

Government in turmoil

'I have never seen the public so incensed'

On the ground

Voters are going to the polls amid unprecedented hostility to politicians, write FT reporters

The sun shone on Gordon Brown's constituency of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath yesterday, but the voters' attitude to the prime minister was chilly.

"Chaos," was how Dave Kay, a constituent, characterised the political turmoil. He thought the premier would step down and be replaced by Alan Johnson – "He seems to go down well with the public."

Soundings taken by the Financial Times in four constituencies showed that public anger against politicians is running as high as ever, in spite of resignations and proposals to reform parliament.

The cosy sense of entitlement that some MPs felt in claiming money for everything from mortgages to bath plugs has been judged damningly by Britons

scraping by on modest incomes.

Yvonne Fraser, a school cleaner who lives in Tyne-mouth called for the offenders to be "shot" and then "sacked", which denoted passion if not logic. She said: "I get £73 a week for working for 11½ hours." The £13,000 that Labour MP David Chaytor claimed towards his mortgage was, she said, "three years' wages for me". It had taken her 25 years to buy her council house.

Tony Doyle, a fire officer in the Salford constituency of Hazel Blears, who resigned yesterday in a move interpreted as hostile to Mr Brown, said: "I have never seen the public so incensed."

His view on Ms Blair's manipulation of the second homes system was that: "She knew it was wrong but they were all at it."

Mr Doyle said he was forced to underclaim his mileage expenses because his employer was so strict. Dorothy Ritchie, a Tyne-mouth housewife, jokingly advised against asking her husband Bob about MPs' expenses because he was so angry about it. "They're in

it for what they can get out of it and they don't think of what the people on the shop floor want," was Mr Ritchie's verdict.

"They are greedy", said his wife, citing Jacqui Smith's 89p bath plug.

In Redditch, the FT interviewed 12 of Ms Smith's neighbours. She stood down as home secretary on Tuesday but plans to contest the constituency she holds with a skinny majority of 2,716 at the next election. Most wanted Mr Brown to resign and a general election to be called swiftly.

Across the country there is strong desire for a clear-out of Parliament that will deprive disgraced MPs of further wages. The Labour leadership is seen as a secondary problem. Fewer people have an opinion on it. Even in his current dire straits, the UK's unelected prime minister does not arouse strong feelings.

Bees manage their affairs better than the Labour party according to Adam Isherwood, who was tending his beehives a few doors down from the address where the fabled bath plug presumably still lurks. Comparing Mr Brown to a

Diversion cheers small businesses

The crisis engulfing British politics appears to be welcome news for small business owners, writes Jonathan Moules.

"It is the best thing ever," said Simone Schehtman, co-founder of Teamworks Karting, a race track operator based in central Birmingham.

This curious stance reflects the belief that, with the headlines no longer dominated by companies going bust or rising unemployment, consumers will be in a better mood to drive a recovery.

Last Christmas was one of the worst for Teamworks in a decade of trading. Although the business has avoided job losses, other cuts have been necessary.

Ms Schehtman said while business confidence has turned a corner in the past few weeks, this is not because of any action taken by the government.

Business owners might complain about the headaches the government creates for wealth creators, such as raising business

rates or removing taper relief on capital gains tax, but few believe the current political ructions have any direct commercial effect on them.

"Business people are very practical and will carry on regardless," said Stephen Alambritis, spokesman for the Federation of Small Businesses.

The expenses scandal has raised business hackles in another respect. Jo Cameron, who runs Coventry-based training company High Performance Academy, said she was "outraged" about what is going on in Westminster.

"As a small business, there are penalties if we do not pay what we owe others," she said.

Another by-product of the political crisis is that it could be preventing better news about the economy from trickling through, according to Mr Alambritis.

"We may be pleasantly surprised when the expenses debacle subsides to find that the recession is not getting any worse."

queen bee gone wrong, he said: "The colony would quietly replace him, or sting him to death."

Alison Robinson – a retired Redditch librarian, who was walking up the street with her nose in a book – said: "We need a general election soon. Public faith in parliament has been badly shaken."

Ms Robinson, a Tory voter, said Mr Brown had been outflanked by party leaders who handled errant MPs more toughly. But even Conservative leader David Cameron had faced difficulties in "knowing where to draw the line".

In Tynemouth, casino croupier Stewart Thompson, who was busy painting his house, said Mr Brown should not resign but face a general election to prove himself. "He has made the mess," Mr Thompson said.

Invited to spin a virtual election wheel, Mr Thompson thought Labour would get back in.

Ms Robinson and Mr Isherwood believed that parties needed to lose some rigidity to create a more democratic parliament. "There are opportunities to be grasped," Ms Robinson

said. "At the moment the cabinet expects to get its own way and, as a result, the whip is used too much."

Mr Isherwood, a would-be LibDem councillor, believes 20 per cent of parliamentary seats should be reserved for independent MPs.

The sense that the main parties are all up to their piggy ears in the expenses scandal looks certain to help smaller parties in today's council and European elections. In Kirkcaldy one Scottish National Party activist, who declined to be named, said he could not believe how well the scandal over expenses at Westminster had played into the hands of his party. "If we held a referendum on independence now, I believe we would win it," he said.

George Percival, an engineer fixing the telephone lines in Tynemouth said he had voted Socialist Labour by post in the Euro elections. Carolyn Elliott, a care worker chatting to a friend outside Ms Smith's house in Redditch, was planning to defect from Labour to the Green party.

In Salford a 25-year-old joiner who was walking his pit bull dog, said: "It is time

for a change, time for someone else." He would not say who he was thinking of voting for. Such reluctance to declare voting intentions is sometimes interpreted as support for the far-right British National Party, an affiliation that dares not always speak its name.

Mike Morris, manager of the Redditch Trades & Labour Club, a big white building near Ms Smith's house said: "Many people who use this place will vote BNP, not to get them into power, but to annoy the main parties". Mr Morris, a Ukip supporter, said the economic situation in Redditch was "very bad". "There are too many immigrants, particularly Poles."

Across the street, Prezemek Nowak, a tattooed young Pole was washing his souped-up BMW. He laughed when asked what he thought of UK politics. The problem, he said, was not that British politicians were corrupt – so were politicians all over the world. The problem, he said, was that they were incompetent.

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