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Blair's Legacy Will Inspire Plenty of Debate

By Zack Gross

British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced last week that he will step down on June 27th, after a decade in office. His supporters and detractors have quickly responded, creating a debate that will rage for decades more, whether his domestic and foreign policies amounted to folly and failure, or demonstrated great foresight and leadership.

Blair was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1953 and studied law at Oxford University. When Margaret Thatcher's Conservative regime was remaking British politics on the right, Blair was elected to Parliament as a Labour MP in 1983. His greatest impact on the public to that date had been as a student rock band guitarist with the "Ugly Rumours."

As the Labour Party fought difficult internal battles in an effort to find its way back into power, Tony Blair, George Brown (Blair's successor and currently his Finance Minister) and other young party leaders met regularly to set an agenda for something they called "New Labour." This was a political strategy, more than a philosophy, attempting to soft-sell social reform to the middle and upper classes, while not being as stridently "left wing" as they believed Labour had been previously.

Under what became known as "Blairism," critical observers of Blair's 10 years complain that he was too fearful that comfortable voters and the media would turn against him and, therefore, didn't do enough on social issues. His friends counter that he accomplished a great deal in improving Britain's National Health Service, the minimum wage and the education system – making them the equal of any in the European Union - but did it very quietly so as not to offend those who might feel that he was a "taxing and spending" socialist.

Blair has been compared, in his style of "third way" politics, to Bill Clinton, who spoke eloquently about social issues but actually moved his party to the right in how social reform was implemented. Frank McKenna, well-respected when he was Liberal Premier of New Brunswick, also fit that mould. Blair has also been criticized by some for the wealthy, conservative friends he kept, curiously cozying up to Nicholas Sarkozy, now the new French President, Silvio Berlusconi, the over-the-top Italian leader and, of course, US President George Bush. Interestingly, new leaders in Europe who want to be friends of the US, call themselves "Blairists."

Tony Blair emerged as a world leader on human rights, poverty and the environment, espousing the urgency of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and leading the battle against climate change. Unfortunately, his efforts did not influence wealthy nations to make the financial and policy commitments necessary to

stem the tide of global warming, HIV/AIDS or the Third World's often abject poverty. In this regard, he was abandoned by his friends.

To his credit, in the late '90s, Blair led the charge to rid the former Yugoslavia, as it broke up, of its dictatorial, ethnic-cleansing leaders, such as Slobodan Milosevic.

The fresh poison in Blair's legacy is his support for, and direct involvement in, the US-led war on Iraq. No policy decision more clearly led to his personal loss of public popularity, growing opposition and calls for his resignation within his own caucus, and his government's decline in the polls. Blair's name took a twist, over the false accusation that there were "weapons of mass destruction" hidden in Iraq, as raucous demonstrators in Britain dubbed him "Tony Bliar."

Once Blair was in with the Bush adventure in Iraq, he refused to back down, saying he felt that he was "doing the right thing." Blair and Bush share a strong Christian faith. George Bush said that Blair's word was "money in the bank" but never reciprocated on the other major global issues of the day.

Much will be said of Tony Blair's legacy, although it is too early to tell just how history will treat him. Some will say that he was too pragmatic and didn't go far enough in playing out the Labour vision of social reform. Others will say that he wasn't pragmatic enough, making a commitment to an unpopular war and taking a US-inspired hard line on post-9/11 issues.

Some will say that he was a world leader on global concerns but they will be countered by the sobering news that his outspoken leadership didn't produce nearly enough action by wealthy nations. He may have been a charismatic leader but promises were left unfulfilled and mistakes were made.

Coming up next for Britons as prime minister is George Brown, Blair's long-time rival. Brown was part of the original discussion group that created New Labour in the early Nineties. They decided between themselves that Blair would go first for the top job. Now, the more doctrinaire and more private Brown gets his turn. He faces the challenge of bringing Labour back in the polls to where they might win the next election. Meanwhile, Tony Blair is yet a young man, in his mid-fifties, so it will be interesting to see if he has a further contribution to make.

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