TONY BLAIR’S TEN YEARS IN POWER

Introduction

Before a hushed House of Commons on June 27, 2007, British Prime Minister Tony Blair delivered his farewell speech. After a decade in power, during which he had led his Labour Party to an unprecedented three victories at the polls, Blair was finally stepping down. He could point to many significant achievements over the course of his administration, including major social and economic reforms such as a minimum wage and greater spending on education and health care. His government had also introduced constitutional changes limiting the power of the unelected House of Lords and granting more self-government to Scotland and Wales. Even more remarkably, he had succeeded in negotiating a peace deal between warring Catholic and Protestant factions in Northern Ireland, a goal that had eluded his predecessors for decades. On the foreign policy front, he had promoted a major humanitarian aid package for Africa with fellow G8 leaders and had not hesitated to use British military force—along with the United States—to end ethnic violence and bloodshed in Sierra Leone and Kosovo.

But overshadowing all of these accomplishments and Blair’s undeniable intelligence and political abilities was the one issue that had dogged him in the last years of his mandate and had perhaps fatally undermined his popularity with the British public. This was his unremitting support for U.S. President George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq and his commitment of a major British military force as part of the occupation of that country. Blair’s endorsement of the Iraq invasion stemmed from his response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, after which he believed the world could never be the same again. Along with Bush, he viewed the war on international terrorism as the most commanding issue of the day and quickly dispatched British troops to Afghanistan to root out Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The British public mostly backed this decision, believing it justified in view of the fact that Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the strikes on New York and Washington, had used Afghanistan as his base of operations.

However, when it came to the war in Iraq, public opinion, and Blair’s own Labour Party were both sharply divided. For his part, Blair was convinced that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had to be toppled because he possessed weapons of mass destruction that could pose a serious threat to international security. Blair’s decision to back the U.S. invasion that ousted Saddam flew in the face of international opinion and was not supported by the United Nations. Nonetheless, he believed it to be the morally right thing to do. For this reason he used all of his considerable rhetorical abilities to achieve a narrow victory in the House of Commons endorsing his decision.

But in the months after the invasion, when no evidence of such weapons materialized, Blair was accused of misleading the public and falsifying secret intelligence to make the case for the existence of these weapons more credible. As the situation in Iraq deteriorated disastrously in the aftermath of Saddam’s ouster, Blair took the blame for his unquestioning support of his ally George W. Bush in what was appearing to have been a disastrously mistaken operation with no solution or exit strategy in sight.
Because of Iraq, and some scandals that tarnished his administration during his last year in power, Blair decided it was finally time to leave office. He had promised before his third electoral victory in 2005, with a sharply reduced parliamentary majority, that he would not seek another term in office. Thus began what journalists were to call his “long goodbye” from 10 Downing St., the British prime minister’s official residence in London. During this period, his one-time ally and now political rival, Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, or finance minister, began to plan his own rise to power. For years, Brown and Blair had been at loggerheads over a number of issues. Once it became clear that Blair was definitely stepping down, Brown saw that his chance had come at last, and he positioned himself skilfully within the Labour Party to achieve victory.

Tony Blair is undoubtedly one of the most important political figures in modern British history. He transformed the Labour Party from a tired, almost irrelevant left-wing fringe group into a powerful political force capable of winning a record three-straight electoral victories. He inspired the British people with an optimistic image of what their country could be during his first successful election. He imposed his personal stamp on the country, most memorably during the aftermath of the tragic death of Princess Diana in August 1997. Dubbing Diana “the people’s princess,” he cannily captured the public mood and, in the process, probably saved the reputation of the Royal Family. He was without question an intelligent, magnetic personality with a remarkable ability to persuade others of the value of his arguments. But Iraq was in the end to be the tragic flaw that brought him down. It will now be up to the historians to evaluate his legacy and decide whether it is to be viewed positively or negatively in the years to come.

**To Consider**

1. In your view, what are Tony Blair’s most important achievements as British prime minister on the a) domestic and b) foreign-policy fronts?

