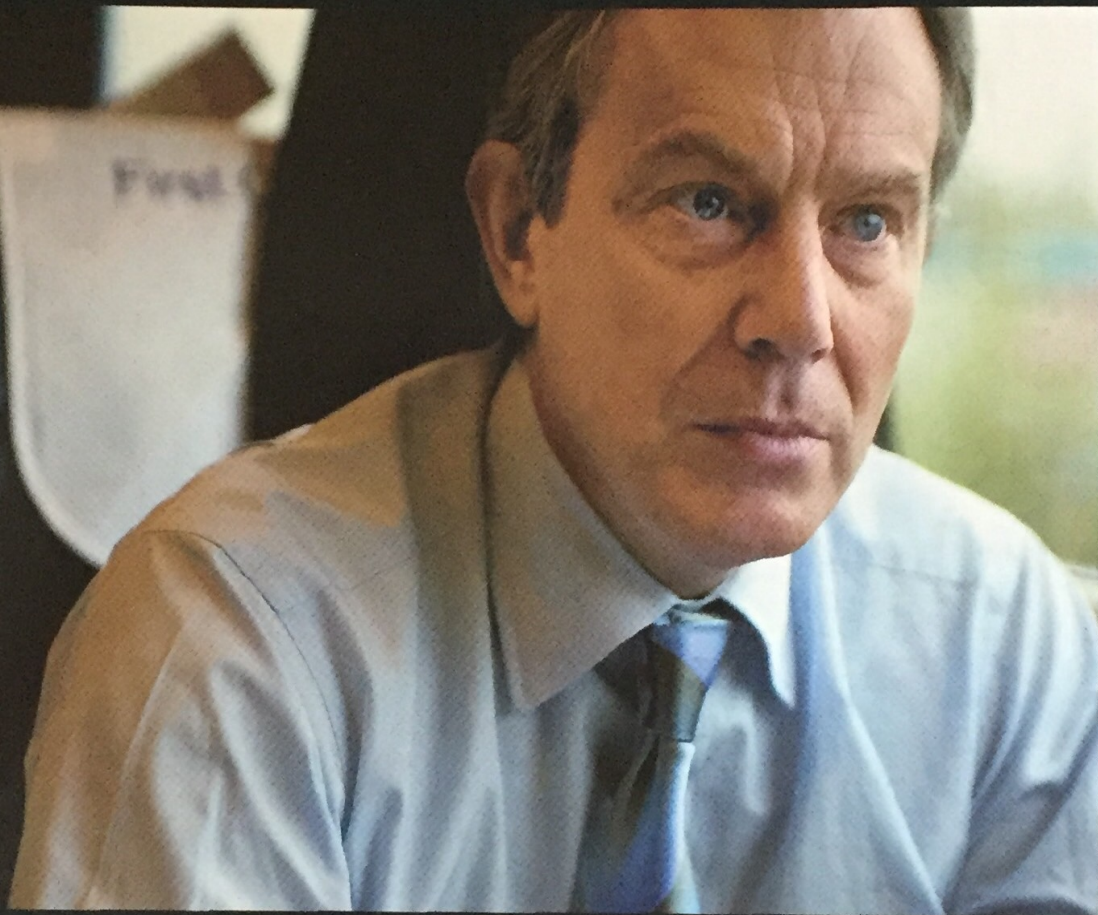


TIME

ELECTION SPECIAL

STAR WARS
THE DARK SIDE RISING



Don't Mention the War

As Tony Blair seeks a historic third term, Britain is prospering. Economic growth is strong, interest rates are low, even the hospitals and schools are starting to improve. But Blair's decision to invade Iraq turned many people against him. Why Brits don't trust Blair, but look set to vote for him anyway



