

## Ethics and Foreign Policy: the Antinomies of New Labour's 'Third Way' in Sub-Saharan Africa

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This article explores how New Labour has attempted to implement its ideas about a 'third way' foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa. Through an examination of British foreign policy practices, we explore whether New Labour has succeeded in finding a 'third way' between traditional views of socialism and capitalism in Africa. In particular, the article focuses on New Labour's attempts to build peace, prosperity and democracy on the African continent. We conclude that although New Labour's claims to add an 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy have succeeded in giving Britain a higher profile in the international arena, the implementation of such a policy is intrinsically difficult. These difficulties in turn arise from the antinomies embodied in New Labour's policy, or more specifically from the tension between the liberal internationalism of the third way and traditional concerns for the national interest, as well as the contradictions inherent in a commitment to both political and economic liberalism.

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New Labour's foreign policy has been mired in criticism and controversy almost since Foreign Secretary Robin Cook first uttered the by now infamous phrase 'ethical dimension' (1997a). First, it was the so-called 'arms to Africa' affair, then the controversial bombing of Iraq, the continued export of arms to Indonesia, and the state visit by the Chinese President. More recently, events in Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe have proved testing cases for the Labour government. There is nothing *new*, and certainly nothing particularly '*ethical*' about New Labour's foreign policy, the critics claim. Instead international relations under the Labour government are conducted in more or less the same manner as under previous administrations, that is, with a calculating eye to the national interest and Britain's international reputation.

This article provides a critical assessment of New Labour's policies in sub-Saharan Africa. As part of its commitment to add an 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy, the government has pledged to give the African continent 'a new priority on the international agenda' (Lloyd, 1999). The article discusses three core themes of New Labour's third way in sub-Saharan Africa, namely peace, prosperity and democracy, and reviews the way in which New Labour has sought to further these causes on the continent. We conclude that although the government's claim to prioritize the 'ethical dimension' has succeeded in giving Britain a higher profile in the international arena, the implementation of such a foreign policy is intrinsically difficult. These difficulties in turn arise from the antinomies embodied in New Labour's approach, or more specifically from the tension between the liberal internationalism of the third way and traditional concerns for the national interest, as well as the contradictions inherent in a commitment to both political and economic liberalism.

## A 'Third Way' Foreign Policy?

After their election victory in May 1997, the Labour Party promised not only a radical change in domestic politics, but also a new approach to foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Elected on a commitment to the principles of social justice – to security, health, education and equality – New Labour announced that these values were also to form the basis of the government's international endeavours. In an increasingly globalized and interdependent world, the argument went, the separation of domestic and foreign policy no longer made sense. Instead both had to be guided by the same principles and the same commitments.

The debate about how Britain should seek to balance the promotion of the traditional goals of foreign policy (national security and commercial prosperity) with an 'ethical dimension' was initiated by the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook only ten days into New Labour's term in office (1997a).<sup>2</sup> The notion of global interdependence played a key role in this debate. Distant events, it was argued, can have a direct and immediate impact on the daily lives of Britons, in the same way as the decisions and actions taken by the people and government of Britain can affect the choices and possibilities of other states and societies. Global warming, deforestation, polluted and over-fished oceans, and the spread of AIDS are only some examples of challenges that show no respect for national frontiers. As the boundary between the national and the international is becoming increasingly blurred, so the traditional distinction between domestic and foreign policy is also eroding. This recognition led Labour to argue that foreign policy 'should not be seen as some self-contained part of government in a box marked 'abroad' or 'foreigners'. It should compliment and reflect our domestic goals. It should be part of our mission of domestic renewal' (Blair, 1997). For the Foreign Secretary this means that the 'Labour Government does not accept that political values can be left behind when we check in our passports to travel on diplomatic business' (Cook, 1997a).

Since 1998 this project has become incorporated into the notion of a 'third way'. Under Tony Blair's leadership, and with the help of several intellectuals like Anthony Giddens (1998; 2000) and Will Hutton (1996), the Labour government has tried to translate this rather nebulous concept into concrete political strategies for dealing with the challenges arising from globalization (see also Hargreaves and Christie, 1998). Blair regards the third way as 'a new politics arising from the ashes of the struggles of the twentieth century between traditional views of capitalism and of socialism', a politics that 'seeks to combine economic dynamism with social justice' (1999). He further contends that the third way 'is founded on the values which have guided progressive politics for more than a century – democracy, liberty, justice, mutual obligation and internationalism' (Blair, 1998, p. 1).

