

## Labour at Brighton

# Blair plans more radical

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TONY Blair used his conference speech to stress his willingness to listen to the public's concerns about fuel prices and pensions, to outline his plans for a Labour second term "more radical than the first" and to issue a grim warning about the prospect of Tory spending cuts.

He began his speech with a tribute to John Prescott.

"No Prime Minister, no party leader, could have a better deputy than John Prescott. You know why the Tories hate him? Because he started out as a seaman, steward on a ship, rose to be Deputy Prime Minister and has never hidden or been anything other than totally proud of where he came from."

In the first of his references to Labour's recent troubles, he joked: "You know why I like him? Because not once in the last two weeks has he reminded me that when he was in charge in August we were 20 points ahead in the polls."

Mr Blair said that he was "the Prime Minister that's supposed to be the great reader of public opinion".

"After the events of two weeks ago, it's no wonder the Government has taken a knock. It happened on my watch and I take responsibility."

His explanation? Labour had come to power as "a breath of fresh air" after the Tories. "In some areas we have exceeded expectations. But for many families life's still a struggle. It's tough balancing work and family. Jobs can be insecure. There's the mortgage to pay and the holiday to save for." Some people concluded that the Government was not listening.

"And, yes, there are things we have done that have made people angry and we should be open enough to admit it."

"The Dome. Hindsight is a wonderful thing and, if I had my time again, I would have listened to those who said governments shouldn't try to run big visitor attractions."

In a reference to pensions, he said: "Seventy-five pence. I tell you now, as Gordon made crystal clear yesterday, we get the message!"

Mr Blair said he owed the public an explanation after the fuel crisis. "Yes, petrol is expensive. But of the 14p rise since the Budget last year, 12p has been in the world oil price which is why these protests have taken place all over the world."

"I am listening to people's anger over fuel duties. For hauliers and farmers, to say nothing of ordinary motorists, there is real hardship. But I have also had to listen over underfunding in the health service."

Being in government meant making tough decisions, Mr Blair said. "Would it ever be right to choose a

priority simply on the basis of a fuel blockade? What of those who can't protest? Whose voice isn't supported by the media? Who go neglected unless we speak for them? So I am listening."

Mr Blair argued that the Government had inherited an economy trapped in a

cycle of boom and bust. In contrast, Britain now had the lowest inflation rate in Europe, employment at record levels and a major budget surplus.

That was not the result of luck but of "choices, hard choices, taken by this Government. By Gordon

Brown, one of the most inspired Chancellors this country has seen".

Turning to the Tories, Mr Blair criticised William Hague for "leaping aboard every passing bandwagon".

He said: "Opportunism always knocks for William Hague. You want tax cuts? Have them. Spending rises? Have them too."

Referring to Mr Hague's claims that he had once drunk 14 pints of beer, he joked: "It all makes sense after 14 pints.

"Everything makes sense after 14 pints. John Redwood looks sane. Michael Portillo looks loyal. After 14 pints, even William Hague looks like a Prime Minister."

Mr Blair said Labour had kept the promise in Line One of its manifesto contract with the people to increase the share of Britain's national wealth spent on education during this Parliament.

"Today I make a further commitment. Line One of the contract in the next manifesto will be a promise to increase the share of our national wealth spent on education in the next Parliament," said Mr Blair.

"Education. Education. Education. Then. Now. And in the future." On health, the Government had achieved

much and wanted to do more, particularly about cancer.

He said the Tories were committed to £16 billion of cuts in Labour's investment. To make that commitment, over 12 months, 20,000 doctors would have to be cut, 20,000 prison officers cut, 40,000 nurses cut, 40,000 teachers cut and 40,000 police officers cut.

Twenty hospitals, 150 secondary schools and 500 primary schools would be shut "under the Tory tax guarantee", Mr Blair added.

"And we've still got £5 billions to go. How will they get there? The biggest ever rise in child benefit — cut. Free TV licences for pensioners — cut. The £150 winter fuel allowance — cut; 1,200 intensive care beds — cut; free eye tests for pensioners — cut; 250 cancer scanners — cut; half a million nursery places — cut; 100,000 child care places — cut under the Tory cuts guarantee."

In a lengthy departure from his scripted speech, Mr Blair set out many of his core beliefs.

"By nature I am a unifier," he said. "I am a builder of consensus. I don't believe in sloppy compromise. There is no point in leading the Labour Party or leading the

country without having a mission and a purpose that's more important to you than anything else."

He pledged: "I will do whatever I can to bring people onside but there are certain things I cannot do. If you ask me to put tax cuts before education spending, I

can't do it. If people want me to go out and exploit the asylum issue for reasons of race, then vote for the other man, because I won't do it."

His journey's end would be "a Britain where any child born in this Millennium, whatever their background, race or creed, wherever they

live, whoever their parents, is able to make the most of the God-given abilities they bring into this world". "That journey is a journey worth making, a fight worth fighting. A fight we must win."

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