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The Rev Peter Thomson obituary

Charismatic Australian Anglican priest who was a huge influence on Tony Blair

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Helen and Peter Thomson, left, with Cherie and Tony Blair during their Christmas holiday at the Thomsons' Victoria farm in 1995. Photograph: Graham Crouch/Newspix

Peter Thomson, who has died aged 73 of emphysema, was a "doer", a minister of the Anglican church of [Australia](#) with a very grounded view of religion. He had a talent for reading people like a book. For him, solving practical problems and making a difference to people's daily lives were a part of [Christianity](#) that talked about the word becoming flesh. This was the aim he pursued through his life in Australia, and for two periods in Britain, where he had a significant influence on [Tony Blair](#). These came first when Blair was a student at Oxford – spellbound from their first encounter, according to his biographer John Rentoul – and later, when Blair was preparing to become the new [Labour](#) prime minister.

For Peter, faith was all about relationships: it had to be anchored in daily life and human action to have meaning. Geoff Gallop, a member of the same Oxford circle, who went on to become premier of Western Australia (2000-06), described Peter as a hard-drinking, hard-smoking Australian who spoke it as he saw it. Like Blair, the young Gallop established a relationship with the somewhat older Peter, a mature student in his mid-30s, that shaped his life, faith and politics.

When Peter arrived at St John's College, Oxford, in 1972, he bawled his eyes out for two days, missing his young family. However, friendships and loyalties grew quickly and stood the test of time. The students loved the outrageous things Peter said, while respecting their basis in theology and politics. Gallop recalls how Peter helped Blair bring together his half-formed thoughts, sharing with him the ideas of the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, who, in his book *The Self as Agent* (1957), had proposed the formula: "All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship."

Peter returned to Australia, and Blair's impressive rise in opposition drew on the American communitarianism that also had a basis in Macmurray – a strand of thought evident in the slogan "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime". Blair became Labour leader in 1994, and the following year spent his first Christmas outside Britain at Peter's 158-acre farm in Victoria's high country on the edge of the Australian bush. The Blair-Gallop-Thomson friendship had evolved over the years, and Blair had by now

gone on to develop his own ideas, which in turn impressed Peter.

As a result, Peter moved to Britain, where, from 1996, he was a supportive friend to the Blair family up to and beyond the following year's general election. His position as vicar of St Luke's, West Holloway, north London, left him some time to join forces with Adele Blakebrough, Helen Taylor Thompson and me. Having each experienced the difficulty of dancing with the dinosaur of government, we wanted to develop a support network for like-minded social activists and so, in 1998, Community Action Network (CAN) was born.

Peter liked the businesslike approach of the social entrepreneur, seeing in our world a practical embodiment of much of his thinking. He understood quickly that future successful social action would all be about building relationships between social entrepreneurs and the business sector, and moving on from the dependency culture so often created by the charitable sector. Peter loved our work at the Bromley by Bow centre, in east London, and understood the "learning by doing" culture and community-building at its heart.

Peter saw in this work a demonstration of what so many politicians talk about, but fail to create in practice, through the theoretical machinations of the policy group. He worried that Blair was missing the crucial practical detail on the ground, and was surrounded by young advisers who had little or no practical experience of the real world. Government understood the shape of the forest but it had little idea what was going on under the trees, which he felt was a big mistake. Change was not top down or bottom up, but grew from the inside out, through the relationships and practical actions that people took together. He continued to play an active role in CAN until he became determined to set about comparable work in Australia, and, in 2001, left for his native Melbourne.

He had grown up in the city's south-eastern seaside suburb of Brighton, the competitive and sports-mad second of four children of strict but loving parents. His father's estate agency business in the northern suburb of Carlton was doing well enough for there to be a tennis court in the back garden of their house near the beach, and the family were regular churchgoers. On leaving school at 16, Peter collected rents for his father. He recognised his privileged background and wanted to do something more worthwhile. Studying at Ridley Theological College, in Carlton, introduced him to Macmurray's work, which taught him to think through religion in relationship to action. What became real for him, he once said, was that every time he was involved in action, everything came alive.

