Transcript

Book Launch: *Heroes or Villains? The Blair Government Reconsidered*

The Strand Group
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Ed Balls: We are here for the launch of *Heroes Or Villains?* by Jon Davis and John Rentoul: Jon Davis, who's a lecturer, a professor here at King's, and director of the Strand Group; and John Rentoul, the chief political commentator for the *Independent*.

It's great to have so many people here – former students, former friends, politicians from the Treasury – from Whitehall and beyond; it's a book which has been – how can I say politely – been long in the gestation, but it is finally here and arrived; and what we're going to do is hear from Jon and John, then we'll have some questions and discussion; then we'll go over the way to where there will be drinks and canapés and food, and also a signing of the book by the two Jo(h)ns.

You can't buy it on Amazon at all at the moment, but, were you to, it would be £25; but here – discounted – cheaper than Amazon, [laughter] at £20; so make sure you get your copy.

I am very pleased to be chairing this event. I only found out I was chairing it last Thursday; I was actually half way up Kilimanjaro, at 15,000 ft, when suddenly there was a 'ping', and it was a very, very brief few seconds of mobile phone coverage, in which I had a text from Jon to say would I chair this event. At that moment, such was the excitement that Little Mix and Danny Dyer dashed onto Instagram, [laughter] but I reflected that in fact it would be great to say yes; but the book only arrived this morning, so I've read some of it over the course of today, but it's going to really repay reading.

It's interesting – I was reading the history of Kilimanjaro, and in the 1840s a big debate occurred about whether there was snow at the summit of this mountain; and there were a couple of sightings… of people who said they'd seen snow at the top of the mountain. But there was the most renowned historian of Kilimanjaro – a guy called William Cooley, with the support of the whole London geographical establishment – who said

there wasn't snow; it was impossible; you couldn't have snow at the equator – and denied this truth for about twenty or thirty years, with general support.

The interesting thing about Mr Cooley was that he actually – even though he was the world expert on the geography of Africa – he'd never actually been to Africa; but he just said it couldn't be the case, and therefore everybody who saw this must be deluded, or foolish, or mistaken. In the end, though, the passage of time, and more and more sightings, established that he was wrong.

Now, the nature of history is that it kind of goes the other way; the more time passes, the harder it is for the historian to hear a contemporaneous account. If we think back, now… a hundred, two hundred years ago, there aren't any contemporaneous accounts; but what you have is the contemporary records of the time – journalism; memoirs – which, to those of us who have been involved in politics and government, are hugely frustrating, because they always feel partial, and *is it the full story*? But what happens – almost the opposite of geography for a period – is, as history starts to be written, people reflect; there's more sources, there's more papers… people actually have time to think and reflect; and that is when you move from journalism, through contemporary analysis, to the first draft of history.

And I think what is really interesting about this book is that this is the book, I think, for the Blair-Brown period, which first decisively moves from memoir and journalism to the first draft of history. What Jon and John have done is they've drawn upon what's been written, what's been reported; documents in the public domain; but also their teaching together, over a number of years, of the *Blair Years* course at King's – also, the history of the Treasury since 1945 – and they've distilled this into a fascinating reflection on many of the controversial issues which historians will continue to debate for years and years to come: the nature of Blair's governing style; the relationship with Gordon Brown; the role of the Treasury; the rights and wrongs of foreign policy. And it's, I think, going to be a real privilege tonight to hear them talk about how they've started to write the first draft of history, and whether they think, so far, they've reached a conclusion; because the thing, I think, reading this book today, is that this is the first edition… but what's going to happen in classes – not just in King's but in universities across Britain, and more widely – people are going to debate, and there's going to be more sourcing and more reflection to come. There will be, in my view, a second, and a third, and a fourth edition of this book over the next twenty or thirty years –

John Rentoul: [to Jon Davis] Are you ready for that? [Laughter]

Ed Balls: – as people start to really deepen their understanding of history. The good thing for these guys is that, unlike Mr William Cooley, they actually travelled to Blair-Brown land, ten, fifteen, twenty years ago, which means that they are supremely qualified to write this. So what we're going to hear tonight is a reflection from Jon Davis, and then from John Rentoul; we are talking about *Heroes Or Villains? The Blair Government Reconsidered*. I do think this is a significant moment: we are starting to hear, today, the first draft of history being written, and being written by two people who are supremely qualified to do so. So first of all could I ask you to welcome Professor Jon Davis.

[Applause]

Jon Davis: Thank you, Ed. Firstly, the thanks – to family, friends; Queen Mary and King's; the Mile End and Strand Group; to students, visiting faculty, and commercial supporters. My colleague and friend, Martin Stolliday, deserves a particular mention. None more deserving of thanks than King's's very own superstar, Ed Balls, fresh from his adventures, who has helped greatly with the book. It really is a privilege and a pleasure to be a part of all of this.

Special thanks must go to Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield (who's just wandered in): godfather of contemporary British history; instrumental in the birth of this book; and, for me, the reason I'm here this evening.

The biggest thanks tonight must go to my co-author, John Rentoul. It has been as smooth and supportive a partnership as one could have imagined.

This is the book of a course – well, several courses, but one in particular: our *Blair Years* class, which I've co-taught with John for eleven years. I first got to know John in the last years of the Blair premiership; we found that we were becoming even more unfashionable than usual, due to our continued admiration for Blair's style of leadership, as public and intellectual support for him deserted in droves. Several factors coalesced to create the course, not least John's wish to – and I quote – become Professor of Blair Studies; and my own desire to do something radical. Creating a history course focused upon a single Prime Minister – one who had only retired a year before – was unprecedented. The first of Alastair Campbell's diaries gave us our backbone, and, if we didn't have still-secret cabinet papers to work with, we would invite those who were in the cabinet meetings to come to the class to be cross-questioned.