THE LONG GOODBYE

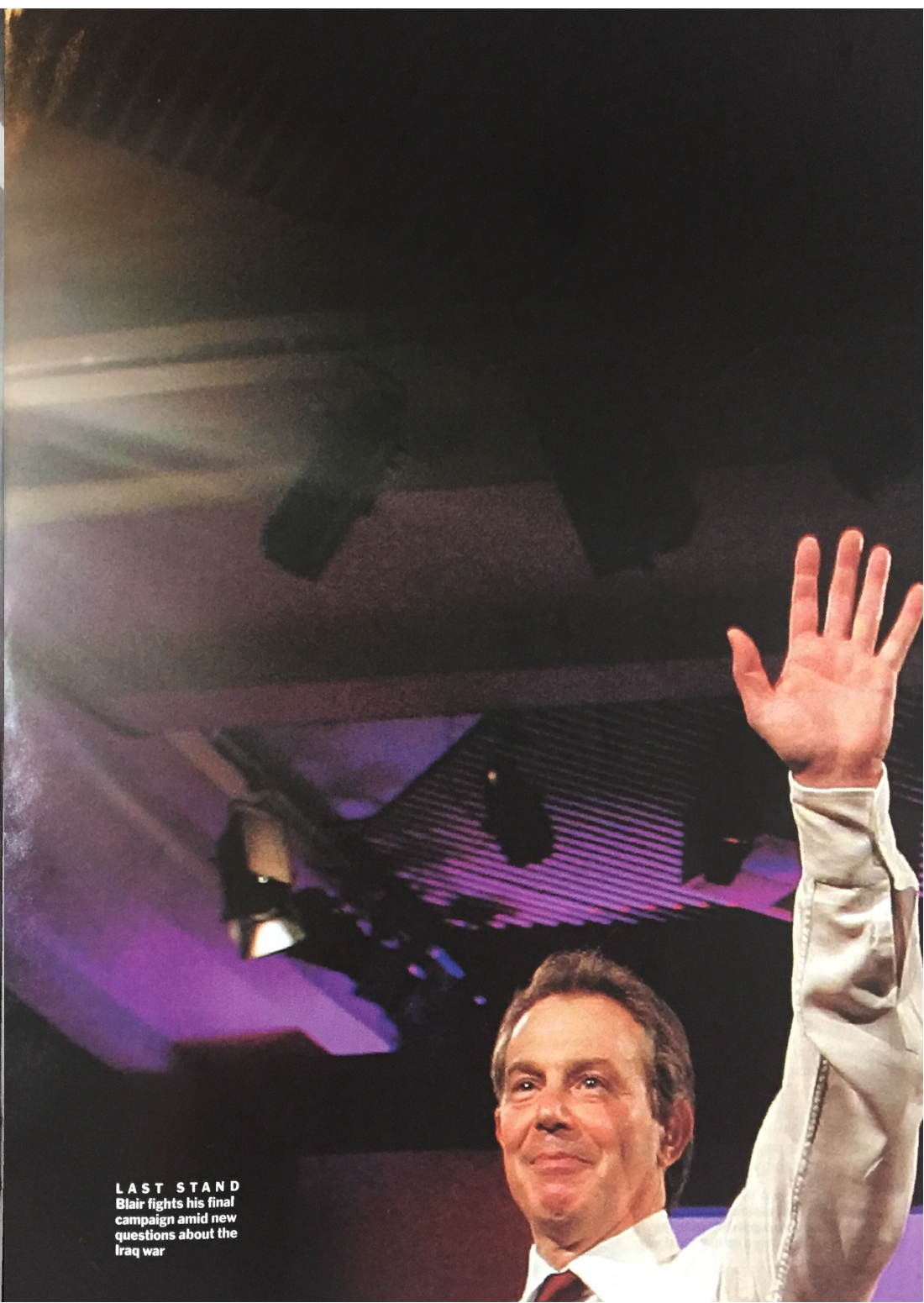
TONY BLAIR LOOKS SET TO WIN WHAT HE'S SAID WILL BE HIS LAST CAMPAIGN. BUT FOR MANY, THE IRAQ WAR HAS TARNISHED HIS LEGACY ■ By J.F.O. McAllister

AS THE BLOND, MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN WAS WALKING HOME one chilly evening recently in Lancaster, 330 km northwest of London, she saw Anne Sacks, the Labour candidate for Parliament, red rosette on her coat, doorstepping her neighbor. Not eager to hear another election sales pitch, she quickly opened her door, stepped inside, turned toward Sacks and smiled, saying: "I think Blair's a lying bastard. But I don't see the point of voting any other way, really." With another big smile, she closed the door.

If opinion polls are right, this encounter is a good proxy for the collective judgment millions of Britons will make

Photograph by Darren Staples—Reuters

LAST STAND
Blair fights his final campaign amid new questions about the Iraq war



this Thursday. That's when they decide whether to return Prime Minister Tony Blair for a third consecutive term in office, unprecedented for his Labour Party. And the signs are that they will do it, almost in spite of themselves.

On most counts, Blair has made a success of his first two terms in office. Britain is prosperous; employment rates are historically high and interest rates historically low. Only 10% of voters cite the economy as a worry. The country's hospitals and schools are starting to improve as Labour pledged when the party swept to power in 1997 and was re-elected in 2001. No great crises loom. Living standards have overtaken those in France, Germany and Japan, and a country whose gastronomy used to be the punch line to a bad joke now has wall-to-wall celebrity chefs—and *incroyable!*—the world's best restaurant.

The trouble for Blair, and for Labour, is that Britain's more affluent, sophisticated citizens have become political picky eaters. And they're fed up with the man in charge, angry that Blair took the country to war in Iraq for reasons many think he

war, he didn't even tell the truth on that." Blair is a "faker who has gone wrong," Howard told TIME.

