

Measures of Prime Ministerial performance indicate Tony Blair was a great leader but voters do not seem to be assessing him as kindly

Jim Buller and Toby James provides insights for assessing Prime Ministers and argues that using their framework suggests that Tony Blair was very successful. However, poll numbers suggest that support for the Liberals would drop were he to take the helm from Ed Miliband.



Earlier in the summer, there was some speculation that Tony Blair may yet dramatically return as Prime Minister. When asked by the Evening Standard whether he would want another term he said 'sure'. Some British Prime Ministers have returned to office after leaving power. These include Lord Palmerston, Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone, Lord Salisbury, Stanley Baldwin, Winston Churchill and Harold Wilson. Most recent leaders, as [Kevin Theakston notes](#), tend to end up doing a variety of other things.



But was Tony Blair any good the first time around? This is obviously a very controversial question. For some he will be remembered as a 'war monger' because of his decision to invade Iraq; for others an apologist for Thatcherism, for dropping many of Labour's left wing policies; for others the successful moderniser of the Labour party who presided over a successive years of economic prosperity and growth in Britain.

There has been very little explicit scholarly work which has sort to evaluate Prime Ministerial performance. This stands in great contrast to the US where attempts to assess American Presidents spans many pages.

We have just published [a new article](#) on how political scientists should assess British Prime Ministers. Our method provides a framework for assessing whether they are successful at winning office and maintaining a sense of governing competence, particularly on the key issue of the economy.

The article considers the case of Tony Blair and argues that he was very successful at this. His party won three full parliamentary terms in a row, a feat not achieved by any other Labour leadership clique. Moreover, it significantly altered the methods by which the party fought elections, reforms that remain in place to this day.

Similar points might be made about the criterion of governing competence. Not only did Blair and his colleagues re-establish Labour's reputation in this area, but some of the policy changes put in place to fulfil this objective (particularly Bank of England independence) now have a lasting legacy.

Although Blair failed to devise a consistent and compelling narrative for New Labour, which had a significant impact on the climate of British politics, the party did win the political argument on important issues, such as greater expenditure on public services.

Party management was arguably Blair's least strong suit in the sense that he was unable to prevent the splits between leader and rank and file that had plagued his successors. But overall, Blair's leadership deserves a very high place in any future league table of British prime ministers.

It has to be said that a Blair return is some way off. Ed Miliband has built up a lead in the polls and the questions about his leadership have retreated. If he loses the next general election then he may not survive as party leader and we should expect a leadership contest, but there will be plenty of younger leadership candidates in the frame if that happens. Unfortunately for Blair [one poll](#) has suggested that Labour support would drop (except in the South-East) if he was to become leader again.

So was Tony Blair a great leader? Here are some of Tony Blair's most [famous moments](#), to help you decide.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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