Through John's impeccable connections to New Labour, and through Peter Hennessy's and my own to senior civil servants, most of the protagonists of the Blair years generously came to our classes. When Blair himself graced the class – on two occasions now – we knew our work was kind of getting somewhere. We immediately found we had a huge amount of new material, much of it contrary to the received wisdom; and Oxford University Press kindly agreed to publish the book of the course.

That was in 2010. [Laughter] But we never missed the deadline. How has it, therefore, taken nearly ten years to be published? The answer is that we all agreed that the Chilcot inquiry needed to be published first. When it finally was, in July 2016, we delivered our first draft three months later. So what are our key findings from all this research? First, that the so-called sofa government of Blair is highly overdone. It extrapolated a more relaxed personality of a new age – remember that, growing up, Blair wanted to be Mick Jagger – and built a concept that bad decisions flowed from this informality. Every Prime Minister acts, at times, more individually, and at others more collectively; Blair would always be at the more prime-ministerial end of that spectrum. But then, he wasn't forced to work through Cabinet in ways that many of his predecessors had been.

He won three consecutive elections, with the two biggest majorities since the second world war; bigger than Attlee or Thatcher in their pomp. The Conservative Party were destroyed as an effective opposition – until David Cameron emerged, but only after Blair had been Prime Minister for eight years. The economy boomed throughout his decade in Downing Street, meaning no crises and plenty of money to go round. And, after eighteen years out of power, the Cabinet as a whole was significantly inexperienced, and the left wing quiet; as the former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Wilson of Dinton, said: "All the things you look to for checks and balances were in a quiet state."

The only real opposition to Blair as a dominating Prime Minister was his Chancellor, like no other. Gordon Brown – with able help [to Ed Balls] from the man next to me – turned the Treasury into a powerhouse the like of which had never been seen before, nor since; and one that could stand up to Number 10. We examine the new concept that this wasn't just a recipe for conflict, but that it actually contributed to a creative tension that led to strong and effective policy-making.

Another controversy of the Blair years was the charge of politicisation: something we reject. Hand in hand with this criticism was that of the marked upturn in both numbers and quality of unelected political appointees. There were undoubted problems with some of these special advisers, but, as a Parliamentary select committee pointed out at the time, it was an issue that "usually generates more political heat than useful light".

Our findings are that this was, in some ways, a tricky situation, but one that soon calmed down to the point where their position is pretty much, now, an accepted, integral, and natural part of our governing system.

Perhaps the most famous – and infamous – special adviser of all time continues to be the source of great fascination: Alastair Campbell. The embodiment of another nebulous but potent criticism – 'spin' – he really was quite something. And while there have been many studies of his effect on government, we offer a new complexity, explaining how his appointment was very much a reaction to the vilification of Neil Kinnock in 1992 – the need to fight fire with fire – but also to how the changing nature of communications – from twenty-four-hour rolling news to mobile phones and the internet – changed the communications role for ever, simply by turbo-charging comms; by speeding them up: government is nothing if it isn't about communication.

And while there was, undoubtedly, real unhappiness at the very top of government in the first years, between the senior civil service officials and New Labour, this largely did not last – something explained, by the most senior civil servants we spoke to, as mostly a generational shift. In fact, most mandarins that came to our class – not all – have spoken warmly of the Blair years, which is a clear difference to the heretofore widely accepted picture.

Finally, we look at foreign policy, and Iraq in particular: something Blair will for ever be indelibly linked to. I've often described myself as fifty-one per cent against the Iraq invasion; I can understand the reasons for it and the reasons against it. We do analyse that a highly complex issue was often distilled to something quite simple; and that there is always a terrible cost to intervening in foreign policy, just as there is a terrible cost to not intervening. We point out the fact that, arguably, the biggest official inquiry into government ever conducted – Chilcot – did not conclude that the war was illegal, nor that Blair lied.

Heroes or villains? That's the ongoing question that we try to rebalance with this book, which brings together the holy trinity of academic impact: research, teaching, and publication. We hope you enjoy it; thank you.

[Applause]

Ed Balls: Thank you Jon; and then to John Rentoul, who – this is not the first book about Tony Blair you've written! The first one was well over twenty years ago.

John Rentoul: Yes; my youngest is eighteen, now, and, as far as she's concerned, I've just been writing the same book about Tony Blair for all her life. [Laughter]

Jon Davis: But this one's rebalanced, though – right?

John Rentoul: This one's so much better because Jon Davis helped me with it.

I'd like to say thank you to everyone that Jon Davis said thank you to, and to Jon himself; it's been an absolute joy to work with him. I was worried that writing a joint book might be a way to destroy a good friendship, but, in tribute to Jon, we've got on extremely well. In fact it's interesting that Jon mentioned Iraq, because there was only one thing that we disagreed about in this book: I thought the invasion was completely justified and right on the information at the time, but my view evolved, and, when we came to read what each other had written, Jon thought I was too critical of Blair on Iraq. It was a matter of emphasis and tone, and we were able to come to a common view without calling each other names, which… if only the whole Iraq debate had been like that in the nation, things might have been better.

So, talking of unexpectedly strong friendships, I'd like to thank Ed Balls for chairing today; for a long time he was, of course, the enemy – ideologically, I mean – we always got on perfectly well personally [laughter]. But for thirteen years in British politics, the only divide that mattered was the divide between the Blairites and the Brownites; and recently it's been remarkable to watch how Blairites and Brownites have come together to fight the common external enemy of the Corbynites [laughter]. But, long before that, Ed and I made our peace – at the Mile End Group, in fact, in 2012: he came to speak about being Shadow Chancellor (which is what he was at the time), and we sat next to each other at dinner afterwards, and he tried to persuade me that there was much less difference between Blairites and Brownites than I thought.