Despite all that's gone right over the past eight years, Blair has been indelibly stained by Iraq. And that disaffection has seeped into the electorate's lengthening litany of domestic complaints about the government, from its ban on foxhunting to its detailed performance targets for teachers and doctors to its terror bill that sought powers for indefinite house arrest without trial. All these gripes, Blair's critics say, are the product of the Prime Minister's defects: arrogance, contempt for constitutional processes, and a willingness to bend the truth to get his way. Brits are among the most positive people in Europe in how they view their personal situation compared to five years ago, and in their expectations for the next five years, yet many of them feel nothing but disdain for the man who's presided over these good times. Even if he wins re-election as expected, Blair's relationship with voters has been permanently strained—and his legacy in voters' minds irreparably damaged.

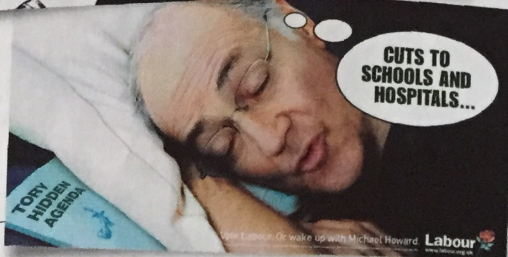
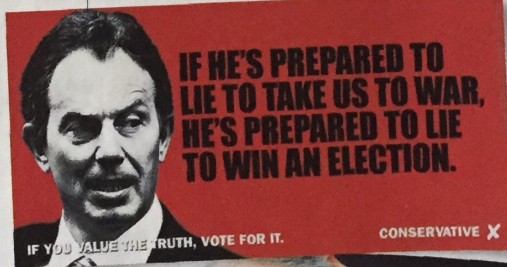
“On the one thing on which he has taken a stand, which is taking us to war, [Blair] didn't even tell the truth on that.” —MICHAEL HOWARD, Conservative leader

knowingly oversold. Last week, their ire was revived when a partial leak prompted the government to publish the Attorney General's 2003 opinion on the legality of the invasion, a document it had stubbornly refused to release for the past two years.

The Attorney General concluded that it would be legitimate to invade without a second U.N. resolution, but his assessment contained many caveats and worries that Blair's public statements glided over at the time. For many, the memo confirmed suspicions that the Prime Minister maneuvered things to keep the Cabinet, Parliament and the public in the dark. Conservative leader Michael Howard said bluntly that Blair “has told lies to win elections. On the one thing on which he has taken a stand, which is taking us to

POSTER WAR

The Tories, top, excoriate Blair; Labour, bottom, mocks Howard; the Lib Dems, right, try a gentler third way



30% and the Liberal Democrats' 23%. That would translate into a huge Labour majority of about 160 seats in the next Parliament, only one less than the current total. But when the survey is narrowed to those

certain to vote, the tally changes to a contest within the margin of error: 36% for Labour, 34% for the Tories, with the Lib Dems unchanged at 23%. While other polls are not so dire for Labour, its canvassers are greeted with enough grumpiness to worry that millions of their backers will stay home. “One lady told me she wouldn't vote Labour again because she had a problem with the night doctor service six months ago,” reports John Denham, an M.P. from Southampton. “It took me 15 minutes of conversation to bring her back.”

The MORI poll found that only 64% of Labour supporters are certain to

vote this week, compared to 80% of Conservatives and 73% of Lib Dems. In seats where the margin of victory is small, tiny variations in turnout could determine the outcome, which is why all three main parties have carefully targeted key constituencies.

A key Labour strategist says its central problem is “a temptation for people to take the election for granted, or make it a referendum on Labour by itself, rather than a real choice about the future between us and the Tories.”

As the campaign entered its final few days, both the Conservatives and the Lib Dems cranked up the pressure on Blair over Iraq, in line with polls showing that trust was his weakest link. Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy told TIME that the “effect of Iraq has been very corrosive for the government and for Tony Blair. Even when the government is performing in a perfectly decent way, there is this lingering doubt.” But will mistrust of Blair be enough to tip the balance against Labour?

