

Tony Blair's Ghoulish Last Decade

The Iraq War salesman may be getting into politics again. Here's a nauseating look back at his appalling post-Downing Street years.

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Say what you will about Tony Blair, but the man's not a quitter. Not content with being repeatedly wrong in his reflexive advice for politicians to tack to the right, Blair doubled down in a [recent interview](#) with Politico, warning against the rise of left-wing populism. Free public services, he said, were "very attractive," but "I'm not sure it would win an election" — though if it did, he noted, "it would worry me" because "a lot of these solutions aren't really progressive" and "don't correspond to what the problem of the modern world is." Later in the same interview, Blair insisted that Democrats try to work with Trump.

As the website noted, Blair "still punches hardest when he's hitting to his left."

We've been hearing a lot about what's progressive and what isn't from Blair of late. Spooked by the Brexit result, Blair has [embarked](#) on a project to inject himself back into British and global politics after a ten-year leave of absence that was first made necessary by his toxic standing among the general public.

Ever the "[radical centrist](#)," Blair has developed a "post-ideological" plan to educate the public about the merits of technological advances and globalization. He's rebranded his firm, Tony Blair Associates, as the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and oriented it towards this goal. He's [teamed up with Open Britain](#), an outgrowth of last year's failed Remain campaign that's [working to halt Brexit](#), and was for a time working with centrist Labour MPs to [break away from the party](#) and form a new movement after what they (wrongly) predicted would be a Tory landslide.

This isn't the first time Blair has waded back into British politics. Labour routinely trotted him out in election years to give his endorsement to the latest Labour prime-minister-to-be, while Blair himself has taken [every opportunity](#) to [warn Labour](#) against [moving leftward](#) (a piece of advice he also [disastrously imparted](#) to Hillary Clinton during her 2016 run).

But his new role is, by Blair's own admission, a more fully committed dive back into politics than at any time in these intervening years.

Yet Blair is the last person anyone should listen to about politics in 2017. For of all the shady post-political careers that Western world leaders have embarked on in recent years, Blair's is perhaps the shadiest.

Few have cashed out like Blair has since leaving 10 Downing Street, operating a dizzying, and often overlapping, web of charities, firms, and foundations that have catapulted him to the status of [one of Britain's wealthiest people](#). In the mere ten years he's been out of office, he's become the living, breathing symbol of the money-grubbing, self-serving political

establishment that the public he now seeks to persuade, loathes.

He's made the kind of money that Barack Obama can only dream of. He's mixed private enrichment with public service in a way that would make the Clintons blush. And he's racked up a list of unseemly clients that Henry Kissinger would drool over. What follows is an extremely condensed history of Tony Blair's post-prime ministerial career.

Lifestyles of the Rich and Ministerial

Lately there's been heightened scrutiny of the money-raking lives of politicians who've left public office. Hillary Clinton's speaking fees and financial donations became a major issue in the 2016 presidential race. More recently, Barack Obama provoked entirely justified outrage for pocketing [\\$400,000 from a Wall Street firm](#).

Tony Blair puts them all to shame.

Blair's hostility to the likes of Jeremy Corbyn, or even any political movement marginally left of center, has to be understood in the context of the enormous wealth Blair has amassed since leaving Downing Street. For a long time, no one knew quite what he was worth, owing partly to the [inscrutable nature](#) of his businesses. In 2012, when one accountant [guessed his wealth](#) as somewhere in the range of £30-40 million, his spokesman denied it was "anything remotely approaching" that sum.

His spokesman was telling the truth. Blair was in fact worth substantially more — [£60 million](#) as of 2015, according to an analysis by the *Telegraph* (in 2010, his spokesman had [called this sum](#) "simply ludicrous"). This was due in part to a portfolio of ten properties worth £25 million in total (as well as [twenty-seven flats](#)), including several multi-million pound manors and townhouses, one of which — a £1.13 million house for their son — they paid for in cash.



ony Blair's home in Buckinghamshire.
Photograph: John O'Reilly/Rex/Shutterstock

Visitors [report](#) that the Blairs "live like royalty," with up to twenty staff members waiting on them hand and foot. They spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on furniture for their £5.75 million country house and nearly [£30,000 for a fitness pool](#). Neighbors are [unimpressed](#): the constant presence of armed police and construction vehicles led some to move away.

As Blair ascended to the uppermost strata of global wealth, his socializing followed suit. He's [hung out on the superyacht](#) of the world's fourth-richest man, [dines regularly](#) with the

billionaire media tycoon behind the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers, and his contact details [were in the "little black book"](#) of pedophile billionaire Jeffrey Epstein, the man whose plane — dubbed the "Lolita Express" — counted Donald Trump and Bill Clinton [as passengers](#), among others.

