



Tony Blair, British Prime Minister 1997–2007

On 27 June 2007 Tony Blair, British Prime Minister since 1997, resigned office in favour of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. Blair's had been a remarkable term of office. Electorally, Blair was the most successful Labour leader, and one of the two most successful British party leaders, of the last 100 years. Despite this, aspects of Blair's term became very controversial in his last years:

... the country that once embraced him as a Messiah ... has now rejected him as a false prophet'.¹

The early years

Tony Blair was born 6 May 1953 in Edinburgh. Briefly a resident of Adelaide (1955-58), he later lived in Durham, and was educated in Durham and at a Scottish private school. He entered St John's College, Oxford in 1972, graduating in law and training as a barrister in London. Unlike his father, who had sought Conservative Party pre-selection, Blair left university certain that only the Labour Party could act as the vehicle for his political ambitions. Working in trade union law helped developed such views.²

Blair MP

In 1982 Blair was defeated in a by-election in a safe Conservative constituency. With a vote of just 10 per cent, he finished third behind a Liberal. In a stroke of luck he secured Labour's last preselection for the 1983 election in the safe Labour northeastern constituency of Sedgefield, near Durham. Although Labour was soundly defeated, Blair won comfortably, as did another new Labour member, Gordon Brown in a Scottish constituency. Cherie Blair was soundly defeated in a southern constituency.

Six weeks after the election Blair and Brown were sharing a room in the Commons which was soon 'a little powerhouse' of ideas and plans.³ Although he had campaigned on the Labour platform of the time, Blair had many doubts about its usefulness as a means of persuading voters that they should abandon the Thatcher Conservatives. Whenever possible he spoke of the need for his party to shift from its policies of the past. With Brown and Peter Mandelson he worked at distancing Labour from the unions, improving relations with business and appealing to voters beyond Labour's traditional heartland.⁴ In 1982 Blair spoke of younger people refusing to support Labour simply because their parents had done so, noting that the party was dangerously reliant on the loyal vote of older citizens. He noted that there was a need to devise policies more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of

younger voters. Blair also pointed to the increase in support for the Social Democrats due to their offering 'a compromise between the overt callousness of Mrs Thatcher and the old-fashioned collectivism of Labour'.⁵

Labour leader

Blair and Brown were soon noticed by party leaders. Seventeen months after his election Blair had been promoted to the shadow Chancellor's front bench team. He was later a trade and industry spokesman. After entering John Smith's Shadow Cabinet as Shadow Secretary of State for Energy in 1988, he was successively Shadow Employment Secretary and Shadow Home Secretary. He also involved himself in working to modernise, unite and make electorally respectable a party badly mauled during the Thatcher-Major period. Blair's efforts reportedly won him a strong following within the Labour Party as a whole.⁶

While Blair was pushing this message, Brown was working to change the old image of Labour as a 'tax-and-spend' party. He believed that the party should convince voters that a Labour government would guarantee a tight fiscal regime. Unfortunately for Brown, however, as he pushed this message many MPs began to see him as less suitable than Blair as a future party leader.

Smith died on 12 May 1994. There was much speculation as to whether both Brown and Blair would contest the leadership. It was soon obvious, however, that Blair was the replacement preferred by many Labour members, something that also was clear in opinion polls. Eventually Blair was elected comfortably ahead of John Prescott and Margaret Beckett. Negotiations between Blair and Brown had resulted in Brown choosing not to nominate, instead being confirmed as Shadow Chancellor.

Tackling the party

Despite Brown's resentment at being denied the leadership, which produced a 'residue of hurt and misunderstanding' that affected their relations thereafter, the pair worked hard to produce a Labour package that was acceptable to voters.⁷ While Brown concentrated on financial policies, Blair, the self-proclaimed party outsider, expressed his determination to create what became known as 'New Labour'.⁸ He took issue with class politics, the ideals of socialism, and the comfortable Labour-trade union links of the past. Symbolically, he challenged, and eventually saw the removal of, Clause 4 of the Party

Constitution, which spoke of securing for workers, 'the fruits of their labour by the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange'. His 1996 call to his party was:

A Labour Government will have a thousand days to prepare for a thousand years.⁹

To the British community he spoke of the 'Third Way':

Forget the past. No more bosses versus workers. You are on the same side. The same team.¹⁰

This was part of his so-called 'big tent', within which many competing social interests had a place.