2. Why is Blair’s decision to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq likely to be viewed as his most serious mistake as Prime Minister?

3. What qualities made Blair such a remarkable and effective political leader? Who is his successor?

4. Do you think future historians will view Blair’s political legacy as mainly positive or negative? Why?

5. How do you personally view his career and legacy? Explain.
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Video Review

Watch the video and answer the questions in the spaces provided.

1. On what date did Tony Blair officially step down as prime minister of Britain? __________________
   How long had he been in power? __________________

2. What was Blair’s campaign slogan during his first successful election campaign as leader of the Labour Party in 1997?

3. How was Blair able to capture the public mood in Britain in the days following the death of Princess Diana in 1997?

4. What are some of the major accomplishments of Tony Blair’s government on the home front and in foreign policy?

5. Why did Blair back U.S. President George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003? Why was this decision so unpopular with the British people and his own party?

6. How did the death by suicide of British arms expert David Kelly cast a shadow on Blair’s credibility over the Iraq issue?

7. What is Tony Blair’s new assignment after leaving the office of prime minister? What qualities will he be able to bring to his new job?
8. Briefly indicate the views of each of the following people interviewed in the video on Tony Blair and his political achievements and legacy:

Jim Naughtie (journalist and Blair biographer)

Neil Kinnock (former Labour Party leader)

Clare Short (former Blair cabinet minister)

David Blunkett (former home secretary)

Which of these viewpoints do you agree with most and why?

9. Discuss what you think Tony Blair meant when he stated:

“I do not seek unpopularity as a badge of honour, but sometimes it is the price of leadership.”

Do you agree with him? Why/why not?

10. In a well-written paragraph outline your personal evaluation of Tony Blair as a world leader. Use specific references to his career to support your ideas.
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Timeline: The Blair Years

Here is a timeline of the major events during British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s 10 years in power. Circle the three that you feel are most significant and be prepared to explain your choice.


1984-92 Blair rises rapidly in Labour Party ranks and aligns himself with those who believe the party needs to reform itself and moderate its image and policies if it is ever to regain power.

1992 Blair is appointed shadow Home Secretary by Labour leader John Smith.

1994 Following Smith’s sudden death, Blair wins the party leadership and pushes through a number of major policy reforms to make it more moderate and electable, such as loosening its ties with the trade unions and abandoning hardline socialist policies.

1997 Blair wins a sweeping victory over the governing Conservatives and becomes the second-youngest prime minister in British history. That summer, he captures the public mood in the wake of the tragic death of Princess Diana by paying tribute to her as “the people’s princess.”

1998 Blair succeeds in negotiating the “Good Friday” agreement between rival Protestant and Catholic groups in Northern Ireland, ending decades of bloodshed in that troubled part of the United Kingdom.

1999 Blair joins U.S. President Bill Clinton in dispatching NATO forces to Kosovo to halt ethnic violence that Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic was committing against Albanians there.

2001 Blair is re-elected, becoming the first Labour leader to win two consecutive majority governments. After the terrorist attacks of September 11 on New York and Washington, Blair declares his wholehearted support for U.S. President Bush’s “war on international terrorism” and sends British forces to Afghanistan.

2002 Blair releases an intelligence report claiming that Iraq could deploy weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes.

2003 Blair supports Bush’s decision to invade Iraq to topple dictator Saddam Hussein and remove the weapons of mass destruction he allegedly possesses. The move costs Blair significant political support at home and tarnishes his image abroad.

2004 Amid allegations that Blair falsified key intelligence reports on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, a five-member panel concludes that his claim that such weapons could be used within 45 minutes was completely false.

2005 Blair wins his third and last election, but with a sharply decreased majority and the lowest voter turnout in British history. But that summer, Blair regains some of his lost popularity by his adept handling of the crisis following the terrorist bombings that strike London.

