Did Tony Blair’s successes outweigh his failures as prime minister?

Peter Hennessey called him a ‘destiny politician’,1 George W. Bush called him a ‘friend’, and Margaret Thatcher called him her ‘greatest invention’.2 Tony Blair was the longest serving Labour prime minister, and also the most controversial. He entered government with the “boldest and most radical agenda in British politics”,3 but left in a bitter departure. Blairism provided British politics with an alternative: free on market but tough on crime, reducing poverty whilst sustaining prosperity. On the world stage, Blair left behind a legacy of peace: ended decades-long sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, stopped the genocide in Kosovo, and rescued Sierra-Leone from the gunfire of gangsters. However, he also left a legacy of war: committed British troops in Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of anti-terrorism whilst killing thousands of innocent civilians. Back home, Blair’s refusal to confront his friend and foe, Gordon Brown, left the government paralyzed. Blair’s Britain was defenceless when the financial crisis hit in 2008 and wealth inequality continued to grow both as a result of his economic policy. Nevertheless he managed to hand over a modernised public service system – his greatest legacy – to his successor. At home, Blair was the reformer; abroad, Blair was the invader. Thanks to Blair, Britain was modernised; Britain was also demonised.

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Tony Blair’s government was one the most effective, yet it was also one of the most dysfunctional in modern times. Andrew Rawnsley argues that Blair had “blue sky ambitions but no detailed policies for achieving many of them”;\(^4\) whereas Anthony Seldon believes Blair “had no idea how to run a government”\(^5\) when he came to power. “I had never held office”, says Blair, “(Being prime minister) was my first and only job in government.”\(^6\) His inexperience soon showed.

Firstly, the government was heavily dependent on ‘spin’. Led by Alistair Campbell, a group of ‘spin doctors’ wrote down the agenda called ‘The Grid’\(^7\) which put them on the offensive when scrutinised by the media. “Tony Blair’s government is and always has been obsessed with ‘spin’”, says Launce Price.\(^8\) This habit placed government into a dangerous position, where a policy’s value depended upon its popularity not potential, like the Millennium Dome project, which ended in disappointment.

Secondly, unlike his predecessor, Blair’s style of government was presidential. Instead of reaching collective decisions via collegiate discussions, Blair was determined to run a “sofa government”.\(^9\) In his view, it is neither modern nor efficient to run a cabinet government in the twenty-first century.\(^10\) Although it was unconstitutional, he was “unashamed” with this style of

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\(^4\) Written and narrated by Rawnsley, Andrew, *The Rise and Fall of Tony Blair*, (Channel 4, 2007).


\(^7\) Rawnsley (2007).


government.\textsuperscript{11} Jenkins criticizes this approach as ineffective, as it “distanced them (decisions) from existing systems of delivery.”\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, Blair’s government was ineffective by 2007, but it was not due to his presidential style.

The terminal factor to Blair’s premiership was nothing to do with the media or his style of government, but his own chancellor. His personal difficulties, and later, policy differences with Gordon Brown, known as the ‘TB/GB’s, divided the party and was toxic to the government. With Brown and his allies in the Cabinet, Blair remarks, “each step was a battle.”\textsuperscript{13} Brown, who Blair once promised the top job to, exploited his advantage. For example, the introduction of foundation hospital was delayed due to Brown’s furious objection. The “duopoly” government,\textsuperscript{14} criticizes Naughtie, was “a struggle of personalities and its energies are directed inwards.”\textsuperscript{15} The consequence was huge: Blair’s failure to overcome Brown’s forces distracted his radical reform agenda for public services, his supposedly greatest legacy.

Blair’s foreign policy was an even mixture of successes and failures. His policy was clear as early as 1999, when he sketched out his ‘doctrine of international community’ in Chicago. “We have learned twice before in this century that appeasement does not work”, said Blair. It was a liberal interventionist attitude. The policy was successful in Sierra-Leone, “the country’s democracy was saved” when British forces successfully toppled the armed group, ‘West Side

\textsuperscript{12} Jenkins, p.274.
\textsuperscript{13} Blair, p.574.
\textsuperscript{14} Naughtie, p.111.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.118.
Boys"; in Kosovo, where NATO intervention, advocated and pushed by Blair, saved thousands of Muslims from genocide. Yet he shed the blood of many Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq. The two wars did not end terrorism, but encouraged extremism in those countries, hence lengthened the war. "I was keen to put the operation back under a UN," argues Blair. But he was unsuccessful. Riddell explains that it "was a plausible strategy" to begin with, but because Blair’s argument for war – Saddam’s possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction – was "not his main motive”, he failed to make the argument. Iraq was significant, for it raised questions about Blair’s pro-American policy, but most of all, his integrity as a prime minister. Anthony Giddens says, “nothing corroded Blair's reputation more.” This policy also led him into the refusal to condemn Israel’s attack on Lebanon in 2006, which Seldon called a “fatal judgement.”