Significantly, unlike most of his party colleagues, Blair was prepared to acknowledge that Margaret Thatcher had 'got certain things right', particularly in regard to privatisation, deregulation and its rejection of 'outdated attitudes' in the community.¹¹ He used polls and focus group findings to establish what the British people wanted from their parliament and government, and was prepared to re-jig Labour policy to suit. A strong law and order call, with the banning of the private ownership of guns, was an example of this. Blair promised that he would be accountable for the way his government would perform:

That is my covenant with the British people. Judge me upon it. The buck stops here.¹²

The 1997 election

At the time of Smith's death, polls indicated that the Conservatives were vulnerable, but three years later the size of Labour's 1997 victory was much greater than had then seemed likely. Its vote of 43.2 per cent was an increase of 8.8 percentage points and its highest since 1970, its majority of 179 was its biggest-ever, and the party had achieved the largest majority for any party since 1935. The Conservative vote had fallen by 11.2 points. A great deal of this was due to the work of Blair and Brown.¹³ Not all voters were swept up in the euphoria of New Labour, however, for over 56 per cent voted against them. The turnout of 71.4 per cent was a drop of 6.2 per cent, meaning that their win was achieved on the support of only 30.8 per cent of the electorate. Remarkably, Labour actually received 430 694 fewer votes than it had managed in the 1951 election. Overall, though, the result was a clear vindication for the Blair-Brown package.

Elected prime minister at 43, Blair was the youngest prime minister since Lord Liverpool, who had been 42 when he assumed office in 1812.

Blair and British government

During the governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major some of the long-standing patterns of government began to alter. Cabinet meetings began to shorten, political advisers became more important, and a steady expansion in the Prime Minister's office saw a centralisation of power. This continued under Blair.

Blair and his colleagues were said to have been horrified by stories of lengthy Cabinet meetings held by the Wilson and Callaghan governments. Thatcher had done much government business through bilateral meetings with ministers rather than using Cabinet to hammer out decisions, and Blair did the same, though he seems to have pushed this much further. Blair's style was described as 'bilateralism'—which involved ministers having to negotiate either with No. 10 or the Treasury, rather than engaging in long Cabinet meetings. The PM tended to focus on education, the National Health Service, Northern Ireland and, increasingly, defence. Chancellor Brown, by contrast, gave much attention to skills and training, the battle to eradicate poverty, welfare reform and international development. All of which meant a continuation of the downgrading of the role of Cabinet that has been a feature of British government for at least five decades. Cabinet meetings under Blair were usually brief.¹⁴

But this must not be exaggerated, for at times the Prime Minister found it politic to involve the full Cabinet in some of the more controversial debates. These included the Euro assessment issue, five-year public service strategies and the Iraq war. As Sir Andrew Turnbull, Cabinet Secretary 2002–05, noted, 'the style in which prime ministers conduct business ebbs and flows over time'.¹⁵ Although Blair pushed further than most to limit its power, essentially he has been no different from his predecessors in seeking to dominate the Cabinet.

With the strengthening of the centre of government, so No. 10 and the Cabinet Office came to displace Cabinet and its assorted committees in respect of policy implementation. This has been handled awkwardly, with three main phases of reform, and observers have doubted whether there has been much lasting success in policy delivery. The PM sought tighter central control but seemed not to fully appreciate the implementation issues.¹⁶

Blair and Parliament

Like many leaders, Blair showed an impatience with the processes of the House of Commons. Early in his term he ignored protests when he reduced prime minister's questions from twice a week to a single appearance. In addition he voted on only about 5 per cent of occasions, much lower than for other prime ministers.¹⁷ As with the Cabinet, he showed a 'formal respect, but little commitment' to the Parliament.¹⁸

Despite this, Blair was a masterly performer in the Commons, particularly in times of great national moment. Even David Cameron, future Conservative leader, described his 2003 Iraq speech as 'masterful', and later admitted to having sent copies to constituents.¹⁹

Achievements

As Blair left office it was clear that many in the United Kingdom saw him as a divisive figure—it was suggested

that such was the hostility towards him that some found it hard to concede that any of his actions may have benefited his nation.²⁰ In fact, his achievements were many. These included the rebuilding of Labour as both a winning party and a successful government party, the turning around of government investment in public services, a great improvement in levels of unemployment, and the alleviation of much inner-city poverty. Private enterprise was encouraged to undertake some public services, such as City Academies and Foundation Hospitals.²¹

Of major importance was the piecing together of what amounted to a new British constitution. There were various parts to this. Remarkably, what has become an increasingly confident federal element was added, with the establishment of devolved governments for Scotland and Wales. Most notably, Northern Ireland was added in May 2007. Scottish and Welsh elections have been by proportional representation, as have the elections for local government in London—which now has a directly-elected mayor. Cabinet systems of government for some local authorities have been mandated. National elections, wherein there is now registration of parties and controls on political donations and national campaign expenditures, are now conducted by the Electoral Commission.