2006 Pressure for Blair to resign as prime minister increases in the wake of allegations that he offered rich businessmen seats in the House of Lords in return for campaign donations to the Labour Party. A major terrorist plot to bring down 10 airliners is foiled.

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Quote
“But people everywhere, not just here in Britain, kept faith with Princess Diana. They liked her, they loved her, they regarded her as one of the people. She was the people’s princess and that is how she will stay, how she will remain in our hearts and our memories forever.” — Tony Blair, public statement August 31, 1997
After 10 years in power, Blair steps down as prime minister and is succeeded by Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, a one-time friend and now strong rival for the position. He later accepts the position of Middle East envoy from the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia.

Source: CBC News In Depth: “Tony Blair’s Political Career: A Timeline”

Analysis
1. How did Blair prepare both himself and his party for their sweeping victory at the polls in 1997?

2. What important achievements did Blair accomplish during his first term in office (1997 to 2001)?

3. Why did Blair back the U.S. invasion of Iraq? What statement made shortly before the invasion would come back to haunt him?

4. What issues and events put pressure on Blair to decide to step down as prime minister in 2007?

5. What do you think were Blair’s worst moment and finest moment? Explain.
TONY BLAIR’S TEN YEARS IN POWER
As Others See Him: Views of Tony Blair

Here is a collage of quotes about former British prime minister Tony Blair from a number of prominent international figures. With which do you most agree and disagree? Be prepared to discuss your views.

“He has been a friend. He has been steadfast. In the face of negative public opinion, he has stood steady and we could always count on him. Well some people say you shouldn’t always have been able to count on him, but he made his own judgments, as to whether he should stand alongside America in some of these crisis periods. But having made that decision he stood firm. You never had to worry about him walking away from you, and that’s what you call a friend, and that’s what you call a strong leader.” — Colin Powell, former U.S. secretary of state

“He was guilty of a good deal of spin occasionally, when he allowed himself to say that Iraq could deploy weapons of mass destruction in 45 minutes. Well, I think he must have realized that was all to influence the public to believe more than there really was to believe. Sometimes I felt it takes a lot of time to build up confidence, but you can lose it in less than 45 minutes, and I think that’s what he did.” — Hans Blix, former UN chief weapons inspector in Iraq

“He was very much struck by what had happened in Bosnia, and determined that the same thing should not happen in Kosovo. And on Kosovo, I think it will be a significant part of his legacy. And I think for most people that he did the courageous thing by saying the international community should intervene. But on the European Union, I think that there he has probably disappointed. He was the first British prime minister for a long time who felt instinctively at home inside the EU. At the same time, the politics of the issue in Britain and the support that he had from the Murdoch press constrained his ability to act. I think that on Europe he will above all else be remembered as the prime minister who did not take us into the Euro.” — Sir Stephen Wall, former Blair advisor on the EU

“He is a political figure who is capable of thinking over the horizon. He is a long-term thinker. I have found him to be a man who has kept his word, which sometimes is rare in the political circles I run in. When Tony Blair tells you something—as we say in Texas—you can take it to the bank. We have got a relationship such that we can have really good discussions. And so we will miss him.” — U.S. President George W. Bush

“I gained the distinct impression that he was totally committed to Africa, for example, when he said that ‘Africa is the sore on the global scene,’ and that unless we dealt with it, it would become an incurable sore. I happen to believe that Mr. Blair brought a moral voice to foreign policy issues by government and so on.” — Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, president of Sierra Leone

“The bonds with Prime Minister Blair have been forged through some of the most difficult times, through the time of 9/11, through the attacks on London, through
Afghanistan, Iraq, and Northern Ireland. President Bush did not just value Blair’s advice, but sought it out. He often said: ‘I need to know what Tony thinks.’ On Northern Ireland, President Bush’s view was that whatever Tony Blair needs, Tony Blair shall have.” — Condoleezza Rice, U.S. Secretary of State

