

Speech by Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party

Tuesday 26 September 2006

--- Check against delivery ---

I'd like to start by saying something very simple.

Thank you.

Thank you to you, our Party, our members, our supporters, the people who week in, week out do the work, take the flak but don't often get the credit. Thank you, the Labour Party for giving me the extraordinary privilege of leading you these past 12 years.

I know I look a lot older. That's what being leader of the Labour Party does to you.

Actually, looking round some of you look a lot older.

That's what having me as leader of the Labour Party does to you.

Nobody knows that better than John Prescott, my Deputy these last 10 years, author of "traditional values in a modern setting".

I may have taken New Labour to the country but it was you that helped me take it to the Party, so thank you.

Something I don't say often enough - thank you to my family.

It's usual after you thank the family, you thank your agent and yes I do want to thank him and through him the wonderful people of Sedgefield.

When I went to Sedgefield to seek the nomination, just before the 1983 election, I was a refugee from the London-based politics of that time.

I knocked on John Burton's door. He said "come in; but shut up for half an hour, we're watching the Cup Winners Cup final".

I sat in the company of the most normal people I had met in the Labour Party.

They taught me that most of politics isn't about politics, in the sense of meetings, resolutions, speeches or even Parties. It starts with people.

It's about friendship, art, culture, sport. It's about being a fully paid up member of the human race before being a fully paid up member of the Labour Party.

But above all else, I want to thank the British people.

Not just for the honour of being Prime Minister but for the journey of progress we have travelled together. Leaders lead but in the end it's the people who deliver.

In the last few months I've seen new hospitals like University College in London, the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital planned in Birmingham or Whiston Hospital in Knowsley, where I laid the foundation stone.

But without the talents and dedication of the NHS staff, they would be just empty shells.

It is their efforts which have cut waiting, improved care, transform and save tens of thousands of lives every day. Thank you.

And we in Government can help put in place the new Academy in Liverpool or the ground-breaking Education Village in Darlington which I have visited recently.

But it's the commitment and love of learning of their teachers and their pupils, and the support of parents, which have given our country the best educated children in our history. Thank you.

And what about Manchester?

A city transformed. A city that shows what a confident, open, and proud people with a great Labour council can do.

So thank you

In 1994, I stood before you for the first time and shared the country's anger at crumbling school buildings, patients languishing, sometimes dying in pain, waiting for operations, of crime doubled, of homes repossessed, of pensioners living in poverty; and told you of our dismay at four election defeats and how it was not us who should feel betrayed but the British people.

That such a speech seems so dated today is not through the passage of time but through progress.

In 1997, we faced daunting challenges.

Boom and bust economics.

Chronic under-investment in our public services.

Social division, with millions living in poverty, including over 3 million children.

And more than all this, a country culturally and socially behind. No black Ministers and never a black Cabinet Minister.

Parliament, supposedly the forum of the people, with only 1 in 10 women MPs.

Gay people denied equal rights.

Trade unionists able to be sacked for joining a union.

Workers on £1.20 an hour, legally. London the only major capital city in the world without city Government.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all run from Whitehall. Inner cities depleted, a refuge for the dispossessed.

This was a country aching for change.

Now, for all that remains to be done, dwell for a moment on what has been achieved.

We have had the longest period of sustained economic growth in British history.

Mortgage repossession, like mass unemployment, are terms we have to be reminded of.

The last NHS winter crisis was 6 years ago.

Heart patients wait on average less than three months. Cancer deaths are down by 43,000.

You are more likely to see a new school building than a crumbling one.

There are virtually no long-term young unemployed.

Today we ask:

Can we meet our ambitious targets on child poverty when, before 1997, the idea of a child poverty target would have been laughable.

We have black Ministers and the first woman and then the first black woman Leader of the Lords. Not enough women MPs but twice what there were.

A London Mayor, thankfully Labour again. Devolution in Scotland and Wales. But not just this.

Free museum entry that has seen a 50% rise in visitors.

Banning things that should never have been allowed: handguns, cosmetic testing on animals; fur farming, blacklisting of trade unionists and from summer next year, smoking in public places.