Blair also forged a close friendship with conservative billionaire Rupert Murdoch, [becoming the godfather](#) to one of his daughters. So friendly are Blair and Murdoch, in fact, that the former prime minister [tried to get his successor](#), Gordon Brown, to stop the investigation into the phone hacking scandal that was consuming Murdoch's company, and later [unofficially advised](#) the chief of Murdoch's UK newspaper group a week before her arrest.

In 2012, Blair [insisted](#) that,

"This notion that I want to be a billionaire with a yacht; I don't. I am never going to be part of the super-rich. I have no interest in that at all."

Yet as one of his guests [told the Telegraph](#),

"A lot of the people he socializes with are billionaires, and his lifestyle involves moving between five-star hotels and mansions around the world, always in private jets and helicopters."

But then, in the words of one of his former underlings,

"he was always intrigued and fascinated by rich people and he has always liked to be surrounded by nice things."

Charity Begins at Home

How has Blair achieved this extreme level of opulence? Immediately after leaving office — perhaps following the lead of his close friends the Clintons — Blair took advantage of every lucrative opportunity he could while setting up an intersecting network of private organizations that have helped further enrich him, and whose structure shields his earnings from public scrutiny.

In 2007, he started the [Tony Blair Faith Foundation](#), a multi-million dollar charity that, along with its US branch, aims to "counter religious conflict and extremism in order to promote open-minded and stable societies." The same year he established the [Tony Blair Sports Foundation](#), which looks to encourage young people in the UK's North East to play sports. The following year he set up another charity, the Africa Governance Initiative, whose goal was to promote development and fight poverty in African nations. And he set up Tony Blair Associates, an umbrella organization that encompasses these various projects. Blair's wife also started the [Cherie Blair Foundation for Women](#), a charity that helps female entrepreneurs.

At the same time, Blair also embarked on a series of ventures meant to supplement his [prime ministerial pension](#) of £64,000 (\$85,000) a year. In January 2008, he became an advisor to Zurich Financial Services and JP Morgan, receiving £500,000 and £2.5 million per

year, respectively, for his troubles. In the latter case, Blair provided [most of his services](#) over the phone, or, as needed, jetting to parts of the world where the bank had interests. His work with JP Morgan was particularly controversial as the bank was [set to profit from the war](#) Blair had started in Iraq. The father of an Iraq veteran [called it](#) “almost akin to taking blood money.”

Blair received a £4.6 million advance for his memoirs from Bertelsmann-owned Random House, a lavish sum that was also criticized by family members of soldiers who died in the war. Blair eventually decided to [donate the advance](#) and all royalties to a charity for injured soldiers. (Lest one think this was an act of contrition, Blair has always insisted the war was the right course of action, saying on [two separate occasions](#) that he still would have launched it knowing what he knows now).



Hillary Clinton and Cherie Blair (Source: [Middle East Eye](#))

Following the example of Bill Clinton, Blair also hit the speaking circuit with gusto, in short order becoming the world’s [highest paid public speaker](#) (a title he’s since relinquished). Institutions lined up to book Blair, who charged anywhere between £157,000 and [£180,000](#) per speech on average (around \$200,000 to \$230,000). The waiting list was two years long. By contrast, at the time, Bill Clinton was charging the equivalent of around [£100,000 per speech](#).

Blair was paid [£300,000](#) by Goldman Sachs to speak in 2008, and seven years later, plans to speak at the World Hunger Forum in Stockholm [fell through](#) when organizers couldn’t pay the £330,000 price tag Blair was asking for a twenty-minute speech — presumably on the subject of world hunger.

Why were companies and organizations clamoring to lavish Blair with money? Perhaps for such [sage nuggets](#) of wisdom as:

- “Politics really matters, but a lot of what goes on is not great.”
- “Religion [can be] a source of inspiration or an excuse for evil”
- “Helping people is a noble profession, but not noble to pursue”

Despite making tens of millions of pounds over the years, it took until 2012 for Blair’s companies to stop the practice of [hiring unpaid interns](#) for months at a time, and that was only when the risk of investigation by the government reared its head (unpaid internships

are technically illegal in the United Kingdom).

Blair insisted his pursuit of money was rooted in more worthy motives. His spokesman [told the press](#) that his “commercial interests provide important funding for his charitable work.” Yet Blair’s charitable work has also proven controversial.

