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Union leaders tell Blair to quit within the year

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TONY BLAIR is being urged by union leaders to quit Downing Street "sooner rather than later".

Despite a successful start to his new term the prime minister is being advised by trade union leaders to hand over to a new Labour leader within the year. The calls, on the eve of the Trades Union Congress conference, come ahead of a dinner with the prime minister and senior union figures on Tuesday at the event in Brighton.

Union chiefs also reserved judgment on Gordon Brown, saying they might not back him to succeed Blair. Whoever wants to be the next party leader will need strong support among the unions, which have a significant proportion of the vote in Labour's electoral college.

Tony Woodley, the general secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union, said last week that Blair should quit "sooner rather than later". Woodley believes Blair should resign by summer next year.

He argued that the new leader would need time to settle in before the next election, when Labour would face a tougher campaign than in the previous three victories. "I think we have got a prime minister who has made history, but we have got 60 seats with majorities of 1,000 or less. It's going to be difficult," he said. "Brown is clearly the favourite but his American-style policies do not make me very comfortable."

The head of Britain's biggest private sector union has also urged Blair to prepare to hand over power. Derek Simpson, the general secretary of Amicus, said Blair risked becoming "a lame duck".

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