A commitment to a third way foreign policy is by implication a commitment to the poorer countries of the world. The extent to which the third way has occasioned a substantial change in Britain's relationship with Africa thus becomes one way of evaluating New Labour's performance. In the post-cold war era Africa has become increasingly marginalized as both its economic and strategic importance has declined, and the Labour government has stated its intention to push the continent higher up the international agenda (Lloyd, 1999).<sup>3</sup>

In its most general pronouncements, the third way in Africa is about promoting and supporting positive change through equitable relationships based on mutual respect. Positive change is here defined with reference to the accepted tenets of contemporary development discourse, namely 'good governance, human rights and sound economic policies' (Lloyd, 1999). The third way also embodies a commitment to international co-operation, and a desire to strengthen Africa's own regional organizations as well as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (Cook, 1998; Lloyd, 1999). A notable initiative in this respect was the Anglo-French St Malo summit, which attempted to overcome old imperial divisions and to pool resources in order to maximize development benefits. Other examples of such co-operation include the UK-South Africa Declaration signed in Pretoria, 7 January 1999, as well as British support for the development of the East Africa Community.

In more policy specific terms, the third way in Africa is designed to build lasting peace, prosperity and democracy. According to New Labour, these are the three key challenges facing Africa at the dawn of the twenty-first century, and consequently they form the core of British policy towards the continent (Cook, 1998; Hain, 1999a; Lloyd, 1999). The rest of this article is devoted to a more detailed discussion of these policies as they relate to sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Preventing Conflict and Building Peace?**

In its first annual report on human rights, New Labour recognized that 'the most effective way to end human rights violations in conflict is by preventing conflict in the first place' (FCO, 1998, p. 19). The British approach to conflict prevention was subsequently given more definition in Robin Cook's speech to the UN General Assembly, and the major themes he identified have since been reiterated by a number of ministers (Cook, 1999; Hain, 1999b). In this speech, Cook pointed to five priority areas for action. First, Britain must help tackle the root causes of conflict, that is, it must fight poverty and promote sustainable development. Second, human rights and good governance must be encouraged to ensure government that rules with the consent of its people. Third, the supply of weapons (including small arms) that fuel conflicts must be curbed. Fourth, the illegal trade in diamonds and other precious commodities that have paid for huge quantities of small arms and mercenaries must be prevented. Finally, the emerging 'culture of impunity' must be countered. 'Those who break international humanitarian law', Cook argued, 'must know that they will be held to account'.

Despite these noble intentions, Cook remained only too aware that violent conflict cannot always be averted. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, 20 out of 45 countries are in conflict, causing an estimated 4000 deaths a week (Hain, 2000a). In order to assist in such situations, Britain has entered into a Standby Agreement with the UN by earmarking forces available for emergency peacekeeping work. The government has also pledged an increased number of police available for UK operations to help maintain civil as well as military order. Furthermore, Britain has committed itself to help build peace by providing political support for conflict resolution, giving practical help to consolidate peace through demobilization, disarmament and rehabilitation, and by boosting Africa's own long-term peacekeeping ability (Lloyd, 1999). Such projects have involved the DFID and the MoD as well as the

FCO with the latter keen to highlight that Britain contributed over 6.5 percent of the cost of UN Peacekeeping Operations in 1997 (FCO, 1998, p. 19). However, it is significant that despite being plagued by several major conflicts, Africa has received a relatively small proportion of the UN's peacekeeping budget in comparison with other areas of the globe such as the Federal Yugoslav Republic.<sup>4</sup> In terms of countering the 'culture of impunity', legislation designed to build a permanent and fully operational International Criminal Court has not yet been ratified by the British government.

Britain's recent role in Sierra Leone seems a better example of how New Labour has tried to operationalize its third way foreign policy. The government, of course, has unhappy memories of this small West African country, following the 'arms to Africa' scandal in 1998 when the FCO was found to have colluded with the military consultancy firm Sandline International to bring 30 tonnes of arms and ammunition into Sierra Leone (see Foreign Affairs Select Committee, 1999). Not only was this in contravention of the UN arms embargo, but the government's apparent support of Sandline also contradicted its official stance against the use of mercenaries on the continent. Having defended the elected government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah at such great costs to itself, the Labour government was poised to support it again when the Lomé Peace Accord broke down and war erupted once again in May 2000.