Peter's ordination in 1959 was central to his life. His calling felt right, and once he had become vicar of St Alban's, North Melbourne, he introduced jazz to services and provided a lounge and library for elderly parishioners. He met his wife Helen when a friend brought her along to help with painting the church basement. "She was such a beauty that I was like a two-year-old again," he once told me. They married in 1961, and the following year moved to Britain, and the rural parish of Fen Ditton, north-east of Cambridge.

Once back in Melbourne in 1963, Peter desperately wanted to be involved in community work and to connect faith and action, so he taught maths full-time at the local high school so that his stipend could go back towards the mortgage of his church of St James, East Thornbury, and its community work. This was a little too entrepreneurial for the church authorities – one of his ideas was to raise community morale by making the church a hairdressing salon led by Helen – and he was warned that if he continued he would be disobeying the bishop and would be sacked. He continued and was sacked.

Then he qualified as an estate agent. His time with the family firm (1966-68) impressed his father and he was offered a directorship, but Peter's heart was not in it, and he went back into the church. In 1969 he became school chaplain at Timbertop, the outback campus of the private Geelong grammar school that the Prince of Wales had attended in 1966, just before Peter's time. However, Boris Johnson, now mayor of London, was in

Peter's care once he returned from Oxford as principal of Timbertop in 1975 – he liked Boris, who was teaching there during his gap year, but thought him a little "wild".

Friends recall Peter running cross-country races with his uncertain adolescent charges and building strong relationships based on mutual respect. "Come on, you slack bugger, get up this hill," he would shout. "Yeah, you old bastard, I'll pass you on the next one," would be the reply. He was charismatic with a deep understanding of people; he could see through them. Community, individual achievement and respect for others were the lessons he wove into the curriculum. A generation of Australian leaders have been inspired by Peter. He moved to South Australia, as master of St Mark's College, Adelaide (1983-90), pursued his interest in community regeneration and advised the state government on social justice. From 1991 to 1996 he was dean of International House, Melbourne University, and master of the residential accommodation at Deakin University, Geelong.

After returning from Britain in 2001, Peter was chaplain of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, a large Australian welfare agency. Its chief executive officer, Nic Frances, had been at the centre of a thriving social business in Liverpool, and joined Peter in promoting the birth of the Social Entrepreneurs' Network (SEN) that same year. SEN spawned a social enterprise movement whose successes ranged from a remote Aboriginal community in the north-west developing a general store to the Samoan community reforming the crime-ridden Sydney suburb of Claymore, through a street barbecue that led to a neighbourhood watch scheme.

In the meantime, Blair joined his wife Cherie by becoming a Roman Catholic after resigning in 2007, and has since launched a faith foundation as the vehicle for his future projects. Once, when Neil Kinnock had asked Thomson to intervene in the early years of the Blair premiership, Peter refused. He knew the prime minister well enough to appreciate when his view was not needed: as he was fond of saying: "What people in Britain don't understand about Tony Blair is that basically he's an Australian."

Peter is survived by Helen and his children, Damian, Serena, Luke, Christian and Quentin.

Martin Wroe writes: The first I knew of Peter Thomson was a handwritten reference commending his application to become vicar in our north London parish of St Luke's, signed by the leader of the opposition, Tony Blair. We'd agreed to keep his appointment quiet to avoid a Sunday morning hack-fest, but Peter gave a lengthy interview to the *New Statesman*. I got into trouble for not telling my own then employers, the *Observer*. Pete got into more trouble, nearly sacked before he'd started, for waxing lyrical on his inclusive approach to gay clergy, terrifying the church patrons who ratify appointments.

Pete turned out to be a charmer, shining blue eyes twinkling from his crumpled features, mischievous laughter pursued by a hacking cough. "Bloody hell, mate, is that the time? I'll be right down!" I'd rung him to tell him there was a wedding party in the church garden, looking for a vicar. For a man so committed to this-worldly political transformation, a lot of the time he seemed to live in another world. He could get away with it because he had what most vicars need and too many don't have – warmth, time, interest, a human touch. As comfortable living in a tiny flat on a local estate as weekending at Chequers, burying people's loved ones as sneaking the controversial Catholic theologian Hans Küng into Downing Street. If there were a cluster of people after a service outside having a smoke, he'd be one of them. And he was always as forgivable as he was forgiving. "So warm," as one parishioner put it, "you could toast your feet on him."

• Peter Ashley Thomson, clergyman and social entrepreneur, born 19 March 1936; died 16 January 2010