



Top Stories

POWER inquiry calls for radical power shift in British Democracy



The final report of the POWER inquiry released today included recommendations to decentralise political power, to replace the

first-past-the-post voting system, and others to revitalize the flagging participation in the democratic systems of the nation.

Opposition may boycott Thai election; demonstrators want Thaksin out



Having outlined his manifesto in his last pre-election radio broadcast, beleaguered Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has

failed to deflect calls for his resignation.

Featured story

Eva Hassett, VP of Savarino Construction Services Corp. answers questions on Buffalo, N.Y. hotel redesign

Eva Hassett VP of Savarino Construction confirms the Elmwood Village Hotel redesign and talks about the changes and what happens next.

Wikipedia Current Events

• Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian breaks his Four Noes and One Without pledge and

Wikipedia Current Events

announces the abolition of the National Unification Council and the Guidelines for National Unification. The move is condemned by the pan-Blue Coalition, United States and People's Republic of China. Chen says that the reversal is a response to aggression by the PRC.

•International Court of Justice (ICJ) begins hearing a landmark genocide case, Bosnia and Herzegovina vs. Serbia and Montenegro. Bosnia filed a claim alleging violations of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide against the former Yugoslavia during the 1992-95 Bosnian war. Bosnian genocide case at the ICJ is a first ever genocide court case against a state in the 60 year history of ICJ.

•British police announce that the total amount of cash stolen in last Wednesday's Securitas depot robbery was £53 million (USD \$92.6 million). Five more people have been arrested in the last 24 hours and 10 properties searched in the ongoing investigation.

•The United Nations World Food Programme says that it needs 11 million USD to be able to continue its Afghanistan operations to June this year. "Poor and hungry schoolchildren who receive take-home rations of food as an incentive to attend school will receive at most half their usual ration and in some cases none at all," says the U.N.

Wikipedia Current Events

More than 50% of the nation's children are malnourished.

•Another series of bomb attacks in southern Iranian cities of Dezful and Abadan wounds at least six people. Eight people died when bombs exploded in the provincial capital Ahwaz a month ago. The Iranian government again accuses Britain of being behind the attacks, although a small Arab separatist group claimed responsibility on its website.

•The deadline set by the kidnappers of Jill Carroll, after which they said they would execute her if their demands were not met, passes with no word yet on whether she has been killed. An Iraqi official says he believes she is still alive and that they know her original kidnapper's name and address, although Carroll may have been sold to another group since.

•The Dubai Ports World controversy continues with Miami-based Eller & Company trying to obtain an injunction in the UK High Court to prevent the sale of P&O to Dubai Ports World.

Australian Prime Minister blames asylum seekers for "Children Overboard" scandal

Australian Prime Minister John Howard says the refugees he falsely accused of throwing their children into the ocean deserve no apology because they did the next worst thing - "they irresponsibly sank the damn boat, which put

their children in the water".

The "children overboard" affair became a controversial focus in the 2001 federal election campaign, when the Prime Minister was roundly accused of cynically exploiting Australia's fears of illegal immigrants by demonising asylum-seekers. Mr Howard and senior ministers falsley claimed on the eve of the election that children had been thrown in the water to guarantee their rescue by the Australian navy.

The boat sank, and the crew of HMAS Adelaide saved 219 asylum-seekers. The then Defence Minister, Peter Reith, released dubious photos of the rescue as evidence that children had been thrown in the water. The Australian government only corrected the record after the election.

Mr Howard says: "They irresponsibly sank the damn boat, which put their children in the water. I'm sorry, if I had have been told definitively, if I had been told that that story was completely wrong, I would have said so, but I wasn't," he says in the book 'The Howard Factor'.

"And my last act before the election was to put that video in the public domain so that I wasn't accused of concealing it, because it was ambiguous. Watching that video, you couldn't tell whether people were being thrown in the water or not, it was just impossible. But after all, they did sink the boat." Mr Howard said the refugees "don't carry any visible signs of being demonised".

Figures from the Department of Immigration (DIMIA) about the 219 mainly Iraqi asylum-seekers,

shows the group wound up with the highest success rate for all refugee claims made under the so-called Pacific solution. DIMIA 96.5 per cent of the Iraqis who were awarded humanitarian protection, though most have since been settled in New Zealand, not Australia.

Refugee rights advocate, Jack Smit, from the West Australian-based group Project SafeCom says: "Refugees don't sink damned boats, Mr Howard!" He said in a media statement: "The Prime Minister remains one of the very few politicians in Australia who maintains the slandering descriptive word 'illegals' to denote boatpeople."

"Refugees rarely sink their boats," said Mr Smit, "Usually it is the people smugglers who do the sinking, sometimes the sinking is due to physical sabotage by sting operators working from countries such as Indonesia, and sometimes these sting operators are contracted by countries such as Australia."