And in fact there's a wonderful story in the book, from Ed, about his earliest days working for Gordon Brown, when – as Gordon Brown was then Shadow Chancellor – Ed Balls wrote an article for Tony Blair, that went into the *Financial Times* under Tony Blair's name. And Brown said: "Why have you written an article for Tony Blair?" And Ed said, "Well, because I thought he's the leader and we all work for him." [Laughter] So Ed's contributions to the book are… there's an awful lot of Ed Balls in this book; which I think is important, because it actually balances up a lot of the story of the Blair government. And his presence here, tonight, of course, is absolutely vital in protecting us against the charge of being the Tony Blair Fan Club.

As Jon said, we've been working on this book for quite a long time; we spent quite a lot of that time pointlessly discussing when would be the best time to publish, because we were trying to judge when there would be an appetite for revisionism about Tony Blair. And every time we thought that the negativity was going to abate, there was more of it; but eventually the turning point came after we stopped looking for it – and it was the EU referendum, in 2016. Which did two things: instantly David Cameron became the biggest villain in contemporary politics, for precisely the same group of liberal-minded graduates who hated Tony Blair; and it gave Blair himself a cause… and he got his voice back, in a sense; people started to listen to him again, because he was the most articulate exponent of a very difficult argument, which is that political leaders should tell the British people that their views on Europe are very interesting but, unfortunately, completely mistaken. [Laughter]

And I'm not saying that the Corbyn Labour Party has come round to Tony Blair; I mean, you've just got to look at the social media response to Angela Rayner on Sunday, when she praised Tony Blair's interview on Andrew Marr. And I've already noticed that every mention of this book on Twitter is guaranteed to trigger "War criminal" and "The Hague" from the Pavlovian tendency.

And I know I've got Jeremy Corbyn's popularity wrong three times: when he stood for the leader; when he stood for the leader again; and when he fought the 2017 election – on the Blairite slogan, actually, of "For the Many, Not the Few" – but the Conservatives won the many votes, and Labour won the few; [laughter] although the gap between them was not as big as Seumas Milne or I expected.

But anyway, I'm like a stopped clock, so I will be right eventually about Corbyn; he's already passed his peak, and I'm hoping that, in the next three years, there'll be more interest in a broader view of Labour and its recent history. And this, I hope, is where King's has so much to offer; I love teaching here – I think the academic rigour holds in check my natural journalistic exuberance – and I think my role in running the *Blair Years* course informs my journalism; and I hope my journalistic connections help to make the course better for the students.

So, if people want to take another look at the recent history of this country, we hope this book will help.

[Applause]

Ed Balls: So, unlike probably a number of people here, I, over the course of the day, have had a chance to read most of the book – not all of it – and I hadn't read it in advance of the publication; so if you don't mind I want to ask you a couple of questions first, and then we'll open it up to others as well.

Let me start on Iraq, because clearly that is such a central, contentious issue; you said you waited years and years for the publication of Chilcot before you published the… before you could finish the book. What is your judgement of Chilcot, as opposed to Tony Blair – how do you think the Chilcot inquiry will be judged by history?

John Rentoul: Well, plainly it was a very, very thorough piece of work… I mean an absolutely huge piece of work; and that's why we wanted to wait until it had come out, because it obviously had access to all papers and documents, including all that secret stuff where Tony Blair writes to George Bush and says "We'll be with you whatever"; but I did think – in the end, I thought Sir John Chilcot himself summarised his own report by saying that Tony Blair had not been straight with the British people, which he said on television a year after publishing this report, and there's nothing in the report that would sustain that finding; so I thought… I thought the way he presented its findings was not very… you could say he'd sexed it up. [Laughter]

Ed Balls: And in the conclusion of that chapter, you talk about non-foreign policy examples – the poll tax, or the ERM – and then you say – and this is at the end of the foreign policy chapter, so this is about Iraq as well – "In every case, as a result of their deep conviction, each Prime Minister became boxed into a course of action from which it became inconceivable to them that they could escape." How do you interpret that sentence in the context of Iraq?

John Rentoul: Well, that's – Iraq was the equivalent, for Tony Blair, of the poll tax for Margaret Thatcher; of Europe for David Cameron… because the easiest thing that David Cameron could have done would have been to – when he didn't get what he wanted in those negotiations – to have said, "Right, that's it, we're leaving, and I'm going to campaign to leave", and he would have… he'd still be Prime Minister now, if he'd done that. And John Major became overly committed – you were there at the time – to the ERM… membership of the ERM; he could have devalued the pound voluntarily before being forced to do so; and so my point was that all politicians… what brings politicians down is their deep convictions, not their dishonesties, or their attempts to please people. It's that politicians actually believe in things.

Ed Balls: You quote a really interesting letter, from John Sawers to... I think it was back to Michael Jay, in which he says, look, we should forget all about this legal stuff, and we should just say this is about regime change –

John Rentoul: Yes.

Ed Balls: – and you speculate as to whether that was John Sawers potentially reflecting Tony Blair's real view as opposed to his public view; but what's the right way to interpret that?

John Rentoul: Well, the reason I quoted it at such length was that it was such an articulate expression of what – you'd have to ask Tony Blair this question – but of what I imagine Tony Blair's private view would have been, which is that getting rid of Saddam Hussein was just a good idea, because you would just be removing a source of trouble in the region.

Ed Balls: Can I ask – Jon, you said a very interesting thing about the difference in the reaction of the official civil service to Tony Blair as Prime Minister, and that there were – there were dissenting views, but there was also a generational change you write about here in the views of what I would call the 'machine' – of the official civil service – to Tony Blair and that style of government. Could you say a bit more about that, because I think people would be really interested in that.