“Tony Blair has taken Britain from the fringes to the mainstream of the European Union. He has done this by engagement, not by vetoes. He has brought to Europe energy, engagement, and ideas and leaves an impressive legacy including his commitment to enlargement, energy policy, his promotion of action against climate change, and for fighting poverty in Africa. Above all he has shared in our determination to create an open, reforming, and strong Europe. I greatly value our friendship and I wish him success for the future.” — Jose Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission

“He was the worst thing that ever happened to Africa. We hope that the children of Iraq and Afghanistan he is killing every day will haunt him for the rest of his life. We hope that he has learned from his mistakes if he is going to take an ambassadorial role in Africa. We hope Gordon Brown will have a different approach towards Zimbabwe, a more humane approach to things than Tony Blair.” — Bright Matonga, deputy information minister, Zimbabwe

“Tony Blair was a very unique introduction in the history, or should I say the tradition, of British life. Young, handsome, intelligent, devoted, religious, he came in at a very trying moment. In Great Britain there is great respect for tradition and yet a new age was born. On the one hand, the Europeanization of the political relations between Great Britain and Europe, on the other hand the global economy and then again the special relationship between Great Britain and the United States.” — Shimon Peres, President of Israel

“We hope that the departure of Mr. Blair and the coming of a new prime minister will lead to a serious change in British politics—one that is less biased towards Israel, that is more reasonable in co-operating with the Palestinian side, and that would support lifting the embargo on the Palestinian people. We hope to see a more independent British policy from that of the United States. Especially on issues related to the Middle East, Mr. Blair promised many initiatives, including a promise of an international peace conference, and he never conducted any of them.” — Moustafa Barghouti, Palestinian information minister

Source: BBC News Online: “Assessing Blair's Foreign Policy” and “In Quotes: Reactions to Blair's Exit”

**Activities**

1. For each of the quotes above, state the central issue or topic relating to former British prime minister Tony Blair that is being addressed by the speaker.

2. For each of the quotes, indicate whether you think the viewpoint being expressed by the speaker of Tony Blair is positive or negative, and give reasons to support your conclusion.
Debating the Blair Legacy

Tony Blair leaves office as arguably one of the most effective political figures in modern British history, and certainly the most successful leader the Labour Party ever had. Yet his legacy is likely to be inevitably tarnished by his decision to support the invasion and occupation of Iraq. According to Ian Kershaw, a professor of modern history at Sheffield University, and author of an acclaimed biography of Adolf Hitler, Blair’s term in office “will go down in history as a lost opportunity, a time when much was promised but relatively little attained.” In Kershaw’s view, this verdict on Blair’s leadership remains valid even when the Iraq disaster is removed from the equation. Kershaw faults Blair for his government’s reliance on “spin doctors” and unelected advisors, leading to a U.S.-style presidential form of government that weakened the House of Commons and traditional British democratic institutions. He also charges Blair’s “New Labour” administration with a failure to deal with problems in the country’s education, health care, transportation, and social services and a legacy of inner-city decay, juvenile crime, and increased economic inequality, despite an era of prosperity. In his opinion, “there is remarkably little to show for 10 years of Labour government, particularly in the position of the less well-off in society. Yet what is Labour for, if not above all to serve their interests?”

But more than anything else, it is Iraq that will go down in history as Blair’s biggest blunder, an “avoidable” disaster as far as Kershaw is concerned. However, for Andrew Roberts, another prominent British historian, Blair’s unwavering support for U.S. President George W. Bush in his war on international terrorism was his greatest accomplishment and will stand as a positive legacy for his term in office. Roberts credits Blair with “Churchillian-style” leadership after the attacks of September 11 and praises him as an “exemplary war leader.” Unlike Kershaw, he does not find fault with Blair’s decision to back the invasion of Iraq, pointing out that at the time he had every reason to believe that Saddam Hussein did in fact possess weapons of mass destruction and posed a serious danger to international security. The fact that Blair was able to commit to this decision and maintain it in the face of widespread public opposition indicates to Roberts that he was a leader who was prepared to stick to his principles when he believed he was right, whatever the political consequences.

