

Tony Blair addresses the Institute for Government

28 June 2010

Present

Lord Sainsbury (LS)

Peter Riddell (PR)

Tony Blair (TB)

LS Ladies and gentlemen, can I begin by welcoming you all to this meeting, which is, I think, probably in some ways the first of its kind. I'm sure Tony knows, there are many post mortems on Government, but not many I think actually look at the workings of the machinery of Government. I think it's also probably fair to say that actually understanding the workings of Government and how well it's done is not at all easy to do from the outside, unless you have actually experienced Government from the inside it's very difficult to really understand how it works. When I went first into Government, I remember seeing there was someone called the Head of the Civil Service, and I assumed from that that this was actually a guy who run the Civil Service. It took me three or four years to understand that not only did he not run the Civil Service, but no one thought he should run the Civil Service (*laughter*). Once you knew that, then of course problems of joined up Government implementation became rather clear to understand. So all that is a way of saying that if you want to understand what happened at a particular time as far as the machinery of Government is concerned, you need to talk to the Politicians and the Civil Servants who were there. So I would also very much like to thank Tony for agreeing to speak and talk about these issues. He has an enormous amount of demands on his time and I think we greatly appreciate him coming along. I know also that there will be many people here this evening keen to know how these issues looked from the perspective of Number Ten, and to hear his views. The format of this evening will be that Tony will first of all talk for ten minutes about some of these issues. Peter is then going to interview him for about half an hour on these issues and some of the things that we are particularly and he is particularly interested in, in terms of the working of Government, and then we are going to have 20 minutes of questions after that. So Tony, over to you.

TB Thank you very much David (*clapping*). Thank you very much indeed, it's a wonderful pleasure to be with you here in the presence of quite a few familiar faces actually, which is good, I think (*laughter*), well we will find out in time, obviously. To say a huge word of thanks to David, not just for inviting me along here today but for the Institute for Government, which I think is a remarkable innovation and absolutely timely for the reasons that I will give, and just a word of thanks from me to him because he is somebody who contributed enormously to the Government. Over the years he was the Science Minister, and we used to have quite ... I mean, around reshuffle times, quite frank conversations really about the respect of Ministers and their merits, and I can honestly say his name never came up for consideration (*laughter*) which I think was a good thing, I think that was a kind of complement really, but what you probably don't know is that he also through the Gatsby Foundation does the most extraordinary charitable work, here and right around the world, and is a quite remarkable individual, so it's a delight and pleasure to be with you, and to be interviewed by Peter who I met for the first time many, many years ago as a new member of Parliament, and I was told that he was an extraordinary combination of a great journalist and a straight forward person, and I found both to be true. So anyway, enough of the complements, now the Government (*laughter*). Actually my story about coming into Government for the first time is that when I first walked into Downing Street, and I literally had only been in there just once for a dinner I think, given in the honour of Bill Clinton under John Major's Government, other than that I had literally never been inside Downing Street at all, and what happens when you go inside Downing Street when you are the new Prime Minister is there is a convention, which some of you will know, which is the staff line up, all the people line up on either side of the corridor leading from the front door

down to the Cabinet room at the end, and of course the other lot had been in power for 18 years, so they were quite used to them really, and some of them were quite fond of them. And so as I was moving down the line and they were sort of clapping, there were a few snuffles and tears and (*laughter*) and by the time I got to the end of it I felt really quite bad about the whole thing (*laughter*). But I remember going into the room at the end, the Cabinet room, and there was Rob Butler sitting there in the chair just next to the Prime Minister's chair, and I went in absolutely exhausted obviously after the campaign and he said 'well, now what?', and that was my introduction to Government. Now I'm going to rattle through, because I want to keep maximum time for interaction with Peter, and questions and comments from people, rattle through in what is going to be very fast order my comments on what I've learnt from the experience of ten years in Government, and actually since in the different work I do in different parts of the world, and these are lessons other than the principle, an unfortunate lesson that you are at your most popular as Prime Minister usually at the beginning when you are at your least effective and you are least popular at the end when you are at your most effective, but there it is, that is what experience teaches you. I'm going to make ten points in ten minutes, which is impossibly difficult, but I will try. First of all, number one, this whole issue to do with Governance is absolutely key today. It is at the heart, or should be, of the political debate. And it is not a debate, as sometimes people think of it, as a debate about transparency or accountability; it's actually a debate about effectiveness. It's a debate about efficiency. So when I look at the work, for example, I am doing in Africa with Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Liberia, or with the Palestinians at the moment, actually the single most important thing ... of course they need a drive against corruption and all these things, the single most important thing they need is capacity in Government to get things done. Which leads me to my second point, which is the context in which we are debating Government today, is a context which is very much 21st Century politics, by which I mean it is, I would say, post ideological in the sense of not about the values that people have, or even the ends they try to achieve, but about the means. In today's world, the labels left and right are far more fungible, 21st Century than they ever were 20th Century. And indeed sometimes I think that by focusing on left/right distinctions in a very traditional way, we actually miss what I think is a far more important political distinction today, which I would describe as open versus closed. In other words, for example do you look at globalisation as an opportunity, do you look at immigration as an opportunity or do you actually see yourself closing down in the face of these forces of change that you see in the world today? I think open versus closed to me is every bit as important today as left versus right, and the point is the context in which Government operates today is a context that is essentially about getting things done. It's about delivery. The third thing is that people want an empowering state, and not a controlling state. And the essence of Government today has got to put the power in the hands of people. And that's not a slogan, it's actually a demand from the public. They are not ... a centralised command and control type Government is not what people want, it's not effective, and in particular in a developed Country it's not acceptable. So for example when we came to do the reforms in the NHS or schools, it was about putting power in the hands of the parent or the patient, it was about consumer oriented public services. The State trying to run those services from the centre, we very quickly discovered after a few years was neither effective nor sensible. That leads me on to the fourth point, which is this; if it is indeed about the State becoming an empowering State and not a controlling State, that will require systemic change to the services that the State delivers. And systemic change will not be delivered, and this is maybe paradoxical in a sense, without a strong centre. Now we spent a long time debating this and my absolute conviction, not just because I was ten years sitting in Downing Street as Prime Minister, but when, and Michael Barber is here today, we started the Prime Minister's delivery unit in Downing Street, and it was a bone of contention politically, it was absolutely and totally central to getting things done in Government. And likewise to have a strategic unit that was capable of long term political thinking and a policy unit that was actually capable of proper policy development, not just for the medium and long term but actually for the short term, this is absolutely of the essence. If you want to drive through systemic change, you've got to drive it through from the centre. Now the centre doesn't have to do deliver all that change but it has to deliver the system's change to get things done, so we would never have got ... I see Andrew Adonis is here, but we would never have got the

Academy Program off the ground had it not been for Andrew in Downing Street with myself and a pretty tightly knit conspiracy of like minded individuals driving that through. Otherwise it simply wouldn't have happened. The fifth thing is Departments then need likewise to orient themselves around project management, delivery and ensuring that they are smaller probably, certainly strategic and geared to very specific priorities that they then have the skill set to be able to deliver. In other words these vast Departments that very often have thousands of people in them, and lots of different things that ... if you are not careful, what happens in Government is you are just literally managing a system, and that can be very, very difficult. It also leads to a kind of inertia within the system, I remember when I first came into Downing Street one of the first presentations I had was from the Home Office, who brought along a group of people to tell me that because the economy was really strong, there was a lot more prosperity about and that meant there would be a lot more crime committed because there are lot more things to steal basically. So I said 'well what happens if we go into recession and unemployment goes up?', well in that case crime also goes up (*laughter*) because then you've got people who are obviously deprived and need to go out and steal things. So basically the idea was that crime always went up. If you are not careful and your Departments are not focused around getting things done, they get themselves into a mindset that is essentially just about managing a system that is unchanged. And that leads me to the sixth point which is this; systemic change ... and systemic change is absolutely essential in today's world, you take any successful private sector company, they are reinventing themselves virtually every year, some of them month by month. If you want effective delivery and that requires systemic change, you will not get such change unless you are prepared to do what I call challenge the givens. What a lot of the time you do in Government work is you assume the system is the system and then you say 'how can we make it work more effectively?'. Actually what you very often have to do is say 'let's challenge that assumption, maybe the system doesn't have to be like that'. When we had a problem with rising asylum numbers, we literally were unable to get anywhere near bringing them down until we started to think about the system that we were operating. Otherwise we were just flogging the system every day and occasionally you would get the odd change. But until you changed the system you weren't going to get something that really worked. When we got NHS waiting lists down, and the dog that didn't bark at the last election was the NHS, it's one of the extraordinary things, every election probably up to maybe 2005 that I can remember was absolutely dominated, even 2001 as I certainly remember, was dominated by the NHS. We got health service waiting lists down and you can actually see this, when we changed the system within which health care was delivered, by introducing competition, the private sector, and so on. And that leads me to the seventh thing, which is this; the best systemic change and delivery begins with the right conceptual analysis. I think one of the interesting things that I discovered about politics is that although much of politics is conducted in a completely non-intellectual atmosphere, in fact politics is quite a severely intellectual business in the sense that if you don't ... I used to see an unbroken thread between an conceptual analysis of what the problem was, then an orientation or direction in order to resolve it and then specific policy. But the specific policy had to flow from a policy direction, and the policy direction had to come from a conceptual analysis. So if you look at the conceptual analysis for example we had about schools or hospitals taking those two areas of reform, based on the idea that unless you've got self governing units like trust schools or academies or hospitals that were foundation hospitals, unless they've got that sense of ownership of what they were trying to do and were given some freedom in order to innovate, you weren't going to get the policy outcomes or the outputs that you actually desired. So it started with a conceptual analysis and then ended up with a policy. Likewise towards the end, and I think this is still a major issue, on social exclusion I came to the conclusion in the end that we had the wrong conceptual analysis of depravation, and I came to the conclusion really too late to do what I would like to have done about it, which was that if you analyse society today, it isn't true that a rising tide will lift all ships, that there actually is a group of people that fit completely outside the main stream of any analysis, and that unless conceptually you target them as individuals and families with severe and qualitatively different problems, from people who might be simply unemployed, might be simply poor, might be simply homeless, then you are not going to get to the right answer, and that social exclusion in fact is a very, very specific domain of policy that requires a very, very specific set of

solutions. The eighth thing is; that's actually the conceptual and analysis probably works best, as does systemic change, if it's based on facts and interaction with the front line. I cannot tell you how much ... occasionally as Prime Minister you are sent out on visits to 'reconnect you with the people'. This is greatly loved of Government spin doctors (*laughter*). And you get out of Downing Street and your mind is full of all the policy stuff, and you sort of almost resent having to go out and do the in touch things and all the rest of it, but I found every time I went out and talked to front line staff about what was actually happening in their service, I learnt something. And I used to say by the end of it to the Departments, go and situate your policy people absolutely alongside the people trying to do it at the front line and you will very quickly realise that like everybody else that some of them will be radicals, some of them will just play the system, but you get alongside the people who are prepared to be change-makers and you will learn an immense amount about what their actual obstacles are and how you can improve things for them. So based along the facts, and interaction with the front line. The ninth point is something absolutely blindingly obvious, is that people matter, the actual people doing it matter. The decisions that you take, the people that you appoint, I mean I know it's completely obvious but it is dramatically important. However, I think there are differences that I would say we need to employ today with the past, and we made some progress towards this at least. We need a far greater interaction I think between the public and private sector. Much of the skill set as necessary today as a skill set that people will learn in the private sector. If you are trying to get something done and you are trying to deliver a project, project management is a private sector skill. I think a lot of our best public services as servants would benefit enormously by spending some years outside and then coming back in. I think there is absolutely no reason why you shouldn't have an exchange between public and private sector. I think we are actually in danger of looking at rules of priority in relation this and them almost becoming an obstacle to that free exchange between public and private sector. I will put in a personal though maybe not terribly popular plea or SpAds. The fact is, in modern politics it is completely absurd to think that there is something wrong with bringing in people who are political, but the fact that they are political doesn't mean to say that they can't also be useful believe it or not (*laughter*). I know this may sound a heretical thing to say but actually I found the majority of Special Advisors were people who weren't brought in to do what I would call the sort of more dirty street fighting stuff at all. Most Special Advisors were brought in because they had both a political idea of where the Government was trying to get to, but also had some ability in terms of policy to get things done. And I just think for our system to think that when you've got 80 SpAds in Government this is a constitutional outrage, I just think this is absurd. Personally I think you need to have that, and Governments for example need to have communications people as well. The idea of Government today surviving without an effective communications machine is just ... you might as well try to face body line bowling in a jock strap with a pencil (*laughter*), it's just not going to work. So it's really, really important I think to realise that when it comes to people today they need different skill sets, you should have far greater interaction in public and private sector and I think we need to get over this worry about SpAds. And also to define that slightly differently, I think there is a real case for people who have been leaders in their field. But people, believe it or not, when they retire in their mid-50s nowadays, they've still got certain energy (*laughter*) or something to give. We could make far more use of people like that in public life. The final thing is this tenth point, I'm probably longer than ten minutes so I apologise. We can actually learn from each other. Countries can learn from each other, there is major good work going on in this business of Government right around the world today, there is absolutely no reason why we can't learn from each other and learn actually very sensible lessons about how people do things differently. Virtually every Country in the world is trying to reform their health care, their school system, their welfare system, their pension system, it would be bizarre if we couldn't learn from them or they couldn't learn from us. But we can also learn from each other Government to succeeding Government. I think if I can be very honest about my own time, if I'd had the benefit of off the record conversations, and I know this is a very difficult thing to do, but I think it is possible to do, with people who have been in the previous Government explaining in a kind of non-ideological way what they were trying to get to ... because very often what happens in politics today is that you take the same idea, you just put a different political dressing on it, and sometimes unfortunately

what that does is it means that people look at the dressing rather than the idea. And I think for example if you took some of the public service reforms that the previous Conservative Government were doing, we very much saw those as an ideological hit and something to be taken out as it were, whereas I think probably in retrospect it would have been better if we'd seen some of what was happening as simply an inevitable part of social change, and we could have obviously amended or changed that in our own way, but we spent too long, two or three years, maybe the first term, learning some of the lessons in relation to that and it wasn't really very sensible. That's why today for example you've got a new Government, and in a sense the British people have again elected a central Government and that's what they decided to do in that extraordinary way they do, they decide they will put in the Conservatives and put the Lib Dems alongside them. This Government particularly, this new Government, will want to focus on getting things done. And there are actually lessons that can be learnt from that, from what went before. So those are my reflections, there's a lot in that to go through. My final, final reflection however is that I certainly learnt, having experienced 18 years of opposition and ten years of Government, that Government is always better (*laughter, applause*).

PR Thank you very much indeed. I remember you saying in 1996 how you hated being leader of the opposition on that. How well prepared were you? You mentioned right at the end you'd like to have had off the record conversations. When you entered Downing Street, when you saw Robin Butler sitting there, how well prepared do you think you were for being Prime Minister? Could other things have happened to prepare you better, because you were focused on winning and you didn't want to measure the curtains in the phrase, you were focused on all that rather than actual governing.

TB Yes, I think definitely we could have been better prepared in terms of policy. Here is the thing about modern politics, which politicians often don't realise until it's too late; politics is actually in the end about policy. And the best long term politics is the best long term policy. But you don't always see that when you are in Government, to begin with particularly. You are still almost locked in campaigning mode, and that is natural, and what you do when you are in opposition is you get a fragment of policy but you don't have the whole picture in the way that you really need to have it. So one of the things I think your Institute could do very, very well is actually provide a continual education about the process of policy making. Because there is no doubt at all by the end of it ... I mean I obviously was a lot better at it than in the beginning, some may disagree with that, but the fact is I certainly felt a lot more confident about that process. But that's what you miss. With the best will in the world you can't have opposition, you know, Labour Party Research Department even at its best and more brilliant, and I think I may see a few survivors or refugees from that amongst the audience. The fact is, there is a whole set of things that you learn and can learn.

PR But in terms of actually learning how to be Prime Minister and all that, because after all you formed a Cabinet and not a single member of that Cabinet had been in the Cabinet before, John Morris outside had but he was an Attorney outside. Did anyone give you advice on actually how to be an effective Prime Minister, I mean you had Roy Jenkins, who was never Prime Minister himself, as a mentor for some of that period, do you wish someone had given you advice on just how to handle Number Ten?

TB Yes I think, yes, it would have been helpful. I mean, how much you listen when you are in the opposition I don't know, because you get so fixated with the business of winning. So I don't want to be unrealistic about it. But the short answer is yes, if you could find the right structure to give people advice about it, then it would be absolutely invaluable. And it would ... one of the things it would prevent us doing, if I am right in saying we are in a less ideological world today, and therefore the premium really is on getting things done, that is my basis thesis, this is about getting things done today. Then actually a lot of that is about experience, it's about having tried and failed, it's about the things that you accumulate once you have been there for a time. So I think we could

do that better. You keep firing questions, I'm going to stand up because otherwise they can't see me.

PR What about when you arrived in Downing Street, what were your first impressions of Whitehall? Because obviously you'd never been a Minister before, you'd never been involved in a big organisation before?

TB My first impression was actually the quality of the people, in fact it was very high, I have to say. My second impression was that after a time what I learnt was that ... because I've been brought up in the Labour Party with the great theory that the Civil Service was a Tory plot. I mean, a couple of years in I was kind of wishing it was (*laughter*) but I discovered that what it really was, it was about ... the problem with the Civil Service is very simple, it can tend to inertia. So it's not a plot for or against anything. The reason why 'Yes Minister' is such a brilliant program is that it can be just a plot to maintain the status quo. But I think that the third thing I came in time to realise was how difficult Government is, and I think this is one of the things people don't understand. Government is really difficult. Now I've got some experience of the outside world and the private sector and so on, and even watching people as I did in during the global economic crisis from the financial and banking side, Government is really hard. This is the thing, people don't realise, it's really difficult. So I think that what Whitehall needs to do now, and we began this process and it is happening, but it needs a different skill set because it's got fabulous people, very good committed people, but it does need I think this greater interaction with the private sector in this broadening of the skill set.

PR In terms of your learning, famously you said in the middle of the first term, you had scars on your back from trying to get change within Government. And also privately you said really a lot of the first term had been wasted. I remember you saying that, and then in fact that the second term was your first term and the third term, which you won, was really your second term. So the education process in terms of Government, it took you quite a long time to shift from campaigning mode to governing mode.

TB Yes, I don't think that was ... basically we did that after a time pretty quickly actually. That was maybe a first nine months' problem. The basic problem was some of these issues that you are grappling with, like how to reform the National Health Service, I mean they are hard. So one of the things that happened was that we were learning, so at first we really did it through; we are going to set a series of targets, and then we are going basically say to the front line of the NHS 'right you get on and deliver that'. The trouble is, I came to the conclusion about two years in we needed systemic change because actually just flogging that system wasn't going to work. Now that took quite a lot of iteration and reiteration. One of the things I think however I benefited from enormously, and certainly in the second term, was outside policy advice from people who were practitioners, non-academics actually but who were practitioners. So I thought nothing of getting four people who were running health management organisations in the USA to come in and tell me how they found their issues to do with things like procurement, and managing the balance between primary and secondary [unclear 30:27] care, and I think we don't do nearly enough of that either. You take something like procurement in Government today, procurement is a private sector ... everyone has to do it. But how many organisations in the public sector do their procurement in the way that a private sector organisation would do it? Now we are beginning, to be fair, it's happening, but it needs to happen a lot faster.

PR You also said that you didn't really take on the reform of Whitehall until your re-election in 2001, I mean that's when a delivery unit was set up under Michael Barber, various other units were set up. Why did it take you that amount of time? Also there were suggestions that Jonathan Powell, your Chief of Staff, had floated the idea of setting up an explicate Prime Minister's office, you rejected that but set up these units, so what led you to do that in 2001?

- TB My frustration that we weren't getting the policy quite right, and we weren't following through in terms of performance management. So what Michael did really was construct the delivery unit that took about ten key priorities in Government and got real time data about how they were being implemented and so on, as a result of that when you did the analysis and the stock takes, we would often find here are the policy problems. It was actually tremendously useful device for making policies well because what would happen constantly is that when you were going through for example the asylum system, you started to realise where the blockages were and those were policy blockages, and then you had to make policy change. So it took, you know, this was an innovation that we had been looking at for a year before the election, but it was pretty fiercely contested, and even today is quite controversial. Indeed, I don't know whether this efficiency and reform thing is the same thing by another name, but this is a non-ideological thing this delivery idea, it's absolutely got to happen. And the thing for the Prime Minister is this, that you can't ... we decided not to set up a Prime Minister's office but we did strengthen the centre enormously. But I promise you, really today you cannot get things done unless you've got a strong centre. If you are not driving things from the centre, forget it, it's not going to happen, it's just not going to happen. I used to say the whole time when I was in Downing Street that my ambition was to get the point when I am sitting round the table with the Minister and my policy people, the departmental people and I'm having to say 'oh my goodness, that is too radical, we can't do that' ...
- PR ... did you ever get to that stage?
- TB Towards the end, once or twice.
- PR What areas?
- TB Actually some of the welfare ideas and one or two of the health things, but having said that once I'd thought about it I was quite up for it anyway. But again, if you take welfare today I think that it will benefit from an enormous debate about what we are really trying to achieve with the welfare system and what we are trying to do and how we are trying to re-balance our spending, all of this is entirely sensible stuff, and I think if my guys are smart in the Labour opposition, then we will engage with this as an exercise that is not just a partisan exercise, but the fact is every single major developed Country around the world today is looking at the systems and how they change them.
- PR One feature of Whitehall, going back a long time, is a very strong departmental structure. You altered the boundaries a bit, you created Departments, you merged them, you demerged the, partly to do with the personalities of some of the people involved on that, familiar long lost heroes, or otherwise, but do you ever feel that you ever [unclear 34:30] in the sense of linking Departments and getting a joined up Government?
- TB I became slightly sceptical at the end except in very specific circumstances, and we did a re-organisation of the Justice Department and so on, which I think was the right thing to do because the problem with the Lord Chancellor's job was he was sitting in the speaker's chair, he was appointing the judges, but actually he had a Department to run, which was the Court Administration, which is enormously important to people, and he wasn't with the time to focus on it, so some departmental re-organisation is important. I became slightly sceptical about how much it delivers for you in the end. I think this cross Government working, joined up Government, what I came to the conclusion in the end about that was it's a little bit of the holy grail, people chase after it for a long time, getting not very far. I think your best joined up Government works from when you have a clear conceptual analysis of the problem that you are trying to solve. And then frankly it's not the bureaucratic structure that matters so much, it's to have the key people around the table with an agreed idea of what they are trying to achieve and why. So if you take one area which, again only at the very end did we start to really get to grips with, which was public health and particularly the role for example of sport and individual responsibility in health care, I became mildly obsessive about this towards the end. Because what would happen is, for the whole issue to

do with sport and lifestyle and all of these things, the system tended to treat it as, right, the end of a busy day, let's talk a bit about sport then. Which is a slightly sad thing to be talking about today maybe (*laughter*) but the fact is that when we started to get traction in this was when we started to understand that this whole issue to do with public health had to become part of the main stream of your health care debate. Now agreeing that and agreeing what you were trying to achieve around that conceptually was more important than whether the Health Department had another bit added to it, or something or other, you know what I mean? So in the end I think joined up Government is about an idea that you have, social exclusion is a classic example. You could have a social exclusion department that necessarily deals with social exclusion. What might deal with it is having an idea about what you want to achieve and then bringing the people around in agreement to achieve it.

PR You talk about a strong centre, but your Government like all Governments, the coalition at present, comes in and say we are going to devolve more power to Local Authorities, and it never really works out. Why doesn't it? There is a conflict between you wanting to drive and allowing people lots of choice locally.

TB That is a conflict (*laughter*). You know because you've basically got the right idea and you want to get it done. I think we had a huge devolution of power obviously, I mean devolution itself, I am fan and remain a fan of elected Mayors and all of that, and I think there could be a lot more driving down to the local level, but I think at the very least ... let me put it this way, you want from the centre to provide the instruments for radical change that you believe in for those at the locality, if they want to take them. So again I don't think you would have got the health care or education changes, certainly not the education changes if you say we will just leave it to the Local Authorities. But I think if you create the frameworks and instruments in the hands of people at a local level, then at least ... and you have then proper systems of accountability, you've got a chance of then getting a healthy debate about whether they should be used or not.

PR You presented that list of ten points, my impression from it was it was very much what your conclusion, both since 2007 but also this is the final two years of your premiership, this was your ideal based on that, how do incoming Prime Ministers avoid being in a position where you work out the right system only after eight years in office? (*Laughter*)

TB Well yes, I think we got there a little bit quicker, in some things at least. Well it comes back to what we were first talking about. That is where you can be prepared I think, better. But also you can ... we will get a lot further, and I think maybe we are going in this way. In a way I regard my ... I mean my Government was the first 21st Century Government, but it was also a Government which I think started to lay out what is a different type of politics today. And this is why I say getting things done, when we came up with that phrase 'what counts is what works', what people took that to mean is that you were chucking overboard all principles, it's not, it's that you can be very ideological about your values and about your ends, but actually the means of doing things ... look around the world today, left and right, Governments are trying to do the same types of things. They are breaking down demarcations in the employment of people in the public sector, they are opening up centres of competition, they are creating a greater power in the hands of the users of the servers, they are basically doing, quite late on, what the private sector has been doing for the last 40 or 50 years, that's what is going on in the public sectors around the world. So it would be surprising if it weren't happening here.

PR Well you have had three years when you have been doing a lot of work on governance, you mentioned it, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, what you are doing with the Palestinians, what lessons have you learnt from them which you could have applied when you were a Prime Minister here?

TB Well they've got the great benefit that they don't have an existing system they are trying to change, I mean they very often had no system, so it's a different type of problem. I'm not sure actually, but what I am sure of, for example the key to getting a Palestinian State is to build the State from the

bottom upwards. Now there is a negotiation that has to happen too. But this thing to do with capacity today, just to give you a little example from what my people are doing in Sierra Leone, we had the money to deliver the health care package, what we didn't have was capacity within the Government to decide that maternal mortality was going to be their priority, to organise the Health Department around delivering it, to put the people in place to get the thing done and then get the money out on the front line and delivered. You could actually measure today the number of lives being saved. So this is ... the Government today, this whole issue to do with governance, Government, the efficiency of Government, what Government is for, how it can be better, I think it's at the epicentre of politics.

PR Now you have described a structure and ideal, but Prime Ministers don't operate in that, they operate with hundreds of problems with each other all the time. How would you advise a new Prime Minister to spend their time, what today should they spend more time on and what should they spend less time on?

TB Scheduling. One of the things you really don't understand until you become Prime Minister is just the importance of managing your time. When I first came in I made a big change which I really believe future Prime Ministers should be grateful for, which is changing Prime Minister's questions from twice a week to once a week. And I know it sounds a small thing, but I noticed when I was leader of the opposition ... when you are leader of the opposition you only have to ask the damn question, you don't have to answer them (*laughter*) but basically it was 3.15 on Tuesday and 3.15 on Thursday, you would be obsessed by that all day. You might do other things, but your mind wouldn't be on them. Your mind would be on that hideous joust that you were about to engage in at 3.15. When you do it, then afterwards there are at least a couple of hours when you are still thinking 'God did I really say ... how could I have done something so stupid'. So I changed it then to one session of half an hour, instead of two of 15 minutes. That saved a day. Then when Robin Cook's reforms moved to 12 O'clock mid-day, basically by 2 O'clock my mind was free again. And I tell you it was an enormous benefit. So a day and a half freed up. But scheduling is really, really important. When I came into Downing Street I was actually very lucky because I had very strong gate keepers, who were brilliant at it, but official dinners ... what was all that about? (*laughter*) I mean, who enjoys an official dinner? Who? I'm hoping to find out one day whoever invented the official dinner! (*laughter*) There is just no point in them at all! No, sometimes you've got to do it but actually the fact is if you are not careful, you are spending a long time, late evening, etc, it's not a healthy thing to do and the Prime Minister's life today is lived at such a pace, and you've got all these people you have to see and people travel today, so they come and see you, you've got to see them. So scheduling, I am absolutely passionate about, it is one of the single most important things for any decision maker in modern politics.

PR What have you spent more time on, those happy hours when you weren't at official dinners?

TB On detail policy. And that's actually what we did. We did an analysis for one of the people we worked with, in my charitable organisation, and we found that only 5% of this decision maker's time was spent on what their declared priorities were. That's obviously not going to lead to a very good result is it? So I would have spent and I did actually probably spend more time on detailed policy than most, but that is so important to do this, and you've got to have ruthless people in charge of your scheduling. Scheduling ... as I said, talking about scheduling is like your diary secretary, this is absolutely critical, it's so important. Because also the other thing about politicians is you've got to say yes to people. Some MP comes up to me, I'm wandering down a corridor in the House of Commons and he says 'I'd love to see you' and 'I really should come and see you because I've got a great idea on such and such', I've got to say yes! I can't say 'what? Are you kidding me?' (*laughter*) You've got to say yes, of course. And I used to have this thing where my diary people knew there were a group of people who could not get in to see me, and it didn't matter whether I told them I wanted to see them, it didn't matter whether I agreed with them, it was monstrous, my staff were keeping them out, they weren't to come in because as soon as they came in it was an

hour wasted of your time. So you've got to keep, that is a really, really ... these things sound trivial but they are absolutely central to getting the job done.

PR Two other ones from me, one is you mentioned people, but like all Prime Ministers you faced lots of reshuffles, Ministers didn't say in posts, some stayed in posts for some time, one can think of some who stayed in the post for a long time, others didn't. Isn't there a temptation to move people around too often, and you would actually have better results in lots of cases if you left people in place longer?

TB Yes, like David (*laughter*). Yes and no. Yes sometimes, but here's the thing, it's a bit like the football coach who splashes out £10m on a player and the scouts told him he is brilliant, he has seen the video and thinks that is fantastic, and then you put him in a team and you think 'God, we are going to get relegated unless we sell this person'. So truthfully I think that's not ... it can be a problem and we did probably too often change, but there were usually reasons for it.

PR What about the Cabinet itself, because you came in, by all reports Cabinet meetings were quite short, but they developed more of a character later on. Does the Cabinet really have any role any longer? Is it a sounding board, or more than that?

TB No, it's got a huge role as ultimate decision maker. What it cannot do, and this is the mistake people make, is it can't be the place where you do an in depth discussion of policy and have a very fraught political discussion, without preparation. In other words ... supposing you were about to say, right we are about to reform all pensions, you sit down as Prime Minister and say 'I'd like to open up a new topic for us today, I'm going to reform the pension system, I think that's quite a good idea and here is basically what we have in mind', and you haven't prepared these guys, no one has done any work with them to see how it is, there has not been a small group of Ministers hammering out the details and the politics of it, it can't work like that, and to be absolutely frank I do not believe it has ever worked like that. I know there's a lot about 'sofa' Governments and all the rest of it, and it's true, there was a sofa in the room on which I sat, but it really wasn't a furniture point (*laughter*). The fact is you will inevitably have on key questions ... I mean there is Tessa sitting there right, when she first came to me with the Olympic idea and persuaded me to do it, I couldn't have taken that straight into the Cabinet and said 'okay, Tessa's had a great idea, we should bid for the Olympics, and if we win it will be several billion pounds' and everyone said oh right, I mean, they are all looking at their watches, it doesn't work. So you had to prepare the ground, you had to work out how you were going to get people on side and so on and so forth. Now the Cabinet is the ultimate decision maker, incidentally. It's not to deny its role as the decision maker, it's simply not to confuse that with the notion that a whole lot of guys sitting around a table are going to simply ... you know, you can prolong discussion for ages. I used to have this debate with Roy Jenkins who used to tell me that in the old days of the Labour Government occasionally a Cabinet would go on a day and a half or two days. And Harold Wilson would have a show of hands. Imagine doing that nowadays. By the time you hit the lunchtime bulletins the Government would be virtually on its knees and ... if it went on overnight, can you imagine, the coalition today saying 'we are going to have a day and a half of Cabinet meetings, there will be a show of hands on various policies' ... I mean, it would be good for us.

PR It's three years on now, what were the best bits of being Prime Minister?

TB The best bits were when you got things done. Like the Good Friday Agreement, or something like that. The best bits were getting things done, definitely.

PR We will now open it up. This is very much for those attending. It's not for my about to be former colleagues in the media, there are lot of questions we could raise. On the subject of tonight, there are lots of questions we could ask, we would ask when the [unclear 51:00] are going to get together again and issues like that, but we want to stick on the subject. Now if you put your hand

up and wait for the mike, and also say who you are as well. So I have some questions, we're going to group them into threes. So restrained, so restrained, I've got plenty of questions if there is no one. Right at the back, Bill **Duffy**.

Q: **Bill Duffy, one of the veterans** - Can I just make a comment and ask you a question, the comment is that as one of those involved, I completely agree with the assessment about what gets delivery in Government, and at that time it was as much as anything not only the skill of Michael's people, but the knowledge that you felt as passionately about it as you did in the selection of a very small number of subjects. My question though is; you were doing that, in some respects we were doing that, in what now seems like a time of plenty. It is tough, as you say it is, and difficult. Would you like to say something about whether the same techniques would be the right techniques in the middle of a fiscal crisis over the next few years?

PR Let's take another couple, that's a very interesting one to pursue. Second question.

Q: **Hi, Adam Sharples, Department for Work and Pensions** – I wanted to ask you about targets. Fairly or unfairly new Labour was associated with using targets as a prime driver of delivery and I just wondered what your reflections were looking back on that, as the new Government has **[unclear 52:48]** Public Service Agreements for example, on what role you think targets ought to play?

PR Right, why don't we take these two together.

TB The answer Bill is even more so in a time of difficulty and challenge and austerity, it is precisely when you've got to drive value through Government. The one thing that is absolutely obvious is that in today's circumstances there will have to be major reform of Government itself, that's obvious. And the whole purpose should be to accelerate the pace of change. That's what a company does when it faces a crisis, that's what we should do. I think one of the hard things, actually, curiously, was doing this in circumstances where people would say to me and particularly politically Back Benchers 'why are we doing all this, upsetting all these people, take it easy', and so I think even more so is my answer to that. And on targets Adam, you don't mind me saying this do you? This is Adam you see, Adam Sharples, Senior Civil Servant now. You mentioned the band Ugly Rumours. He was the lead guitarist.

PR I know, I know (*laughter*).

TB Extraordinary thing. Anyway, there you are. I don't know about you but it would not be a good idea for me to get back up on stage and start singing. On targets, I think that the ... yes I know, you've got something to scribble about now, sorry about that Adam, sorry, embarrass you (*laughter*). It was very clean living, as I like to tell you, even in those days. No, the targets ... look, I think we should just de-mystify the targets business, we at a certain point definitely had too many, right, and some of them conflicted, which is just silly to have that. However, I can't think of any organisation that is going to spend billions of pounds on something and not say we want some output. So I think we've just got to de-mystify that. We are talking about things we would learn, you know, I think that's one thing. If I were them I'd be really careful of that. Not in the sense that you shouldn't make the targets and everything sensible, but some of the change we got was by having a target, and as I say I can't think of a private sector organisation that wouldn't have a target if they are spending a very large sum of money supposedly to achieve an outcome. That they wouldn't at least say 'we expect this outcome to be achieved'. So I just think we should be sensible about that, and we did on occasions take it too far I think, but basically it would be a mistake to get rid of them all together I think.

PR Right, gentleman there?

Q: **My name is Richard [unclear 55:51 Hefon?] and I teach at the Open University** – you said that you liked most about being Prime Minister getting things done, and I suppose the things you liked least was going to official dinners, but I ask you if you could say what it is about being Prime Minister you thought you were most best at, and what you weren't so good at.

PR Interesting one, is there another one? Yes.

TB Take another one quickly! (Laughter)

Q: **[unclear 56:15] one time Treasury, then DEFRA, now Institute for Government** – I would ask a question about what your advice to a new Government would be about handling the media. One of your farewell tour speeches was about the feral beast and the effect it had, so I wondered what you might reflect on how you handled the media, and how future Governments should prevent the media [unclear 56:37] Government policy?

TB Free press is a very important part of the democracy (laughter). I think what I was ... wait a second, I think I'll leave there ... no I think that what I was best at doing actually was getting out of traditional policy boxes. The skill my political life had not equipped me for sufficiently was this basic skill of project management which I had to learn on the job, and I found that tough, and I also found, although I tried to fight against this, it's very, very hard in the life of a Prime Minister today when crisis comes at you, to be able to segment your mind so that a crisis is going on but you are still carrying on with the basic things. I remember when we had the foot and mouth disease thing, and it was just simply the most ghastly thing. If you remember, they were burning animals right next to Heathrow as the tourists were landing and the whole thing was ... it's just one of these ghastly nightmares. And it's not what you come into politics to deal with, but you have to deal with it. Six months of my life was spent dealing with foot and mouth disease, and by the end of it I could tell you everything there was to know about how the disease happened, how it spread, what the different types of cattle were, etc. What was really difficult, and I'm not sure I was always as good as this as I should have been, was then absolutely segmenting away, blocking away some hours each day to make sure that I wasn't chasing after the latest bit of information about this rather than just having to close your mind off in order to settle down and make sure your health reform was on track, your criminal justice stuff was moving forward. But I think crisis management is a topic all on its own today, which is a very, very difficult thing but an immense part of the Prime Minister's job. On the media, it is I think ... apart from the obvious decision making like war and peace and so on, which is obviously the toughest part, dealing with the media is the most difficult part I think. Because you are trying to have a conversation with people as Prime Minister and you are trying in a way ... you are trying to persuade them obviously but you are also trying to engage them in a conversation. It's a thing that most people don't understand, but actually most politicians basically would prefer to do the right thing, and this is not commonly understood, they come in quite deliberately to go and make as big a mess of things as they possibly can. And you are trying to have a conversation with people about policy and difficult policy choices, and the way the media works today is, as I said in the speech, leaving aside all the feral beast comments, but it is by impact, it is by essentially getting something that makes people go 'wow, my God is that what's happening', so that's the way it works. And in 24 hour a day, seven day a week media it's very hard. You are constantly that wretched breaking news, always breaking something. And so it's a very difficult part of it, and the only way of dealing with it is to do two things, first of all you have to have a professional media operation. It is as I said earlier a complete delusion to think you can do without it. And secondly I'm afraid in the end as Prime Minister particularly, and I did actually sort of attain this in the end I think, you've got to also rise above it a bit, because here's the thing that you don't understand a lot of the time when you are Prime Minister, is that you are involved in this complete immersion in stuff that's coming at you all the time, and there are times you wake up and you do not want to see the newspaper, not even the headline, not even anything to do with them. And you are thinking it's all terribly difficult and terribly important, and that's one of the great antidotes of actually going outside and meeting people, is you realise that for most people they

don't think about politics a great deal. So what seems to you absolutely traumatic is to them quite irrelevant actually. I sometimes forget this now, and I will see somebody who has been in the news for something terrible, but I've forgotten it, I'm looking like a punter nowadays, so I've forgotten about it. So I say 'how are you?' and they go 'how am I?' (*laughter*), 'do you know what I've been through?', it comes in and goes out, so you realise that and the other thing you realise about the public is they do actually think it's a difficult job in the end, and they are quite glad they're not doing it most of the time. Which is no to say that they won't be ferocious in their criticism, but actually the British people are more decent than ... often you can sit there thinking, reading all this stuff coming at you, so I think you need the professional operation, you need to give yourself a little bit of psychological distance, otherwise you go nuts with it.

PR Tony Blair, thank you very much indeed, for your frankness, and rising a little bit to the feral beast. David [unclear 01:02:37] is now going to say a few words, thank you very much for answering the questions, and a journey will be appearing in September I think.

TB I hope so!

LS I must say I had very high hopes of this meeting, and they have very much been fulfilled. I think a lot of the issues that Tony you have raised are ones which are very central to the kind of thinking of the Institute of Government. We believe also that the effectiveness of Government is now a key issue, that introducing people in opposition to the policy making process, and indeed to running Government is the absolute key issue, broadening the skill set of Civil Servants, strengthening the centre, and we share as you probably know the scepticism about re-structuring Departments, where we have just produced a very I think good report. So thank you very much for coming here and speaking so openly and frankly about the issues of making Government work more effectively. One of the things that has always struck me in Government was the corporate memory in Government is very bad, so lessons have to constantly be re-learnt, which you would have thought the system could actually come and learn. My solution to a better Government was to say whenever a Government Department produced a white paper, there should be an appendix which gave the previous white paper, and what had actually happened there from it. But that's far too radical. So I think this meeting has been an extremely good one, I think we have made a small step forward in actually improving corporate memory of Government, and Tony can I thank you very much indeed for coming here this evening and talking so frankly, thank you very much (*applause*).

END.

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