

A close-up, high-angle portrait of Tony Blair, looking slightly to the left. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his skin and the intensity of his gaze. The background is a soft, out-of-focus greenish-yellow.

**TONY
BLAIR'S
LONGEST
DAY**

ColdType



British Prime Minister Tony Blair will be faced with two huge challenges in late January when he must win a Commons vote to pass education reforms and the publication of the report of the Hutton Inquiry into the death of Dr. David Kelly. An 8-page essay by **James Cusick**, Westminster Editor, Sunday Herald, Glasgow

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My name is Tony Blair ...
and this will be the longest day
of my premiership. The
following takes place between
12.00p.m. on January 27 and
12.00p.m. on January 28, when
I have to save the world . . .

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JANUARY 27, 2004



Westminster's bell should sound the same as it does every day. Except on this day, January 27, nothing will sound normal, even Big Ben. Nothing over the next 24 hours is going to feel routine or politically comfortable. This will be get-even day, decision day, pay back day, a day to survive or be buried. At its end, Big Ben will sound to Tony Blair like either a death knell or the peacetime equivalent of a war-time siren that signals the enemy's bombs have failed to make a direct hit. This will be judgement day.

Just before noon, the electronic gates of Downing Street will open to welcome a small unmarked van. Armed police will have already carried out a thorough search before the button is pressed to open the security gate. A second search will be carried out. If clean, the road-level steel barrier will lower and the van will pass through and along the short stretch of road to Number 10.

The van will have been given a discreet armed escort from a printers' firm, believed to be somewhere in the southeast, all the way to Whitehall. Since January 19, and under security that kept their operation a secret even from key intelligence officials, the printers will have been producing copies of a report that will decide whether or not the current Prime Minister gets to keep his job and fight the next general election as leader of the Labour Party. If all the advanced publicity amounts to anything, the report – written by the retired appeal court judge, Lord Hutton – should have all the elements of a whodunit page-turning political spy thriller. Britain's media has waited months for this day, the 24-hour agony of the Prime Minister is their agony too.

At precisely the same time as the van swings into Downing Street, similar deliveries – most of them covertly arranged at destinations in and around London and pre-agreed with the Hutton Inquiry staff – will be made to the BBC, to its Today programme journalist Andrew Gilligan, to the BBC Newsnight journalist Susan Watts and to the wife of the weapons scientist, Dr David Kelly, whose suicide sparked the investigation. These are the main players of the inquiry who have waited 15 weeks since Hutton ended his final session at the Royal Courts of Justice last year.

Downing Street staff will take the boxed package of reports into Number 10 and across the checked black and white floor of the entrance hall, which looks like a giant

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chess board: an analogy not lost on those advising Blair on the strategic moves he'll need to make over the next 24 hours to survive.

How he decides to move after seeing the executive summary of the report will be only one hurdle in the 24-hour period. Blair cannot checkmate or even stalemate his opponents by dealing with Hutton alone. Over the next seven hours he'll have the newly delivered report in front of him and then leave his office for the Commons to face the daunting prospect of a government rebellion over student top-up fees. The vote is due at 7pm. Its outcome will determine the political climate into which Hutton will deliver his televised summary at around noon the next day.

Lose the vote on tuition fees, and a wounded Blair might be unable to politically survive even diplomatically-phrased criticism in Hutton's lengthy text. But win the tuition vote and Blair will be emboldened to see out any criticism he can legalistically and linguistically mould into a different interpretation.

There is only one scenario that Downing Street fears above all else: the prospect, however unlikely, that Hutton's criticism of the Prime Minister – especially over his implied helmsmanship of the strategy which forced Kelly's name out into the public domain and which may have influenced his suicide – will be direct and unambiguous.

Blair's Downing Street office isn't that fancy for a prime minister; a smallish classical-style desk, covered with family pictures, sits next to a bright airy window. Around the office are high-backed, red-leather armchairs. In these chairs, before the afternoon is out, will be a series of advisers and strategists: the Lord Chancellor Lord Falconer, director of communications Dave Hill, chief of staff Jonathan Powell, director of government relations Sally Morgan and, perhaps, director of political operations Pat McFadden. The advice of the former spinner-in-chief, Alastair Campbell, is likely to be sought on a continuous open phone line. If Hutton is bad, Campbell will become a political Samaritan, offering solace and advice on how Blair can spin himself out of the hole. If Hutton is good, Campbell will suggest an attack strategy to get everyone through the next day, and probably the next year.

Like a surgical team desperate to discover the cause of a death, the dissection of Hutton's findings will begin within minutes of the report coming into Blair's office. While the dissection is taking place, Blair will need to take on board either good or bad news from his government's chief whip, Hilary Armstrong.

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Armstrong will give it to Blair straight. The first Commons motion that threatened to derail Blair's plans to introduce variable tuition fees for universities down south was signed by

more than 150 government rebels. As the package has been watered down and adjustments made to meet the concerns of some in the rebellion, the alliance has shrunk. Even though the arithmetic of Blair's solution offers less than £1 billion to solve the £11bn funding gap said to exist inside the universities, Blair has tried to sell the tuition package, as one MP says, as "astonishingly an Old Labour solution. From a fix for the elite, it has become a saviour for the poor and the needy".