Jon Davis: Well, when in 1997 to about 2000, 2002, the first three, four, five years – for those of you... the students get this all day long, so forgive me – the idea, all based upon 'standing on the shoulders of giants', is the idea of permanent government, of temporary government; and then with the advent of about seventy or so very senior politically appointed special advisers, you've got three tribes of government. And this had been seen in British government before; it had been seen during the first world war, second world war; in the nineteenth century it was quite normal. And then in 1964 Harold Wilson brought a very small amount of high-level, left-wing economists in; but it was really... Mrs Thatcher brought in about forty of them – and then Blair came in with about eighty.

And the point about the eighty was not just the number; it was the power that they actually brought... from people like Alastair Campbell; from people like yourself, Ed; people like Andrew Adonis or David Miliband, Ed Miliband, Anji Hunter; we're talking real power at the centre. And that did cause a problem when it came to the official machine, as it had operated prior to 1997 under John Major. Although even there, there

were special advisers; of course there were – Baroness Hogg, I seem to think, crops up in a lot of people's comparisons. What happened, I think, is that there was an older generation – I don't think it's the only issue, but I think that it is an issue – that there was an older generation who had got used to eighteen years of Conservative rule... and by no means am I saying that that older generation didn't want Labour; that's not what I'm saying. It's more of a style issue, I think – and again, I really don't want to say it's the only thing, but I think it was there.

And what it meant was that Robin Butler retired – it was always planned that he would retire at the end of 1997 – and Richard Wilson came in; and the Treasury – Terry Burns lasted ten months, I think, until he left, as permanent secretary of the Treasury – and so there was just... there was a natural sort of change, here. I mean, we quote in the book Lord Burns talking about how, for him, leaders of any ilk should have a great deal of flexibility to actually shape the machine as they see fit. And what I think's really interesting about Terry Burns is that... for him to say that, actually... it just makes it understood that Gordon Brown came in, he wanted a new set-up, and there's no rules to say that he can't.

Ed Balls: You talk about Blair and Brown as like a coalition which had to come together and find an accommodation – you actually make, in the book, a parallel to what happened after 2010, and the formal coalition – but also, I think, there's a debate in the book about the extent to which there was an ideological difference between Blair and Brown. Was there really a substantive policy difference... was it really like two parties? Compared to the spectrum you see in the current Labour Party, maybe they were much closer together. So explain a bit more this idea of them being like a coalition; what does it – what does it mean?

John Rentoul: Well, it was... that was Andrew Adonis's insight, actually – or, possibly, his joke – that when the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats came into government in a coalition, the civil service commented on how much easier it was to manage them, and how much more polite they were to each other, and respectful, and how they negotiated their differences in a much more grown-up way than the way the New Labour parties had conducted themselves. But I think there were ideological differences; they may have been largely the creation of Gordon Brown's determination to present himself as slightly to the left of Tony Blair, as the obvious successor, in order to win the support of a Parliamentary Labour Party which was well to the left of Tony Blair.

Jon Davis: I think there's an interesting point on that particular issue, and we go into a little bit of detail – it's only a few pages; it felt longer to write – [laughter] on the limitations of markets; and I think that's one of the key moments where there is actually a philosophical difference. And it's not much of a difference, but it's there. And then it's like that 'supertanker' idea, where you just – if you go down that path, after ten, fifteen, twenty years, you'd end up in a very different place; and I think Blair, and then [to Ed Balls] you, and Gordon, really thought about the philosophical impact of that. That's quite late, isn't it – 2003, 2004, when the Choice agenda is really getting underway – and so I think that there's... that we can overdo this; but I think that there is a difference.

Ed Balls: There's an interesting question for you, as historians and reflectors on this period, about the right lesson that you should draw; because what was really interesting, after Tony Blair stopped being Prime Minister, was that, at the time, the opposition drew certain lessons from this period. One of the lessons – by the way, I think they draw the wrong lesson on these two, but I'm interested to know what you think – one lesson they drew was that Tony Blair became a better Prime Minister over time, because he became more radical and confident; and that, therefore, the right thing for them to do was to try and be more radical and confident from the beginning... which, as it happens, Tony Blair didn't do, because he kind of knew he was learning on the job. And the second conclusion that George Osborne and David Cameron drew was that their friendship would make them a better partnership.

And it's interesting... you reflect in the book about that issue as well, because, in the end, on the one issue where they disagreed – we now know, the referendum – George Osborne, in deferential, friendly respect, defers to David Cameron on that issue. So, was Blair a better Prime Minister in 2006-7 than in 1997-98? And was the tension between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown that you write about in the book... did that make the government stronger or weaker?

Jon Davis: [to John Rentoul] First one for you, John.

John Rentoul: What, it's a difficult question so I've got to answer it? [Laughter]

Jon Davis: You're good at this stuff.

John Rentoul: Well, I certainly agreed with Tony Blair in 2005, 2006 that Gordon Brown was a pain, and he was holding him back from doing the right thing for the country; and that, if only Gordon Brown could be got rid of, everything would be fine

and we'd be full steam ahead to a glorious, New Labour future. But you can't argue with what happened after that, which is, as you say, David Cameron and George Osborne drew a lesson from that conduct – absolutely resolved not to repeat what they thought were the mistakes of the Blair-Brown relationship; and yet, could you say that they performed better as a government as a result? I'm a bit sceptical.

Jon Davis: I'm really interested in this Blair-Brown, Osborne-Cameron phenomenon; I'll tell you what I'm really*, really* interested in, is the idea of the Treasury as a constitutional bulwark. And this is something that we speak about in class, but I thought it was really interesting that you [to Ed Balls] – when you wrote about it in your own autobiography, and then Gordon wrote about it as well – that, as you may know, Blair wanted to move Brown to the Foreign Office in 2001 and 2005, and I don't know what the conversation actually was, but there was plenty of planning; and we've had people, I think – did Anji come to our class about this? – talking about how people went to bed, the Blairites went to bed thinking that Brown was going to be moved; and they woke up to recognise that he wasn't moving [laughter]. And the idea was to move him to the Foreign Office – which, in a normal time, for somebody who's got no foreign policy experience… very honourable move, for somebody who wants to be Prime Minister, to widen the view – but there was no chance that this was going to happen, because the Treasury was the power base.