THE TORIES HAVE RUN A CLEVER CAMPAIGN, fanning resentment that “hard-working people who play by the rules,” as Howard puts it, are being held back by a government contemptuous of the truth and fair play. They have spent millions identifying

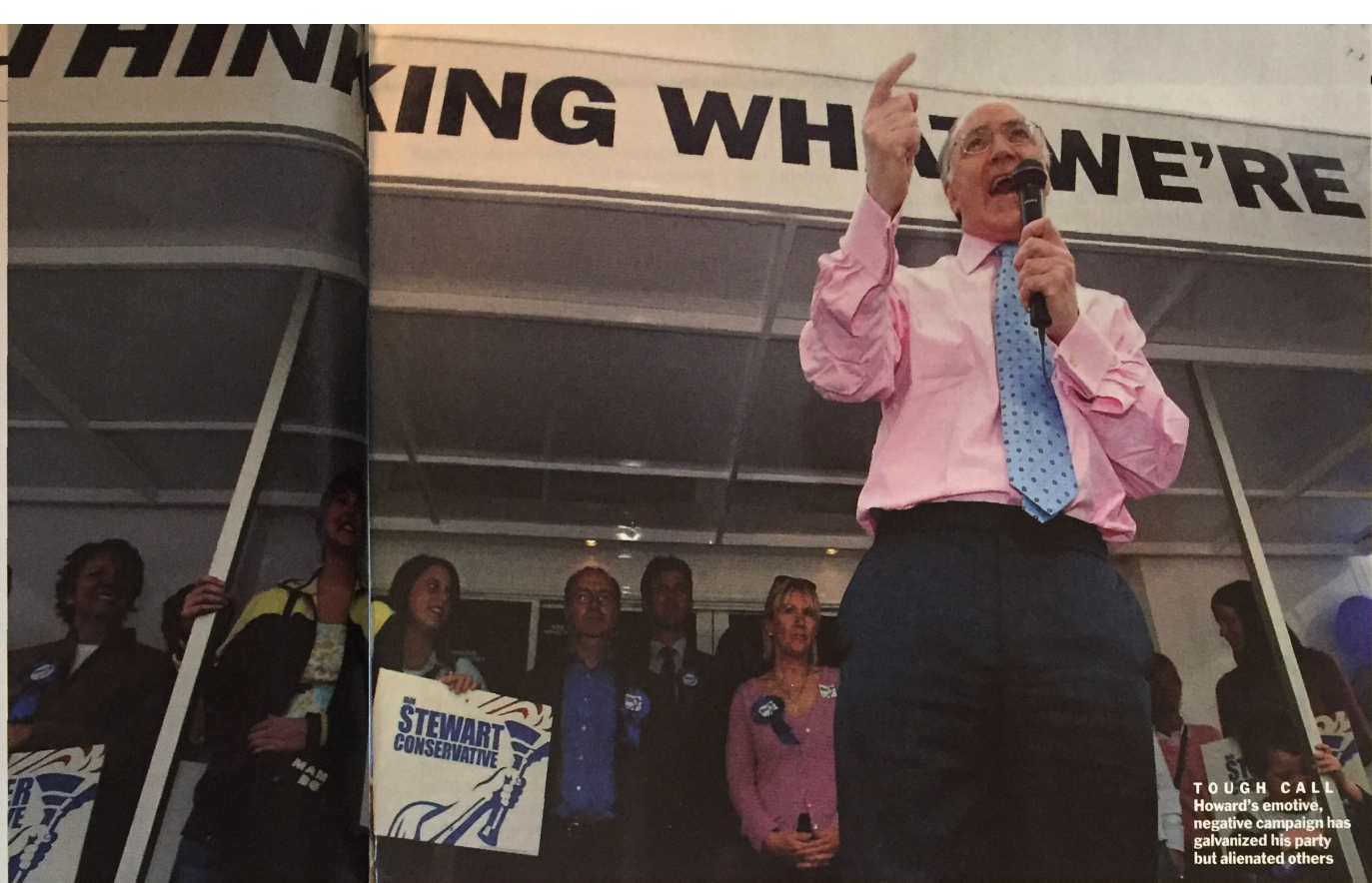


voters who are most susceptible to targeted appeals in marginal constituencies that teeter on a few hundred or a thousand votes. The Lib Dems are hobbled by Britain's “first past the post” electoral system, which makes it hard for a third party to win any individual seat even if its national support is high. But

they've achieved their best pre-election polls since the party began by aiming squarely at Labour supporters still burning about Iraq, including 1.6 million Muslims, who in some seats form a sizable bloc. In seats where they and the Tories are the

main contenders, Lib Dems encourage Labour supporters to vote tactically for them—and use the website www.tacticalvoter.net to arrange a vote swap with a Lib Dem who will vote Labour in a seat where that's the best chance for beating the Tories. Kennedy is making inroads among Labourites and swing voters who don't warm to the Tories but assume Blair's going to win anyway and want

to cut his majority down to size. That possibility, multiplied by millions, is what keeps the lights burning late at Labour headquarters. A sharply reduced majority might force Blair to resign quickly in favor of his heir apparent Gordon Brown, now Chancellor of the Exche-



TOUGH CALL
Howard's emotive, negative campaign has galvanized his party but alienated others

quer, who would also be hampered by a weakened parliamentary party. And it would certainly complicate Blair's remaining time in government. "Blair couldn't manage with a majority of 50 seats," worries one of his allies. "It requires a type of politics [consensual, deal-making] he has never played."

spot problems that may surface in a third term. Labour's pledge to revitalize the public services is a huge undertaking, requiring time-consuming training of teachers and doctors, hundreds of new buildings costing billions, and management and financial overhauls. Constrained by a fixation on keeping taxes low

insistence on more private money for universities, and for new hospitals that control their own finances outside the National Health Service, sparked rebellions by Labour backbenchers who believe the changes will promote inequality.

