

Big conversation

This document is about the future. Our aim is to open a conversation with the British people about the challenges Britain faces and how together we can meet them.

We have made progress in the last six years towards our goal of social justice but we can't rest. The quickening pace of change makes the case for New Labour - for bolder reform, for our vision of a future in which all, not just a few citizens have opportunity - even stronger.

Realising that vision means facing up to new challenges.

- The economic challenge is to build an economy based on human capital and knowledge, new technology and innovation.
- The challenge for public services is to provide universal services that are also personalised to individual need, in a consumer driven age.
- The challenge for law and order is how to recast the system for a 21st century in which organised crime and anti-social behaviour requires a different criminal justice system to 50 years ago.
- The challenge for politics is how to create a better dialogue between politicians and the people.
- The challenge for families is how to balance work and home responsibilities.
- The international challenge is how in an interdependent world collectively we tackle global threats rather than hide from them.

And we won't have a fair society in the future if we don't face up to these challenges.



This document identifies those areas of opportunity and concern for policy making and then asks some of the key questions that enable us to maximise the opportunities and minimise the threats. Many of the questions will need answers by the time we publish our manifesto.

We offer a renewed idealism about the power of politics to make a real difference to people's lives, but we make clear, too, the realities of government - the need for priorities, for spending choices, for tough, sometimes difficult decisions for the long-term common good.

Our future success as a society and a country requires a new

emphasis on spreading opportunities more widely, for that is the route to success in today's economy.

We have to ensure all our children get a decent start in life. Extend the choice which is now a monopoly of the well-off to all parents and patients. Increase support so people can better balance work and family life. Provide more ladders of opportunity through better education and assets for all. Empower local people so they can take more control over their own lives.

This acceleration in opportunity will only happen if we have the courage to recast the 1945 welfare state, which was right for the time, replacing a "one size fits all" system with one of individual aspiration backed up by strong communities. It needs a new partnership between citizen and government: a modern, streamlined, empowering government on the one hand and more active, responsible citizens on the other.

It means New Labour must inspire people once more about our values - social justice, opportunity for all - but be bolder about the means for achieving them.

Facing up to difficult challenges should not frighten either the party or the country. After all it has been the key to the successes we have had so far.

Economic stability required Bank of England Independence and tough rules on spending. Primary school standards rose because of the literacy and numeracy strategies. Reforms including new treatment centres are reducing waiting in the NHS. Our street crime initiative reduced crime dramatically. The Minimum Wage, according to the Tories, was going to cost two million jobs. The New Deal required us to levy a windfall tax on the privatised utilities. Devolution we were told would paralyse Parliament for years. Investment in the health service required national insurance to be raised. Lifting 600,000 children out of poverty required us to redistribute our national wealth.

Now, together we must go further and faster. And I believe that New Labour is equipped to do so. The party changed once dramatically in opposition. We got rid of outdated ideology when we changed Clause 4. We have built a new Labour Party that has proved competent and credible in government. Now having laid the foundations in the first term, having set in train deep and long term public service reform in the second term, we can have the confidence to move forward again.

Our challenge is to shape the future around a modern progressive agenda. The public don't want us to stand still nor want a return to the past and a government who left people at the mercy of global forces to sink or swim.

We have come so far since 1997 that it is easy to forget what happened to Britain under the Tories. Opportunity was denied to too many people. The uncertainty created for families and business because the economy lurched from boom to bust. The misery of unemployment over three million, of sky-high mortgages, negative equity, and house repossessions. Neighbourhoods torn apart by crime which doubled in eighteen years.

It is also easy, too, to forget the pessimism and cynicism which dominated the country. Selfish individualism displaced community and mutual responsibility. More children grew up in poverty. Sections of society who did not fit in to a pre-ordained Tory model – single mothers, ethnic minorities, gay people – were targeted. The Tories stood opposed to basic measures of fairness like the Minimum Wage.

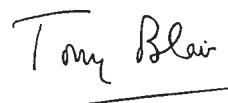
Our public services were not just short of money or doctors, nurses, teachers or police. The public sector was given the clear message that it was second best, didn't matter and the private sector ruled.

Today the same Tories offer the same people, with the same brand of politics. But Britain has changed. The country has moved beyond the values of the 80s. There is more optimism about the future. A different set of values – solidarity, community, opportunity – provides the country with a new compass. It is these values - our Party's enduring values – which will guide us as we discuss with the whole country the challenges ahead and the choices we face.

Over the coming months I will be visiting many parts of the UK discussing the questions posed in these pages; so will ministers, MPs, MEPs, our councillors and other representatives. Indeed, many Labour MPs have already developed new and innovative ways of engaging with local people. This document is about the issues that will shape our future but it should also be a chance for us to develop new forms of engagement, linking the policy challenges facing government with the issues that most concern ordinary people. The dialogue will frame the thinking for our next manifesto, helping to enrich and feed into the Party's Partnership in Power process.

It's time for a grown up discussion. Big issues need real debate, a big conversation between politicians and the people.

Let the conversation begin.



Rt Hon Tony Blair MP