



*Cherie Blair, author of
Speaking for Myself: My life from Liverpool to Downing Street*
The Aspen Institute, One Dupont Circle, NW, Washington, DC
Thursday, October 23, 2008, 12:00pm to 1:30pm

EVENT REPORT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 3
ISSUE BACKGROUND 4
SUMMARY OF DIALOGUE 5
BIOGRAPHIES 5
PARTICIPANT LIST 8

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On Thursday, October 23, 2008, the Council of Women World Leaders and the Aspen Institute's Alma and Joseph Gildenhorn Book Series hosted Cherie Blair, in a discussion on her recently released autobiography, *Speaking for Myself: My Life from Liverpool to Downing Street*. The talk was moderated by Adrian Wooldridge, *The Economist's* Washington, D.C. Bureau Chief. The discussion was attended by over 130 individuals from government, nonprofit organizations, businesses, think tanks, and the media.

Cherie Blair conveyed her experience growing up in working class Liverpool; being the first in her family to attend university; and succeeding among men as a woman barrister. She talked about the challenges of being the Prime Minister's wife during a time of war, and of being a working mother.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Within the framework of the *Madeleine K. Albright Women's Voices at the Aspen Institute Series*, (*Albright Women's Voices Series*) the Council of Women World Leaders, jointly with the Aspen Institute brings together leaders from the political and the corporate worlds, as well as the non-profit sector. In its ongoing work with women leaders internationally, the Council has developed a strong history of bringing expert practitioners, scholars, donors, and activists together to address issues of great importance to women. The Council is committed to ensuring the presence of women at the decision-making tables, ranging from positions in executive offices and legislative chambers, to participation in keynote speeches and roundtable panel discussions.

Under the auspices of the *Albright Women's Voices Series* and as part of the *Alma and Joseph Gildenhorn Book Series* the Council and the Aspen Institute welcomed Cherie Blair, wife of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, to the Aspen Institute to present her new autobiography, *Speaking for Myself: My Life from Liverpool to Downing Street*. Abandoned by her actor father at a young age, Cherie Blair overcame innumerable obstacles to become one of the United Kingdom's most successful lawyers. When the Labor Party took power in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1997, Mrs. Blair was faced with a new challenge, being the wife of the newly elected British Prime Minister. Tony Blair was the first UK Prime Minister in recent history with a young family and Mrs. Blair was the first wife of a prime minister with a serious career. In her autobiography, she gives a thorough account of her life and her unique experience combining life as a working mother with that of being the Prime Minister's wife.

SUMMARY OF DIALOGUE

The discussion was introduced by Susan Sherwin, Executive Vice President of Development at the Aspen Institute. The dialogue was moderated by the Washington Bureau Chief for *The Economist*, Adrian Wooldridge.

Cherie Blair began by describing her childhood growing up in a Catholic working-class neighborhood in Liverpool. She attended a local convent school, and subsequently went on to higher education at the London School of Economics .

At the time she decided to make law her career there were very few women barristers, and had she been aware of precisely how few, she might not have chosen that career as she would have felt that statistically the odds were against her succeeding. Many times she found herself being the only woman legal representative in the court room. Her situation was further complicated by the fact that she appeared far younger than her age, and had a Northern accent - very different from the vast majority of the students who spoke with a middle class accent and came from a more privileged background.

Adrian Wooldridge asked Blair to discuss her opinions on social mobility in England. She responded that, as the first person in her family to attend university, she appreciated the importance of social mobility. During her time at the London School of Economics, she had been fortunate to receive a government grant for her living expenses and tuition fees. There are now many more young people from working class families attending university, but their studies are funded instead by loans. She thought it was right to fund education in this way, as the taxation system could no longer bear the cost of grants, given the increased numbers of students. She felt, however, that if a grant had not been available to her when she was a student, her mother and grandmother would have found some way to support her, so determined were they that she should get a good education

She first met Tony Blair while they were studying to become barristers. She wasn't very impressed with him at the time. She worked for Derry Irvine as an apprentice, and was furious to find out that Tony Blair was given the same position as well. They quickly became rivals.