For example, Blair’s religious foundation appeared to be swimming in money. In its first year, the foundation received [\\$9.8 million worth of donations](#). A 2009 tax return for the foundation’s US branch showed that Blair had somehow raised \$1.1 million by working an [average of one hour a week](#). Only part of that was the \$200,000 Blair was receiving from Yale University to lecture on religion and globalization. The donors’ identities were kept secret.

In 2014, a former employee of the foundation, Martin Bright, claimed that [Blair used the charity as a think tank](#) for his private office, and hired a team of five communications officers to work for the charity; their job was to defend Blair’s reputation. Bright, whose job was editing a website for the foundation about religious conflict, said “huge amounts” of its time “were spent in meetings to ensure the website didn’t embarrass Blair.”

Meanwhile, most of the staff of Blair’s sports foundation were loyalists carried over from his time as prime minister, and their compensation in the foundation’s first four months [exceeded](#) the total spent on actual charitable activities. Both of its two highest paid staff earned more than the chief executive of Oxfam.

Given Blair’s swift ascent to the highest tiers of the rich list, and his [propensity](#) for hiring [bankers](#) and [mining executives](#), it’s not surprising that he [thought](#) a 50 percent tax bracket for those earning £150,000 or more was a “terrible mistake,” [cautioned](#) politicians not to “go too far on regulation” following the financial crisis, and warned: “Don’t take thirty years of liberalization, beginning under Mrs Thatcher, and say this is what caused the financial crisis.”

Blair received [numerous awards](#) for his philanthropic ventures. But not everyone was happy about it. When he won the Save the Children legacy award in 2014, [two hundred of the charity’s staff](#) signed a letter calling the award “morally reprehensible” and demanding it be withdrawn. The CEO of its UK branch, who was a former aide to Blair, was [forced to apologize](#).

A Life of Service

At the same time Blair was financially entangling himself through his charities and private advisory roles, he was also engaging in high-profile work allegedly in the public interest. Blair’s first job out of office, which he kept until 2015, was as special envoy for the Quartet — the name given to the four entities involved in mediating an Israel-Palestine peace settlement, namely the United Nations, United States, European Union, and Russia.

Though some at the time suggested Blair may not be the best fit for the role of Middle East mediator — after all, he had [helped orchestrate](#) and launch a war in the Middle East on false premises that killed hundreds of thousands and destabilized the entire region — the Bush administration [insisted](#) on choosing him.

In its ceaseless jet-setting, its enormous expense, its blurring with Blair’s private business

interests, and its almost total lack of tangible, positive results, this particular gig set a pattern that would recur throughout his post prime ministerial career.

Blair's position wasn't paid, but that doesn't mean it came cheap. For office space, he and his staff rented out ten rooms, indefinitely, at the luxury American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem. They also slept at the hotel to the tune of £2,000 a night, despite the British Consulate-General being nearby. The total cost of came to around [\\$1.34 million a year](#), not counting the money spent on security and equipment. Blair [later relocated](#) to a less expensive building in East Jerusalem.

Blair's role was ostensibly to help mediate peace between Israelis and Palestinians, yet it took him a whole year to [schedule his first visit](#) to Gaza, and almost another year after that to actually visit. (His first scheduled trip was called off due to a security threat.)

When Israel launched its brutal war in Gaza in 2009, with a 107-to-1 ratio of Israelis to Palestinians killed, "peace negotiator" Blair [said nothing](#). (A week after the bombing began, Brown [told puzzled reporters](#) that Blair was "on holiday at the moment" — though he was actually meeting Israel's defense minister). With Gaza still in smoldering rubble, Blair [received](#) a \$1 million prize from Tel Aviv University for "his exceptional leadership and steadfast determination in helping to engineer agreements and forge lasting solutions to areas in conflict."

Aside from a few minor successes — namely, getting Israel to call off a few checkpoints in the West Bank, which [one former Palestinian Authority cabinet member](#) believes Israel was going to remove anyway — Blair's tenure was largely free of accomplishments. Perhaps he was distracted: [according to one UN official](#), "there is a general sense that he is not around."

Unsurprisingly, when Blair did do something, it appeared to largely favor the Israeli position.

In February 2008, when Israel choked off the Gaza's electricity supply in response to Hamas rocket attacks, even the British and [US governments](#) were critical. Blair, however, was more reticent.

"It's incredibly difficult, this, and my worry all the time is that you alienate the people," he [said](#), upon being asked if he needed to tell Israel not to cut power to Palestinians. "But the reason why I have sympathized with the dilemma Israel has, and I've been criticized for doing so, is that if I was sitting in their seat . . . I mean, the truth of the matter is that it is difficult for them to be able to attack the extremists in isolation from the people."