POWER inquiry calls for radical power shift in British Democracy

The POWER inquiry, set up in 2004 to examine participation and involvement in British politics, today published "Power to the People", its final report, making 30 key recommendations designed to "save British democracy from meltdown".

The recommendations include decentralising power, from central government to local government, replacing the first-past-the-post electoral system with a more responsive one, reducing the voting age to 16, and giving citizens the right to initiate legislative processes.

The Independent newspaper covered the story with a front page splash titled "Blueprint to give power to the people". The paper has been "campaigning for democracy" ever since the 2005 general elections, in which the Labour Party won 55.2% of the seats with just 35.3% of the votes. The newspaper ran a petition urging the Prime Minister to institute urgent reform of the voting system.

The final report credited the use of proportional voting elsewhere in Europe with both a reversal of declines in voter turnout and the formation of flexible, responsive coalitions,

"[I]t is significant that most European countries have proportional systems which should provide a wider choice of parties from a more diverse political spectrum who all stand a good chance of winning places in Parliament or even in a governing coalition. This therefore raises the question of whether this factor can be treated as a genuinely significant cause. We feel it still can. Firstly, because it is such a commonly cited factor in all the expert and public evidence received by the Inquiry. And, secondly, because there is recent research to suggest that proportional systems have, on the whole, limited if not halted election turnout declines in comparison to Britain."

The POWER inquiry is funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Limited, and the inquiry is holding a conference on Saturday 25 March 2006 to discuss their findings, before formally ending.

Chair of the inquiry, Helena

Kennedy challenged politicians to "rise above their party ranks and start treating democratic reform as a non-partisan necessity - not a political toy".

The Prime Minister's Official Spokesman said that the report dealt with many issues, which were all matters to be debated within parties and between parties, adding that the report had added to the debate.

Oliver Heald, Shadow Constitutional Affairs secretary for the Conservative Party, welcomed the call to give more power to MPs, but opposed the plan to drop the voting age to 16. The Liberal Democrats acting president Simon Hughes welcomed the report, saying "British Democracy is in crisis whatever the Government pretends - most voters are ignored and most people feel they have no influence".

Accidental explosion occurs in Israel

An explosion occurred at the Rafael Arms Development Authority in Kiryat Bialik, Israel today.

At least six people have been injured including police officers and medics. Rescue services say the injuries range from "moderate" to "light."

The explosion is not believed to be terror related. "We are not talking about a suicide attack. It is a work accident. We don't know exactly what, a chemical that blew up in a bottle," said Moshe Weizman, a regional police spokesman.

Rafael makes electronic warfare systems, missiles and tank armor.

Reaction to Ken Livingstone suspension

The news that London Mayor Ken Livingstone is to face a one month suspension over comments made to an Evening Standard journalist was a surprise to many across the political spectrum when it was announced on Friday.

Deputy Mayor Nicky Gavron, who would take over the Mayor's duties in the event of a suspension, said "This decision is absurd - millions of Londoners elected the Mayor, and three unelected officials remove him. An elected Mayor should only be removed by the law or by the electorate, not by an unelected body."

Support was also received from the Stop the War Coalition, who said in a statement that they were appalled - "Ken Livingstone was elected by millions of Londoners and he has been suspended by an unelected quango". The Trades Union Congress also condemned the statement, praising the Mayor's "absolute commitment and exemplary and consistent record in opposing racism of any form". The National Assembly Against Racism Vice Chair said that they were "outraged" at the decision, also praising the Mayor's record of anti-racism campaigning.

The Board Of Deputies Of British Jews suggested that the Mayor had been "the architect of his own misfortune" by failing to apologise over the incident, but said that they had not sought anything other than an expression of regret.

The Muslim Association of Britain argued that the suspension was a serious blow to democracy and free speech by undermining "the essence and values of democracy".

The Chairman of the London

Jewish Forum Adrian Cohen welcomed the decision, but suggestion that it should never have reached the point of a suspension "when a simple apology could have avoided all the pain caused to so many Jewish Londoners", a sentiment echoed by the Jewish Leadership Council.

The Editor of the Evening Standard, whose journalist is at the centre of the controversy, claimed that the journalist had behaved impeccably and accused Mr Livingstone of being stubborn.

London Mayor Ken Livingstone to appeal over suspension

London Mayor Ken Livingstone, who on Friday was told that he would face a four-week suspension from office over remarks made to a newspaper journalist, has said today that he will seek a judicial appeal.

The ban was issued to Ken Livingstone by the Adjudication Panel for England for 'bringing his office into disrepute' by comparing an Evening Standard journalist to a 'concentration camp guard' when doorstepped by the journalist as he was leaving a private party in February 2005.