When asked by Wooldridge about the role of religion in her life, Blair said that her faith defines her, but that the British as a whole did not talk openly about faith. In the past, being Catholic was a disadvantage in British society, but she is finding that her children do not face the same sense of being in a minority that she felt when she was growing up. She emphasized the importance of secularism in government.

Wooldridge inquired about the Labor Party landslide in 1997, which followed 18 years of Conservative rule. Blair responded by drawing parallels between the current US election and the 1992 election in the UK, in which, despite the conviction that Labor would win, they ended up losing. She warned that you can never be sure of the outcome until all the votes are in the ballot box.

Speaking on the topic of work-family life balance, Blair did not have a set answer, claiming that she seems always to be teetering on the brink of chaos, but somehow manages to avoid it. She was

the first wife of a British Prime Minister to have a university education and a career. Aside from being in the public eye, she feels that she faced the same challenges as all working mothers. She is grateful to have been the child of a working mother, because it allowed her to feel assured that she could have a career and still be a good parent.

When asked what advice she would give Michelle Obama or Cindy McCain, she passed on advice given to her by Hillary Clinton: that you are not going to please all people, and that some people will dislike you no matter what you do or who you are, because of what you stand for. She advises the next US President's wife to be true to herself.

Wooldridge turned the discussion to institutional bias against women in the public eye. Blair explained that when the media has difficulties attacking a politician because he or she is successful, they sometimes go after the spouse instead. It is not a personal matter. According to Blair, women in politics are treated differently than men. Often, to trivialize a woman's role, their appearance – good or bad – is emphasized, instead of their actions or words. She concluded with the statement that in the 21st century, women deserve better than that. Equal respect for women and men will ultimately create a better dialogue.

Wooldridge questioned Blair about living through criticism of her husband's policies on Iraq. She described the stress of having protesters outside her window calling her husband a murderer, and suggested that our political system sometimes allows us to forget that leaders are just human beings. They are not entirely bad or good; they are just people trying to do the best they can. She then spoke about the internet, and how blogging has changed the dynamics of criticism. Though it may feel to a blogger that they are speaking into a vacuum, their words actually do reverberate and can cause damage. She and Wooldridge reflected on the British media's tendency to print any story, regardless of verification or propriety.

On the topic of plans for the future, Blair explained that law is her first passion, because becoming a barrister was something that she achieved for herself, and a practice that she does for herself. Her second passion is women's rights. Being raised by two women who did not enjoy the same opportunities that she had, and seeing women around the world still living with similarly limited opportunities, has had a profound influence on her. She praised the work of the Council of Women World Leaders, and emphasized that economic independence is a vital component of women's rights. It is much harder to get the respect you deserve from men, she points out, if you constantly have to depend on them for your economic needs.

Following the moderated discussion, Blair took questions from the audience. The first question addressed Tony Blair's conversion to Catholicism and the role played by Cherie Blair in the political decisions of her husband. Blair answered that her husband did not convert to please her, and that she absolutely did not make any political decisions for her husband. As is common in marriage, she and Tony share similar values and often discuss global issues but did not make decisions for the other. She stated that she stayed away from political decision-making.

Another member of the audience asked about Cherie Blair's relationship with the Queen. Blair answered that the Queen was always kind to her, and that when she thinks of her, she thinks of

service, because the Queen has done a lot to serve the people. She shares common interests with Prince Phillip, particularly in regards to the internet.

She was asked to address the progression of women's rights. Blair agreed that progress in the arena of women's rights is very slow. She referenced a study which concluded that, if we keep moving at the current rate, we will have women represented in 50% of parliamentary seats 250 years from now. She acknowledges that women have come very far in education, and identifies the need for women to take maternity leave as the main hindrance to women obtaining leadership positions and salaries equal to those of their male counterparts. Once a woman has a child, men and women assume completely different roles, where the woman is seen as the nurturer with no other abilities, and the men as workhorses with no feelings. There needs to be a shift in popular mentality.