Years later, when the Palestinian Authority made a bid for UN statehood, Blair warned it would be "deeply confrontational," and then [worked with the Obama administration](#) to tempt the Palestinians away from such a move. But the [proposal he created](#) — one that dropped calls for an end to illegal settlements while demanding Palestinians recognize Israel "as a Jewish state" — was a non-starter.

It was Blair's move to halt the statehood bid that finally ruined his credibility in the Palestinians' eyes.

"There is no one within the Palestinian leadership that supports or likes or trusts Tony Blair, particularly because of the very damaging role he played

during our UN bid,” one official [told the Telegraph](#), adding he was “persona non-grata” in Palestine.

One PLO official [described him](#) as “a junior employee of the Israeli government.” A [Palestinian presidential aide](#) said that, instead of a neutral entity, he “sounds like an Israeli diplomat sometimes.”

True to form, in 2013, Blair hired an ex-Israeli intelligence officer and former aide to Benjamin Netanyahu as a private consultant, further undermining his appearance of neutrality.

By 2014, individuals ranging from Noam Chomsky and Ken Livingstone to Labour MPs [signed an open letter](#) calling for Blair’s removal, labelling his achievements “negligible.” By May 2015, [senior diplomats were calling him](#) “ineffective” and saying his role was “no longer viable.” Later that month, he [resigned](#).

Blair may have failed to achieve much of anything regarding Israel and Palestine, but his mediator role appeared a useful fulcrum for his business endeavors. In 2011, [according](#) to the British current affairs program *Dispatches*, Blair persuaded Israel to allow Wataniya Mobile to operate in the West Bank and promoted the development of a gas field off the coast of Gaza operated by the British Gas Group. Both companies happened to be clients of JP Morgan, which Blair was being paid millions to advise. Wataniya’s CEO gushed about the deal, calling it a “milestone” for a company that had once been “nothing” yet subsequently captured 23 percent of the market. (Wataniya was based in Kuwait, whose government was [another client](#) of Blair’s).

It turns out that while serving as envoy, Blair made two undisclosed trips to Libya on dictator Muammar Gaddafi’s private jet. (These travel arrangements were, [in one case](#), negotiated on notepaper labelled “Office of the Quartet Representative.”) One of these visits took place just as JP Morgan was [trying to negotiate](#) a multibillion-pound loan from Libya. Blair claimed it wasn’t a business trip, but emails obtained by an anti-corruption group showed JP Morgan’s vice chairman urging that the deal be finalized “before Mr. Blair’s visit to Tripoli.”

At the same time, numerous other conflicts of interest reared their heads. Blair reportedly served as a personal adviser to the chairman of the Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessey Group at the same time the company was [profiting](#) from resources drawn from illegal Israeli settlements. He continued to advise Abu Dhabi’s sovereign wealth fund, Mubadala, even as observers pointed out that it could [undermine his work with the Palestinians](#). In a deal that would have reportedly netted him £1 million, Blair was in [talks with supermarket chain Tesco](#) to bring its stores to the Middle East. He [used his envoy position](#) to try and benefit several of his other projects, including contacting the British ambassador in Lebanon about starting an education program in the country — before being told his unpopularity guaranteed its failure.

As the director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding [told the Guardian](#),

“There is no clear division between Blair’s diplomatic dealings and business dealings in the Middle East.”

Tangled up in Green



What made it especially difficult for Blair to separate his public and private business was the fact that, along with his charities, Blair was also running Tony Blair Associates, a for-profit consultancy firm that made up a significant source of Blair's income.

What exactly did TBA do? For one, it was in the business of "[providing introductions](#)," bringing corporate clients and governments together to set up business deals. For instance, it was alleged that Blair [introduced a Chinese businessman](#) wanted by Interpol for bribery to the Abu Dhabi royal family, for a deal worth \$3 billion. In 2012, he tried to [broker a deal](#) between an Irish businessman and the Qatari royal family, something the businessman said TBA was doing "out of the good of their heart."

Blair was also [pitched](#) to PetroSaudi, a privately owned oil firm co-founded by a Saudi prince, as someone who could "unlock situations which might otherwise be blocked by political factors." He went on to promote the company in private meetings with Chinese officials — all for a \$100,000 per month retainer.

To illustrate how tangled Blair's various activities were at the time: he was, at this point, still serving as the Middle East peace envoy; many of his meetings with Chinese officials happened while he was visiting on behalf of his religious charity; and TBA's director assured PetroSaudi that it made no difference if they paid money to the firm that owned TBA or the firm that owned his charities, "given where the cash ultimately ends up."

