

Blair: my mission to win

SIMON WAINMAN

By Philip Webster
Political Editor

TONY BLAIR geared up his party for a fight for the heart and soul of Britain yesterday by appealing for a second term and promising that it would be more radical and reforming than the first.

Casting himself as "a man with a mission", the Prime Minister accepted that recent troubles such as the fuel crisis had left Labour facing a serious battle to be re-elected. "We are in a fight and it's a fight that I relish," he said. "It is a fight for the future, the heart and the soul of our country."

But he preceded his call to arms with a frank acknowledgement of his Government's mistakes, in which he included the Millennium Dome and last year's decision to increase pensions by only 75p.

In an act of contrition that surprised and pleased the Labour conference in Brighton, he said that he wished he had listened to those who said governments should not try to run visitor attractions such as the Dome. He declared that he and Gordon Brown had "got the message" on pensions. There were things they had done that had made people an-

term of office so that Labour could implement its ten-year plan for the health service, transform secondary education, make the streets safe, move towards full employment and use the growth of new technology to spread prosperity to all.

He also promised that the manifesto would commit Labour to increase the share of national wealth spent on education. There would be 1,000 specialist schools by 2004 and an extra £1 billion investment in technology to ensure one computer to every five children in secondary schools.

He promised new help for the victims of crime and a policy of zero tolerance towards the "job culture". It was time to stand up for the pensioners who were afraid to go out, time to stand up for the single mothers scared to walk to the shops, time to stand up to the thugs and bullies. Bail would be toughened and there would be fixed penalty fines of up to £100 for drunkenness.

Mr Blair was given a warm and lengthy ovation by a party clearly responding to the fact that he finds himself in greater trouble than ever before in his leadership. Senior colleagues admitted that he had made the kind of speech that he could not have expected last month before the sudden slide in Labour's fortunes. But his acceptance that he had a serious contest on his hands carried far more urgency.

The Prime Minister dispensed with the kind of high-flow themes, such as the "young country" and the "giving age", that have characterised previous conference speeches and there was no mention of the "forces of conservatism", the focus of his attack last year.

Instead, in an unscripted personal passage towards the end Mr Blair described himself as a "unifier", who would do whatever he could to bring people onside. But there was an "irreducible core" within him that meant that he would never put tax cuts before education spending, exploit the asylum issue, or tell people that Europe was a place full of terrible people.

He had a vision that he believed could unite the country, having been brought into Labour by the old principle of solidarity, the belief that "shoulder to shoulder we get more out of this life than as isolated individualists". There were decent Tories out there, but they were not in charge of today's Conservative Party.

Mr Hague last night accused Mr Blair of refusing to say sorry to people who had promised and expressed dissatisfaction in recent weeks, and dismissed the speech as "the usual new Labour cocktail: meaningless statistics that cover up a comprehensive failure to deliver, unscripted promises to listen that reveal just how out of touch he has become, and apologies that never amount to saying 'sorry'".

"Of course, Tony Blair said he was listening. But we're all used to his vague promises and spin. The fact is that he showed no sign of having heard a thing."

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Tony and Cherie Blair after the Prime Minister's address to the Labour conference in Brighton yesterday, when he received a long and warm ovation.

Prime Minister works up a sweat over core values



Matthew Parris
Conference sketch

DRIPPING with sincerity and gushing with sweat, Tony Blair drenched his shirt and soft-soaped his party.

But Meatloaf got there first. "I'll Do Anything For Love (but I won't do that)" runs the hit Tony Blair would do anything for Labour, he told his party conference yesterday. Then, with a sob in his voice and perspiration on his brow, he reeled off a list of things nobody would have dreamt of suggesting he do anyway, and insisted that he would not, should not, simply *could* not do them.

They were incompatible with his "irreducible core". Irreducible core? Delegates looked a bit puzzled as Mr Blair launched this mysterious entity at conference. Was it something chewy you find in one of those smart Tuscan soups?

It was brilliant stuff: Clinton-with-a-hint-of-Widdecombe.

Under pressure from the old Labour Left, Mr Blair offered a passionate pledge to resist pressure from the extremist Right. With a mock spur-of-

the-moment delivery, and departing from his text, the Prime Minister cited things such as racism, xenophobia, slashing help for the poorest. "Ah, *can't* do it," he protested, sweating profusely, accent dumbed down and estuarial glottal stop replacing his t's. The audience moved, quite forgot that he was actually the Prime Minister and under no such pressure, and roared their support.