On Iraq, Blair articulated that in order to assess whether we are moving in the right direction, we need to look at where we have come from. Democracy is fragile and complicated under all circumstances. Images of people in Afghanistan and Iraq – even in the US – lining up to vote are powerful and show us that people do want to make their own choices, both domestically and in the Middle East. At the same time, we have to remember that this does not exist in a vacuum. Democracy needs rule of law, human rights, protection for minorities and bureaucracies. According to Blair, Eleanor Roosevelt was a genius to be able to gather the majority of countries into one room to sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She emphasized that it is important to remember that it took the West hundreds of years to build the institutions of democracy and that it will take some time for it to develop fully in the Middle East

Blair commented that kindness is a word that we don't hear enough in public life. All religions teach kindness, which is why religion is so important to her personally. Religion helps us to be the best we can be, she said. We share common values but see them from different angles. That is why diversity is such a benefit to society.

On the topic of the Olympics in London, Blair responded that the Olympic movement plays to commonalities, and allows us to come together and see each other as equals. The London Olympics in 2012 will be a different experience in comparison with the Beijing Olympics. It will play to the strengths of London – diversity and youth.

BIOGRAPHIES

Cherie Blair

Cherie Blair is a leading human rights lawyer, a passionate campaigner for women's equality and wife of Tony Blair. Her determination to help women overcome discrimination and prejudice has seen her visit and speak in many countries. Having herself combined a demanding career with bringing up four children, she also actively promotes policies and initiatives to improve work-life balance for women and men.

The New York Times wrote: “Cherie Blair is viewed as something of a wonder woman for her ability to balance her high-powered professional life, high-visibility public life and intensely consuming private life.” Her husband when Prime Minister said his wife was “...an enormous source of strength and an extraordinary person in her own right. I never know how she manages with all the different things she does - the work, the family.”

There was nothing in Cherie's background to suggest such a distinguished career. But having been brought up by a single mother in a modest home in Liverpool, she won a place at the London School of Economics. She graduated with first class honors in law and went on to top the class in her Bar examinations.

She met and married Tony Blair in 1980 when they were both lawyers. They now have four children, the youngest, Leo, being the first born to a serving Prime Minister for over a century. Cherie continued her legal career while bringing up a family and in 1995 was appointed Queen's Counsel as senior trial lawyers in the United Kingdom are known. Cherie specializes in employment and human rights law and is regularly asked to appear in courts abroad. She also serves as a part-time judge.

During Tony Blair's decade as Prime Minister, she was often at his side at international summits, on official trips overseas and during election campaigning. But she also made regular visits on her own as she continues to do. Many of these visits are linked to the charities with which she is associated. Mrs Blair is closely involved with over 20 charities with a special emphasis on those working with women, with children, and with those based on Merseyside. She was an Ambassador for London 2012. In September 2008, she introduced the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women which, in partnership with existing organizations that promote women's roles and leadership in a global economy, supports women entrepreneurs in the developing world. Cherie Blair has been a member of the Labour Party since she was 16.

Her campaigning on human rights and women's equality led in 2007 to Cherie being awarded the Eleanor Roosevelt Val-Kill Medal. This is bestowed on those judged to “embody the spirit and legacy” of the former US President's wife who chaired the committee which drew up the UN Declaration on Human Rights.

Cherie has co-authored *The Goldfish Bowl*, a fascinating account of the life in Downing Street from the perspectives of the spouses and families of Prime Ministers who lived there before the Blairs. Her best-selling autobiography **SPEAKING FOR MYSELF** was published in the U.K. May 2008

and in the U.S. on October 13, 2008.