For Anthony Seldon, who has written a biography of Tony Blair, his sheer ability to transform the Labour Party from an almost irrelevant socialist group with a record of electoral failure into a potent political machine capable of winning three consecutive majorities is enough to ensure a positive legacy. Under his leadership, Britain’s economy grew, and its status in the world was enhanced. Although Iraq was a serious miscalculation, it can be counterbalanced by significant achievements such as the “Good Friday” peace agreement in Northern Ireland, long overdue overhauls to the education and health-care systems, and closer ties to the European Union. Blair may not have succeeded in advancing the three international causes closest to him—reducing poverty and HIV/AIDS in Africa, dealing with the environmental crisis of global warming, and negotiating an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict—but Seldon
is convinced that “Britain’s standing in the world, and in Europe, is higher in 2007 than it was in 1997.” To him, this is in large measure thanks to Tony Blair’s leadership. And the fact that neither the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, nor Conservative Party leader David Cameron is likely to depart from his policy directions to any substantial degree (with the possible exception of Iraq) is also the ultimate test of the legacy of Tony Blair on his country’s political scene.

Source: BBC News Online: “How Will History Judge Blair?”

Activities

1. Form groups to read and analyze the passage above. Summarize the main points that each author makes about Tony Blair and his political legacy. Indicate whether you think the author’s overall evaluation of Blair is positive or negative, and why.

2. In your groups, review the arguments and evidence each author makes to support his viewpoint of Blair’s legacy and state whether or not you agree with it and why.

3. Try to come to a consensus on the primeministership of Tony Blair and present your findings to your peers.

Notes:
Gordon Brown and Tony Blair have been both close allies and bitter rivals over the course of their remarkably similar political careers in the British Labour Party. Both men were elected to Parliament for the first time in 1983 and rose rapidly through the party ranks, attracting the favourable attention of leaders such as Michael Foot, Neil Kinnock, and John Smith. They also shared the view that after spending so many years in the political wilderness during the regime of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Labour was in need of a serious overhaul if it were ever to regain power. They devoted all of their efforts to persuading the party faithful to abandon cherished socialist dogmas such as public ownership and unilateral disarmament, and instead focus on developing policies that would appeal to middle-of-the-road British voters who were growing weary of Thatcher’s hardline right-wing administration.

Born in Scotland in 1951, Brown pursued careers as a university lecturer and television journalist before entering politics. Known as a somewhat dour, serious individual with little personal charisma, Brown was also a hard worker who always kept his focus on the task at hand. As a result, both he and Blair quickly established themselves as the rising young stars in the Labour Party during the early 1990s. When party leader John Smith died suddenly in 1994, they were both viewed as likely contenders to succeed him. To work out their differences, the two men met at an upscale Italian restaurant in the fashionable London suburb of Islington and worked out a deal. Labour insiders such as party media chief Peter Mandelson were convinced that Blair was a more favourable choice for party leader, since he projected a much more media-friendly public image than the serious, dour Brown. In return for a promise to bow out of the leadership race, Brown received from Blair the commitment that once Labour regained power he would become the most powerful Chancellor of the Exchequer, or finance minister, in the history of Britain. Reluctantly, Brown agreed to the deal, and Blair easily won the party leadership.

The two men worked tirelessly to ensure a sweeping victory for Labour in the 1997 general election, and Brown found himself the second most powerful politician in the country. But quickly the ambitions of the two men came into conflict, as Brown and Blair found themselves in conflict over a number of issues. Their biggest dispute was over the issue of whether or not Britain should enter the Euro zone and abandon the pound sterling as its unit of currency. An ardent Europhile, Blair strongly backed the Euro, but Brown was much more reluctant. He imposed a set of stringent economic tests that he insisted should be passed before he would agree to put the question before the British people in a referendum. At the same time, both Blair and Brown continued to build up their own personal power bases within the government and Labour Party, leading many to wonder who was actually running the show. According to Matthew Taylor, Blair’s former policy chief, party insiders began to feel like “children in a dysfunctional family where mom and dad are too busy arguing with each other to ever talk to the kids.”

