

A Conversation with Tony Blair

Speaker:

- ◆ Tony Blair, Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

Tony Blair, Former Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, kicked off the 2015 World Knowledge Forum with a discussion simply titled, “A Conversation with Tony Blair.” Having been out of office for nearly eight years, Mr. Blair spoke on a wide range of issues, including the rise of China and the ever important role of technology, from a unique perspective. “One of the advantages of leaving office is that you get to study the world in a different way than as a Prime Minister,” he said.

Mr. Blair began by commenting on globalization and the challenges that come along with it. “The challenge is making globalization work, the only way to do that is make people connected,” he said. But Mr. Blair expressed concern with how this connectedness will affect the less fortunate. “The world has one big challenge: how do you make the unstoppable force of globalization work for the benefit of the largest majority of people?”

The former Prime Minister put the onus on politicians to help their people with this challenge. “The single biggest challenge is educating people to have an open mind,” he said. He believes that an open, creative mind can work across the boundaries of nation, race and religion. He reiterated the importance of education to achieve this goal.

Mr. Blair also shared advice for current and aspiring politicians. “I would advise people to spend some time outside of politics . . . learn about the world and also study government,” he said. He believes it’s important for politicians to not only study what works in their own country, but also look abroad for answers. “Get the best in,” he said, “and learn a huge amount from what people are doing.”

Embracing reform, according to Mr. Blair, is “the single biggest skill politicians have to learn.” To ensure that reform is done right, he stressed three things that must be in place: prioritization, policy development, and implementation.

While discussing the rise of China, Mr. Blair touched on reform and political development. “More importantly is that they develop politically and economically. And the leadership knows that,” he said. He believes that this reform and development can come with a relationship with the United States and European Union. “There has never been a shift like this in geopolitics without conflict,” he said, adding that he is optimistic that the conflict can be avoided through diplomacy.

Mr. Blair had some harsh words for his native Europe, however. He was critical of the current status of the European Union and the Euro. “Europe is a great idea that is often badly implemented,” he explained, adding, “The problem with the single currency was that it was motivated by politics and expressed through economics. . . . It took us 10 years to figure out

Germany and Italy were different.” Mr. Blair believes reform can work but worries that it will be difficult while operating under a single currency system.

The conversation shifted to technology, which Mr. Blair believes will transform healthcare and education, as well as service sectors from banking to insurance. But the rise of technology, he said, will also have a downside. “We will find with this new generation with technology that it will give rise to a lot of displacement and a lot of change.” Mr. Blair stressed once more that it is the responsibility of government to guide its citizens through these times of immense change.

Mr. Blair also warned governments against the pull of nationalism as a philosophy, an important lesson he believes can help nations better cooperate and prosper. In response to a question about the need for Japan, China, and Korea to overcome a long history of colonization and invasion issues, Mr. Blair advised, “Know your history, understand your history, be respectful of your history, but don’t live in it.”

Reporter: Andrew Stone