Allowing things that should never have been banned: the right to roam; the right to request flexible working; civil partnerships for gay people.

And in 2012 it is London that will host the Olympic Games.

Of course, the daily coverage of politics focuses on the negative.

But take a step back and be proud: this is a changed country.

Above all, it is progressive ideas which define its politics. That is the real result of a third term victory.

And the Tories have to pretend they love it.

The Bank of England independence, they never did in 18 years, the minimum wage, they told us would cost a million jobs. The help for the world's poor, they cut. They fall over themselves saying how much they agree with us.

Don't lose heart from that; take heart from it.

We have changed the terms of political debate.

This Labour Government has been unique.

First time ever two full terms; now three. Why? How?

We faced out to the people, not in on ourselves. We put the Party at the service of the country.

Their reality became our reality. Their worries, our worries.

We abandoned the ridiculous, self-imposed dilemma between principle and power.

We went back to first principles, to our values, our real values, those that are timeless, and separated them from doctrine and dogma that had been ravaged by time.

In doing so, we freed Britain at long last from the reactionary choice that dominated British politics for so long: between individual prosperity and a caring society.

We proved that economic efficiency and social justice are not opposites but partners in progress.

We defied conventional political wisdom and so changed it.

Around that we built a new political coalition.

The USP of New Labour is aspiration and compassion reconciled.

We reach out not just to those in poverty or need but those who are doing well but want to do better; those on the way up, ambitious for themselves and their families.

These are our people too.

Not to be tolerated for electoral reasons.

But embraced out of political conviction.

The core vote of this Party today is not the heartlands, the inner city, not any sectional interest or lobby.

Our core vote is the country.

It was they who made us change.

The beliefs of the Labour Party of 2006 should be recognisable to the members of 1906. Full employment; strong public services; tackling poverty; international solidarity.

The policies shouldn't.

The trouble was for a long time they were.

In the 1960s, re-reading the Cabinet debates of In Place of Strife, everyone was telling Harold Wilson not to push it. They said it was divisive, unnecessary, alienated core support. In the end he gave up but so did the public on Labour.

Even in 1974, the Labour Government spent 2 years renationalising shipbuilding and the public spent 2 years wondering why.

In the 1980s, Council house sales had first been suggested by Labour people. It was shelved. Too difficult. Too divisive. We lost a generation of aspiring working class people on the back of it.

In the 1980s we should have been the party transforming Britain.

We weren't.

The lesson is always the same.

Values unrelated to modern reality are not just electorally hopeless, the values themselves become devalued. They have no purchase on the real world.

We won not because we surrendered our values but because we finally had the courage to be true to them.

Our courage in changing gave the British people the courage to change.

That's how we won.

10 years after, Government has taken its toll. It does. It's in the nature of the beast.

In the harsh climate of the 24/7 media, in which gossip and controversy are so much more newsworthy than real news, people forget.

I spoke to a woman the other day, a part-time worker, complaining about the amount of her tax credit.

I said: Hold on a minute: before 1997, there were no tax credits not for working families not for any families; child benefit was frozen; maternity pay half what it is; maternity leave likewise and paternity leave didn't exist at all. And no minimum wage, no full time rights for part time workers, in fact nothing.

"So what?", she said "that's why we elected you. Now go and sort out my tax credit." And, of course, she's right.

In Government you carry each hope; each disillusion. And in politics it's always about the next challenge.

The truth is, you can't go on forever.

That's why it is right that this is my last Conference as Leader.

Of course it is hard to let go. But it is also right to let go. For the country, and for you, the Party.

Over the coming months, I will take through the changes I have worked on so hard these past years.

And I will help build a unified Party with a strong platform for the only legacy that has ever mattered to me - a fourth term election victory that allows us to keep changing Britain for the better.

And I want to heal. There has been a lot of talk of lies and truths these past few weeks.

In no relationship at the top of any walk of life is it always easy, least of all in politics which matters so much and which is conducted in such a piercing spotlight.

But I know New Labour would never have happened, and 3 election victories would never have been secured, without Gordon Brown.

He is a remarkable man. A remarkable servant to this country. And that is the truth.