The British economy sustained growth for ten years under Tony Blair. It had done very well compared to the world’s five largest economies. Despite following the previous government’s spending limits, Blair managed to deliver ‘The New Deal’ welfare-to-work programme, funded by a ‘windfall tax’ on big corporations. The growth decreased in public sector debt interest allowed the Treasury to allocate more money for all other spending programmes. New Labour also managed to spend more without raising the top rate of income tax, by adjusting contribution levels of ‘stealth taxes’, such as the National Insurance. William Keegan describes this as

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16 Blair, p.247.
17 Ibid., p.441.
“redistribution by stealth.” Much of the credit of economic growth was claimed by Brown and the Treasury, who Blair allowed independence to conduct the policy. However, the financial crisis of 2008 led doubters to reevaluate Blair’s record. Under Blair, the public sector expansion was beyond sustainable. For instance, between 2003 and 2004, the number of public sector workers increased by 2.5% in comparison to 0.5% in the private sector. A “two-speed economy”, in which some sectors, like manufacturing, perform less well than others, like finance, was developed. Robert Taylor argues that “skills and training issue did not receive the government attention that it deserved.” Reviewing New Labour in 2010, Giddens criticizes Blair’s overreliance on the financial sector and his “gigantic tax haven” that created “a culture of irresponsibility.” To his defence, Blair reveals his argument with Brown on conducting a Fundamental Savings Review (FSR). Debating with Brown in 2005, Blair argued, “We had reached the limit of spending” and “enough was enough”. However, Blair was reluctant to confront Brown and lost the argument for FSR. Unable to claim credit for the success, Blair bears the responsibility for the economic tragedy. As Jenkin concludes, “The economy caused Blair not pride but pain.”

“Ask me my three main priorities for government, and I tell you, education, education, education.” There was no doubt about Blair’s commitment in reforming Britain’s crumbling schools and universities. In the first term, Blair introduced ‘Sure Start’, the literacy and

24 Driver & Martell, p.76.
26 Giddens (2010).
27 Blair. pp.574-575.
28 Jenkins, p.287.
numeracy strategy and education action zones. But Blair’s vision was more radical than that, he believed Britain was now in the “post comprehensive era”. The establishment of academies, which allowed private or charity organisations to invest in schools with poor performance, was the most successful reform. The result is clear: academies are improving 3 times faster than other schools; funding for school buildings more than doubled from £1.26m in 1997-8 to £3.02m in 2005-06; and despite opposition in general public, in the education sector and in politics within his own party, the introduction of tuition fees created a more “cost-effective” system, with 1.6 million people in higher education. Paradoxically, the reform increased “pressure from the centre through target-setting.” As a result, schools were trained to meet government targets, not attainment. It is difficult to assess Blair’s achievement in education fairly, though standards have improved and financial pressure eased, historians will need to wait and observe further changes in the years to come.

Likewise, the National Health Service urgently needed reform. It was the most enduring legacy left by a Labour government, and successive Labour leaders vowed to protect it, however much it costs. Blair begged to differ. In his 1999 conference speech, he stated that “money is not all it needs” to reform healthcare. Blair’s motto for his NHS reform was “choosing not waiting”, a stance for diversity similar to his education reform. The system was reorganized and “run by GPs”. Blair gave them power over finance and administration, allowing them hold budget and

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31 Blair, p.578.
34 Ibid, p.384.
negotiate with the hospital trusts.\textsuperscript{36} Whilst reforming, Blair invested more spending on health, and more strategically. There was an increase of 8-9\% a year on average and 12-15\% in poor areas.\textsuperscript{37} On the other hand, the reforms also led to management overload. Like teachers, doctors are now chasing targets. Figures show that even when compared to primary care-led systems only, Britain’s expenditure level still failed to match those of others, like the Nordic countries.\textsuperscript{38}

“By 2005 the NHS was £800 million in debt”\textsuperscript{39}, says Jenkins, and was “no longer the wonder of the world.”\textsuperscript{40} Despite the harsh criticisms, Blair’s reform ensured NHS could bear the burden of increase number of patients, and bettered the NHS from its status in 1997.

In summary, both Blair’s successes and failures were controversial; his critics differ vigorously when assessing his legacy. Jenkins believes Blair’s reform had introduced “aversion, defensive administration and red tape”\textsuperscript{41} in public services. Giddens, on the other hand, argues that Blair government marched Britain towards a “more liberal and tolerant society than it was.”\textsuperscript{42} Riddell gave a modest verdict of Blair’s premiership; “Blair has not been a failure as prime minister,” says Riddell, “but nor has he been as successful as he should have been.”\textsuperscript{43} His greatest weakness, failure to confront Brown, obstructed his public service reform and economic policy adjustments with the grave consequence of overspending. His foreign policy was equally polemical. As liberal intervention led to peace in Kosovo and Sierra-Leone, it also shed blood for ten years in

\textsuperscript{36} Blair, p.215.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p.398, Table 18.1.
\textsuperscript{39} Jenkins, p.289.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p.292.
\textsuperscript{41} Jenkins, p.281.
\textsuperscript{42} Giddens (2010).
\textsuperscript{43} Riddell, p.192.
Afghanistan and Iraq. Iraq, in particular, damaged his integrity as a prime minister. After all, it is difficult to evaluate all aspects of Blair’s successes and failures as prime minister at this stage, only four years from his resignation. However, one thing is for sure: he ran a reformist government for ten years, and pulled the gravity of politics towards his ideals – Blarism.

“Neither Gordon Brown nor David Cameron fundamentally argue with Blarism,” says Rawnsley in 2007, “they quarrel only who will best deliver it in the future.”44 Blair’s shortcomings might have failed him to be the best, but his successes had guaranteed his place as one of the most successful prime ministers in British history.

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