More depressing for Labour campaign managers: surveys show people haven't noticed the improvements that really have taken place since 1997. They're beginning to be satisfied with the policing, health care and education they receive in their own area, but think their personal good experience is a fluke—especially because newspapers can find plenty of individual horror stories. Last year pollsters put a series of "objectively uncontroversial" statements to a representative sample and found incredulity. "There is faster access to treatment in NHS hospitals"; only 35% believed it. "There are thousands more teachers working in our schools"; 34%. "The overall level of crime has fallen"; 29%. Yet all the statements are true.

That's why Iraq has potency beyond the 18% of people who consider it a "very important" issue in its own right. Blair has been Labour's ubiquitous brand image for 10 years. Now, with only 32% trusting him, his key political task of assembling disparate shards of favorable evidence about public services into a compelling account of national progress is easily drowned out by the din of people calling him a liar. Sighs one adviser at Labour campaign headquarters: "Our problem is Iraq and trust, and voters are going to punish us for it, and there's really nothing Tony can do to make it better."

It will still take a major upheaval for Michael Howard to sleep in Downing Street Friday night. Such has been the triumph of New Labour that the party of Margaret Thatcher remains on the defensive, its membership aging, unable to convince voters it has changed much since John Major was defeated in 1997. Labour now occupies the center so comprehensively that one of Blair's campaign themes has been to castigate the Tories for being like Labour in the 1980s, an ideologically pure rump unwilling to buckle down to the self-criticism needed to regain voters' trust. Brown even has the cheek to razz Howard's spending plans for lacking fealty to the Iron Lady. "No election program of Mrs. Thatcher would have contained such irresponsible promises," he harumphed—and such is Labour's record of fiscal probity that he got away with it.

The economy is one of Labour's electoral trump cards, but it's not difficult to

HARD PRESS
Labour struggled to get out its message over the din on Iraq



WAR SPOILS
By opposing the Iraq invasion, Charles Kennedy has helped the Lib Dems

“The effect of Iraq has been corrosive for the government and for Tony Blair.” —CHARLES KENNEDY, Lib Dem leader



by European standards—in 2003, 37% of GDP compared to 46% in France and 42% in Germany—progress has been slower than the fizzy expectations uncorked by Blair's first landslide. Among experts, there are serious arguments about whether Labour's favored formula of private financing coupled with detailed performance targets in the public services is getting good results or whether it distorts priorities and wastes money, as the Tories contend. Blair's

through a shopping center, shaking hands, joshing, asking for votes and getting some, before giving a brisk stump speech. In person, the 63-year-old son of a Romanian Jewish immigrant, a lawyer who rose quickly in the Conservative Party to become John Major's Home Secretary, is appealing and a decent campaigner. But his TV image is colder, like a bank manager or prosecutor, and his previous role as a hard-line, high-profile Tory minister reinforces the view that the party hasn't changed much. "The more people see him, the better it is for us," exults one Labour strategist. Only 36% consider him trustworthy, scarcely better than Blair's 32%. According to MORI, 53% think he's not ready to be Prime Minister.

Howard dislikes Blair personally; he once said, "Blair thinks he walks on water," and then, with a mirthless laugh, "No, he thinks he's God." But his campaign, though it's become bitterly personal at the end, has been precisely calculated. After listening to what bothered focus groups the most about Blair, the Tories devised five promises in 10 words—"lower taxes, school discipline, cleaner hospitals, more police, controlled immigration." These pledges have been endlessly repeated and carefully embedded in Howard's dark rhetoric about "the forgotten majority," who "have suffered in silence for the last eight years, and felt no one is on their side," and whose hard work "is not recognized or rewarded" by Labour. The ultra-right French National Front used the slogan *vous pensez ce que nous pensons*; the Tories, perhaps coincidentally, settled on *ARE YOU THINKING WHAT WE'RE THINKING?*

The red meat of grievance has energized Conservatives. Howard's plan to impose a tough annual cap on all immigrants, including asylum seekers, scored with Labour voters, too, even though the government had already ostentatiously toughened up in this area. For a while, the polls surged for the Tories, as voters' ears pricked up to their emotionally resonant issues, especially immigration. Their chief strategist, Lynton Crosby, likened their appeal to a dog whistle. But polls show the rest of the country has been turning off. Mark Penn, a U.S. pollster working for

Too Turned Off to Turn Out

Sarah Bruce does not consider herself to be apolitical, much less apathetic. The 28-year-old radio producer studied politics at university, cares passionately about environmental issues and maternity benefits, and voted in the U.K.'s general elections in 1997 (for Labour) and 2001 (for the Green Party). But now she doesn't respect any of the three major parties, and has no intention of going to a voting booth on May 5: "What's the point?"

