

My response to Sir Tony Blair's essay

There has been a lot of discussion around Sir Tony Blair's essay, released earlier this week. I have set out my thoughts on Tony Blair's intervention below, focusing on inequality, tech and values.

Tony Blair is right to say the Government needs a mission and a plan to achieve it which, given where we are, must include the effective implementation of radical policies. And it is good his essay is provoking debate within the Party and the country. Blair is right to demand that the Government have a technological strategy - the Science Innovation and Technology Select Committee which I Chair has been demanding this on a regular basis! But he doesn't set out what that strategy should be, beyond staying close to big US tech and integrating their products into the state, or what it should serve - sovereignty, growth, empowerment of British people, British values (democracy, human rights and freedoms, human dignity). He has apparently interest in or understanding of the issues the Pope raised this week in his Encyclical that so clearly echo what so many of my constituents are thinking. Also really striking for a self-proclaimed tech evangelist, for Blair technology is something that happens to us, we have no role in shaping it. That is exactly the attitude which causes people to fear technology.

Both Wes and Andy are right to critique the absence of any commentary on inequality, in all its forms. In particular, I would argue, inequality between London and the rest of the country and between those with capital, or access to it, and those without it. The benefits accruing to capital have risen sharply over the past few decades, particularly in relation to labour.

Whilst there is emphasis on the progressive achievements of the last Labour government there is no recognition that it failed to put power in the hands of working people, rather it redistributed the benefits of economic growth more fairly. If power had been put in working people's hands, then the Tories could not have impoverished people so quickly and people would not have been so angry with, and felt left behind by, the economic system that they voted for Brexit and now are voting for Farage.

And that is the other big thing missing for me, there is no sense of what people are feeling. He says the vote for the hard right is because they get things done, but what do they get done? Farage didn't even stick around to get Brexit done. People in Newcastle Central and West voted for Farage because they felt angry and ignored and therefore any change must be for the better.

'Embracing AI' in the way he describes will not give people autonomy, quite the opposite. He seems to want to repeat the policies of the nineties and noughties for the twenties and thirties but working people are once bitten twice shy. At best it is a kind of trickle down pie approach - if the pie gets bigger, your share of it will get bigger too. But unfortunately, it won't!

Finally one test of course is which of his big funders is he challenging with this essay - Oracle's Ellison? AWS? The Saudi Government? The answer is only the Labour Party. But then of course we don't actually fund him anymore, we just, long ago, provided him with the platform from which he pontificates.