The government's decision to intervene in Sierra Leone stands in need of an explanation. It seems clear that Britain could have withdrawn from the country shortly after the successful evacuation of its nationals. Although such a course of action might well have occasioned some domestic and international criticism, the decision to commit more troops was hardly less risky in terms of inviting public condemnation. It is also clear that economic interests alone cannot explain Britain's involvement, since despite Sierra Leone's rich mineral deposits British investments are negligible (Zack-Williams, 2000). It seems then that at least some of the explanation for Britain's deployment of some 1,300 troops in this small country can be located in New Labour's 'ethical' commitment, or put differently in the moral outrage that the RUF's atrocities produced. This was also evident in New Labour's defence of their prolonged involvement, which was couched in terms of democracy, human rights and the future credibility of UN peacekeeping operations.

Angola is another country where New Labour has made positive efforts at building peace. Recognizing that Angola was Africa's worst Cold War victim and that UNITA and its leader Jonas Savimbi were creations of the West, the FCO has pledged to help isolate and defeat UNITA (Hain, 1999c). In particular, efforts have been made to stop the illicit diamond trade that has financed UNITA's operations, and in June 2000 Britain hosted a meeting where representatives of the diamond industry agreed plans for a global certification scheme for rough diamonds (Hain, 2000b). While one should have no illusions as to the ease with which the trade in 'conflict diamonds' can be stopped, the Labour government's efforts in this regard could help bring an end to violence in not only Angola, but also Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

On the issue of arms and light weapons, the fit between New Labour's words and deeds is less impressive. Britain has supported the Action Programme for Southern Africa, which was launched following a May 1998 workshop sponsored by DFID

and organized by two NGOs, Saferworld and the South African Institute for Security Studies. The Action Programme includes a commitment to 'reverse the culture of violence' in Southern African states (Cooper, 1999, p. 14). British ministers have also endorsed the EU's programme on Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms at the EU/Southern African Development Community (SADC) summit (November 1998) and the West African Small Arms Moratorium.

However, a serious commitment to a third way foreign policy would require Britain to work towards reducing its own arms sales to Africa. The government's repeated assurances that it will not grant any more licences for arms exports that might be used for internal repression or torture makes little sense on a continent where few states have any external enemies to speak of. In the long-term, there can be little doubt that peace and security requires demilitarization. As one South African analyst argued, 'arms sales simply perpetuate the cold war mentality of international military competition and wasteful expenditure on weapons systems that cannot guarantee security' (Shelton, 1998, p. 36). Yet, at the same time as the DFID conference on light weapons, the British government was engaged in an aggressive and successful campaign to persuade the South African government to purchase UK arms as part of a larger package amounting to some US\$4.8 billion (Cooper, 1999, p. 14).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, spare parts supplied by Britain for Zimbabwe's fleet of Hawk jets have in practice only served to fuel the conflict in the DRC. Such arms exports will continuously put Britain in a contradictory position; trying to keep the peace, while simultaneously supplying the warriors with weapons. This was dramatically illustrated by the *Daily Mail's* front page featuring a child soldier in Sierra Leone brandishing a British-made rifle (30 May 2000).

Britain's stance on the arms industry illustrates some of the difficulties involved in implementing a third way foreign policy. Britain has one of the largest arms industries in the world, employing some 400,000 people across the country. The government's responsibility towards the job security of these people stands in an uneasy relationship with the commitment to protect the human rights of foreigners. As long as Britain maintains an export oriented defence industry a fundamental tension will be contained within New Labour's desire to promote peace and human rights abroad, and lofty ideals will continue to be attenuated by the necessities of domestic politics. A clear example of this is the government's recent decision to exclude a planned bill designed to regulate the British arms trade from the Queen's speech in November 2000 (*The Guardian*, 28 February 2000; 23 August 2000).

All in all, New Labour has a mixed record on conflict prevention and peace building in sub-Saharan Africa. There are some notable efforts and achievements, but some equally glaring oversights and policy blunders. Viewed from a continental perspective, New Labour's interventions and contributions to military training and security sector reform can also be regarded as relatively minor, especially given the prevalence and intractability of conflict in the region. Moreover, it should be noted that the novelty of the government's approach appears to be somewhat exaggerated. Support for peace building projects is by no means exclusive to New Labour. In 1994, for example, the Conservative Prime Minister, John Major supported the establishment of a peace keeping force of between 1,000 and 1,500 African troops, trained, equipped and financed by France and other European powers, and

eventually the EU (Rye Olsen, 1997, p. 314). In addition, the 'good government' strategy of the previous administration included support for the promotion of human rights throughout Africa.

