

The Daily Telegraph

City: MONDAY VIEW:

Brown knows that Labour won by just 13,515 votes

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890 words

10 September 2007

The Daily Telegraph

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English

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POLITICS, like business, can be reduced to a bottom line, or a handful of figures - whether it is the latest exam statistics or Gordon Brown's

yo-yoing poll lead. So here are

some more.

Take 13,515. This figure is highly significant because it is the actual size of Labour's majority at the last general election.

Put another way, if this number of people - about the same as the population of a small town - had voted differently, then Tony Blair, with just 322 out of 646 seats, would have been in charge of a minority government.

Mr Blair - and now Mr Brown - would have had to persuade the Liberal Democrats to join the Government to get a majority. In return the Lib Dems would have probably bagged a couple of high-profile posts as the price for joining a coalition. Imagine what might (not) have happened, say, if Sir Ming Campbell or Vince Cable had been around the Cabinet table when the Government was considering dropping the Serious Fraud Office's probe into the Saudi arms deal.

To find these 13,515 people you have to search in 33 constituencies across Britain, from Crawley (which Labour won by 37 votes) to Dorset South (a relatively comfortable 1,812 majority). Labour's 64-seat majority from the 2005 election might seem to be respectable, but, as Rob Hutton from Bloomberg points out, many of these are held by wafer thin margins.

Labour knows it is potentially in a precarious situation electorally. At Labour's pounds 200,000 convention in Manchester earlier this summer, where Mr Brown was "crowned" Prime Minister, a 6ft high poster in the entrance to the hall said: "One million voters will decide the next election." In fact, as Mr Brown will know, it is a lot less than that.

Councils are finally starting to treat us like shareholders

SLOWLY it seems that our local councils are getting a bit more business-like. Tomorrow morning councillors from Barnet will be in the City of London trying to whip up support for an innovative bond to help them raise hundreds of millions of pounds to pay for local schools, as well as Barnet's section of London's North Circular road.

That comes after a quango called 4Ps (which stand for Public Private Partnerships Programme) published a booklet called *The Estate We're In*, which estimated that pounds 52bn of our money is tied up in offices and other accommodation for local authority staff across England.

The tips in its guide seem pretty obvious: consolidate existing buildings to one main hub, adopt flexible working and accept what it describes as "internal cultural changes".

This last point could be the trickiest, but 4Ps - and **Barnet council** - are on the right lines. Council tax payers are like shareholders. We have a right to expect our councils to look at alternative ways to pay for our local services, especially with big increases likely around the corner.

Surely it's no surprise that sweatshops exist. How else would prices be so low?

SHOCK! Horror! Clothes which are very cheap in our high street shops are probably made in grim factories in the Far East. Some newspapers have been getting very surprised by this revelation, but it really should be no surprise.

Loyal readers might recall my own Kettle and Toaster Index, which showed how one retailer was selling them for pounds 49.90 12 years ago, and just pounds 19.95 today. This was the result of low cost manufacturing in the Far East.

Cheap clothes are no different. High street retailers might tell us that they are doing all they can to ensure that their subcontractors in Bangladesh, India and China pay their staff a living wage. That might ease our consciences.

But the simple and sad truth is that as long as you or I can buy a pair of pants for the price of pair of Mars Bars, then someone else is going to have to pay the price.

In this case, it is the poor unfortunate who stitched them together in a grim sweatshop thousands of miles away.

'Happy slapping' row shows why politics is easier than business

ON the same day that Conservative leader David Cameron was criticising websites that glorify violence, Google offered a suitably libertarian defence of its decision to continue to air street gang videos on its YouTube website.

Rachel Whetstone, Google's head of European communications, told ITV News: "We think that those videos are a reflection of what is going on in society today.

"There are some of those gang videos that we remove and some of them that we don't. We look at them very carefully when they are flagged and we review them."

Which just goes to show that while politicians can talk, and talk, and talk, businesses have to be rather more pragmatic when considering unilateral bans.

Even if the company's spokesman is a former chief of staff to Mr Cameron's predecessor, the partner of Steve Hilton, Mr Cameron's image guru, and godmother to one of Mr Cameron's children.

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