The House of Lords now has a Lords Speaker, all but 92 of the hereditary peers have been removed, as have all judges. A new Supreme Court has been created. The *Human Rights Act 1998* required public bodies to comply with the European Convention on Human Rights, and the *Freedom of Information Act 2000* provided a statutory right to freedom of information. According to Oxford University political scientist Vernon Bogdanor, these constitutional changes amounted to an 'historic era of constitutional reform', which would 'be remembered long after most current political squabbles are forgotten'.²²

Iraq

There was an undoubted moral dimension to Blair's analysis of world events. It was probably as a consequence of his determination to push certain views and actions in international affairs that his standing suffered most in his party and across the country. It has been suggested that he was unusual among British prime ministers for his pushing-aside of a hard-nosed foreign policy in favour of a liberal imperialism akin to that of William Gladstone.²³ In 1999 he spoke of a 'doctrine of the international community', and of it being time to qualify the principle of non-interference in the internal events of other nations.²⁴ In following such a path, Blair has been called 'perhaps the most Gladstonian Prime Minister' since the 'Grand Old Man' himself.²⁵ As Foreign Secretary Robin Cook put it soon after the 1997 election, Britain's foreign policy would now display an 'ethical dimension'.²⁶ Within two years of taking office, such was the argument for British participation in Kosovo.

Such also was the main justification for the invasion of Iraq. Saddam Hussein had long been in Blair's sights. Until the invasion in March 2003, he had worked at justifying such action. He certainly welcomed the participation of the US, but was calling for action long before the election of George W. Bush. For example, in the House of Commons on Remembrance Day 1998, Blair damned the Iraqi dictator as the 'only leader' in the world to have 'used weapons of mass destruction'.²⁷

It is clear that doubts over Blair's claims, highlighted by the suicide of British weapons expert, David Kelly, caused Blair to lose much support in his parliamentary party and in the nation.²⁸ Opinion polls prior to the invasion suggested that close to half of the voters saw him in a favourable light; in the years since, the figure has been about twenty points lower. In 2004 he asserted,

... let others accept that ridding Iraq of Saddam Hussein has made the world not just better but safer.²⁹

However by early 2007 only about one-third of respondents believed Iraq should have been invaded, and about two-thirds of voters apparently believed that Blair had exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. In March 2003 Robin Cook resigned as Leader of the House, stating in the Commons that he could not support a war which had 'neither international agreement nor domestic support'.³⁰ The next day, 139 Labour MPs supported an amendment which stated that, 'the case for war against Iraq has not yet been established'. This was the largest Commons backbench rebellion for over 150 years.³¹

The knock-on effect

Unfortunately for the Prime Minister, the nerve shown by the angry backbenchers seemed to encourage other rebellious behaviour. Analysis has shown that although for most of the 139 members this was their first vote against their government, their action was not a 'one-off'. Most went on to vote against the Government on other issues. One cannot be sure that it was the Iraq issue that generated such rebellion, but it was certainly the issue that freed many backbenchers from the close party ties that had bound them to their party's side since coming to power. Some observers wondered if the Iraq adventure produced a lack of respect for the party's leader:

Just as with much of the electorate outside the Palace of Westminster, so too inside: Iraq was the moment when many Labour MPs stopped trusting Tony Blair.³²

The impact on voters

For some years it could be said of Blair that he 'effortlessly found the dead centre of public opinion'.³³ While obviously an exaggeration, there is much agreement among political observers that on occasion he was able to express the mood of the country, as in the aftermath of the Omagh bombing (1998) and the 9/11 events in the US (2001).³⁴ Over time, however, this support declined markedly, so that the Labour vote in the 2005 election was