And what's interesting is that, in 2007, Brown asked Ed [Balls] if he would lead a new centre, once Brown became Prime Minister, merging the Cabinet Office and the Treasury with a new Chief Secretary, who would look over both of these big parts of the British centre, and with a Chancellor. And Ed said no. And I think it's really interesting from a – you say, from a constitutional point of view, that you actually don't think that this could work; that it shouldn't work. And so, while it's all entirely true what you say about Cameron and Osborne… maybe they were too close. Maybe they learnt the wrong lessons; maybe you do need – as I said in the preamble – a bit of conflict between the Treasury and Number 10.

The other point – can I just follow up – in '05 to '07, I think that, more and more, it looks to me as if Blair really understood the system; he writes in his own autobiography how you're – as a politician, as a Prime Minister – you are often at your most politically potent when you are at your most inexperienced; and then you become experienced just as you lose all of your political credibility. That '05 to '07 period – where Blair was very disappointed to only get a 66 majority – [laughter] but what he wanted to do was to really impose his legacy; and in all kinds of ways I think that that's a really remarkable period that demands… doesn't demand… would *warrant* further research.

Ed Balls: I think, though, there is no doubt that people went to bed, in 2001 and 2005, thinking Gordon might not be the Chancellor the next day. The same people probably also thought that Tony Blair wanted to join the single currency; [laughter] but the question of what did Tony Blair think, as opposed to those people… did Tony Blair actually – I mean, of course there were people who were telling him to move Gordon Brown, but, in the end, did Tony Blair want to? Because he didn't. He could have done; he had a majority. Maybe, actually, although both of them at times found this very hard to deal with – because they were both strong personalities, and frustrated with each other – but actually, they were better together; because, at key moments, they would listen to each other – actually they trusted each other – and they both were very good at stopping the other doing stupid things… in general. And –

Jon Davis: And they'd always draw back from the brink as well, right?

Ed Balls: But that tension between the Treasury and Number 10 was also creative, and made for better policy. Question mark: did that work more effectively earlier rather than later? Question mark: actually, did George Osborne let the country down by not saying to David Cameron, "I'm the Chancellor, and the referendum's a bad idea"?

Jon Davis: On the referendum, I don't know much more than most on this; it seems to me that history tells us that when a prime minister wants to make a decision – the famous one, I think, is Clement Attlee, the great collectivist, the man of Cabinet – we've always talked, from Lord Hennessy's books, all the way on… the gold standard of how you handle a Cabinet. When it came to nuclear weapons policy, in Cabinet committee, the economic ministers were there; and the economic ministers said, well, it's very interesting, but the country's broke. And he adjourned, and then he just called another Cabinet committee where he conveniently forgot to invite the economics ministers, [laughter] and we became a nuclear nation.

It seems to me that there's something very similar there; that Cameron felt in his guts that he was going down that pathway; he did the deal with William Hague, not with Osborne, so he had, then, heavyweight support in the Cabinet over it; and I think they did it abroad, didn't they? – I think so – on tour. Which meant that, you just bring it back as a *fait accompli*.

Ed Balls: But George Osborne could have stopped him.

One final question from me: you may be writing the second or third edition of this book together, in twenty years' time, with, more sourcing, and more memoir, and more papers…

Jon Davis: It'll be holographic, then, and … [laughter]

Ed Balls: How do you think history will be judging Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and New Labour in twenty years' time, differently from how they currently are being judged?

John Rentoul: Well, it's been so difficult to predict; I mean, we were expecting Tony Blair revisionism to kick in around 2012 or thereabouts, and yet his reputation continued to just go down. So we're probably not the best people to ask. I quoted Robert Tombs, the great historian, in there, and I remember reading his wonderful book; but he, as a historian, just goes for the most negative possible reading of Tony Blair's time in government. And I suspect that that is probably going to colour most people's perceptions. And I think there's probably going to be a large amount of history that regards whatever happens to Brexit as a bad thing, and blames Tony Blair for it.

Jon Davis: I think that it's a really difficult one, and history might not be able to handle this complexity; but if you handle foreign policy in a box over there, and domestic policy there – which you can't do, obviously; but if you did – I mean, on the domestic policy, I, for one, think it was remarkable; and I think, looking back over history, I think it was fantastic to have that kind of ability; those ten years, the majorities, the money… clever, clever people being brought in to really change things; the National Health Service in 2011, with all that time at its highest ever approval ratings… these things don't just happen.

But when it comes to foreign policy, I say fifty-one per cent – I don't believe that Britain invaded Iraq; I believe that we were part of an American-led invasion. I think there's a very big difference. But I make no judgement on that.

Ed Balls: The interesting thing, when you read the book, is – because of all the classes you've taught, for a number of years, and all the on-the-record interviews done in those classes, with such a wide range of people – I think this is the first book which combines sourcing and independent judgement about those years. I'm not saying that I agree with all of it at all – and others will debate it – but I do think it's very unusual because, up to now, we've had lots of individual people's personal view; this does feel like the start of a different, really interesting phase, and I find it fascinating, so I definitely would recommend people buying it and reading it.

Ed Balls: Who would like to ask the first question?

Audience member: Thank you, Ed. I'm going to ask an awkward question, because I can, and because I know you. There's a famous line where Tony Blair said that you made him feel like an abused wife; and it's one that I think is a bit full-on.