"That's right, Tony," each kindly soul in the hall murmured inwardly, "don't you let them force you!"

He could have gone on. "Ask me to rip the cars off me old aunty, and ah've gotta tell yer, ah *can't* do it!" Wild cheers. "Ask me to legislate for the slaughter of the firstborn and ah've gotta tell yer, ah *can't* do it!" Audience weeps with emotion.

Less effective with this audience would have been: "Ask

me to link old folks' pensions with younger folks' earnings, and put a penny on income tax to pay for it, and ah've gotta tell yer, ah *can't* do it!" But, irreducible as it is, even Tony's core has limits.

Whatever other cores this passage stripped bare, it was undoubtedly the core of his performance.

The rest (as befitted a speech prefaced by the pledge, "This is not a time for lists!") was a series of lists: more lists, and longer, than in any speech I have heard from this Labour leader. There were 26 lists, containing 161 items and 71 figures. If this was not, as the Prime Minister acknowledged, a time for lists, God spare us when such a time does come.

Mr Blair's leadership of the Labour Party began in a speech in Bloomsbury, his audience cowering under a barrage of abstract nouns. To

what have we now come! A hail of Post-it notes, bullet points and killer statistics.

It struck your sketchwriter that this speech won over two audiences.

The catch in the throat, the buckets of sweat, the whinnying insistence by the Prime Minister that he really did have principles, palpably moved his conference, of course. He moved much of the press, too, cynics being suckers for sentimentality.

Whether it will have moved the television audience, I am actually not told.

If only fitfully, few will have failed to thrill (as I thrilled) to Mr Blair's passionate protests and his confessional style. But it was the passion of an actor, not so much deceitful as self-induced.

Blair's is the best kind of acting, where the performer gets right inside the part, believing in and for a while, becoming the persona he has taken. This is not to lie, but to become — to assume a mantle.

Yesterday the Prime Minister assumed it with energy and skill.



"I've acknowledged my mistake — can't we move on to my good points?"

ery and should be open enough to admit it. But he declared that the Government could not be forced into decisions on priorities by blockades and that there were many competing demands for help.

Even so, he said, he was listening to people's anger over fuel duties, and that for hauliers and farmers as well as the ordinary motorist there was real hardship. "I am listening I hear. And I will act," he said.

Visibly perspiring during what was an intensely electrifying address, Mr Blair mixed penitence with defiance in a way that won over his party and appeared to have brought it closer to him last night. He also accused William Hague of jumping on evening passing handwagons and pandering to prejudice.

In a foretaste of the campaign to come, he claimed that the Conservative refusal to accept the Chancellor's spending plans would mean tens of thousands fewer nurses, doctors and teachers, and the closing of hundreds of schools and hospitals. Labour's claim that the Tories are committed to £16 billion of spending cuts will be one of its main weapons and Mr Blair disclosed that he had commissioned research on what such cuts would mean. Potential casualties included intensive care beds, nursery and childcare places, the arts and sport, he said.

He appealed for a second

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Archer trial may clash with election

By Steve Bird,
Andrew Pierce
and Stewart Tandler

LORD ARCHER of Weston-super-Mare, the former Conservative Party deputy chairman, could face trial at the height of the next general election for perjury and perverting the course of justice.

The millionaire author was charged yesterday over allegations surrounding his libel case against the *Daily Star* and friends said he now fears the case will be heard next spring, which is forecast as the time of the election.

Although he is no longer a party member, they said Lord Archer believed the case would resurrect smears of Tory sleaze and revive memories of Jonathan Aitken, the former Tory Cabinet minister, who was jailed for 18 months after admitting conspiracy to pervert the course of justice and perjury over his libel case against *The Guardian*.

Lord Archer, who was freed on bail yesterday, was last night due to make his stage debut in his first play, *The Accused*. Next Tuesday he will appear before Bow Street magistrates on five charges in a real life case that could take him to the Old Bailey and even jail.

The charges come after police investigations launched after allegations last year that he had asked his friend, Ted Francis, to concoct an alibi for him as he prepared to sue the *Daily Star*. He went on to win £550,000 in damages from the newspaper over its allegations that he had slept with the prostitute Monica Coghlan.

He subsequently admitted that he had asked Mr Francis

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