In 1983, at a post-election rally, Dennis Skinner, a firebrand, gave a welcome (of sorts) to his new - and far more centrist - colleague. Anthony Charles Lynton Blair "is supposed to be a Labour Member of Parliament," Skinner proclaimed. But "up to now" his political experience includes: "Durham Choir School; Fettes College, Edinburgh - the Eton of Scotland, I'm told, not that I'd know; St. John's College, Oxford, and the Bar - and that's not the one you buy a pint in."

A university, not a union, man, Tony Blair was a founder of the "New" Labour Party. Abhorring class conflict and locked in a relationship of "mutual incomprehension" with Britain's big unions, he supported reforms in taxation, business regulation, health care, education and crime "as much geared by the aspirations of the up-and-coming as to the anxieties of the down-and-out." Unlike many liberals, Blair supported policies that promoted efficiency as well as social justice. He deems Bill Clinton his soul mate.


In "A Journey," Blair provides a detailed account of his years in office and a primer on the nature and uses of political power. Just in time, he hopes, to help the center left in Britain and the United States escape its perennial plight "of short bursts of power in an otherwise steady line of conservative government."

It's long - too long. And repetitious. But Blair does make a compelling case that his progressive program worked. During his tenure, he points out, Britain experienced the longest period of economic growth in more than a century; a decrease in the time between diagnosis and treatment in the government-run health service; a rise in educational performance at all levels; and a reduction in crime.

On Iraq, Blair advances by now familiar, but still hotly contested, arguments. He admits that the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction was wrong but emphasizes that Saddam intended to resume an active program as soon as possible; constituted a grave and growing threat to his own people and others in the region, and should have been removed from power. He blames Al Qaeda and Iran - and not "feckless or reckless" American and British bureaucrats - for the chaos and carnage that followed the toppling of the regime. And he insists that the people of Iraq are far better off than they were in 2004.

Candid and comprehensive, with interesting reflections on the royal family, Vladimir Putin, Sierra Leone, and Northern Ireland, "A Journey" is hobbled by Blair's obsession with Gordon Brown, by turns his colleague, friend, chancellor of the Exchequer, rival and successor. Blair insists that Brown was an enemy of New Labour, had "no" political feelings, "zero" emotional
intelligence and was "in a perpetual state of machination" to replace him. If Brown had built on Blair's reform program "and not wandered into a cul-de-sac" of mixed messages, muddled compromises and indecision, he adds, defensively, Labour would have been "much better placed for the economic crisis."

In politics, Blair acknowledges, there are no "dignified exits" or "orderly transitions." And resentment is "a bad and distorting emotion." Even if he believes that Brown forced him out of office, Blair should have been less self-serving and more gracious. Or held his tongue. As it is, "A Journey" may not play an entirely positive role in securing Blair's legacy. It certainly won't help if, as he implies, he's contemplating a comeback.

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**A Journey: My Political Life**  
By Tony Blair  
Alfred A. Knopf, $35

**Associate Images:**
Britain's former Prime Minister Tony Blair has a new book, "A Journey," in which he provides a detailed account of his years in office and a primer on the nature and uses of political power. JOHN D. MCHUGH/AP