

The Public Speaking Racket: Tony Blair and the Silver Tongue

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"The eye-watering fee works out at £275 a second for the proposed 20-minute speech." Daily Mail, Jun 1, 2015

He may well have been one of the most insincere of political figures, but that has not stopped Tony Blair filling his money bags with heft since the days when New Labour seemed to be the only force in British politics worth looking at. It was the highpoint of hypocrisy and cant, of swindling effects and spinning deceptions. Taking Britain to war with Iraq on President George W. Bush's belligerent ticket topped it off.

Then came the lecturing circuit, that money-laden trail of rich gravy and cost that has typified the retirement, if one can term it that, of political figures who capitalise on their supposedly hard won wisdom. They know; they were there.

The mundane, the mediocre and the disingenuous rock up the receipts, uttering banalities on behalf of openings, the addressing of clubs, and conferences where six figure price tags are commanded. They tend to feature the insoluble themes: retaining peace; abolishing hunger; alleviating poverty. Organisers and the speakers are entirely complicit in this endeavour - neither intend resolving the difficulty whose purpose sustains them. An entire industry, rooted in public relations deception, has grown up, gold plating speakers with coaching tips and suggestions.

One product of this system is Scott Berkun, who gives lists on the hireable types for speaking, and cost scales. His *Confessions of a Public Speaker* observes that the circuit itself transformed with free market tremors and technological stresses. "Lecture series, training conferences, and corporate meetings created thousands of events that needed new speakers every year." [1] Grass-roots community services vanished before the monetary flood. Value became meaningless to fluff.

The recent rejection by Blair of an engagement that would have cost £330,000 returned the public speaking circuit to the lime light. If ever an event says it all, with its message, and its participants, this had to be the Eat Food forum in Sweden. The gathering deems itself a forum where "science, politics and business can share insight and ideas into achieving our common goal of sustainability feeding a healthy world population."

Suspiciously, it looks like a forum where failed figures go to preach, a communion of disaster in session and subsidised sermonising. Blair had just finished up his stint as Middle East Envoy, a position that seemed to entail a trail of cock-up and woe. Adding spice to that are his other sources of revenue, raked in for the strategy consulting concern Tony Blair Associates, advisor to such clients as Kuwait and Kazakhstan. Blair may speak of advice and reform; his clients are otherwise disposed.

For all that, Blair demanded, through Kruger Cowne talent agency, over two hundred thousand pounds, in addition to eighty thousand pounds in expenses for a twenty minute address.

In that, he was joined by another man of silver tongue and persuasion, Bill Clinton. In an address to the same forum last year, Clinton netted around the same fee – Kruger Cowne were certainly not going to let that amount go by, though it was reported by an unnamed source in *The Express* (Jun 1) that “Blair is not Clinton” and that his appeal was “fast diminishing.”[2]

This is the world of public speaking speculation, stock chips that provide regular returns, or gradually tail off into the investment sunset. “So for his talent reps to think Eat was going to pay massive bucks for him shows they overestimated his worth.” Eat itself suggested that the deal failed to materialise because “the fee they wanted was quite high.” As a result, claimed the organisation’s executive producer Odd Arvid Stromstad, “we didn’t want to go into it” (*Daily Mail*, Jun 1).[3] No talk, naturally, about the theme of the conference: to alleviate hunger and forge sustainable consumption. A conference about hunger could not feature the starving.

The response from Kruger Cowne has deflected the light on plain avarice and shifted it to charity. When in need of a good cause, charity will step in to provide the suitable alibi for greed. Not that the choice of where Blair’s planned fee was destined to go non-partisan. The agency had requested that Eat pay the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women his fee. Yes, equal opportunity for women and all that.

Blair’s office simply cited logistical impediments as to why this “donation” was never finalised. “Prior commitments meant it would be logically impossible.” Nor did his office negotiate “the amount of money that he would be earning” as he was not going to earn anything in any case. The spinning hand of Alistair Campbell still works its spectral magic.

Such form of public speech making acts as a racket, a form of verbal colonisation and graft. For 20 minute talks, Blair finds himself earning tens of thousands of pounds. In 2007, he is reported to have received £327,000 from Chinese property developer Dongguan Guangda to address 600 Communist party officials, business figures and bankers. Two years later, the Philippines was the site of the next Blair public speaking invasion – one which cost £400 thousand for two engagements.

It is a sign of modern measurement that in terms of public good, worth lies not in the content, or the sagacious nature of the speaker, so much as the delivery and name. Signatures, not substance, count. In this way, faecal matter resembles gold dust. It is a form of cost-laden ventriloquising. And it is bound to continue.

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Notes

[1] <http://archive.oreilly.com/pub/a/social-media/excerpts/9780596802004/why-speakers--earn-30k-an-hour.html>

[2] <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/581161/Tony-Blair-wanted-330-000-hunger-talk>

[3] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3104684/Plan-Tony-Blair-address-world-hunger-conference-abandoned-333-000-fee-20-minute-speech.html>

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