Ed Balls: Me?

Audience member: Yes, that you made him feel that way... when you were manoeuvring to get him to agree to step down. And it's a line I always bring up when people call you a Blairite... and I go, "Really?!"

I wanted all of your reflections on that period, where you and others were trying to get Tony Blair to say when he would step down.

Jon Davis: It was clearly a robust time... I'm pleased to know you, Ed, in the post-political era. [Laughter]

Clearly, for all of the reform changes – to change is to choose; to choose is to disappoint – this is a hard time, of hard people coming up and hard-hitting each other; and it doesn't surprise me at all that Blair would talk like that. At the same time – if I recall, *from the same book* – Blair also talks about the great capacity for intellectual understanding, and really driving the whole New Labour idea forwards. So it seems to me that that's the normal warp and woof of politics and government.

Ed Balls: Well, in the leadership election campaign in 2010, on the *Newsnight* hustings, we were all asked to choose who had been our... who we thought was the best Labour Prime Minister in history. And interestingly, of the five candidates, I was the only one who chose Tony Blair; neither David nor Ed [Miliband] made that judgement [laughter]. And I always thought that winning elections was very important; I think it's a habit that Labour, at some point, will have to get back into.

The reality, though – as you'll read in this book – was that the first discussions about transition, which became the smooth and orderly transition, began in 2003; not involving me, but involving Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, John Prescott. And we can debate whether Tony Blair did, or was right to, make promises; and we can debate whether or not Gordon Brown was correct, or should have believed promises. And I

guess the thing… if you read my contribution to this book – I actually… I'm strongly of the view that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were more effective when they worked together; and they would have been more effective if they had worked harder to work more effectively together.

So I was not… I mean, I was there from the beginning, but Tony Blair was the Prime Minister; I wrote his article for the *Financial Times*; but we were working as a team, but part of that team became about managing the transition. And that became – as the book documents – very bumpy and difficult along the way, because Tony Blair changed his mind… and also, changed his mind for complicated reasons, and that was destabilising. Fundamentally, though, this guy… he wasn't *abused*; [laughter] he was the Prime Minister. He was the most powerful man in the country. And I think the reason why somebody like me actually got on well with both of them is because, in the end, weak leaders surround themselves with sycophants, who tell them what they want to hear; but actually, talking about the Osborne-Cameron relationship and the nature of tension, strong leaders – and Tony Blair says this in his biography – want to be surrounded by people who challenge, and disagree… and to their face.

Jon Davis: He got that! [Laughter]

Ed Balls: And, to be fair to Blair and Brown, that is what they both did to themselves, to each other, all the time; and that made them more effective as a partnership. And I think, if you don't have that in government, then you end up making bad decisions. So "abuse" is ridiculous; but did I challenge Tony Blair? Absolutely. There was one particular moment – pre-'97 – where we had a discussion about tax; and he said, "Can we make a commitment to not raise the tax burden?" And I said, well, you can't do that, because the tax burden's likely to go up, and then we'll have broken our promise. And he said to me, "Wash your mouth out, young man!" And I said, that's what John Major will have said to people in the election campaign in 1992, and he ended up paying a very bad price for that; so be careful what you say on tax. I just thought that was me doing my job.

Audience member: Hi. Yesterday, I think it was, marks the one-year anniversary since the attempt by the Russian state to poison Sergei Skripal. I'm just wondering what you feel about the Blair government's treatment of Vladimir Putin, and whether Blair completely misread him, and whether it's had an effect on foreign policy since – particularly in terms of Litvinenko, and the treatment… the response to Litvinenko.

John Rentoul: That's aimed at me, isn't it? A difficult question: I'll have to take that one. I think it's a very good question, because there's no doubt that, in hindsight, Tony Blair made a mistake in treating Vladimir Putin so warmly… because, I remember, he actually went and visited Russia, to speak to Putin, before Putin was even elected as President, or Prime Minister, or whichever it was… which is against all Foreign Office protocol; you don't go and talk to candidates beforehand. But Tony Blair thought that Putin was a moderniser, which may suggest something of the limitations of that kind of simplistic analysis; of dividing people into modernisers and traditionalists. But if it had worked out, we'd now be saying what a genius move that was… to go and get in with a modernising, democratising leader of Russia.

Ed Balls: I remember being at breakfast with Jonathan Powell, in '97 or '98, and talking about the transition from Bill Clinton; and Tony Blair had had a very close relationship with Bill Clinton, and the question was could there be a close relationship with the next president, after the election of George W Bush? And it was absolutely an objective of Number 10, on foreign policy, to not allow a lurch to a bad relationship – because it would move from Democrat to Republican – but instead to try and find a way in which a good relationship could be maintained and strengthened, because that was in the British national interest… and that seems to be absolutely right. So – I'm not going to say that there weren't mistakes made along the way – but actually, Tony Blair's starting intention was to try to bind the 'new Putin' into a dialogue; that strikes me as being absolutely the right thing to do. I think it's later where it becomes more challenging, maybe.

Audience member: So – just with regard to Iraq – would you say that, if Blair had a failing, it was in failing to prepare adequately for the aftermath of action, rather than in taking the action – so that… don't get me wrong – as you know, I'm a Captain in the Royal Navy – I'm entirely content to put warheads on foreheads when required; I just like to know that the consequences of my violence have been properly considered.

Jon Davis: Can I answer that one, John? On this particular point, I think it's partly because we really misread the dysfunctionality of Washington; and it seems to me that, while… it's why I always make the point that we joined an American-led invasion – and I'm sure that we could have done a lot more… but I think we tried; I think that we were being told that things were OK… that things were going to be fine. And while you can always do a damned sight more, of course, and you've got to be absolutely clear – and you're the most meticulous people that I've ever met – I think we were badly let down. I do.