Election	Turnout	Labour vote (%)	Conservative vote (%)	Labour seats	Labour majority	Labour proportion of reg. voters
1997	71.4	43.2	30.7	490	179	30.8
2001	59.4	41.4	35.2	412	166	24.6
2005	61.3	35.5	32.3	355	64	21.8

a fall of 7.7 percentage points on the 1997 figure (see Table). Significantly, the turnout also fell. In 2005 Labour was supported by barely one voter in five. At the time of Blair's retirement announcement, the Guardian/ICM poll had his party 7 points behind the Conservatives. This fall may have been hastened by the 'cash for peerages' claim that Labour had nominated some of its secret donors for peerages. Blair was interviewed by police over the matter.³⁵ The 2007 local government elections produced Labour's worst Welsh results for a century, its first Scottish election loss for 50 years, and its lowest number of English councillors since 1978. *A New Statesman*

1. Martin Bright, 'A Blair-sized hole', *New Statesman*, 7 May 2007, p. 11.
2. John Rentoul, *Tony Blair: Prime Minister*, Warner Books, London, 2001, pp. 47, 56.
3. James Naughtie, *The Rivals: the intimate story of a political marriage*, Fourth Estate, London, 2001, p. 37.
4. Anthony Seldon, *Blair*, Free Press, London, 2004, p. 659.
5. Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle, *The Blair Revolution: can New Labour deliver?*, Faber & Faber, London, 1996, pp. 33–34.
6. Rentoul, op. cit., p. 224.
7. Naughtie, op. cit., p. 56.
8. BBC Radio 4, 24 November 1996, quoted in Michael Foley, *The British presidency: Tony Blair and the politics of public leadership*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, p. 92.
9. Nick Cohen, 'Totally wonkers', *Observer*, 9 March 1997.
10. Speech to Labour party conference 1996.
11. Foley, op. cit., pp. 98–99.
12. Speech to Labour party conference 1996.
13. Naughtie, op. cit., ch. 2.
14. Peter Riddell, 'Tony Blair: prime minister or president?', *Politics Review*, February 2006, pp. 31–2.
15. 'Sir Andrew Turnbull's Valedictory Lecture', [2005], http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/rtf/sat_valedictory_lecture.rtf, accessed on 14 June 2007.
16. Paul Fawcett and Oonagh Gay, 'The Centre of Government—No. 10, the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, House of Commons Library *Research Paper* 05/92, p. 3.
17. Robert Orchard, 'Going ten rounds with Tony', *The House Magazine*, 30 April 2007, p. 23.
18. Naughtie, op. cit., p. 285.
19. Frances Elliott and James Hanning, *Cameron: the rise of the new conservative*, Fourth Estate, London, 2007, pp. 209–10.
20. Bright, op. cit., p. 11.
21. Geoff Mulgan, 'Luck and The Thing', *New Statesman*, 7 May 2007, p. 29.

editorial believed that he was leaving Labour 'in distress and disarray'.³⁶ It was an ignominious end.

In retrospect

Christopher Meyer, British Ambassador to the US between 1997 and 2003, has observed that, as with all long-serving leaders, Tony Blair will be remembered both for his achievements and his controversial decisions:

Today, he will be remembered above all for Iraq. On the other side of the ledger, however, is Northern Ireland.³⁷

For world leaders it is ever thus.

22. Vernon Bogdanor, 'The Historic Legacy of Tony Blair', *Current History*, March 2007, p. 101.
23. *ibid*, p. 102.
24. David Marquand, 'A man without history', *New Statesman*, 7 May 2007, p. 38.
25. Bogdanor, op. cit., p. 103.
26. Philip Stephens, *Tony Blair: the making of a world leader*, Viking, London, 2004, p. 159.
27. House of Commons, *Debates*, 11 November 1998.
28. Stephens, op. cit., pp. 241–4.
29. Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *Yo, Blair!*, Politico's, London, 2007, p. 131.
30. House of Commons, *Debates*, 17 March 2003.
31. Philip Cowley, *The Rebels: How Blair Misled His Majority*, Politico's, London, 2005, p. 123.
32. *ibid*, p. 134.
33. Mulgan, op. cit., p. 29.
34. Orchard, op. cit., p. 20.
35. 'Blair questioned in honours probe', BBC News, 14 December 2006.
36. 'A sad and salutary end, but the chance for a fresh start', editorial, *New Statesman*, 14 May 2007, p. 4.
37. Jeffrey Stinson, 'Blair to resign June 27 after decade as PM', *USA Today*, 9 May 2007.

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