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# Parents can still smack – if they're gentle

## 47 Labour rebels vote for ban

By GEORGE JONES  
POLITICAL EDITOR

A TOTAL ban on parents smacking their children was rejected overwhelmingly by MPs last night.

The Commons backed a compromise under which parents would still be able to administer a "mild" smack, but could face prosecution for punishment that caused bruising, a black eye or left a red mark for several hours.

An attempt by back-bench Labour MPs to outlaw all smacking of children was rejected by 424 votes to 75, a majority of 349, after a brief, but highly-charged debate.

Forty-seven Labour MPs defied a three-line whip to vote for a smacking ban.

It was the second rebellion by Labour MPs within 24 hours. On Monday night 29 backbenchers voted against the Government's Gambling Bill which paves the way for Las Vegas-style super casinos. Many more abstained.

The larger revolt over smacking will be seen as a further sign of growing discontent among Labour backbenchers over the Government's domestic legislative programme.

Most Tories supported the Government to uphold the right of parents in England and Wales to administer "reasonable chastisement".

The Government had warned MPs that introducing a complete ban risked criminalising parents who smacked disobedient children in the heat of the moment.

Tony Blair had refused demands for Labour MPs to be given a free vote on smacking. Officials made clear that he wanted a balance between protecting children and parents' disciplinary rights.

Ministers feared that a complete ban would be regarded as intrusive and fuel criticism of a "nanny state" as the election approaches.

Government sources argued that the increased likelihood of prosecution for excessive smacking would effectively make the use of a slipper or cane an offence.

David Hinchliffe, the Labour chairman of the health select committee, led the attempt to scrap the Victorian legal defence of "reasonable chastisement".

He said that a ban had the overwhelming support of every child protection agency in the country.

Citing experience gained during his time as a social worker, Mr Hinchliffe said it was "a scandal and a disgrace" that in 21st century Britain at least one child every week "dies at the hands of their parents or carers".

He said he had witnessed in individual cases, the progression from what was now being called gentle smacking to serious injury and, in a couple of instances, death.

Mr Hinchliffe called for children to be given the same protection from assault as adults. "Smacking is hitting and smacking hurts. It causes not only physical pain it hurts inside too."

He rejected suggestions from Julie Kirkbride, the Tory member for Bromsgrove, that smacking could be an appropriate part of parents' duty of care to give their offspring "proper guidance".

Margaret Hodge, the children's minister, argued that it was wrong to create a new offence which could criminalise thousands of parents.

She said that nobody smacked a child without reason and most people felt guilty afterwards.

"Do you really believe we can support good parenting by adding to those bad feelings, by threatening the long arm of the law," she said to shouts of "yes" from Labour MPs.

Miss Hodge said that by removing the defence of reasonable chastisement on charges of causing actual bodily harm or cruelty, the legislation tightened the existing law and provided additional protection.

But it stopped short of criminalising parents for administering a light smack. She promised a review after two years.

Tim Loughton, the Tory spokesman, said there was no evidence to prove a link between a moderate smack and violent effects on children.

"It is insulting to decent families trying to bring up their families in difficult circumstances to suggest otherwise," he said.

The overwhelming majority of parents knew the difference between smacking and beating.

Commenting on the vote, Tony Samphier, of the Children Are Unbeatable Alliance, said Mr Blair had chosen Victorian values over modern family standards.



REUTERS/JASON REED

President George W Bush remained confident in Columbus, Ohio, yesterday, where he flew after voting near his ranch in Texas

# Huge turnout as fired-up Americans have their say

By ALEC RUSSELL  
IN WASHINGTON

### TOMORROW US ELECTION SUPPLEMENT

Reports and analysis by our top team

AMERICANS appeared at their most divided in decades as millions queued to vote last night amid predictions of the highest presidential election turnout since the Vietnam war era.

In a sign of the uncertainty and volatility of the polls, President George W Bush and his Democratic challenger, Senator John Kerry, broke with convention and campaigned for the last crucial votes even as voters went to polling stations.

Officials in several states predicted a turnout of more than 60 per cent – a level last reached in the bruising election of 1968 when Richard Nixon won his first term.

In one polling station in Cleveland, Ohio, the key "batleground" state where the race may be decided, more people voted in the first hour than in the entire election day in 2000.

There were predictions that turnout could reach 120 million, almost 15 per cent higher than last time, when 51.3 per cent of the electorate voted.

High turnout traditionally favours the Democrats and the early figures yesterday fuelled hopes in Mr Kerry's camp that his party's huge registration drive in the past few months would unleash an avalanche of new Democratic voters to give him victory.

They also cited the tradition that when a president seeks re-election, undecided voters switch at the last minute to a challenger. But Mr Bush was fractionally ahead in an aver-

age of all the opinion polls in a race that has become a statistical dead-heat.

His supporters pinned their hopes on their own turnout operation and also the idea that in the shadow of the September 11 attacks swing voters would buck tradition and stick with the incumbent.

They also had an early victory in Ohio where a court ruled in the Republicans' favour by clearing the way for parties to deploy workers at polling stations to dispute voters' eligibility.

After voting in a fire station near his ranch in Crawford, Texas, Mr Bush said: "I've given it my all. I feel calm. I have confidence in the judgment of the people."

Mr Kerry voted in his home town, Boston, and spent his early morning in Wisconsin, a state that Al Gore narrowly won last time and where Mr Bush has been pressing hard in the past two months.

Traditionally barely 50 per cent of the electorate votes in presidential elections. But after four years of war, terrorism, radical economic initiatives and polarising politics, Americans have been more fired up than in decades.

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'Right, I'm off to bed for a few hours, so call me if there's a result'



Analysis: Page 12  
Quango queen: Page 19  
Melanie McDonagh: Page 24

### NEWS Islamic murder in Amsterdam

A Dutch film-maker was shot and stabbed to death in an Amsterdam street yesterday by a Muslim assassin in reprisal for his attacks on Islam **Page 15**

### HEALTH Delta back on song

The singer Delta Goodrem talks about her 18-month battle with Hodgkin's disease **Page 20**



### NEWS Dad, I've driven over a cliff

A teenager took three friends for a spin hours after passing her test... and drove over a 100ft cliff. Unhurt, she phoned her father to say: 'I've had an accident - please don't shout' **Page 11**

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# Camilla boycotts wedding over snub

By CAROLINE DAVIES

THE Prince of Wales announced yesterday that he and Camilla Parker Bowles would not be joining the Queen and his sons, Princes William and Harry, at the wedding of his godson on Saturday.

His last-minute cancellation has provoked intense speculation that he is withdrawing from the wedding of Edward van Cutsem, 29, to Lady Tamara Grosvenor, 24, the Duke of Westminster's daughter, in protest over the seating arrangements for Mrs Parker Bowles.

Prince Charles was to have sat alongside the Queen, Prince Philip and his sons in front of the 650-strong congregation.

It is understood that Mrs Parker Bowles was to have been placed several rows behind him on the other side of the aisle, as a guest of the

bride's family, during the ceremony at Chester Cathedral.

There have been reports that, as well as being placed well away from Prince Charles, she was also expected to arrive at the cathedral separately, and travel in a different car to him to the reception at the Grosvenor family seat, Eaton Hall.

Last night Clarence House would say only that the prince would be spending Saturday at Warminster, meeting families of the Black Watch soldiers serving in Iraq.

"The Prince as Colonel-in-Chief is going to visit wives and families of those currently deployed in Iraq and as a result is unable to attend the wedding," said a spokesman.

Clarence House added that the prince had spoken to the commanding officer of the Black Watch and "it was

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