

Life After Death for Tony Blair

Keir Starmer has brought the discredited Labour leader back in the hope he can revive the party's electoral fortunes. It's fatally flawed

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Just three years ago Tony Blair looked finished. Washed up. Defunct. Politically dead.

[The Chilcot report](#) had established the facts surrounding Blair’s deep culpability for the catastrophic Iraq invasion.

With Blair beside him, Starmer can no longer claim to be a man of honesty and integrity.

Blair had poisoned his own reputation by receiving huge sums for giving lucrative advice to a succession of seedy and sometimes murderous dictators.

Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party closed its doors to the one-time Labour premier.

Back from the dead

But this week Sir Tony rose sensationally from the dead, courtesy of Sir Keir Starmer.

Starmer exhumed Blair by placing him at the heart of a Labour campaign video in this Thursday’s local elections.

This completes the rehabilitation of Blair that began in January this year when he received the [Order of the Garter](#), the highest honour available in British public life.

It is an open secret that Buckingham Palace, dismayed by Blair’s conduct in office, has long resisted such a move.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson is thought to have urged the Queen to change her mind about Blair’s knighthood.

Now Starmer has completed Blair’s public resurrection. To many this will seem an

astonishing decision.

Starmer must have known that his new alliance with Blair would estrange many idealistic Labour supporters who despise the former prime minister.

In this article, I will examine the reasoning behind Starmer's decision to bring Blair back into the heart of Labour politics.

Election winner

First, there is no getting away from the fact that Blair is, quite simply, the most successful leader in the history of the British Labour Party.

Before Blair's famous 1997 victory, Labour had lost four elections in a row – 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992.

Blair won three handsome victories in a row – 1997, 2001 and 2005 – before being forced out of office in an internal coup masterminded by supporters of Gordon Brown.

Since then Labour has suffered four more straight defeats – 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019.

Politics is ultimately about winning. Starmer may have concluded that he does not want Labour to lose a fifth general election in a row, and that he wants a proven winner like Blair by his side.

A reasonable calculation.

He knows that Blair became a winner by forging an unbeatable electoral alliance between traditional Labour voters and the aspirant middle classes who have historically voted Tory.

He wants to repeat that magic combination. Another reasonable calculation.

I guess Starmer calculates that the Iraq War is now history.

The invasion took place, after all, before some of the young people who will vote in this week's local elections were even born.

And I am sure he personally recalls how at its best Blair's New Labour offered hope and a radiant national optimism, and wants to recreate that.

Understandable grounds for assuming that bringing Blair back from his political graveyard will resurrect Labour's fortunes.

New Labour is history

But there are also powerful arguments for leaving Blair unmolested in the mausoleum of disgraced political leaders.

First, the New Labour era is long gone.

Back in 1997 when Blair stormed to power, Britain enjoyed its strongest economy since World War Two.

Today we face [inflation and recession](#) – and with recession comes desperately hard economic choices of the kind that Blair never faced.

Also the demographics have changed beyond recognition. Blair won power by taking working-class voters in traditional Labour areas for granted.

His successors have paid the price for that betrayal – those working-class voters have fled to the Tories.

Most important of all, the political argument has changed beyond recognition.

Boris Johnson has emerged as the sleaziest and most deceitful British prime minister in more than a century – so much so that he fills many voters with disgust.

Starmer's best hope of fighting an amoral chancer like Johnson is to project himself to voters as a man of honour and decency.

There's zero chance of doing that with Blair by his side.

The biggest lie

Blair never lied with the fluency, frequency and lack of shame for which Johnson has become notorious.

But there's no getting away from the fact he is responsible for the biggest and worst political lie in modern history: the claim that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Blair needed to tell that lie in order to justify sending British forces to fight in what was otherwise an illegal war.

There were no weapons of mass destruction, and most good judges accept that the [war was illegal](#) as well as a catastrophe for millions.

With Blair beside him, Starmer can no longer claim to be a man of honesty and integrity.

He has therefore thrown away an electoral trump card.

All the more so because Starmer has not just bought into Tony Blair personally. He's swallowed whole the New Labour concept that Blair brought to Downing Street.

As political journalist Oliver Eagleton makes plain in an outstanding new book, *The Starmer Project*, Starmer has revived the slavish Atlanticism which was a core feature of the Blair era.

Old guard

Meanwhile, Starmer has become dependent on the Blairite old guard.

Blairite heavyweight David Blunkett sits on Labour's "council of skills". Blairite spokesperson Matthew Doyle has been enlisted as communications director. New Labour pollster Deborah Mattinson is back as Starmer's strategist.

Eagleton states that Peter Mandelson, whose name is synonymous with New Labour manipulation and deceit, has been “recruited as an informal adviser”.

That does alarm and surprise me.

Eagleton reveals that Starmer has even asked Lord Falconer – another core member of the Blairite inner circle – to give him “introductory seminars in economics”.

By modelling himself on “New Labour”, Starmer is fighting a war with an obsolete political technology that’s a quarter of a century old.

He may find – to paraphrase Karl Marx – that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then for a second time as farce.

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