With honesty a tough commodity to find in the corridors of Westminster at the moment, Armstrong will have her job cut out. She knows the confluence timing of the tuition-fee vote and Hutton will be to her advantage. The majority of the party still back Blair. "One of the whips brought up what happened to the Tories after they dumped Thatcher," said one MP who claimed he was "talked-to" by a member of the whips office. "Talked to" is Westminster's equivalent of an Aikido arm-lock and a threatened knee in the groin.

She'll tell Blair at around 2pm that the rebel numbers have substantially shrunk. And she'll come back again around 6pm to give her last update before the vote. Numbers? Blair needs a rebellion of less than 81 from the government benches, if all other MPs vote against the government. Even with the edges crumbling since the date of Hutton was announced last week, sources near to the whips office say Armstrong will have the tough job of saying it "could come down to single figures".

At the core of the rebellion are Labour MPs who believe Blair has served his purpose and they simply want another person – Gordon Brown – in charge. The changes to the tuition package, the timing of Hutton, the prospect of damaging the PM at the worst possible time. They care not. Armstrong will tell Blair of an effective rebel whipping operation led by the Brownite former whip, Nick Brown.

Cameras will do all they can to catch the mood inside Blair's car as it exits parliament's main gate on its way back to Downing Street. A lost vote by the government, and television news editors will be unable to resist comparing the image with Thatcher's tear-filled face inside her car as she left the Commons for the last time as Prime Minister. But a win by the government, and the entire focus will shift to noon on Wednesday.

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The BBC will be in the best position to judge how the events will synergise. It will have Hutton for seven hours. Pundits from other outlets will dissect how the BBC is reporting events. Back inside Downing Street, if there has been a positive vote and the report on his desk is defensible, Blair will be able to enjoy an evening meal with his wife for the first time in months. But a lost vote and a potentially difficult report?

JANUARY 28, 2004



As midnight and the prospect of a sleepless night approaches, this is time Blair is likely to phone his closest advisers: Peter Mandelson, Charlie Falconer, perhaps Alan Milburn, the former health secretary, and Campbell. According to one former Number 10 aide: “Campbell will expect a call in the middle of the night, and he’s likely to get one. How the hell can you sleep anyway?”

The hundreds of pages and appendices in the Hutton Report will be Blair’s only option of a night-time read. But nearly seven years into the job – having survived tough vote after tough vote and the political fallout from three wars – Blair must have learned to be a good sleeper.

But he’ll have steered clear of any caffeine during the last day. A high heart rate, given his recent health scares, will be the last thing he will want to endure in a period of heightened stress.

By 2am, Blair may be asleep, but his office staff will continue to dissect and scour Hutton’s text. Hutton took months to put this together, Downing Street will now have less than 12 hours left.

Although Blair may have nodded off, the same luxury will not befall Tory leader Michael Howard or LibDem leader Charles Kennedy. Both men, and two of their aides, will be allowed into the Cabinet Office at 6am, locked in for a period of six hours till Hutton formally publishes his findings with an oral and televised summary from the Royal Courts of Justice at noon. “This is twice as much time as the Tory government gave Robin Cook to dissect the Scott Report,” said the PM’s spokesman, Tom Kelly. The message? They should be damn grateful for this magnanimous gesture.

Howard and Kennedy have two options: slog into the night to ensure they know

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where to look inside the dense legal text of Hutton, or get a decent sleep in the hope that political experience and adrenaline will lead them to the gold they expect Hutton will have diplomatically spread through his findings.

For Kennedy there is less pressure. In the Commons he'll concentrate on one thing: Blair took Britain to war focused on the threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Now, even Blair admits they might never be found. Kennedy will leave the barristerial fireworks, the fire-brand advocacy, to the pugilistic Howard. Kennedy will try and score with the fraud of the war.



07:00

Blair will be awake, up and at his desk. The briefings will begin instantly. Overnight the summary drafts of Hutton will have been improved on; the fallout from the Commons vote analysed. He will have five hours before he's back at the dispatch box again, and again fighting for his political survival.

While Howard and Kennedy slave away inside the Cabinet Office with highlighters and scribbled notes, Blair will again be at his desk. The focus? Are Hutton's comments on how the two dossiers were put together defensible? If Dr Kelly is criticised, how far can he diplomatically go into pointing this out? Is the role of Campbell criticised? If Hutton points to the vendetta against the BBC, how can he defend the government? And if there's enough criticism of the BBC, how far can he use this to deflect criticism of himself? And finally, in the passages on the naming of Dr Kelly, how far will Hutton go in pointing a finger at the PM? The folders in Blair's office will snap shut just after 11am. He'll shower, change and just walk down to the entrance hall. He may smile at those around him, raise his eyebrows and in a gesture seen a thousand times over the years, say: "Right, OK, let's go."



12:00

He may already be in his office in the Commons when Hutton begins his televised summary. If everyone around Blair – and Blair himself – has done his job properly, Hutton's summary will offer no surprises. And the speech Blair will be holding in the small folder he'll open at the dispatch box at 12.30pm on January 28 will determine how the history books judge the premiership of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair, MP for Sedgefield.

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Over these 24 hours, Blair has the potential to become one of the greatest political survivors and escape artists ever seen in British political history – or one of its tragic heroes.

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