstered his position: his decade of experience as chancellor under Mr Blair encouraged some to believe that he would be a strong leader in difficult economic times.

Yet Mr Brown may well hang on for some months yet. The prospects of anyone taking over from him before the next election still look slender. Although Alan Johnson, the affable health secretary, is considered a possible replacement if the job becomes available, it still appears unlikely that Mr Brown would choose to resign. Despite the ministerial resignations this week, it seems doubtful that anyone in the cabinet is yet ready to challenge Mr Brown's position as leader of the Labour Party. A faction in the party that is still bitter at Mr Brown's disloyalty to Mr Blair would like to see the current prime minister fall. But anyone who took over now would face enormous pressure for an early election, which the Labour Party would be expected to lose.

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