Adrian Wooldridge, Washington Bureau Chief, *The Economist* Adrian Wooldridge, based in Washington, DC, is the Economist's Washington Bureau Chief. He writes the magazine's Lex Column, covering politics, social policy, and social and political events. Previously he has been The Economist's West Coast Correspondent, Management Correspondent and Britain Correspondent. He is the co-author of *The Company: A Short History of a Revolutionary Idea*, *A Future Perfect: The Challenge and Hidden Promise of Globalization*, *Witch Doctors*, a critical examination of management theory, and *The Right Nation*, a study of conservatism in America.

REGISTERED ATTENDEES

Odeh Aburdene

Beth Davis

Anneli Ahlbom

Tom Dine

Maya Ajmera

Monica Dorhoi

Aseel Alayli

Beth Dozoretz

Lee Allen

Ronald Dozoretz

Christine Au

Janet Eissenstat

Sara Barker

Amitai Etzioni

Carolyn Beacraft

Neickie Euigalit

Elizabeth Dempsey Becker

A. Huda Farouki

Margaux Bergen

Samia Farouki

Berl Bernhard

Mariano Fernandez

Wilma Bernstein

Sarah Ficenec

Rahul Bhandari

Kelly Funk

Landrum Bolling

Anne Ganten

Melinda Brouwer

Chuck Genrich

Finola Bruton

Kathleen Gerard

Natalia Brzezinski

Kathy Gest

Antoineta Cadiz

Elizabeth Gibbens

Tenley Carp

Alma Gildenhorn

Veronica Cummings

Katy Glakas

Jason Daughn

Nick Glakas

Jonathan Groner

Jill Grosspierre

Libby Halaby

Tina Fried Heller

Josh Henson

Michael Higgins

Joanne Huskey

Anna Jarborg

Maha Kaddoura

Beth Kannan

Audrey Kelaher

Jeffrey Kenner

Beverly Kirk

Rebekah Krimmel

Emma Kristensson

Keming Kuo

Linda Langley

Hyunja Laskin Kenner

Barbara Lauren

Joanne Legomsky

Seth Levey

Rossalina Madjirova

Robert Mahony

Marlene Malek

Dale Mathias

Caitlin McDevitt

Stewart McLaurin

Mary McNaught

Martha Mihaly

R. Garrett Mitchell

Lauren Morra

Elise Mullen

Piper Nelson

Russell Newell

Mary O'Connor

Deedy Ogden

Michaela Oldfield

Nancy Overholt

Edit Papai

Erica Parkhurst

Gabe Pellathy

Megan Petersen

Andrew Pierre

Charlotte Ponticelli

Kyle Poole

Nancy Porter

Eric Porterfield

J. Ram Ray

Rosemary Reed

Melissa Robison

Joan Root

James Rosebush

Lars Roth

Deborah Saks

Vicki Sant

Ulrike Scharioth

Beth Schucker

Elizabeth Sinclair

David Smith

Sally Bedell Smith

Adrienne Stefan

Kari Steover

Patricia Sullivan

Luba Tauveztal

Ashley Terhan

Christina Thomas

Cathy Tinsley

Bisera Turkovic

Marylouise Uhlig

Frida Wallnor

Inga Watkins

Bob Weidemer

Paula Wellington

Laurie Westley

Kay Winning



Cordially invite you to a lunchtime book talk

Featuring

Cherie Blair

author of

Speaking for Myself:
My Life from Liverpool to Downing Street
(Little, Brown & Company, October 2008)

Moderated by Edward Luce
Washington Bureau Chief, The Financial Times

Thursday, October 23, 2008
12:00 pm

The Aspen Institute
One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC

Books available for sale and for signing on-site.

A buffet lunch will be served.

Please reply via email to stacey.loomis@aspeninstitute.org or by phone to (202) 736-3850
This invitation is non-transferable.

About *Speaking for Myself*

Abandoned by her actor father, Cherie Blair overcame obstacles to become one of the UK's most successful lawyers. But when Labor took power in 1997, she faced new challenges: her husband was the first Prime Minister in recent history with a young family, and Cherie was the first PM's wife with a serious career. Now, she gives a complete account of her own life and she reveals for the first time what it was like to combine life as a working mother with life married to the prime minister.