So now, 10 years on, this Party faces the real test of leadership: not about what we've achieved in the past; but what we can achieve for Britain's future.

Not just how do we win again; but how does Britain carry on winning?

I won't be leading you in the next election.

But I've sat in the hot seat for 10 years.

Here's my advice.

The scale of the challenges now dwarf what we faced in 1997. They are different, deeper, bigger, hammered out on the anvil of forces, global in nature, sweeping the world.

In 1997 the challenges we faced were essentially British. Today they are essentially global.

The world today is a vast reservoir of potential opportunity. New jobs in environmental technology, the creative industries, financial services. Cheap goods and travel. The internet. Advances in science and technology.

In 10 years we will think nothing of school-leavers going off to university anywhere in the world.

But with these opportunities comes huge insecurity.

In 1997 we barely mentioned China. Not any more. Last year China and India produced more graduates than all of Europe put together.

10 years ago, energy wasn't on the agenda. The environment an also-ran.

10 years ago, if we talked pensions we meant pensioners.

Immigration hardly raised.

Terrorism meant the IRA.

Not any more.

We used to feel we could shut our front door on the problems and conflicts of the wider world. Not any more.

Not with globalisation. Not with climate change. Not with organised crime. Not when suicide bombers born and bred in Britain bring carnage to the streets of London. In the name of religion.

A speech by the Pope to an academic seminar in Bavaria leads to protests in Britain.

The question today is different to the one we faced in 1997.

It is how we reconcile openness to the rich possibilities of globalisation, with security in the face of its threats.

How to be open and secure.

And again, there is a third way. Some want a fortress Britain - job protection, pull up the drawbridge, get out of international engagement.

Others see no option but to submit to global forces and let the strongest survive.

Our answer is very clear. It is, once again, to help people through a changing world by using collective power to advance opportunity and provide security for all.

To reconcile openness and security as we reconciled aspiration and compassion, not as enemies but as partners in progress.

The British people today are reluctant global citizens.

We must make them confident ones.

The danger in all this, for us, is not ditching New Labour. The danger is failing to understand that New Labour in 2007 won't be New Labour in 1997.

10 years ago I would have described re-linking the BSP with earnings as "Old Labour". Our aim is by 2012, but by the end of the next Parliament at the latest - we are going to do it. Rodney Bickerstaffe has become New Labour. Or have I become Old Labour?

10 years ago, if you had asked me to put environmental obligations on business, I would have been horrified. Now I'm advocating it.

I would have baulked at restrictions on advertising junk food to children. Today I say unless a voluntary code works, we will legislate for it.

10 years ago I parked the issue of nuclear power. Today, I believe without it, we are going to face an energy crisis and we can't let that happen.

Over the next year we are reviewing every aspect of our economic policy, not because we were wrong in the past, but because whether in tax and spending, regulation, planning, enterprise, the question is not about our competitiveness in the last 10 years, but in the next 10.

Developing financial services and the City of London; the creative industries and modern manufacturing. How to be the world's number one place of choice for bio-science - if America does not want stem-cell research - we do.

How to fund transport through road-pricing.

Skills. I say to business: you have a responsibility to train your workforce. To trade unions: here is the chance to be the learning partners for the workforce of the next generation. Take the chance.

Global warming is the greatest long-term threat to our planet's environment. Scarce energy resources mean rising prices and will threaten our country's economy.

In 15 years we will go from 80% self-sufficient in oil and gas to 80% imported.

We need therefore the most radical overhaul of energy policy since the War. We will increase the amount of energy from renewable sources fivefold; ensure every major business in the country has a responsibility for greenhouse gas reduction; treble investment in clean technology, including clean coal; and make sure every new home is at least 40% more energy efficient.

We will meet our Kyoto targets by double the amount; and we will take the necessary measures, step by step by step, to meet one of the most ambitious targets on the environment set anywhere in the world - a 60% reduction in emissions by 2050.

In the future, as people live longer, we can't afford good pensions and help for disabled people who can't work, with 4 million people on benefit, many of whom could work. Almost a million less than there were. But too many.