Ken Livingstone refused to apologise to the journalist over the incident, saying "I have nothing to apologise for". Responding to claims that his comments were anti-semitic, Ken Livingstone said of the Daily Mail group, who own the Evening Standard, "no one in Britain is less qualified to complain about anti-Semitism....in truth, those papers were the leading advocates of anti-Semitism in Britain for half a century".

The four week suspension is due to start on Wednesday. The Mayor has asked for the suspension to be

stayed until his appeal has been heard. The appeal will seek review of both whether his comments were a breach of the section of the code of conduct which prohibits bringing one's office into disrepute and whether the sanction is appropriate.

It is estimated that the legal costs of the appeal will be around £80,000, which will have to be funded by the Mayor should he lose.

6 Teenagers die in car accident in Victoria. Several others injured.

Six teenagers were killed in a horrific road accident near Mildura in north-western Victoria, late at night on February 18.

Cassandra Manners, aged 16, Stevie-Lee Weight, 15, Cory Dowling, 16, Shane Hirst, 16, and his sister, Abby Hirst, 17, died at the scene. Josephine Calvi, 16, was flown to the Royal Adelaide Hospital, where she later died of head injuries. Seven other teenagers were injured, including 15-year-old Marco Medici who is now in a stable but critical condition in The Alfred Hospital in Melbourne.

The accident occurred after the teenagers left a 16th birthday party and walked along Myall Road, Cardross, south-east of Mildura. A car allegedly came speeding around a bend, hit the gravel on the side of the road, lost control and struck the group. The alleged driver, later identified as 34-year-old Thomas Graham Towle, fled the scene on foot, leaving his 10-year-old daughter and four-year-old son in the car. Towle was later arrested by police in Redcliffs. He was taken to Mildura police station for questioning.

Towle has been charged with six charges of culpable driving causing death, four charges of negligently causing serious injury, one charge of failing to stop and one charge of failing to render assistance after an accident. Towle faced Mildura Magistrates' Court on February 20. Magistrate John Dugdale remanded him into custody to reappear before the court on June 26.

Meanwhile, the town of Mildura and surrounding areas is in deep mourning. Premier Steve Bracks said the State Government will provide \$AU40,000 for counselling and support services.

Around 3,000 people attended the funeral for Josephine Calvi today. Funeral services for the other five teenagers were held last week.

Five month old girl injured in "deliberate" house fire

A five-month-old girl is in a critical but stable condition in Sydney's Westmead Children's Hospital after receiving burns to 11 percent of her body in a house fire. The fire broke out at around 2am Sunday in the Department of Housing property in Kelso, a suburb of Bathurst, NSW, Australia.

Police and fire crews were called to the house after a neighbour reported seeing the fire and four men, described as being of "Aboriginal" appearance, running from the area.

Police said that the five-month-old girl and her twin sister were sleeping in a front room when the fire broke out. The twins' parents rescued their children and fled before flames engulfed the entire house.

Inspector Chris Davey said police

thought the fire may have been deliberate and had spent Sunday gathering evidence at the scene. "We're treating the fire as being deliberately lit at this point in time - we have investigators on the ground trying to identify four males seen to be leaving that area," he said.

Australian government announces study of tax system

The Australian federal treasurer, Peter Costello, has announced a study to compare the Australian taxation system with those of other countries. It will include overall tax levels, as well as indirect tax, income tax and company tax systems. Mr Costello says that the results are intended to inform discussion of the future of the tax system.

"The aim of the study is to provide a public document that compares Australian taxes to those in other countries. This will identify those areas where Australia leads comparable countries and those areas where it lags. It will enable a focus on the most important areas," Mr Costello said in a media release.

The study will be lead by Mr Richard (Dick) Warburton and Mr Peter Hendy. Mr Warburton is Chairman of Caltex Australia Ltd, and has been Chairman of the Board of Taxation since its inception in September 2000. According to its website, the Board of Taxation is "a non-statutory advisory body charged with contributing a business and broader community perspective to improving the design of taxation laws and their operation."

The Australian Democrats welcomed the study but warned that nothing would be achieved without serious reform of the tax

system.

"The Inquiry announced yesterday by the Treasurer may turn out to be a step in the right direction but will be a pointless exercise if it ends up being simply a 'desktop' report," said Senator Murray, Democrats Tax Spokesperson.

"The problem with Mr Costello's approach is that in contrast to the approach taken on the GST, the New Tax System, and the Business Tax System, he has seen income tax change to be solely part of the budget process. Across the whole of the political and public policy spectrum, there is strong agreement that reform is needed, not just tax cuts, and that the income tax system needs redesigning, not just fine tuning."

Australian government accused of neglecting regions
Simon Crean, Shadow Minister for Regional Development, has accused the Howard Government of abandoning regional development and showing no commitment to rural Australia. In a media release timed to co-incide with the ten year anniversary of the Howard Government, Mr. Crean said that the privatisation of Telstra and a failure to reform the Regional Partnerships program demonstrated the governments lack of commitment to the bush.

