

LEADING TRANSFORMATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**A former government leader looks back at what he learned in office.
Among his lessons: think big, apply rigorous analysis,
and don't be afraid to learn from the successes and failures of others.**

TONY BLAIR served as prime minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from May 1997 to June 2007. He was also the leader of Britain's Labour Party (1994 to 2007) and a member of parliament (1983 to 2007). Since leaving office, he has founded a number of philanthropic organizations, including the Africa Governance Initiative.

An unfortunate lesson of being prime minister is that you are at your most popular when you are at your least effective, usually at the beginning of your time in office, and at your most effective when you are your least popular, toward the end. That is to say, you learn on the job. Over time you learn the lessons of how to make government work, how to achieve the systemic change that is essential for modern leaders. In this short essay I want to set out the five lessons I learned about leading government transformation.

First, the question of governance is absolutely central. It should be at the heart of the political debate—in both the developed and developing worlds. And it is not a debate, as people sometimes think, about transparency or accountability, although of course

these are crucial; it's actually a debate about government effectiveness. So, for example, when I look at the work I am doing with my Africa charity—supporting the presidents of Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia—or as quartet representative with the Palestinian Authority, the single most important thing they need is the capacity in government to get things done.

This focus on implementation has fundamental implications too for the nature of politics and political leadership today. Despite partisan divides, 21st-century politics is, in fact, increasingly post-ideological. The biggest challenges we face are similar in most countries: growing our economies in a way that creates opportunities for everyone, providing high-quality health and education services, ensuring safety and security. And

in most cases, the best solutions are already known. So the challenge for political leaders is no longer just about knocking down your opponents' arguments; it is about building up a system of government that delivers results.

The second lesson is that you have to aim for systemic change. The pace of change in the modern world is incredible, with the emergence of new powers, such as China, India, and Brazil; new technologies in communications, energy, and medicine; and new global challenges like climate change and the financial crisis. Only systemic change, as opposed to incremental or piecemeal reform, will allow government to keep pace in a rapidly changing world.

And the only way you will achieve systemic change is if you are prepared to “challenge the givens,” as I call it. It’s very easy when you come into government to take the system as a given and then ask, “How can we make it work more effectively?” Actually, what you very often have to do is to say, “Let’s challenge that assumption; maybe the system doesn’t have to be like that.” For example, in the United Kingdom we had a problem with the management of rising immigration numbers. We needed to get them under control, but we were unable to get anywhere near bringing them down until we started to think about the system that we were operating, looking at every aspect of how the system was organized, its objectives, what information was collected, and how it was structured and led. Otherwise we were just flogging the system every day, and occasionally we would get the odd, incremental change. But until we changed the system we were not going to get something that really worked.

And that leads me to the third lesson: the best systemic change and delivery begins with the right conceptual analysis. One of the interesting things I discovered is that although

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much of politics is conducted in a completely non-intellectual atmosphere, the best policy actually comes from a clear, rigorous intellectual approach. As prime minister, I looked for an unbroken thread between a conceptual analysis of what the problem was, then an orientation or direction in order to resolve it, and then a specific policy. That sequence was crucial: the specific policy had to flow from a policy direction, and the policy direction had to come from a conceptual analysis. For instance, toward the end of my time in office we had a major issue of social exclusion, which incidentally is still a huge challenge and was a big factor in the recent riots in the United Kingdom. I came to the conclusion that we had the wrong conceptual analysis of deprivation. If you analyze society today, it is not true that a rising tide will lift all ships. There is a group of people that resides completely outside the mainstream of any analysis, and unless conceptually you target them as individuals and families with severe and qualitatively different problems—different from people who might simply be unemployed, might simply be poor, might simply be homeless—then you are not going to get to the right answer. It was only through a better conceptual understanding—that social exclusion is in fact a very specific domain of policy—that we came to the right policy solutions.

The fourth lesson is something absolutely blindingly obvious, but crucial nonetheless: people matter. The actual people developing and enacting policy, the people you appoint,

matter. We need far greater interaction between the public and private sector. Many of the skills needed in government today are cultivated in the private sector. I think a lot of the best public servants would benefit enormously from spending some years outside government and then coming back in. And there is absolutely no reason that you should not have such an exchange between the public and private sector. That is why my Africa charity puts so much emphasis on helping African governments to attract the best private-sector talent. As African governments work to attract high-quality investments or get the best deal for their country from their natural resources, they need people with international commercial experience on their side of the table.

My final point is that governments around the world can learn from one another. And it's not a question of rich countries having all the answers. Many of the most interesting innovations in government—in technology, in new ways of organizing delivery, in new partnerships between the public and private sectors—are coming

from emerging and developing countries. For example, PROGRESA, the system of cash transfers for poor households pioneered in Mexico, is now being given a trial run in New York. Innovation can flow in all directions. So as political leaders we need to widen our view and try to learn not just from the usual suspects, the countries most similar to our own, but also from everyone trying to take on common challenges in new ways.

Globally we can get much better at learning from one another, which is why I welcome the efforts of the various research centers and government institutes around the world to identify and disseminate the best government innovations. It is also why I work through my charity, the Africa Governance Initiative, to support African leaders overseeing the transformation of their countries.

Prime minister was my first and only job in government. There is no training that can ever prepare you for the challenge. But I do believe there are lessons we can all learn about how to lead transformation in government, and I hope this essay and this anthology can make a small contribution to making life a little bit easier for future government leaders. I wish them well. ■

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