

Tony Blair

Tony Blair think-tank revenues hit \$140mn as governments pay for advice

Former UK prime minister's institute set to expand to over 40 states as growth continues despite criticism of Saudi work



Tony Blair talks to the FT: 'One of the first things I say to any prime minister or president is 'do you have a plan?' A country needs direction' © Charlie Bibby/FT

George Parker and Jim Pickard DECEMBER 22 2023

Tony Blair has revealed that [his institute](#) is on course to make \$140mn in annual revenues and provide advice to more than 40 governments, underscoring the enduring political influence of the former UK prime minister.

In an interview in his West End office, Blair told the Financial Times he would not sell the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, partly because he believes the not-for-profit business's strong growth will continue.

"I don't want to do that — but we do get approaches," he said. "For a start, this could grow to be much bigger than we are now. I don't know how big. I think we'll probably go past 1,000 people next year.

"We're in over 30 countries now. We added another nine countries last year and we'll add another nine this year, maybe. We've now got a waiting list of governments wanting to come in to the programme."

The institute is set to make about \$140mn in revenues this year, his office said, more than triple the \$45mn it recorded in 2020 and up about 16 per cent on 2022. Staff numbers are on their way to quadrupling from 263 people in 2020.

The group makes most of its income from government work, deploying advisers who include Sanna Marin, the former Finnish premier and a recent high-profile recruit.

Blair, executive chairman, is often the first point of contact from leaders seeking advice. He then sends teams to work in the country concerned, sometimes staying on when a change of government occurs.

He says the institute operates in Africa, the [Middle East](#) and south-east Asia and is building its business in the Americas. Blair also refers to projects in the United Arab Emirates and in eastern Europe, while the 16 African countries in which the institute works include Kenya, Senegal, Ghana, Rwanda and Malawi.

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Its work in Saudi Arabia has drawn the most intense criticism. Blair's institute was — and still is — providing advice to Mohammed bin Salman in spite of the crown prince's alleged role in the brutal murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

“A few years ago people challenged us over working in Saudi Arabia but I have absolutely no doubt that the changes they are making there are of enormous importance socially and economically, in terms of the country and the region and in

terms of broader security,” he said.

Asked if he turns down business, he said: “Yes, absolutely. We have said no and we've pulled out of places. I won't say where, but we have left places when we decided they weren't going in the right direction.

“The staff that come here and work for us, even though we pay well, will come and work for the institute because they have a sense of mission. They don't want to work in a country where they feel they can't have an impact.”

Blair says he spends 85 per cent of his time at the institute, which he owns but from which he does not draw a salary. He earns money from private advisory work, speeches and his position as chair of JPMorgan's international council.

Blair, 70, said he would like his institute to outlive him and he intends to fend off interest from potential buyers. "Yes, for sure. that's the ambition. Definitely."

"Nobody does it the way we do it here," he said. "We're not McKinsey or BCG, though we have a high regard for what they do. We do get involved in small 'p' political strategy and implementation."

Blair's regular advice is simple. "One of the first things I say to any prime minister or president is 'do you have a plan?' A country needs direction."

A second common strand is that deploying technology is vital. "This is maybe *the* challenge for government today: how do you harness the technology revolution."

Outside of his formal advisory work, Blair maintains contact with political leaders at home and abroad. This week he met Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, to discuss the crisis in Gaza.

In the UK, Labour's current leader Sir Keir Starmer has also turned to Blair for advice and defended his record as the party's most electorally successful leader, even though he is still reviled by some on the Labour left.

Blair expects some of his well-paid staff will migrate to government if Labour wins Britain's election, but Starmer has already signed up to his predecessor's diagnosis that business needs stability.

"The advantage that Britain had when you had Margaret Thatcher, John Major and then myself was that you had almost 30 years of government with a certain core of policy around the business sector that wasn't very different," Blair said.

"Now, my government did lots of things in the public realm and implemented social change and all the rest, but we didn't disturb the basic emphasis of enterprise that Thatcher introduced."

He says Starmer was right to say recently that Thatcher had a sense of mission. "He was saying something that is pretty obvious — she knew where she was going," Blair said.

He thinks he is less of a hate figure for the Labour left than he used to be — many have never forgiven him for the 2003 Iraq war — but notes also that he did win three successive elections.

Blair says he is “pleased” for former Tory premier David Cameron, who was recently installed as foreign secretary. “I think it’s a good move for the country — he’ll do a good job and people will take him seriously,” he said.

Would he accept a [similar offer](#) if Starmer wins the next election? “First of all, I don’t think he would be very interested in doing that,” he said. “Secondly, I’m happy building the institute and doing the work I’m doing.”