That is why we need more radical welfare reform, getting more disabled people, more lone parents, more on unemployment benefit, into work, not to destroy the welfare state. But to preserve it.

And why is reform so important in public services?

Over the past 10 years Britain has invested more in our public services than any comparable nation in the world. From near the bottom in Europe to the average in a decade.

300,000 more workers, treble the money, 25% more pay in real terms and the largest ever hospital programme; that is an NHS being re-built not privatised.

Refurbishing or rebuilding every state secondary school in the country. 92,000 more classroom assistants, 36,000 more teachers, pay also up 17% in real

terms. This isn't privatising state education; it's producing the best schools results ever.

But what happens?

Expectations rise. People want power in their own hands.

Two thirds of the country has access to the internet. Millions of people are ordering flights or books or other goods on-line, they are talking to their friends on-line, downloading music, all of it when they want to, not when the shop or office is open.

The Google generation has moved beyond the idea of 9 to 5, closed on weekends and Bank Holidays. Today's technology is profoundly empowering.

Of course public services are different. Their values are different. But today people won't accept a service handed down from on high. They want to shape it to their needs, and the reality of their lives.

The same global forces changing business are at work in public services too. New ways of treating. New ways of teaching. New technologies.

There will be no selective Trust Schools or City Academies. But if, as at the Academy I visited in Lewisham, good GCSE results doubled in a year, and a school once under-subscribed, now five times over-subscribed, how is that a denial of public service values? Surely it is the most vivid affirmation of them.

And if an old age pensioner who used to wait 2 years for her cataract operation now gets it on the NHS in an independent treatment centre, in 3 months, free at the point of use, that is not damaging the NHS; it is fulfilling its purpose.

My advice: at the next election, the issue will not only be who is trusted to invest in our public services, vital though that is.

It will be who comes first.

And our answer has to be.

The patient; the parent.

Meeting the 18 weeks maximum for waiting in the NHS with an average of 9 weeks from the door of the GP to the door of the operating theatre. Booked appointments. The end of waiting in the NHS. Historic.

Transforming secondary schools in the way we have done for primary schools. Schools with three quarters of children getting good results the norm. Historic.

Both within reach.

Do this and we will have earned the right to be custodians of our public services for the next generation.

If we fail, and without change we will, then believe me: change will still be done; but in a regressive way by a Conservative Party.

I want change true to progressive values, done by a fourth term Labour Government.

I always said the Home Office was the toughest job in Government. It hasn't got easier.

We should get a few facts straight. Crime has fallen not risen. We are the only Government since the war to do it. Asylum applications are dealt with faster, removals are greater, the system infinitely better than the chaos we inherited in 1997.

But the fact is that the world is changing so fast that the reality we are dealing with - mass migration, organised crime, ASB - has engulfed systems designed for a time gone by.

30 million people now come to Britain every year. Visitors, tourists, workers, students. Our economy needs them. 227 million pass through our airports.

Yet we have no means of checking who is here lawfully.

The fundamental dilemma: how do we reconcile liberty with security in this new world?

I don't want to live in a police state, or a Big Brother society or put any of our essential freedoms in jeopardy. But because our idea of liberty is not keeping pace with change in reality, those freedoms are in jeopardy.

When crimes go unpunished, that is a breach of the victim's liberty and human rights.

When organised crime gangs are free to practice their evil, countless young people have their liberty and often their lives damaged.

When ASB goes unchecked, each and every member of the community in which it happens, has their human rights broken.

When we can't deport foreign nationals even when inciting violence the country is at risk.

Immigration has benefited Britain.

But I know that if we don't have rules that allow us some control over who comes in, goes out, who has a right to stay and who has not, then instead of a welcome, migrants find fear.

We can only protect liberty by making it relevant to the modern world.

That is why Identity Cards using biometric technology are not a breach of our basic rights, they are an essential part of responding to the reality of modern migration and protecting us against identity fraud.

I remember when I introduced the DNA database. On it go all those who are arrested. We were told it was a monstrous breach of liberty.

But it is now matching 3,000 offences a month including last year several hundred murders, and thousands of rapes and other violent offences.

Difficult reform leading to real progress in the fight against crime.

