

Tony Blair: A Reckoning

by [Robert Bruce](#) (January 2020)



Phenomenon, Florin Petrachi, 2017

The powers of a first-rate man with the creed of a second-rate man. –Walter Bagehot

Most political careers probably do end in tragedy but if Tom Bower had opted for a less-clichéd hook on which to hang his impressive biography, *Broken Vows: Tony Blair–The Tragedy of Power*, he might—with the full authority of 596 meticulously researched pages—also have noted that they can also descend into venality. The penchant of Blair for the hospitality and gaudy accoutrements of the celebrity millionaires is well known and, with retirement, a shameless disregard for probity and conflict of interest has elevated him into the league of the minor super rich. Always envious of the rich and chastened by his notoriously vulgar wife, Blair has not been shy in his pursuit of reward. By the most reliable estimates, the ex-Prime Minister is worth a cool £60 million—a significant part of it extorted from audiences credulous enough to lap up platitudinous sermons on the Third Way for up to £320,000 a go, and an even larger share earned from offshored philanthropic trusts raking in eye watering commissions from corporations happy to use him as bag man in sensitive markets. These are, in themselves, perhaps no more than the baubles many former chief executives help themselves to, but for

someone who traded so heavily on his moral compass this splitting of the difference between philanthropy and insider trading is fair comment, particularly when, as with a cancelled lecture for a charity the price of his much vaunted Christian conscience is a cool £320,000 for twenty minutes. This is quite a high price for virtue to run amok and, in this respect, his charity work is true to form.

☒ Famed for the Delivery Units which he continues to foist on reluctant Third World hosts[\[1\]](#), no Prime Minister in British history can boast such an interrupted procession of white elephants and maladministration, run up at costs which would shame the banana republics he consults. Blair sailed into office in 1997 on the slogan of “24 hours to save the NHS.” After two terms, £50 billion, and an avalanche of Soviet targets, the Office for National Statistics was obliged to sombrely pronounce most of the money had been siphoned off. Meanwhile, the infamous soundbite “education, education, education” triggered nothing more than sixties trendiness and an explosion of activity—there were sixteen White papers and eleven Acts of parliament alone in his first term—that was itself a Kafkaesque response to the failure of previous bouts of social engineering.

In a solemn initiative, almost a billion pounds was committed to combatting truancy. The rates actually increased instead, and much of this was actually fuelled by illiterate secondary school pupils who owed their low achievements to a disastrous reversal of pedagogic standards. Government spending increased by over 78%, but any prospective benefits were more than wiped out by an abandonment of phonics and, when one looks at the flagship Academies, the disconnect between image and substance was dismally apparent. The costs of the new (needlessly overcomplicated) buildings were immense

and, once these Corbusian monstrosities sprang up, they proved too clever by half. In one East London school, no one could open the windows after the caretaker unexpectedly died of a heart attack and, for all the investment in their design, they proved no less adept than their rickety state counterparts in mass producing illiterates. The middle class predictably voted with their children. No statistic spells out the failure of his educational fantasies more than the soaring private admissions of that era and, in characteristic *de haut en bas* fashion, Blair spared his own children from it.

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Governments with a corrupt messianic zeal are rarely content with prudent housekeeping, and New Labour's pursuit of eternity was accompanied by all the Lilliputian status projects which proliferate incontinently in Third world states. If Thatcher's enduring architectural legacy, the transformation of Canary Wharf from derelict docklands to financial nerve centre of the world had been a ruthless piece of free market triumphalism erected into glass and stone, Blair's Millennium Dome, characteristically tasteless, overspun and ruinously overbudget, was an ugly symbolic metaphor for his tenure.

Confronted with the clear evidence of failure and desperate to secure a social legacy in his Third Term, he simply revived—in the shape of Foundation Hospitals and selective education—Tory policies he had so expensively recanted in his first. Why such wasteful and expensive interludes are necessary to arrive at basic first principles are something of a mystery but, here at

least, we are not dealing with a novelty. All Left-wing governments move to the Right eventually if only for the reason that, if ideas can soar to Aeropagus, the facts of life are fundamentally conservative, the eye-watering expense of aborted socialist utopias pushing even hardened left wingers in a portentously neo-con direction. The first political figure of any weight to embrace monetarism, let it be remembered, was not Margaret Thatcher but the embattled Labour leader, James Callaghan, whose famous repudiation of the Keynesian settlement in 1976 has an eerily contemporary ring.