

The Essence of Leadership

An Interview with The Honorable Tony Blair



EDITORS' NOTE *Tony Blair is the Representative of the Quartet – U.S., Russia, E.U., and U.N. – to the Middle East, through which he is focused on working with the Palestinian Authority to prepare the institutions and groundwork for statehood, as part of the international community's effort to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace. The goal of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation is to promote respect and understanding among major religions and to make the case for religions as a force for good, demonstrated by organizing interfaith education and social action projects to overcome global poverty and conflict. Tony Blair's Africa Governance Initiative helps some of Africa's most visionary leaders deliver the change their people need to relieve poverty. The Tony Blair Sports Foundation aims to increase the number of volunteer coaches and officials so that more children and young people get the opportunity to play sport. He served as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from May 1997 to June 2007. He was a Member of Parliament for Sedgefield from 1983 to 2007 and Leader of the Labour Party from 1994 to 2007, resigning from these positions in June 2007.*

Given the recent developments in the Middle East, are you optimistic about positive movement in this area?

There has to be movement, because people have been waiting a long time to get this issue resolved. There is an agreement, more or less, that we need two states for two peoples. We should be able to make progress on this and it's desperately necessary, because the



Middle East as a whole is in turmoil. It's important that the Israeli-Palestinian issue doesn't get used in that turmoil. Instead, we need to recognize that this embodies this small bit of land where two peoples are living intermingled side by side and that we need to create the circumstances in which they can do so peacefully. The important thing is to get negotiation back on track as quickly as possible, which we're working on right now, and to combine that with real change on the ground that improves the lives of the Palestinians, lifts the weight of occupation from them, and gives Israel the genuine sense that its security concerns are being taken into account.

You've been clear that political leadership is key to driving much of what is taking place in the Middle East, especially around conflict resolution. But how tough is it to find that leadership when there is such uncertainty?

The great challenge for leaders is to make tough decisions in circumstances where the consequences are unpredictable. This is why leadership is such a challenging business right now.

But one of the things that you learn about leadership is that inaction is also a decision; it's just a decision not to act and it too has consequences, and those consequences are often more predictable.

If we do not move this situation forward with the Israelis and Palestinians at the moment, it will move back, and the consequences of that will be greater tension and violence in the region. We've come a long way since 2000 in terms of a more peaceful situation on the ground – we don't want to go back there.

What is your vision for your charity, the Africa Governance Initiative?

The Africa Governance Initiative works alongside the governments of African countries to build the capacity to govern effectively.

The great challenge for Africa today is not aid – although that is important, particularly in areas like combatting killer diseases – but governance. It's not just creating transparent and honest government; it's also about effective government – the challenge for governments today is efficacy.

So we help governments in Africa prioritize, deliver, and track the performance of the various projects they're doing. The important thing for all these governments is to create the

circumstances in which basic areas like energy, power, agriculture, and infrastructure are working at a level where people see the benefit, which gives them greater faith in politics. Africa has an enormous opportunity now with the development of China, India, and other emerging market countries, which desperately need the resources that Africa has. Africa can develop those resources, but how they do so will crucially effect whether those countries do well or not.

What was your vision in creating the Faith Foundation and what are you trying to accomplish through those efforts?

The biggest challenge we have toward peace and security in the 21st century is not fundamental clashes of political ideology but fundamental clashes of cultural or religious ideology. If you look not just at what is happening in the Middle East but across the world, there are groups of people who are using religion to further extremism and are creating huge political, cultural, and religious divides. Even in Europe, you now have political parties starting up all over the place that are based on a view that the identity of Europe is under threat; some of those parties are openly Islamophobic – that is a huge problem.

The trouble is that politicians want to say this problem is a political problem, but these people think it is about religion, so if you don't deal with the religious dimension, you're not dealing with the problem.

Our foundation is about practical interfaith engagement. We have a schools program that, through the Internet and videoconferencing, provides a secure online facility for exchanges among schools of different faiths across the world. We're operating in 17 different countries. We have strong support from U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and we have signed agreements with several governments around the world. We hope to take the idea that, at a very early age, we should educate young people towards religious harmony and interfaith understanding rather than using their religion as a badge of identity in opposition to others.

