

Back to school Our writers return to their classrooms

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Oscar Wilde
Was he
really a
crashing
bore?

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Marco
Pierre White
Exclusive
weekly recipe
– steak au poivre with oysters
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Newspaper of the year

Lawyers poised as US vote hit by technical glitches

Third of electorate use
controversial machinery

Early indications of high
turnout in close contests

Julian Borger Washington
Ed Pilkington Evansville, Indiana

Americans turned out yesterday to decide who will control Congress for the last two years of the Bush era, closely watched by poll observers and thousands of lawyers from both parties ready to step in to the fray if the results were close.

More than a third of the electorate voted on new electronic machinery, and anxiety about the experiment in computerised democracy was evident from the beginning as reports came in of glitches.

In Florida, there were complaints that touchscreen computers had wrongly recorded voters' choices and Democrats called for the machines to be impounded. In parts of Indiana and Ohio, computer problems meant polling stations failed to open on time, with voters being turned away or given paper ballots.

"It's an unmitigated disaster," said Warren Stewart, the political director of VoteTrustUSA, a watchdog organisation that is deeply sceptical about the introduction of electronic voting. "There is no way to overestimate the problems. I was expecting it to be bad, but not this bad."

It was unclear how many voters were affected. Any suggestion of a malfunction or fraud in the many close races for the House of Representatives, Senate or governorships was expected to spark a legal challenge in an election fought against the backdrop of a divisive and unpopular war.

The Democrats were seeking to win control of Congress for the first time in 12 years, casting the vote as a referendum on George Bush, who would be rendered a "lame duck" president if his party lost its majority. The president has sought to portray a vote for the Democrats as signalling weakness to America's enemies.

Of 435 House of Representative seats up for grabs, the Democrats need 15 to win control of the chamber. In the Senate, 33 seats are being contested and the Democrats need six for a majority. Pollsters have consistently given the Democrats a good chance of taking the house, though the polls narrowed recently as the Republicans fought back.



A shirt-sleeved President Bush greets supporters during a rally in Dallas, Texas Photograph: Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

Financial markets were anticipating sufficient Democratic gains to shift the balance of power in Washington. The Dow Jones industrial average soared ahead in early trading, as investors calculated that legislative gridlock created by a Democratic majority in either house would slow regulatory change and create a more favourable environment for business.

Mr Bush cast his vote – in what at \$2.6bn (£1.37bn) are projected to be the most costly congressional elections in American history – at a fire station near his ranch in Crawford, Texas, and urged people to follow his lead. "We live in a free society and our government is only as good as the willingness of our people to

participate," the president said. "Therefore, no matter what your party affiliation or if you don't have a party affiliation, do your duty, cast your ballot and let your voice be heard."

Following the 2000 presidential election, which brought Mr Bush to power after a legal battle in the supreme court, lawyers have played an increasingly important part in party strategies. The justice department sent a record 850 poll watchers to 69 cities and counties as a safeguard against fraud. Meanwhile, the Democratic party recruited more than 7,000 lawyers to watch polling stations on its behalf, and the Republicans are believed to have fielded a similar number.

Early signs suggested that voter turnout, usually low in midterm elections, could be higher than normal.

One of the few certainties was that the vote would mark the official start of the 2008 presidential race. The leading contenders from both parties have taken a high-profile role on the campaign trail and some are expected to make a formal announcement of their intention to run soon after the results become clear. One of the potential frontrunners, Hillary Clinton, voted yesterday in her election for her New York Senate seat. "I voted for change, except for me," Senator Clinton said, after casting her ballot with her husband, Bill.

Blair summit to rescue drifting government

Patrick Wintour Political editor

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown last night convened an unprecedented meeting of 60 ministers in a bid to put the government back on track after Labour's recent infighting. The summit was seen as an attempt by the government to draw a line under the party's difficulties, and set out a challenging policy agenda for the next 10 years. The involvement of both the prime minister and the chancellor alongside senior civil servants was taken as a sign they realise they must cooperate if the party is to overcome its most serious midterm poll decline since it came to power in 1997.

