**Leo Blair obituary**

Lawyer whose capacity for overcoming difficulties and flair for performance proved an inspiration to his son Tony

* [Julia Langdon](http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/julialangdon)
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Leo Blair, who until suffering a stroke at 40 had held the ambition of becoming prime minister, with his son Tony, who achieved it. Photograph: Toby Melville/PA

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the life, character and career of Leo Blair, who has died aged 89, on his son, [Tony Blair](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/tonyblair). The former [Labour](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/labour) party leader and prime minister inherited his ambition, drive and charm; his exceptional articulacy may well have been derived from his father's own theatrical antecedents.

Leo was a self-made man who had transformed his own unusual and impoverished childhood as a foster child in a Glasgow slum to become a highly successful lawyer. He, too, had wanted to be prime minister, but suffered a stroke brought on by overwork at the age of 40. For three years he was unable to speak, apart from being able to utter the single word "good".

As a consequence, he transferred his ambitions to his children. Tony, who was then aged 11, would subsequently describe his father's illness as one of the formative events of his life and as "the day my childhood ended". Leo was taught to speak again through the dedication of his wife, Hazel, and he also recovered the self-taught ability to play the piano.

Named after his astrological sign, Leo had an extremely complicated childhood and adolescence. His children later said that it did not damage him, but fuelled his own wish to succeed. He was reluctant to speak of it to his family. It was only when Tony reached political prominence that the new Labour party leader discovered the reason for his two middle names, Charles and Lynton.

Leo was born in Yorkshire to Augusta Bridson, the daughter of a middle-class army officer and his wayward wife, and there was clearly a reckless gene in the family. "Gussie" had run away to join the theatre, changed her name to Celia Ridgway, married twice and was divorced by her second husband when she conceived Leo with another actor called Charles Parsons, known on stage as Jimmy Lynton.

The stigma of illegitimacy was such that the parents asked a Glasgow couple they had met while touring in Scotland to foster the baby for them. They were James Blair, a shipyard rigger, whose work was subject to the employment vagaries of those difficult economic times, and his wife Mary, who had suffered two miscarriages and was desperate for a child. She was an ardent and committed communist.

Charles and Celia married when Leo was three years old, but it was only when he was 13 that they tried unsuccessfully to retrieve him from the Blairs and bring him to live with them in London. Mary Blair was so distraught at the fear of losing her fostered son, that she shut herself in at home and threatened to take her own life; Leo resolutely decided to stay with the only mother he had known, in the Glasgow tenement where five or six families shared a lavatory.

He kept letters from his mother and half-sisters in a biscuit tin under his bed, but after he had enlisted in the second world war his foster mother wrote to his birth parents to tell them that he was missing, believed killed in action. Knowing nothing of this, he believed his own family had lost interest in him, and it was only when Tony became Labour leader that Leo was reunited with his natural family. Leo became secretary of the Govan branch of the Scottish Young Communist League, aged 15, a post he held for three years. When he left school he got a job with the Daily Worker and wanted to become a Communist MP. He worked briefly for Glasgow corporation as a clerk, but in 1942 joined the Royal Signals as a private.

He was promoted to lieutenant and by the end of his war service was an acting major. His politics were transformed by his experience of life in the officers' mess, and he became a Conservative.

At the Ministry of National Insurance in Glasgow, where he then worked as a clerk, he met Hazel Corscaden (known as Hazel McLay, since her mother had remarried), an Irish Protestant from County Donegal, and they were married in November 1948. Leo joined the Inland Revenue, worked as a tax inspector and studied at night for a law degree at Edinburgh University.

When he qualified he accepted a job as a law lecturer at the University of Adelaide, travelling there with his wife and two sons, Tony and his older brother, William, at the end of 1954. Their daughter, Sarah, was born in Australia. All three children eventually followed their father into the law, William becoming a high court judge.

After their return to Britain, Leo lectured in law at Durham University, qualified as a barrister for the English bar and became active in Conservative politics. He was chairman of Durham Conservative Association, ready to try for any vacant Conservative seat and a popular and effective performer, particularly on regional television. He went down well with the Tory party faithful – his daughter-in-law, Cherie, once commented of her husband: "If you met his father, you'd see where he gets it."

Leo was immensely proud of Tony's success and after his son's election as leader in 1994 joined the Labour party. He became a visiting lecturer and chaired industrial tribunals. According to Tony, he was a "militant atheist".

Hazel died in June 1975. Leo's second wife, Olwen, died in March this year, and he is survived by his three children.

*•* Leo Charles Lynton Blair, born Charles Leonard Augustus Parsons, lawyer and academic, born 4 August 1923; died 16 November 2012