Although their reasoning varies, millions of Britons will join Bruce this Thursday in not casting a ballot. A smaller and smaller percentage of Britons is taking the trouble to vote (see chart). At least two major opinion polling organizations forecast that turnout in this election will be the lowest in nearly a century. Nonvoting is an international phenomenon, but in Britain, the drop in votes from young women like Bruce has been especially striking. In the 1997 election that brought Labour to power, 64% of women between 18 and 24 voted, and 70% of those between 25 and 34; in 2001, those numbers plummeted to 46% and 56% respectively. Many young British men, too, decline

Not Interested

Overall voter turnout in British general elections



"active" or "rational" indifference; they argue that the chance of an individual vote affecting an election's outcome is so small that choosing to vote is itself an irrational act. Others believe that nonvoters may be responding to the fact that modern Western elections are largely decisions about technocratic competence; nonvoters correctly assume that winning candidates and parties will make largely the same choices as

those they defeat. Whatever the truth of those theories, they don't do a very good job of explaining why gender—alongside income and education—has become such a powerful dividing line between Britain's voters and nonvoters.

Proposals abound to make voting easier—Internet voting, SMS voting, voting by post—but it's far from proven that such methods actually boost turnout. A judicial report issued last month about two local elections in Birmingham that found "evidence of [postal] elec-

toral fraud that would disgrace a banana republic" has prodded police to issue special warnings—especially since requests for postal ballots in some areas are up to 20 times higher than in 2001. So politicians and nonvoters seem locked in a bind. Women don't vote in part because so few elected officials are women, which is in part because women don't vote. Politicians and parties use negative campaigning because it's effective; if that means that some people don't vote, so be it. Such cynicism only confirms what nonvoters like Fearn already think: "People are so naive that they'll vote one man in and he'll be the one to revolutionize everything. He'll fail at something and people will be disappointed, because that's what happens."

Political scientists differ in how they explain voter abstentions. Some speak of



ABSTAINER
Fearn says parties' cheap shots will keep her from voting this week

TONY STODART—GETTY IMAGES FOR TIME

By Jim Ledbetter. With reporting by Jessica Carsen/London

Where the War Is Still Raging

Bethnal Green and Bow is one of the poorest constituencies in Britain, and backed Labour with a 10,000-plus majority in the last election. But incumbent M.P. Oona King is fighting for survival. One issue has shaken the political kaleidoscope in this multi-ethnic area of east London: Iraq. Police were called in to protect candidates after George Galloway, whose Respect party is running on an anti-war ticket, was threatened by Muslim extremists and King, who supported the war, was pelted with eggs.

Galloway, a former Labour M.P. for Glasgow, founded his Respect party and chose to contest a constituency where 40% to 50% of the electorate is Muslim precisely because he wants to create a stir and capitalize on his antiwar credentials. He was a frequent visitor to Iraq and in 1993 laid a wreath at the shelter where 300 were killed by a U.S. bomb. In 1994, he greeted Saddam in the name of "many thousands" of antiwar Britons. He was expelled from the Labour Party in October 2003 after comments that included advising British troops to refuse to obey "illegal orders" to fight.

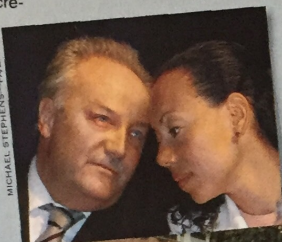
But in Bethnal Green he hadn't reckoned with al-Ghuraaba, an apparent offshoot of a disbanded radical Muslim youth organization, which denounces voting as un-Islamic and, Galloway says, threatened his life. Galloway was forced to retreat to his car after youths disrupted a tenants' meeting he was holding. King, too, has been intimidated. The daughter of a British Jew and a black American civil-rights activist, she was pelted with eggs and had her tires slashed when she attended a memorial for Jewish war dead. She and Galloway first blamed each other for inflaming the situation, but later tried to defuse it.