Mr Blair is also eager that if Mr Brown comes to power he is not seen to be tearing up parts of the Blair legacy. Cooperation between the two men has improved markedly since the alleged coup attempt in September.

Unusually, the policy review is being conducted jointly by the cabinet office, No 10 officials and the Treasury. The civil service is intimately involved in a process that some will see as a preparation of the next Labour election manifesto.

Ministers were urged to become closely involved in the renewal and to contribute ideas beyond their departmental briefs - Downing Street believes that the party can fight its way out of its current difficulties by concentrating on policies – on the grounds the Tories don't have any.

The meeting yesterday included a presentation on a huge range of policy issues including the challenges of globalisation, rising inequalities, and the growing numbers migrating to Britain. The presentation suggested Britain would face a new set of challenges in 2017 that were sharply different to those faced 10 years ago when the party came to power. The policy work is being conducted by six ad hoc cabinet committees that are due to report by May, feeding into the Treasury spending review at the end of the summer.

That review, covering its own agenda, is widely seen as moment that Mr Brown can stamp his personal authority on the government.

In the presentation last night ministers were given a series of striking predictions about Britain in 2017. They included

- A projection of a 2.4 million rise in the number of people aged over 65 from 2006
- Another that by the middle of the cen-

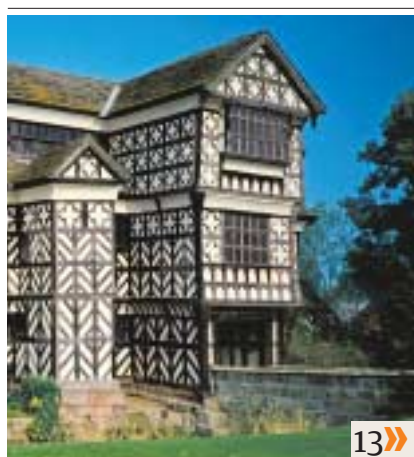
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National

40-year sentence for al-Qaida terrorist

A British al-Qaida terrorist was jailed yesterday for at least 40 years for plotting a series of synchronised attacks intended to kill thousands on both sides of the Atlantic. Muslim convert Dhiren Barot, 34, planned to use explosive-packed limousines, dirty bombs, and gas attacks to carry out a range of atrocities. His targets included US financial institutions, a London Underground train, and the Heathrow Express. Jailing Barot, Mr Justice Butterfield told him: "You represent a serious danger to the public for an indeterminate time. I cannot know when, if ever, you will set aside your burning desire to murder, maim and destroy life."

National



Home green home: 500-year-old Tudor houses are better insulated than those of today, British Gas has discovered

Financial

M&S bounces back with 32% profit rise

Marks & Spencer yesterday confirmed its return to high street pre-eminence, with its shares reaching an all-time high as it announced a 32% rise in half-year profits to £405m. Chief executive Stuart Rose, who fought off a hostile takeover bid from Sir Philip Green two years ago when the chain was in the doldrums, said the business was "firing on all cylinders" on the back of better stores, better products and better services. Sales had been boosted by a high-profile ad campaign, and its share of the womenswear market has risen to more than 10%. The chain was on course to make a full year profit of £1bn, last achieved in 1997.

Sport

O'Neill dismisses Chelsea bias claim

Aston Villa manager Martin O'Neill last night dismissed claims by Jose Mourinho that Chelsea failed to beat Villa earlier this season because the game was refereed by Graham Poll. The match at Stamford Bridge ended in a draw and O'Neill said: "Graham Poll was not the reason why Chelsea dropped two points. In fact there could have been a case to argue that he was quite lenient to their player who had professionally fouled Juan Pablo Angel with about 10 minutes to go." O'Neill said Chelsea had taken over from Manchester United in terms of controversial behaviour towards officials.

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