LONDON, Feb. 15 — No date has been announced, and no one is officially running. But politicians from the Labor and Conservative parties have already behaving like bona fide candidates in a bona fide vicious campaign that, once again, has Prime Minister Tony Blair at its center.

Anticipating that the next national elections will take place in May, the parties have been staking out their territory on everything from law and order to immigration and education. But the real fighting is going on in the pages of Britain’s naively partisan national newspapers.

Never fans of Mr. Blair, newspapers like The Daily Mail (populist) and The Daily Telegraph (staunchly Tory) have ratcheted up their complaints to perhaps their highest pitch ever. Every day brings a new barrage of criticism, personal as well as political, that has touched on such topics as the efforts of the prime minister’s wife, Cherie, to earn money by giving speeches abroad and the couple’s difficulties in trying to find tenants for an expensive new London house they bought with an eye to the day Mr. Blair finally leaves the government.

Most recently, The Daily Mail accused Mr. Blair of trying to use the forthcoming marriage of the Prince of Wales and Camilla Parker Bowles to his political advantage by somehow getting them to set the wedding for April 8—the same week he is expected to announce the date the election will be held.

In many ways, all this is an exercise in futility. Mr. Blair presided over two landslide victories for Labor in 1997 and 2001 and appears poised, barring some unforeseen extraterrestrial intervention, to win handily again. The Conservatives appear to be falling at a familiar mission: to paint their opponents as the lesser of two evils. But worst of all was the third group: 35 percent of the public said they did not know how they felt.

Indeed, in a Mori poll, just 22 percent of voters said they would vote Tory. “It’s a zero-sum game,” said Sir Robert M. Worcester, chairman of the independent Mori Polling Organization, explaining why Mr. Blair’s unpopularity has not helped the Conservative leader, Michael Howard. “You don’t beat somebody with nobody.”

Indeed, in a Mori poll, just 22 percent of voters said they were satisfied with Mr. Howard’s performance, while 43 percent said they were not. But worst of all was the third group: 35 percent said they did not know how they felt.

Part of the Tories’ problem is that Labor has moved steadily to the right since the 1980’s and early 90’s, when it was in opposition. On many issues, particularly criminal justice and immigration, the party has all but co-opted the Tory agenda.

In addition, the Conservatives are still suffering from post-Thatcher depression. Many of their members are over 60, and still regard the period from 1980 to 1991, when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher presided with her iron grip, as the party’s golden age.

Since Labor took over eight years ago, there have been three Tory leaders — William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and now Mr. Howard — each one seemingly more hopeless than the one before, and none anything like a match for Mr. Blair.

All of which helps explain why the Tory party, driven to distraction by the impenetrability of the Labor fortress, has been working so hard to find a weak spot. Much of its effort has been spent trying to bolster the impression that Mr. Blair is an unsavory and too slick-by-half character whose party is run badly by spinmeisters.

That is why The Daily Mail has mercilessly chronicled the difficulties Mr. Blair and his wife appear to be having with their new house, disparaging the neighborhood as not very nice, the house as needing a lot of work and the Blairs’ asking rental price as laughably high.

It is why the paper said that Mrs. Blair was “cashing in” and likened her to the Queen of Sheba in an article about her recent speaking tour. It is why Mr. Blair’s decision to hire his combative former spokesman, Alastair Campbell, to help orchestrate his re-election strategy had the Tories sputtering in The Times of London about “smears” and “dirty tricks.”

In fact, both parties are trying to capitalize on voter disgust at dirty politics, but those arguments have little to do with actual policy; so many straw men have entered the debate that everyone real seems to have fled.

For instance, the Conservatives recently attacked a pair of advertisements that had been posted with others on the Labor Web site. Few members of the public had even seen the ads; the idea was that people could vote on their favorites for use in the national campaign.

One poster showed the faces of Mr. Howard and his deputy, both of whom are Jewish, transposed onto the bodies of flying pigs, over the caption “the day the Tory sums add up”; the other depicted Mr. Howard creepily waving a hypnotist’s watch and saying, “I can spend the money twice.” The Tories said the ads were anti-Semitic; Labor said it had not meant to cause offense and in any case had never planned to use the ads, because so few people had voted for them.

Next the Tories focused on Labor’s use of a newly enacted Freedom of Information law, accusing Labor of underhandedly trawling for skeletons in the Conservative closet. Labor countered by saying that while it had indeed made Freedom of Information requests about previous Tory governments, the Tories had made 130 such requests about the current Labor government.

The game of spin is a hall of mirrors, with each party complaining that it is more spun against than spinning. Meanwhile, real-life voters who have tried to keep up are left wondering who was guilty of the original spin, and why in fact they should care.

As a spokesman for John Major, a former prime minister, said, discussing an exchange-rate imbroglio in 1992 but inadvertently describing the non-campaign campaign thus far: “It is spin outspinning itself.”

LETTER FROM EUROPE/Sarah Lyall

An Election Is Coming, and It’s Getting Personal

Michael Howard, the Tory leader, has gotten little benefit from Labor’s troubles.

Ideology? Since Labor has largely stolen the Tory issues, what’s to debate?

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