

Just what did send voters over the edge?

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The election that wasn't; the nationalisation of Northern Rock after much dithering; the tax assault on entrepreneurs, rich and not-so-rich foreigners, and low-income 10p taxpayers; renegeing on the manifesto promise to hold a referendum on the new EU constitution. The list goes on, and none of it really explains why Gordon Brown and no-longer-New Labour are struggling.

The real reason, and the reason why the Prime Minister might not be able to bail out his sinking ship, is to be found in the tipping point. Think back to the days when New Labour burst on the scene. It did very much the same thing it is doing now, to wild applause, and not all of it was because of Tony Blair's communication skills. It raised taxes, stealthily to be sure, but moved them upwards rapidly.

Brown then turned the spending spigots on, again to the applause, or, if not the applause, then the acquiescence of a public that felt that public services had been held on too short a leash by the Tories. And he rolled back the market-oriented reforms of Margaret Thatcher, replacing them with targets and centralised control, while Tony Blair spluttered in impotent rage. This was generally approved of by a public that was willing to forget the reform-first, spend-later pledges of New Labour.

Meanwhile, Blair and Brown unleashed a flood of immigration. Blair felt good all over from his espousal of ecumenical multiculturalism and wanted to burnish

the European credentials that he felt had been tarnished by his Chancellor's refusal to scupper the pound in favour of the euro. Brown wanted to keep wages and inflation low by importing a low-paid workforce to replace British workers who found his stay-on-the-couch benefits more attractive than a day's work. And never mind the consequences.

At the same time, they spun a web of politically correct constraints around the police that made it safer to arrest a child for troussearing a Mars bar than to pursue burglars or murderers, the latter emboldened by the certainty that even if caught, their period as guests of Her Majesty would be limited by cell shortages.

And yet Labour coasted to election triumph after triumph, despite being led by a man whom voters felt had taken the nation into a war under false pretences, and who was entirely too chummy with George W Bush, a President they regarded with even greater contempt than Ronald Reagan. Not all of New Labour's victories could be attributed to the unpopularity of a Conservative Party that had yet to strike a balance between its adherence to historic principles and the facts of modern life.

Meanwhile, the Government critics wondered: why are voters willing to go along with policies that were not producing the improvements in their lives that the new taxes should have brought? The answer is that voters will tolerate a long descent to a tipping point, where they feel



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even enjoined them to hug-a-hoodee, although not in so many words. But then came a tipping point in the rise of knife-wielding ferocious teenagers taking random violence to a level that one mother tells me has her kissing her children goodbye every morning before school because "I don't know whether I will see them again". All the while, the police are deployed to make certain that patrons of discos do not shout, or even whisper, anti-gay, anti-black or anti-Muslim remarks.

After a decade of submission, a tipping point has been reached: the very people who were willing, reluctantly perhaps, to watch crime rise, and see criminals released early because the Chancellor refused to fund an adequate number of prison places, have had enough. They won't take it any more.

Yes, the state of the economy contributes to the Government's unpopularity. Gordon Brown claimed that the decade of low unemployment which was due in part to the flight from jobless rolls to disability benefits, low inflation and decent economic growth was manufactured in No 11 Downing Street.

So it is understandable that short shifts is given to his claim that the rise in unemployment, the fall in house prices, and the soaring costs of food and fuel were made in the US with the sub-prime mortgage crisis, and in China, thanks to rising demand for petrol and food. Live by the prosperity sword, die by the recession sword. Attention now

focuses on the inability of the Government to loosen fiscal policy to stimulate the economy. After all, Bush, the intellectually challenged Texan from whom Brown so pointedly distanced himself at their first meeting, had both cut taxes and kept the deficit to about one third of the tax-raising United Kingdom.

The result is that US authorities can afford a stimulus package to fight the slowdown, involving mailing cheques to taxpayers, while the flood of red ink drowning Alistair Darling puts the entire burden of recession-fighting on the Bank of England. Unlike the US Federal Reserve Board, it has no mandate to do anything of the sort.

So when Gordon Brown's advisers grope for ways of using the two years left before a general election to extricate the Government from its difficulties, they have to ask the right question. What were the tipping points that brought us low, and how can we retreat from them in a significant way? As the £2.7 billion tax fix, class warfare in Crewe and the PM's pledges to get on with the job demonstrate, tinkering won't matter.

Only a drastic rollback of the frontiers of the state - on taxes, spending and intrusive regulation - can set in motion a pull-back from the tipping points that Labour has arrived at. It is not a U-turn of which this Prime Minister is capable.

Comment on Irwin Stelzer's view at >> telegraph.co.uk/personalview