

What needs to change...in foreign policy?

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"LET'S face facts. It's important for people like us, but there are no bloody votes in foreign affairs." It was about 10 years ago. A close advisor to Tony Blair had come to talk politics with Neil and me over dinner. This view was always an unwise one. In the decade since, it has become tragically absurd.

Over the last 10 years the distinction between domestic and external policy has become increasingly blurred, if not almost redundant. Much of foreign policy relates to home affairs and much of internal policy relates to international conditions. That is the nature of this global age, especially for a medium-sized power with a history of extensive world engagement and consequent significance in world institutions, like the United Kingdom.

2007 will bring a new Prime Minister, hopefully Gordon Brown. He will, I believe, give clear priority to issues of global importance. In doing that he will need to identify the links between human rights, human security and counter-terrorism. And he will also need to consider adjustments to foreign policy that, among other things, will mean stepping out the shadow of the special relationship and being prepared to courteously but candidly disagree with the US on Kyoto, the International Criminal Court, the Chemical Weapons Convention, Guantanamo, "extraordinary rendition" and much else. This is not merely important for regaining distinctiveness for UK policy; it is vital to the efforts to strengthen the common sense and common interest of multilateralism against the systemic unilateralism of the Republican administration.

We will not regain respect and proper influence for British foreign policy until we have a foreign policy that is seen to be authentically British. Tony Blair was no doubt sincere in believing that unflinching support for America after 9/11 was the best way to exert influence over the direction of American policy. The problem is that his support has been abused and not requited. The

observation of one state department official about America's approach to Britain- "we typically ignore them and take no notice" - should not have come as a shock. It comes through the "Yo Blair" school of politics and it generates a global perception that will remain unchanged until it is understood that the special relationship, as currently conceived, is part of the problem not part of the answer.

Foreign policy adjustments also mean distancing Britain from the term "War on Terror". The phrase - never used in Britain in 30 years of Northern Ireland emergency - endows terrorists with the accolade of being "warriors". They are delighted by that. More worrying than the words and their implications, however, is the fact that the term diverts attention and energy away from the spectrum of policies necessary to contest and diminish terrorism. Armed violence must obviously be resisted and combated by military response. If that is the sole or main reaction to terrorism, however, it will never be enough. Persistent and generous efforts to reduce poverty, to spread education and employment opportunity, to increase the stability and security of communities are vital to any rational anti-terrorist strategy.

To have legitimacy, a doctrine of military intervention needs to be grounded in a consistent set of principles. Apart from clear-cut cases of self-defence, such as Afghanistan, intervention needs to be justified with reference to accepted humanitarian principles. These were largely spelt out in The Responsibility to Protect report produced by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. The problem with the Iraq war is that it was seen to have been conducted largely for reasons of geopolitical self-interest, with humanitarian concerns grafted on to provide political cover. If it is to survive, as it must, the idea of humanitarian intervention needs to be decoupled from great power interests and rooted in a much broader international consensus.

The need for that is reinforced by the reality that there is tragically now a proliferation of the organisations and causes that are using murder to further political, religious and ethnic purposes. The inability of the mighty to suppress and defeat that Hydra of violence is a compelling lesson of the last five years.

In place of the "War on Terror" terminology and mentality we need to categorise terrorist crimes less as acts of war and more as crimes against humanity. That means understanding what actually fuels political and religious radicalisation - and it means stronger collaboration and cooperation between governments, multilateral institutions, police intelligence and law enforcement agencies, and, crucially, the people of the communities that are beset by the zealots.

The UK has made very positive contributions to the understanding of the need for global, social and economic justice and human rights. Our government has been at the vanguard of efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals and has doubled resources for development to move nearer to the 0.7% of GNP target. The focus has been on the world's poorest countries, there have been real advances in the untying of aid, and Gordon Brown has worked relentlessly to increase debt relief.

However, we can detect that there is some inconsistency when geopolitical or trade interests come into play. In the places and the times where those factors are mainly absent the UK is - rightly - tough, for example on Burma and/or Zimbabwe. The larger, manifestly more powerful states, like Russia, Saudi Arabia and China are not subjected to similar criticism and pressure despite justifying international condemnation. Policies on arms transfers also contradict the strong position that the UK adopts on human rights. Several states listed as "major areas of concern" by the Foreign Office are receiving licensed military equipment. There needs to be a tightening of controls and a strengthening in the provisions and enforcement of the European Union Code of Conduct.

Meanwhile as the debate on Trident rises in volume it is clear that Britain should neither add to proliferation nor weaken its ability to invest in more pressing areas of economic, climate, military and civil security by undertaking to replace Trident with a new nuclear weapons system. Trident replacement is a missed opportunity for Britain to show that it is able to relate to the perils that confront the post-Cold War world and face up to those dangers while

setting a positive example of international responsibility. There is really no military justification for a country like Britain to sustain a Trident nuclear arsenal.

Concerted engagement to deal with tensions in the world is essential when the mandate and purpose of international organisations are being called into question. The UN, the EU and the Bretton Woods institutions are all struggling with an identity crisis coupled with low ratings among the global public. The UK has an important role to play in dealing with the reasons for those negatives and ensuring that we can promote our progressive foreign policy values.

Both missions involve strengthening our natural alliances and relationships with a community of democratic neighbouring states in the EU. On the Middle East, for instance, the Chirac-Zapatero exclusive exchange - with contacts with Prodi - should be recognised as a clear signal that the UK needs to come in out of the cold if our country is to have the influence which it can and should deploy on policy and conduct. Indeed in the next few months there will not only be a new Prime Minister in Britain; there will also be a new President in France. Surely this could, if properly used, provide an opportunity to overcome the Franco-British antagonism that has been one of the most damaging legacies of the Iraq war. British foreign policy, influence and potential for international mediation will be stronger when we speak collectively and convincingly with and through the EU. And, as that is done, Cameron and Hague have to be challenged when they say that we don't need to work closely with the rest of Europe. Their chronic nationalist introversion combined with their new internationalist headline grabbing betrays an almost comic inconsistency. It should be exposed - not just for entertainment, but to demonstrate their deep seriousness deficit.

Robin Cook attracted right wing derision when Foreign Secretary for believing in an "ethical basis" for foreign policy. But the wisdom and practicality of this is increasingly evident. The ability to choose between right and wrong increases the possibility of winning and keeping trust. So ethical and progressive values

must colour all of Labour's actions. That's not the implausible idea of the UK as knight in shining armour, brandishing a Union Jack and charging to the rescue of the world. The reality of the UK working with others - leading others - for the greater stability, security, prosperity and liberty of the people of the planet is practical and plausible. That should be our foreign policy for the future.

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