During his time as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Brown achieved the near-impossible, gaining for Labour the reputation for sound management of the British economy. He was able to fund...
substantial increases in government spending on health, education, and the police force, largely through tax increases, leading some of his opponents to accuse him of raising taxes “by stealth.” However, his economic policies found favour with the voters and were one of the most important factors behind Labour’s convincing second-term victory in 2001.

By 2003 Blair’s political position became less tenable as a result of a massive negative public backlash over his decision to support U.S. President George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq. Brown did not publicly distance himself from this position at the time, although he harboured some doubts about it in private. But he did use Blair’s new vulnerability to advantage over another contentious issue that emerged at the time. This was Blair’s decision to raise university tuition fees, a measure that met with strong opposition from students. Brown was also strongly opposed to this idea, believing it flew in the face of Labour’s traditional commitment to equal access to education. He waited until the very last minute to instruct his supporters in the House of Commons to give Blair the votes necessary to pass the bill raising tuition fees. In doing so, Brown was signalling to Blair that he could not continue to govern without his support.

In response, after the 2005 election, which Labour only narrowly won, Blair began a secret plot to remove Brown from office and replace him with someone more loyal. For his part, Brown was adroitly positioning himself as the leader-in-waiting after Blair’s public announcement that he would not seek a fourth term as prime minister. Brown was eager for Blair to step down and pressured him to announce a definite date for his departure rather than engage in the “long goodbye” from office. When it became obvious that no Blair supporter was waiting in the wings to challenge Brown for the party leadership, Labour insiders reconciled themselves to the fact that Brown would be their next chief.

To some within the party ranks, Brown appears to be a more traditional socialist who never really embraced all of the “New Labour” policies Blair so strongly championed. This may be true regarding some issues such as taxes, government spending, education, and health-care reform. However it is unlikely that Brown’s administration will depart in any significant way from his predecessor’s moderate, centrist positions on most questions, especially if it hopes to win another term in office against a resurgent Conservative opposition. It is likely, though, that Brown will seek the earliest feasible opportunity to withdraw British troops from Iraq, since he is aware of how deeply objectionable their presence there is to most British voters.

At long last, Gordon Brown achieved the position he had coveted for so long when his former friend and rival stepped down at the end of June 2007. The man who would be king now found himself on the throne and clearly relished the position. But whether or not he would be able to retain it for long with his party so badly bruised by Iraq and other issues was an entirely different question.

**To Consider**

1. What are the main similarities and differences in the personalities, political beliefs, and careers of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown?

2. Why were the two men destined to be both allies and rivals during their years in politics?

3. In your opinion, in what ways do you think Brown’s administration is likely to differ from that of his predecessor? Be specific.
TONY BLAIR’S TEN YEARS IN POWER
Evaluating a Prime Minister

As Tony Blair leaves office as prime minister of Britain, journalists and historians are already beginning to evaluate his period in office and what its lasting legacy is likely to be. Using the material contained in this resource guide and the accompanying video, form groups to prepare and present your own assessment of the career, accomplishments, failings, and likely legacy of this remarkable politician.

You could use the following criteria in preparing your evaluation—and also develop others:

- Domestic achievements
- Foreign policy achievements
- Political image and abilities
- Major mistakes or failures of his administration
- Electoral success
- Popularity with British voters
- International reputation
- Relationship with George W. Bush

On the basis of these criteria or others, each group should determine whether it believes that Blair’s political legacy will be viewed as mainly positive or negative, and why. After the groups have finished preparing their evaluations/assessments, they can present them to the class as a whole. Following this, the class can engage in a general discussion of Tony Blair’s accomplishments and failings as prime minister of Britain, and how he and his government are likely to be remembered by future historians.

Notes: