



AFTER A DECADE, BLAIR HANDS BRITISH PREMIERSHIP TO BROWN

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair stepped down Wednesday and his former economic minister Gordon Brown assumed the nation's highest elected office in an election-less transition.

Because Blair handed over the premiership in a non-election year, Brown did not need to win a vote from the British people. Instead, he secured support last month from his fellow Labour members -- the liberal party currently in control of Parliament -- ensuring they would install him in the role.

"I will lead a new government with new priorities," Brown said, reported the New York Times. "I formally accept the nomination, the responsibility it brings, and the opportunity to serve the people of Britain."

Blair, who was serving his third term since entering office in 1997, announced his decision to leave his post last September. The decision dates back to an alleged dinner meeting between Blair and Brown in 1994, the Financial Times reported, where the two possible political foes within the Labour Party agreed the more popular Blair would run for office first, serve into his second term, and then hand over power to Brown.

The legacy of the Iraq war

As Brown moves into the prime minister's residence at 10 Downing Street, he inherits some domestic and international problems left over from Blair's 10 years in office.

Blair's unpopular support of the U.S. decision to invade Iraq and his deployment of thousands of troops to the war-torn region turned much of British public against him.

Brown has thus far failed to outline a clear policy on Iraq, largely dodging questions about the continued British role in the region -- leaving open how he may tackle an issue experts say could make or break his political future.

The incoming prime minister has acknowledged that Blair consulted faulty intelligence before entering the war, but has not outlined a plan for withdrawing the more than 5,000 British troops.

He has, however, expressed a willingness to limit the prime minister's power in deciding military policy.

"I have already said Parliament should have a more formal role in issues of war and peace," Brown told the New York Times. "But I think we can go further and learn from what's happened over the last few years."

Brown has not said to what degree he would continue Blair's friendship with President Bush, stating only that the relationship between the British prime minister and the American president is important.

Who is Gordon Brown?

Although Brown served as chancellor of the exchequer -- the office overseeing Britain's economy -- throughout Blair's tenure, he remains somewhat of a mystery to the public.

"The next prime minister is, by and large, a blank sheet of paper," a recent Sunday Times of London editorial said.

The son of a Scottish minister, Brown has served in politics for the better part of his life. Elected to Parliament in 1983, he represented the Labour Party on issues of trade and industry before taking a position at the Treasury.

He is heralded for stabilizing the British economy despite its recent downturn. Under Brown, unemployment rates dropped to record lows, inflation was kept at bay, and the economy grew proportionately faster than the rest of the European Union, making his decision to keep the British pound instead of switching to the euro currency seem particularly shrewd.

"I think he is seen as a somewhat more solid ... clergyman's son, giving it to you straight," Timothy Garton Ash, professor of modern history at Oxford University, told the New York Times. "He's not regarded as a prince of spin or a liar."

The leader of the rival Conservative Party David Cameron, however, has frequently criticized the unorthodox transition as a violation of electoral protocol and said Brown can't provide the change Britain needs.

Issues at home

At first, it was unclear if the Labour Party would embrace Brown as Blair's replacement, but the party appears to have rallied around national issues.

"The mood within the party is far more upbeat than many people had predicted," Liam Byrne, the immigration minister, told the Financial Times. "There will be a real opportunity for Gordon to put the Labour Party and government back on a very strong political footing."

For his domestic agenda, Brown is likely to use the Labour Party's backing to better the National Health Service, looking to improve long-term care and balance the budget of the perennially criticized government-run health program.

Brown is additionally expected to seek reforms in Britain's retirement pension program and propose a new cross-town subway project in London. He also has made clear he opposes a Scottish move toward independence, despite hailing from the island's northern region.

Brown also will have to start looking toward the next election in 2010. He will likely have to invigorate the economy and mend the health care system to avoid surrendering power to the Conservatives.

"What we are about to see is the start of a long and vigorous campaign towards the next election," Byrne said.

-- *Compiled by Brian Mason for NewsHour Extra*

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