(Blair's deal with PetroSaudi came with an added scent of impropriety, given that as prime minister, [Blair had pressured](#) the UK's Serious Fraud Office to quash an investigation into alleged corruption in arms deals between Saudi Arabia and British firm BAE Systems, which the British High Court [later ruled](#) had been illegal).

Friends in Authoritarian Places



Tony Blair with Henry Kissinger (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

In 2015, Blair told [Vanity Fair](#) that Henry Kissinger was his role model. He said this was because Kissinger continued working even into his nineties — though one might wonder why he didn't cite someone like, say, Jimmy Carter, an actual philanthropist, who isn't a war

criminal. But given Blair's work, one might be forgiven for thinking he was referring to Kissinger's history of enabling dictatorships.

Blair's work at TBA often involved him dispensing political advice for pay to unsavory regimes around the world. The firm's first client was the Kuwaiti government, which [paid seven figures](#) for Blair's advice on "good governance." He also [flew to Azerbaijan](#) to give a paid speech and meet with the country's repressive president. Infuriating local activists, he didn't mention the country's poor human rights record.

He signed a deal [said to be worth £8 million](#) to advise the corrupt and repressive government of Kazakhstan, which Pavel Sheremet, a Russian journalist, [called](#) a sign "that Western politicians can do any work for money" and that Blair had "informally agreed to bring Kazakhstan's viewpoint to the Western politicians and investors." Kazakhstan [paid for Blair's travel](#) and first-class hotel stays; in return, Blair did things like tell its president how to [paper over](#) his government's murder of protesters in his speeches.

Blair [did something similar](#) for president Alpha Conde of Guinea in 2013 after Guinean government forces fired on protesters, leading Conde to seek Blair's help. The former prime minister's "independent, politically neutral organization," the Africa Governance Initiative, sent over a document advising him how to win the "communications battle."

Blair has long insisted that the Iraq War was justified by the need to end Saddam's repression and violence. But he's shown he has no problem with autocratic rule in other Middle Eastern countries. He [became an adviser](#) to murderous Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as part of a project financed by three Gulf states to bring foreign investment to Egypt's economy (though Blair denied he was profiting from his role). In the midst of the Arab Spring, Blair [called](#) Egypt's previous dictator, Hosni Mubarak, "immensely courageous and a force for good." He [called](#) for Western countries to do more to help the "liberal and democratic" elements in Arab countries, but then [praised](#) the Egyptian army's armed overthrow of its country's democracy, viewing the formation of a democratic government by the Muslim Brotherhood as the greater threat.

Blair's affection for autocrats isn't limited to the Middle East and Central Asia. He became an [unofficial adviser](#) to Rwandan president Paul Kagame, whose government worked with Blair's Africa Governance Initiative (AGI); the two are [reportedly good friends](#). Kagame most recently won an election with [99 percent of the vote](#), has been accused of war crimes by the UN, and [regularly silences](#) his political opposition. Blair, however, [insisted](#) he was a "visionary leader," and has [constantly defended](#) Kagame from criticism while keeping silent about human rights abuses, leading Human Rights Watch to [accuse him](#) of "helping to prop up" the government. It can't hurt that Kagame pampers Blair with a private jet to fly him in and out of the country.

A Vision for the Few

What's next for Tony Blair? The latest signs are that he's now ready to devote himself more intensely to politics. As of 2016, he's [closed down](#) his various commercial activities and put their "substantial reserves" into his nonprofit work (though he also said he's retaining "a small number of personal consultancies for [his] income"). His latest initiative is the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, a "not-for-profit organisation dedicated to making globalization work for the many, not the few." The Institute [hopes to](#) "articulate a vision of liberal democracy that can garner substantial support and to push back the destructive

approach of populism,” thereby renewing the center. As part of this project, it will “inform and support those in the active front line of politics.”

But Blair’s whole post-prime ministerial career has been one big advertisement for the failure of his particular brand of globalization. He is precisely one of those “few” for whom the new hyperconnected, globalized world has paid handsome dividends, thanks to grotesque corruption and obscene private wealth. And far from advancing a vision of “liberal democracy,” he’s used his privileged position to bolster countless authoritarian regimes, all for a price.

When he left office ten years ago, Blair promised to use his global connections to heal the world. Instead, he worked to make himself fabulously wealthy. Now he’s making the same promise again. As a dear friend of his might say: fool me once, shame on you.

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