In the next Parliamentary Session, the centre-piece will be John Reid's immigration and law and order reforms.

I ask people of all Parties to support them.

Let Liberty stand up for the Law-abiding.

And of course, the new anxiety is the global struggle against terrorism without mercy or limit.

This is a struggle that will last a generation and more. But this I believe passionately: we will not win until we shake ourselves free of the wretched

capitulation to the propaganda of the enemy, that somehow we are the ones responsible.

This terrorism isn't our fault. We didn't cause it.

It's not the consequence of foreign policy.

It's an attack on our way of life.

It's global.

It has an ideology.

It killed nearly 3,000 people including over 60 British on the streets of New York before war in Afghanistan or Iraq was even thought of.

It has been decades growing.

Its victims are in Egypt, Algeria, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Turkey.

Over 30 nations in the world.

It preys on every conflict.

It exploits every grievance.

And its victims are mainly Muslim.

This is not our war against Islam.

This is a war fought by extremists who pervert the true faith of Islam. And all of us, Western and Arab, Christian or Muslim, who put the value of tolerance, respect and peaceful co-existence above those of sectarian hatred, should join together to defeat them.

It is not British soldiers who are sending car bombs into Baghdad or Kabul to slaughter the innocent.

They are there along with troops of 30 other nations with, in each case, a full UN mandate at the specific request of the first ever democratically elected Governments of those countries in order to protect them against the very ideology also seeking the deaths of British people in planes across the Atlantic.

If we retreat now, hand Iraq over to Al Qaida and sectarian death squads and Afghanistan back to Al Qaida and the Taleban, we won't be safer; we will be

committing a craven act of surrender that will put our future security in the deepest peril.

Of course it's tough.

Not a day goes by or an hour in the day when I don't reflect on our troops with admiration and thanks - the finest, the best, the bravest, any nation could hope for.

They are not fighting in vain. But for this nation's future.

But this is not a conventional war. It can't be won by force alone.

It's not a clash of civilisations.

It's about civilisation, about the ideas that shape it.

From 9/11 until now I have said again and again. If we want our values to be the ones that govern global change, we have to show that they are fair, just and delivered with an even hand.

From now until I leave office I will dedicate myself, with the same commitment I have given to Northern Ireland , to advancing peace between Israel and Palestine. I may not succeed. But I will try because peace in the Middle East is a defeat for terrorism.

We must never again let Lebanon become the battleground for a conflict that neither Israeli or Lebanese people wanted though it was they who paid the price for it.

Peace in Lebanon is a defeat for terrorism.

Action in Africa is a defeat for terrorism.

What is happening now in the Sudan cannot stand. If this were in the continent of Europe we would act.

Showing an African life is worth as much as a Western one - that would help defeat terrorism too.

Yes it's hard sometimes to be America's strongest ally.

Yes, Europe can be a political headache for a proud sovereign nation like Britain.

But believe me there are no half-hearted allies of America today and no semi-detached partners in Europe.

And the truth is that nothing we strive for, from the world trade talks to global warming, to terrorism and Palestine can be solved without America, or without Europe.

At the moment I know people only see the price of these alliances.

Give them up and the cost in terms of power, weight and influence for Britain would be infinitely greater.

Distance this country and you may find it's a long way back.

So all these changes of a magnitude we never dreamt of, sweeping the world, are calling for answers of equal magnitude and vision.

All require leadership. And here is something else I've learnt. The danger for us today is not reversion to the politics of the 1980s. It is retreat to the sidelines.

To the comfort zone. It is unconsciously to lose the psychology of a governing Party.

As I said in 1994, courage is our friend. Caution, our enemy.

A governing Party has confidence, self-belief. It sees the tough decision and thinks it should be taking it.

Reaches for responsibility first.

Serves by leading.

The most common phrase uttered to me - and not at rallies or public events but in meetings of chance, quietly, is not "I hate you" or "I like you" but "I would not have your job for all the world".

The British people will, sometimes, forgive a wrong decision.

They won't forgive not deciding.

They know the choices are hard.

They know there isn't some fantasy Government where nothing difficult ever happens. They've got the Lib Dems for that.

