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Of polling and the aftermath of defeat

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FOR a few days in the run-up to the UK general election, the British people were anxious. They were held back from slashing at their coats and jumpers, by thick clouds which cast a gloom.

Then, a day before the election, it happened.

Clear blue skies came, freeing the sun to liberate the people from the suppression of additional clothing.

Thursday, polling day, was similarly a fine early summer day, when British voters in a frenzy of climatic liberation, flogged the ruling Tories, giving them their biggest defeat this century.

But far from looking defeated on Friday afternoon, was John Major.

With sunglasses on, flanked by Norma and children, the former Prime Minister went to watch cricket, his passion.

He was being very English, commentators said.

It is time to move on "when the curtain falls," he told the media in a "cool" address at Downing Street earlier, saying he would step down as leader of the Conservative party.

Tony Howard, The Times' obituary editor, had predicted Major would not stay on as party leader, as he felt Norma would persuade Major to leave immediately as the wife felt his party had betrayed him.

Soon after Major said he would step down, Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke, saying he felt sorry that "John has stepped down," declared his candidacy for the leadership.

Because of the practice in British politics that the change-over takes effect immediately, hours after the full results were known, Major had resigned as Prime Minister and Tony Blair made the new PM.

Major, 54, moved out of Downing Street the same day although Blair, 43, said Major didn't have to do that immediately.

Many including Blair, are impressed with the dignity Major demonstrated in the campaign - especially in the last few days, said Blair - and in defeat.

Some commentators said Major, "the weak leader", didn't shed tears as he was leaving Downing Street.

In 1990, Lady Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady did!

Thatcher, commenting on the election results, reminded British people that she did not lose in an election.

Equally liberated over the weekend were the politicians and the media people, who did not sleep on Thursday night.

"We must now go and get some sleep," said 36-year-old William Hague, the former Welsh secretary, who has emerged as a contender for the leadership of the Conservative Party as he was being pursued by reporters.

The print journalist and television presenters would, it seems, need to recuperate too.

The BBC election team of David Dimbleby, Jeremy Paxman and Peter Snow, had a short break on Friday, starting from 6am. But at 9am, they were back on the screen.

The degree of political debate in the UK, was well demonstrated throughout the election night, with politicians and commentators being interviewed on television in small hours.

This must be quite a fulfilling experience for fans of British politics, many of whom "enjoy" the witticism and standard of debate.

Still on the debating qualities, the obsession with "winning arguments"

rather than getting things done, was said to be a factor for the Tory landslide defeat.

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