



Cherie Blair, wife of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, charms a big crowd in Madison last Friday. Photo by Lisa Bousquet

IN MADISON, BLAIR WOWS CROWD

By Lisa Reisman

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The audience seemed to hang on her every word. Toward the end of her remarks last Friday evening in Madison, Cherie Blair confirmed a secret pact between her husband, former Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the Queen.

"Tony, I understand there's been a little movie made about us," the Queen reportedly said, referring to the 2006 film starring Helen Mirren. "I'm not going to see it. Will you?"

Prime Minister Blair told Her Highness that he would not. Instead, he assured Her that he'd assign that duty to his wife.

That Cherie Blair ultimately viewed the film should not paint her as a docile woman. Quite the contrary.

"I do not remember a time when I lacked for confidence," the 54-year-old Blair told the crowd of

425 packing the pews of the majestic First Congregational Church of Madison. Blair was the inaugural speaker for the Davis Infinite Topic Lecture Series that will feature experts from science to the arts.

BRITISH INVASION

Blair: Ex-PM's wife wows crowd

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Indeed, from the time Blair was 14, she would regularly announce "Prime Minister!" when questioned what she wanted to be when she grew up.

She did make it to 10 Downing Street, of course, if not in the way that conformed to her youthful aspirations. And once there, she was anything but a shrinking violet. This was a woman roundly vilified by the British press for her full-bore lack of restraint and generally disdained by the public for her reluctance to be cast in the expected role of quiet, compliant Prime Minister's wife.

For all that, Cherie Blair was, by all appearances, uncommonly refined — not to mention altogether inspiring — in her presentation sponsored by Madison's Scranton Library and spotlighting Sunshine House, a home-away-from-home for terminally ill children and their families. Despite the cool drizzle in the air — "God has been kind and brought British weather," Blair, clad in a tailored dark-teal suit, quipped — the convivial audience warmly received the native of Liverpool. For Americans, after all, a forthright, ambitious, and at times divisive first lady of working-class origins is old news. By 1997, when the Blairs moved into 10 Downing Street, we'd known Hillary Rodham Clinton for five years.

Not so the Brits. Before Cherie Blair, most No. 10 spouses, including Denis Thatcher, stayed in the background. Then again, Blair was no ordinary spouse. The first wife of a British Prime Minister to have a college degree, she broke the mold by managing to maintain her career as a well-regarded barrister and Queen's Counsel, a high legal rank in Britain, all the while bringing up four children and fulfilling her considerable duties as Prime Minister's wife under microscopic scrutiny.

Still, Blair's address on Friday night focused less on her decade at 10 Downing Street than on the journey that brought her there and on her passionate advocacy of women's rights, among other charitable projects, she's undertaken since her husband left office in 2007. Hence, the title of her recent memoir "Speaking for Myself:" a reference as much to the constraints imposed on the headstrong, outspoken Blair as a "walk-on part in history," as she puts it, as to the voice she has reclaimed and the causes she can now freely advance.

One of those causes, educational programs for girls across the world, Blair attributed to her strong-willed mother and grandmother, both of whom left school at 14.

"Bright women who passed their love of reading onto her," the doe-eyed fair-skinned



Cherie Blair addresses a crowd of more than 400 at the Congregational Church in Madison last Friday night.

Blair told the audience, they struggled to make ends meet in hardscrabble Liverpool but refused to compromise on her education.

Thus was born her appreciation that hard work and dedication could deliver dreams. Without education, said the woman named by *Forbes* Magazine in 2004 as the 12th most powerful in the world, she would never have been the first member of her family to attend college, or become a lawyer or, for that matter, encounter her husband, whom she met while studying to become a barrister, and land on Downing Street. Nor would she have been exposed in her travels to the discrimination suffered by women in developing countries worldwide, and roused to fight on their behalf.

"It blights society as a whole," said Blair, of statistics showing women twice as likely as men to be living in poverty in Asia, Africa, and parts of the Middle East. According to Blair, who's met Afghani girls desperate to go to school, as well as energetic female entrepreneurs in Kenya and Tanzania hungry for ideas to keep their enterprises afloat, there's no shortage of ambition and enthusiasm.

What's lacking is opportunity, she said, particularly in education, which inspired her involvement with the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh. The university's mission, to train Asia's most talented, impoverished girls to become leaders in their own countries, was founded on the idea that training elite women could solve many of the problems faced in Asia.

"We know that two-thirds

of the students who are not in schools are girls and that's because families have chosen to educate their boys and not their girls," Blair said. Research has shown, she added, that it's better to invest in girls because of the intergenerational aspect of educating a mother, who can educate an entire family.

"Look at the countries that are failing," she said. "They're the ones that are wasting the talent and potential of their women." A nation succeeds when it harnesses that most precious resource.

"I was so fortunate coming from where I came from and yet ending up in No. 10 Downing Street," said Blair, whose voice bears only a trace of her Liverpool roots. "And I know I'm not that exceptional. I think if a girl like me can make it, then there are plenty of other girls across the world with a little bit of opportunity who can make it too."

As for her years in the sometimes unforgiving limelight, she has no regrets. Absolutely, she replied, when asked if she would encourage her children to go into politics, noting her belief in the nobility of public service.

She did, however, voice one complaint: the flawed portrayal of her husband in "The Queen." In the film, Prince Charles towered over Tony Blair. In fact, Prince Charles is a mere 5 feet 8. Her husband is over six feet. "Perhaps it's best that Tony kept his word to the Queen, after all," she mused.

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