"The Minister for Transport and Regional Services has failed to clean up the Regional Partnerships program, four months after a Senate Inquiry recommended major changes," he said. "\$1.1 million dollars spent on the Gunnedah Grains to Ethanol project has been wasted - it still hasn't produced a single litre of ethanol. Likewise Beaudesert Rail, the recipient of \$5.7 million in Government grants, has not

travelled a single kilometre."

Regional Partnerships program provides government assistance for projects in regional areas. According to a government media release, there is \$360.9 million available under this program for the period 2005-06 to 2008-09.

Mr Crean also criticised the National party for "[selling out] rural and regional Australia - on Telstra, on trade and on essential services."

"Last week's revelation that Telstra plans to get rid of 5000 payphones after privatisation show the serial contempt of the Bush by the Coalition."

The Minister for Transport and Regional Services, Warren Truss, has distanced himself from the Telstra announcement, saying that Telstra has an obligation to maintain services. "Certainly, there is a still a demand for payphones around Australia. Telstra are expected to provide those kinds of services," he said.

"I think the time will come when we will move on to new technology and some of those systems that were more important in the past will be less important in the future but there are still many Australians who still depend on payphones and community telephone systems. Telstra has an obligation to provide those."

Warren Truss' office was contacted to provide a response to Mr. Crean's criticisms, but had not responded by the time this article was published.

Eva Hassett, VP of Savarino Construction Services Corp. answers questions on Buffalo, N.Y. hotel redesign

Buffalo, New York – Wikinews was the first to tell you that the Elmwood Village Hotel development in Buffalo, New York was to undergo "significant changes".

The Elmwood Village Hotel is a proposed project that would be placed at Elmwood and Forest Aves. in Buffalo. In order for the development to take place, at least five buildings that house both businesses and residents, must be demolished.

To confirm and to get more information about the changes, Wikinews interviewed Eva Hassett, Vice President of Savarino Construction Services Corporation, the development company in charge of building the hotel.

Wikinews: The hotel proposal is being redesigned. Could you comment on that? What changes are being made? Are they significant?

Eva Hassett: The hotel has been resized as a 72 room, FOUR story building. This is 10% smaller in number of rooms and a full story lower. We are also redesigning the facades in a way that will minimize the mass - more of a vertical feeling than horizontal. Different materials, windows, details. The smaller size of the hotel also makes the number of on-site parking spaces more appropriate and hopefully represents less of a challenge to an already difficult parking situation.

WN: Will you still be going before the city's planning board as scheduled on February 28? Same for the Common Council?

Hassett: We will be on the Planning Board agenda this Tuesday morning but I do not

expect that the Board will vote on the item that morning. I think we will be mainly explaining the new design and hearing input/questions.

WN: Will there be anymore public meetings?

Hassett: We would be happy to do one more big public meeting. We will be talking to Forever Elmwood about that on Monday (February 27, 2006). We would like to see if there is support for the new design and we also want to honor the public's request for another meeting. I am hopeful that meeting can take place the week of March 6th.

WN: Is Savarino considering Mr. Rocco Termini's design/proposal? If no, do you (Savarino) support/oppose?

Hassett: We are hopeful that we can build the hotel as redesigned. We think it would be a great addition to the Elmwood Ave. area, a good way for out-of-towners to see what Buffalo offers and a big help to the businesses there.

WN: Are you considering more time for the community to make a judgement?

Hassett: As I mentioned above, we expect to have one more meeting to get public reaction to the new design, and I think the Planning Board may want an additional meeting to make their determination. We do however, have constraints that will limit the amount of extra time. We still think it is a great project for the City and Elmwood; and we still want it to be something that the community wants as well.

So far, the City of Buffalo's City

Planning Board is still scheduled to meet at 8:00am (Eastern) on February 28, 2006 followed by the Common Council meeting at 2:00pm on the same day.

Images of the design are not yet available. "We are working on the renderings this weekend, but I will likely have some early in the week," stated Hassett.

Today in History

364 - Valentinian I was elected Roman Emperor by officers of the Roman military at Nicaea, Bithynia.

1784 - John Wesley, a minister of the Church of England, chartered the first Methodist Church.

1947 - Civil disorder in Taipei and Keelung, Taiwan was brutally suppressed by the Chinese Nationalist military in the 228 Incident.

1983 - The final episode of the television series M*A*S*H was broadcast in the United States, and became the most-watched television program in history.

1986 - Prime Minister Olof Palme of Sweden was assassinated in Stockholm.

February 28 is Mardi Gras, Shrove Tuesday in Western Christianity (2006); Peace Memorial Day in Taiwan.

Quote of the Day

"If you want to have good ideas you must have many ideas. Most of them will be wrong, and what you have to learn is which ones to throw away." ~ Linus Pauling

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