John Rentoul: I'd agree with that. But I do think, and this is where I have changed my view slightly; I did think that that was the problem with Iraq, but actually, once you've been through the whole of the Chilcot report, I think the problem was more fundamental. It wasn't just a failure to plan for what happened afterwards; I think it was… what happened afterwards was never going to be something that you could deal with. I think you were bound to break the country, and it was bound to be impossible to manage the situation after that; and that is a failure of… a deeper failure of planning, if you like; a failure to realise that, actually, it wasn't a good idea, because it was going to cause problems that you couldn't actually handle.

Audience member: Can I ask – Tony Blair shares one thing with David Cameron: they both came to high office without any previous government experience whatsoever; leaving aside Iraq, on which opinions may differ, and I'm sure you could talk about that all night – did Tony Blair make more mistakes because of his lack of experience, or is there no evidence for that?

Jon Davis: Cameron was there on the Exchange Rate Mechanism day… so he'd got a little bit of experience of disaster. But yes.

John Rentoul: Well, he was a special adviser; it was a classic example of the change in British politics, where you get to the top through being a special adviser… so, actually, once you've become – in his case, you become Prime Minister; but he had got some experience at the highest level of politics, which Tony Blair hadn't – he'd only had experience of being an MP, and of being an opposition MP. I think Tony Blair prepared for government with more seriousness than any previous incoming Prime Minister, partly because he was aware of the limitations of his past experience. And I think, although there were things which you can put down to inexperience, I think on the whole he handled that very well; I know he writes in his own memoir that he wasted his first term before he got to grips with the question of how to deliver public service reform, but actually, if you look at it, a huge amount was achieved in that first term – not least peace in Northern Ireland, which was this huge achievement that everybody just takes for granted now.

Ed Balls: I kind of disagree – and, actually, almost disagree with Tony's final conclusion in his memoir; I think politics is really hard. The reason why people find it very hard to shift into politics in mid-life, after a career in business – which we've seen very many times – is because politics is really hard; and Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had a fourteen-year apprenticeship in Parliament… in politics, but also, for ten years, in shadowing governments; so actually they'd had a lot of preparation. But I think they also

knew their limitations; and they were actually very cautious at the beginning, which was wise, because they knew there were things they had to learn which you could only learn from the inside, and there was only so much preparation you could do. And it's really important to learn that simply saying things – which, in opposition, is all you have – doesn't actually turn into action; and that things can have unintended consequences, and take a long time.

And so the reason why New Labour was very cautious, for example, about National Health Service reform in '97 – the reason we had secretaries of state who were there to manage the system – was because I think Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were both very cautious about quick and decisive action which they may not fully understand; I think they were aware of that. Tony Blair says in his memoir, "I'd wasted my early period" that, having been Prime Minister for ten years, I now wish I had been more radical at the start. But that's only a conclusion that he could reach and implement having been Prime Minister for ten years; that wasn't a view he had when he'd never been Prime Minister at all.

And that's why I think David Cameron and George Osborne drew the wrong conclusions, because they read Tony Blair's book, and thought, bloody hell, we'd better be more ambitious early on; they moved far too quickly to their first spending review; they unleashed a whole series of big and small reforms – big reforms in the NHS; small reforms in something like, I don't know, forestry – [laughter] and then spent four years trying to repair the damage. I mean, the NHS reforms were essentially put on hold, after a year and a half, because nobody knew quite what they were, but they certainly weren't working; those were mistakes that Blair and Brown never made. So the reality is that however hard politics is – and however much you learn, in Parliament, from the outside – it's hard being a politician, but even harder being a Prime Minister; and I think Tony Blair was really aware of that in '97 – much more than David Cameron was in 2010.

Audience member: Thanks. I was really intrigued by the idea of the permanent versus temporary governments that you mentioned; and when Blair uses his political capital post-2001 to focus on Iraq, how did that, kind of... the 'beast' of the civil service deal with the fact that the political focus was taken away from the domestic agenda to solely focus on the international stage? The Prime Minister is captivated with Iraq; how did the usual system of permanent government continue?

Jon Davis: Are you writing an essay on this? [Laughter]

Audience member: No; but it might be useful for your class, so say some good stuff!

Ed Balls: [to Jon Davis] Explain the temporary-permanent point first, and then answer the question.

Jon Davis: Yes, well… OK. So. Permanent: the idea of the civil service; people who are recruited on merit; promoted on ability; who are there beyond shifts in government… from Conservative to Labour; they can be there all the time. There's a famous… I don't know how apocryphal it is; I've never been able to actually find it – the idea that Stalin couldn't understand this; that at Yalta there was Churchill, surrounded by civil servants… and then at Potsdam there was Attlee, surrounded by the same civil servants. He couldn't understand that, because obviously, in Russia, you would have executed all of the civil servants. [laughter] And that's the biggest difference – that's the big shift; that these things just continue.

There are particular points that you can point to – certainly in the early Blair years – from around communications officials, where they all left within a year… the top ones from every department. There are issues around it; but basically the show goes on, and you get the civil service continuing: permanent.

Temporary being politicians – and this is the delicious, wonderful area of humour and tension which is where *Yes, Minister* plays off so well – so that you've got… the *temporary* is supposed to be in charge; but the *permanent* should have the real understanding. So when it comes to Iraq… that's a tough question; it's something that I don't think can be answered just very, very simply; obviously, when you come to defence and security, the issues are far more… you find fewer special advisers there. It's much more professionalism, over years – over many, many years.

John Rentoul: The important thing which did happen under Tony Blair was that he set up the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit specifically to manage the process of making sure that the Prime Minister's attention was always on the domestic agenda, regardless of what else was happening in the world. And what was extraordinary, living through those times, was how active Tony Blair was – flying around the world, dealing with the consequences of 9/11, and so on – and yet he did carve out the time just to make sure that the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit was monitoring the domestic agenda on his behalf. And he set up that entirely new mechanism.