Government isn't about protests or placards, shouting the odds or stealing the scene. It's about the hard graft of achievement.

There are no third-term popular Governments. Don't ignore the polls but don't be paralysed by them either.

10 years on, our advantage is time, our disadvantage time.

Time gives us experience. Our capacity to lead is greater.

Time gives the people fatigue; their willingness to be led, is less.

But they will lose faith in us only if first we lose faith in ourselves.

Polls now are as relevant as last year's weather forecast for tomorrow's weather. It's three years until an election.

The first rule of politics: there are no rules. You make your own luck.

There's no rule that says the Tories have got to come back.

David Cameron's Tories? My advice: get after them.

His foreign policy. Pander to anti-Americanism by stepping back from America . Pander to the Eurosceptics through isolation in Europe. Sacrificing British influence for Party expediency is not a policy worthy of a Prime Minister.

His immigration policy. Says he'll sort out illegal immigration, but opposes Identity Cards, the one thing essential to do it.

His energy policy. Nuclear power "only as a last resort". It's not a multiple choice quiz question, Mr Cameron. We need to decide now otherwise in 10 years time we will be importing expensive fossil fuels and Britain's economy will suffer.

He wants tax cuts and more spending, with the same money.

He wants a Bill of Rights for Britain drafted by a Committee of Lawyers. Have you ever tried drafting anything with a Committee of Lawyers?

And his policy for the old lady terrorised by the young thug is that she should put her arm round him and give him a nice, big hug.

Built to last? They haven't even laid the foundation stone. If we can't take this lot apart in the next few years we shouldn't be in the business of politics at all.

The Tories haven't thought it through. They think it's all about image. It's true we changed our image. We created a professional organisation.

But if I'd stood in 1997 on the policies of 1987 I would have lost. Period.

And it's the same now. Enough talk of hung Parliaments.

The next election won't be about image unless we let it be.

It'll be about who has the strength, judgement, weight and ideas for Britain's future in an uncertain world.

And if we show belief in ourselves, the British people will feel that belief and be given confidence.

Something else I've learnt.

It's about a Party's character.

I'll give you two examples.

Dennis Skinner. Watching from his sick bed. Get well soon.

Never agreed with a policy I've had.

Never once stopped him knowing the difference between a Labour Government and a Tory one.

People like Janet Anderson, George Howarth, Mike Hall.

Good Ministers, but I asked them to make way. They did. Without a word of bitterness.

They never forgot their principles when in office; and they never discovered them when they left office.

This is the Party I am proud to lead.

From the day I was elected until the day I leave, they will always try to separate us.

"He's not Labour." "He's a closet Tory."

In the 1980s some things done were necessary for the country. That's the truth.

Saying it doesn't make you a Tory.

I'm a progressive.

The true believer believes in social justice, in solidarity, in help for those not able to help themselves.

They know the race can't just be to the swift and survival for the strong.

But they also know that these values, gentle and compassionate as they are, have to be applied in a harsh, uncompromising world and what makes the difference is not belief alone, but the raw courage to make it happen.

They say I hate the Party, and its traditions.

I don't.

I love this Party.

There's only one tradition I hated: losing.

I hated the 1980s not just for our irrelevance but for our revelling in irrelevance.

And I don't want to win for winning's sake but for the sake of the millions here that depend on us to win, and throughout the world.

Every day this Government has been in power, every day in Africa, children have lived who otherwise would have died because this country led the way in cancelling debt and global poverty.

That's why winning matters.

So keep on winning.

Do it with optimism.

With hope in your hearts.

Politics is not a chore.

It's the great adventure of progress.

I don't want to be the Labour Leader who won 3 successive elections.

I want to be the first Labour Leader to win 3 successive elections.

So: it's up to you.

You take my advice. You don't take it. Your choice.

Whatever you do, I'm always with you. Head and heart.

You've given me all I have ever achieved, and all that we've achieved, together, for the country.

Next year I won't be making this speech.

But, in the years to come, wherever I am, whatever I do. I'm with you. Wishing you well. Wanting you to win.

You're the future now. Make the most of it.