Bethnal Green is one of around 10 constituencies across the country with large Muslim populations where Iraq is still a raw, immediate issue rather than just another reason to distrust Tony Blair. The turmoil around Galloway and King has encouraged challengers to step up their campaigns. Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats are fielding Bengali candidates in a constituency where some 30,000 voters trace their origins to Bangladesh. "Oona took it for

granted that people would vote Labour," says Mohammad Belal Ahmed, chief editor of the Bengali Surma News Group, whose headquarters is in the constituency. "She was arrogant. She should have consulted before she voted for the war, or at least she could have abstained."

Galloway—or Gorgeous George as he is known, thanks to his expensive suits and big cigars—intends to capitalize on sentiments like that. He strolls along the streets, refusing to respond to the abuse of one white man who calls him a "F—ing traitor!", greeting robed women outside a school with "Salaam alaikum," and muttering "Respect" to black youths, who enjoy the street cred of his party's name. "I'll vote for him," says Gulamali Yussuf, a 45-year-old shopkeeper. "He has always been solid in whatever he has said and done."

Yet the war is by no means the only issue in this deprived, high-unemployment area, which has housed waves of immigrants since the 17th century. In a launderette full



MICHAEL STEPHENS/PA-REX/PHOTOS

WAR ZONE
Galloway and King, inset, are fighting for Bethnal Green's Muslim votes



TOM HARRIS/ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES

of suspicious white people, Galloway is challenged to address some key concerns. "What can you do for us?" manager Angie, who refuses to give her surname, asks aggressively. Galloway talks of how he will fight poor schooling and the drug scene, and the "privatization of housing" that he claims will push out long-term residents. "I'm a working people's champion debater and I could be a champion for you," he says.

Meanwhile, the Conservative candidate—Shahagiri Bakht Faruk, a long-time local resident and small businessman—is canvassing a run-down local-authority block full of Bengali immigrants. "Galloway is here to [politically] exploit these people," says Faruk. "He does not know this area." The truth is, as editor Belal Ahmed remarks, "it won't be an easy ride for any of the candidates." —By Helen Gibson/London

Labour, says Howard's harsh language, especially his recent venomous attacks on Blair, have "appealed to his base but appalled the rest." Immigration is the only issue where Howard leads in the polls; on the economy, education, health, taxation and terrorism, Blair is ahead. Chris Patten, former Conservative Party chairman and to the left of its current leadership, observes, "When I whistle for my dog, I don't find that a lot of others come, too."

Kennedy, the Lib Dem leader, has tried instead to sing a song of sweet reason. Affable and calm, refusing to "go negative" on Blair or Howard, he attracts voters impatient with political mud wrestling while his manifesto zeroes in on Labour's sore points: advocating more control of the Health Service by front-line doctors, repealing tuition fees, free nursing-home care for the elderly, all financed (maybe) by an explicit tax hike on the rich. As Iraq continues to bubble, Kennedy's ace is having opposed the war from the start, unlike Blair and Howard.

IN THE BACK OF THE PRIME Minister's motorcade going from Swansea to Cardiff, Alastair Campbell is talking fast. Blair's longtime champion and message guru is dictating ideas to an aide in London for a press release denouncing Howard, who earlier that day had said Britain's handgun laws were too tough. "It should say 'rank opportunism ... and irresponsibility!'" he shouts into the cranky mobile phone. In the back seat, Philip Gould, Blair's veteran pollster, is phoning to arrange the final touches on a presentation to Blair about the state of public opinion. Campbell and Gould are the dynamic duo of Blair's previous victories, back with their well-known moves: rapid rebuttal, daily polls and focus groups, rigorous attention to keeping Blair positioned in the center.

Except, this time, the apathy of Labour voters seems impervious to their charms. One long-serving Blair aide likens them to generals fighting the last war. In 1997 and 2001, winning swing voters was key. But "the evidence has been saying for a while that Labour's battle this time wasn't going to be swing voters but turning out the disaffected working-class vote, who aren't alienated so much from

Labour but from politics generally," he says—as well as Muslim voters who have little incentive not to defect. "This adds up to a different kind of battleground that they haven't seemed to grasp."

Labour has chosen two key issues on which to fight: a pledge of continued economic growth and further improvements to public services. "The answer to the trust question is to show Blair has done his job and Labour has delivered," says a campaign strategist. And the party has shoved an avalanche of attractive policies onto the airwaves—increased maternity leave, help to a million home buyers, refurbishing all secondary schools. Labour has telegenic young ministers to sell its substantial accomplishments—a minimum wage for the first time (now \$9.20 an hour), a million more homeowners since 1997, two million more people at work, 28,000 new teachers, 13,000 more police, a doubling of foreign aid. But as one minister ruefully admits, "We often speak in the language of targets and delivery, which is an important discipline within government, but it doesn't always engage and inspire disaffected electors."