Ed Balls: I'm not sure if I quite buy this distinction between permanent and temporary; I mean, you have an official civil service, and then you have elected ministers… and the elected ministers are always there; and that is, in the end, where the legitimacy of the

government comes from. But my sense is that – other people in here are better able to answer this question; but I would say – in the nine months before the beginning of the conflict in Iraq, up to the first week... that the vast majority of the Cabinet spent ninety-nine per cent of their time on non-foreign-policy/Iraq issues; Gordon Brown at the Treasury would have spent eighty per cent, ninety per cent of his time on non-Iraq/foreign policy issues; and that Tony Blair, as Prime Minister, would have spent a majority of his time, certainly, on non-foreign-policy/Iraq issues. He didn't leave it to the Delivery Unit; Tony Blair was having meetings with ministers on domestic delivery issues every week, up to and during the Iraq conflict.

One of the realities of being Prime Minister – which is why it's so incredibly hard, and some people are better at it than others – is that you have to be able to multitask, and you don't ever say, "I'm going to be doing Iraq, and therefore I'm going to leave the rest of governing to the permanent machine." Tony Blair was, in my experience, across every aspect of policy, and having meetings on it, all the way through the Iraq conflict; and the relationship between the ministers and the permanent civil service didn't change at all because there was a conflict. I think it would be different at certain points at the height of the financial crisis, where things became incredibly intense for civil servants and ministers.

Jon Davis: And obviously, Ed, with the ultimate example of the Second World War, Churchill became not just Prime Minister but Minister of Defence; and did leave the entire domestic agenda to Attlee.

Ed Balls: Yes; that's right.

Audience member: So, as a senior Brit on the ground, working with the Americans in Iraq immediately after the war, we were the guys, essentially, who disproved the pre-war intelligence, and therefore the legal case for war... after the event, of course. My view about Chilcot is – of the man himself, highly articulate; very, very carefully expressed views. I think that the problem is not so much that he 'sexed up' the findings, but that, actually, by definition, any summary of Chilcot will do that, because it's quite simplistic by definition.

My question is not about that; it's more about what your sense is – coming out of the realm of the book, and looking to today – of the ownership of the ground; the ethos of those years... where does it reside today? And if it doesn't reside anywhere in Westminster, what's your sense, looking ahead, of who will, in due course – whether it's a centrist party; maybe neither of the main parties – but what's happened to the

ownership of that ground… and if nobody owns it now, what is your sense about why not?

Jon Davis: That's an easier one for you, John Rentoul. [Laughter]

John Rentoul: Well, I think that ground is now owned by Chuka Umunna, the leader of the Independent Group of Labour MPs…

Ed Balls: Was that a joke, or serious?

John Rentoul: It was an ironic comment. [Laughter] No, I think the fact that the Independent Group is so small, and that people think that the idea of Chuka Umunna as its leader is ironic, shows that it's not going to inherit the whole of the New Labour project. But I don't think you can reinvent the New Labour project; I think the whole point about this is that it's history; that Britain has changed already… I think, whatever happens to Brexit, Britain will be very different; and I think there's no point harking back to the Blair government as a model for how to do politics in the future. Obviously there are lessons you can learn about effective government; but the idea that that centre ground, that was defined by Tony Blair and called New Labour, can just be bolted back together again is a fantasy.

Ed Balls: Jon?

Jon Davis: I do think that nature abhors a vacuum, though… and there's a lot of homeless voters out there; something will rise.

Ed Balls: I think it's a really interesting question. My answer is this: that at every point you have to debate and disagree about the future; and sometimes that happens across the chamber of the House of Commons, and sometimes it happens within political parties. And Labour and Conservative disagree; Blair and Brown disagreed. And that's a good thing, because that's how you argue out issues; but in the end, the only things which last are the things which become consensual… become agreed. And that's where change, and longevity, come from.

And it's really interesting, when you're reading the book, that there were times when Tony Blair and Gordon Brown argued about issues and disagreed, but then what they did became, between them, consensual. The academies programme; I opened… I signed off more academies than any other education secretary; absolutely there was a debate, in the beginning, about academies policy, but it was a good policy, and it became part of

the consensus. The Conservatives voted against central bank independence and the national minimum wage, but over time they've become part of the consensus of our time. And I think the answer to your question is that if you ever think debate, and argument, and tension, and creative tension are a bad thing, then you're a fool; because that's not the way to get to answers and to get to good decisions. But if you have a politics which says… or a time which says that to agree is to betray; that consensus is a dirty word; that it's only as an outsider that you can be legitimate – that consensus is a bad thing – that is a real recipe for bad government and for bad decision-making. And it feels to me as though we are in a time where too much of politics is simply defined by being against, and outside.

And the lesson of the New Labour years – between Blair and Brown, but also in our relationship with the Conservatives – is that, in the end, we found that establishing centre-ground, consensual issues of our age as answers – something which was good and acceptable – and those are the things which have lasted. And the country will get back on track at the point where we start valuing, again, debate… which leads to a resolution, which leads to agreement and consensus. And until we get there it's going to be a tougher time.

So, that's my answer; I would like to thank Dr Jon, and Professor John – Davis and Rentoul – for tonight; thank you all for coming – such a great audience; to wish the book well, in its sales and its impact, and into its second edition; to invite you all to come and have a drink, and buy a copy of the book… at the discounted – relative to Amazon – price of £20; and can I just say, to Jon and to John, thank you for writing the book; thank you for, here at King's, establishing a teaching and research method without which this book wouldn't have appeared; and say, on behalf of everybody here, we hope that method, and this discovery, continue to go from strength to strength in the years to come.

Thank you.

[Applause]