We also have a university program that is focused on research and developing the academic study of religion and its place in the modern world, and that is taking place in about nine universities around the world, starting with Yale in the U.S.

We now have an action program that is about using the faith infrastructure in Africa to combat killer diseases, like malaria. So in Sierra Leone, we're training priests and imams, as well as community workers, to use the mosque or church in the villages, which often won't have a health clinic or hospital, to train people how to distribute the materials for fighting malaria and to show people how to use it, as well as to encourage them to continue to use it.

In the three months that we have been running the program in Sierra Leone, we have reached about a quarter million people. You can mark the difference, because if people use the bed nets and the drugs they're given, they can significantly reduce death from malaria.

So it's a program based on the notion that we need to encourage harmony among the main faiths and it provides a practical set of programs to do that.

In terms of the efforts you and The Climate Group have had on an ambitious post-2012 climate change agreement, is the support there and the dialogue around climate change the right one?

The objective with our climate change plan is to take the commitments countries are prepared to make individually and put them together in a global agreement, and to send a clear direction to their various economies that they're moving in a green direction. You have to make business a partner in this. And the solution to this will come from science and technology. In countries that are industrializing, like China and India, the people want to consume just as the West has consumed. We have to invent the scientific and technological advancements that will allow us to consume better. Where there are programs in energy efficiency that are effective, we should be implementing them; in those countries where deforestation is rampant, we should be encouraging them to choose a different means of securing their livelihood.

So the fight against climate change is to get a global agreement together. It doesn't have to be perfect, but it will send a strong signal to the international business community that this is the direction we're going in and will encourage the development of science and technology, which is key.



Is it sometimes tough to be patient with all the challenges an agreement like this has faced?

It can be frustrating, but what I'm trying to do in each of these areas is to demonstrate that there is a different way of looking at things that would be more effective and I'm trying to mobilize governments behind that different view.

I'm under no illusion that I can single-handedly change the situations. But what I can do is demonstrate, through my philanthropic work, a new idea or a different way of doing something.

So in the Middle East, for example, my theory is that you have to build this concept of peace from the bottom up through the economy, through what happens on the ground, as well as a negotiation top down.

In Africa, it's about showing that if we provide the infrastructure of effective government and decision-making, we will need so much less aid because the countries will then have the potential for wealth on their own.

In respect to interfaith, it's about encouraging people at an early age to see their faith as theirs but to also see that there is a faith community in which many different faiths are involved,

and showing governments that this is the right way to go so people can start driving these programs throughout their education systems.

Likewise, with climate change, my theory is, you have to make business a partner in this, not the enemy.

So in each of these situations, it can be very frustrating, but I'm trying to show that, conceptually, we can do this differently and better.

In government, you were known as somebody who got things done. Many today suggest there is a lack of that kind of leadership. What makes a successful leader today and how were you able to bring people together and make such an impact?

Leadership has never been tougher than it is now, particularly with the economic and financial crisis we have faced over these past few years. But leadership involves two things: understanding the world is changing fast and understanding that we have to change with it. There is no leader today who is not an agent of change; and leaders need to understand that because change is so difficult. When you try to institute change, you get resistance, and sometimes the things you suggest will not be popular, at first. But the essence of leadership is taking responsibility for engaging in that process even though you know you're going to be pushed back and it's going to be tough.

Leadership is about understanding that we live in a world whose defining characteristic is change and it's being prepared to make the difficult decisions to translate that change into reality.

There are many who have served in government at different levels who say that after they were out of office, they got engaged in projects that were more impactful. Do you feel that way?

In some respects, I do. The great thing about my new life is I can take subjects about which I'm passionate and devote real time, energy, and commitment to them, whereas when you're in government running a country, you don't always get to determine the agenda. When you're outside, although you have less power, you sometimes have more influence. ●



Tony Blair speaking at ODI on governance and leadership for development in Africa; Tony Blair in Rwanda; Tony Blair visits Rokuba Government Hospital in Freetown, Sierra Leone; Tony Blair talks to female students of The Winchester School, Dubai about interfaith understanding. (counterclockwise from top center)