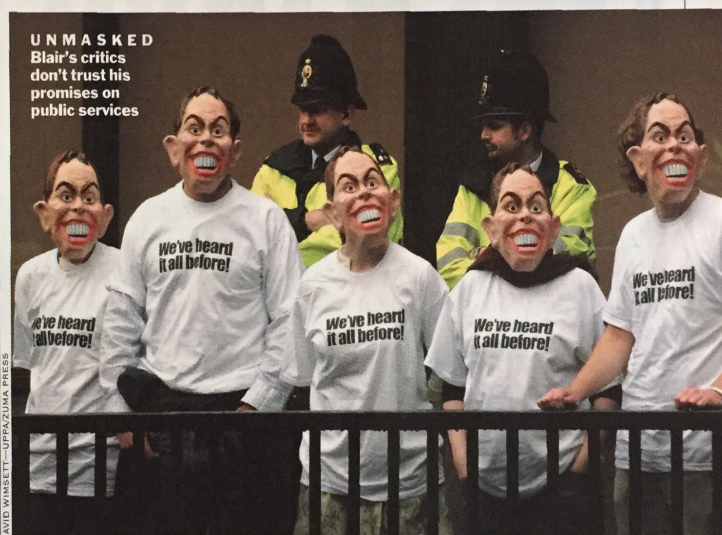
This campaign has tried to tug at apathetic Labour heartstrings with a threat—Howard—and a two-word walking promise: Gordon Brown. He is widely expected to tack left after replacing Blair sometime during the next term, and already polls higher than Blair for "most capable Prime Minister" (41% to 33%). Their interminable rivalry has been patched up and the two now are campaigning together, straining to get a big majority. A London Labour voter who told a party canvasser he was disappointed with Blair says the canvasser "immediately brought up Brown and mentioned his name three more times in about 30 seconds."

So where does that leave Blair, as he faces voters for the last time? He has certainly weathered on the job, but despite the drain of Iraq he remains "upbeat," according to an old friend. A civil servant in his orbit calls him "the best politician we have, very impressive." His self-confidence is striking. He waves away briefings with "I can handle it," and he usually can, though his instinct for handling people isn't always matched by attention to the grubby details of policy. That confidence is a bulwark of his political power, at home and internationally. A TIME/CNN poll shows that 60% of Britons consider Blair a "strong leader," even though 51% consider him dishonest. Half of French people consider him strong, too, and despite Ger-

mans' deep aversion to Blair's Iraq policy, they trust him as much as they do their own Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder.

But Blair is growing less patient, even as voters grow impatient with him. "He's more self-absorbed, as they all become," says a long-time adviser; and more alone. Many of his original band of aides have departed Downing Street. "The demands are intense and he gets frustrated about not being able to get things done," says the adviser. Another veteran aide thinks Blair is looking to become a kind of chief executive uncon-

that the day when Brown will take charge is advancing. Paradoxically, the man leading Labour to a likely third and unprecedented victory may have little time to add to his achievements. So we may see Blair hurrying to make a mark on aid to Africa at the July G-8 summit in Scotland, or in peace negotiations in the Middle East or Northern Ireland. Of course, Blair will not want to be seen as being forced out, but he's not addicted to Downing Street. One veteran aide says "he still has another big job in him," and another has said for years that Blair never wanted to stay beyond 10 years in office.



DAVID WISSETT—UPFAX/PA PRESS

strained by politics, able to drive through reforms more radical than he was willing to venture when re-election loomed. But the aide also wonders "if Blair's quite worked out what are his wellsprings of new energy. He spends too much time dealing with professionals in suits and ties, who aren't the ones who renew him. He already seems a bit detached. He's quite an intuitive politician; he needs a different kind of connection to pick up on the next stage of the story." What, like living on a sink housing estate for a few weeks? "That's not a bad idea."

Re-election, if it comes, will not restore the affection Blair felt from his countrymen before Iraq; more like the modus vivendi of an errant spouse returning home for the sake of the children. At campaign headquarters, even Blair's stalwarts admit that the pummeling on Iraq has hurt, that victory on Thursday will not clean the slate—and

Besides his undoubted political triumph of remaking Labour and leading it to three terms, what will his legacy be? Of the scores of worthy plans in Labour's manifesto, from raising the school-leaving age to funding more R&D, none is particularly visionary; there are no calls to greatness that might engage the country on a new level.

But perhaps that's the point. If Labour wins this week and the government's improvements in public services pay off, Blair will have given his more affluent, less deferential, more demanding citizens what they seem to want. Instead of schools with outdoor toilets—there were more than 600 of them in 1997—they want modern ones with enough teachers, health care on a par with the rest of Europe's, trains that run on time, and the right successor: Gordon Brown. To deliver that will be no mean achievement. The question is, will Blair be remembered kindly for it? ■