Although New Labour recognizes that economic deprivation is a cause of violent conflict, and that peace therefore requires economic improvements (FCO, 1999a, p. 34), its Africa policy continues to conform to the parameters set by the IMF and the World Bank. As the next section will show, this approach is not without problems. In the context of peace building, Cook's perfectly reasonable observation that '[i]f we want armed parties to a conflict to lay down their arms, then realistically we must demonstrate to them that they also have a better economic future in peace' (1998), may be difficult to put into practice given the economic austerity measures promoted by the international financial institutions.

### **Building Prosperity?**

Poverty, the Secretary of State for International Development Clare Short, argues 'is the biggest moral challenge facing the world' (Short, 1999a). The persistence of abject poverty is an affront to a government that perceives the world as interdependent, and where the commitment to reducing poverty at home is seen to confer 'on us a moral obligation to fight poverty abroad' (Cook, 1998). In line with New Labour's vision of global interdependence, moral duty abroad is easily reconciled with 'hard-nosed' national self-interest, as a wealthy and prosperous Africa is seen to benefit not only Africans, but also Britons and the world in general. The global economy, according to Cook (1998), is not a zero sum game. 'If we are all prosperous, we all win. If there is widespread poverty, we all lose.' This, then, is the rationale behind the second aim of British policy in Africa, namely to build prosperity on the continent.

There are three central aspects to Britain's strategy for encouraging economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, namely, the promotion of free and fair trade, the reduction of debt, and the enlargement and refocusing of the development aid programme. Among these goals, it is Britain's leading role in the initiative to reduce the debt burden of the world's poorest and most indebted countries that has attracted most attention. The Chancellor Gordon Brown was instrumental in securing agreement for a new debt relief package at the G7 Summit in Cologne in June 1999, and Britain was also central in the final financial negotiations increasing its own contributions to \$221 million – thereby ensuring that sufficient money was forthcoming from other major creditors. The \$23 billion assistance package was intended to increase the number of countries eligible for debt write-offs, as well as speed up the implementation of relief so that many countries would be able to reap the benefits by the end of 2000. Despite such improvements, Jubilee 2000 has warned that under the latest package outlined after the G7 Summit in Okinawa by the end of 2000 only 7 percent of the total debt owed by the HIPC countries will have been cancelled, and even in 2005 the percentage written off will be just 42 percent (2000). Currently, only nine countries are receiving debt relief and no country has had its debts cancelled.

Another central element of the Labour government's approach to foreign policy was a renewed commitment to development. Britain's foreign aid had declined

steadily under the Tories, accounting for only 0.26 percent of GNP by the time they left office (DFID, 1999). As part of its effort to reverse this decline, the Labour government established a separate Department for International Development (DFID), which in November 1997 published the first White Paper on international development for over 20 years. The symbolic value of this Paper far outweighs its practical value as a tool for the eradication of poverty. It enabled the government not only to differentiate itself from the previous administration, but also to claim the moral high ground in terms of its dedication to the world's poorer countries. Apart from the announcement that British aid should no longer have the parallel aim of promoting UK business interests, the Paper contains little new in terms of policy prescriptions or future commitments. It describes the overall aim of DFID as 'the elimination of poverty in poorer countries', and its policy proposals and recommendations are rather general, emphasizing traditional areas such as primary education and health (DFID, 1997). The key target of the White Paper is to halve the proportion of the world's people living in extreme poverty by 2015, but given the limited aid budgets of Britain and other Western countries this seems a rather empty slogan. That said, the government has pledged to increase its aid budget by 28 percent in real terms by 2001, bringing the total to more than £3,000 million a year (FCO, 1999b). Such an increase, however, would only bring British aid up to about 0.3 percent of GNP, about the same level as it was under the Conservatives in 1993 and still significantly below the international target set by the UN at 0.7 percent of GNP. Although the government has committed itself to reaching this target, no date has been given as to when this will be achieved (FCO, 1999b).

Not only are such promises rather limited and disappointing, but New Labour's policy proposals for stimulating economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa also contain little new and remain steeped in economic liberalism. Like most Western donor countries, the government follows the World Bank's lead when it comes to development policy. Since the late 1980s, the World Bank has established itself as the intellectual leader of the donor community (see Gibbon, 1993), and has been the driving-force behind the formulation and refinement of contemporary development orthodoxy, the so-called 'good governance' agenda. Although this agenda represents a move away from the crude economic liberalism of the 1980s, in that it pays more attention to the state and its relationship to society, current development policy retains a strong commitment to economic liberalization (see World Bank, 1989, 1992, 1997). Political and economic liberalization are now regarded as mutually reinforcing processes, and the aim is to reform *both* the state and the economy. A reformed and democratized state is expected to be more successful in terms of implementing economic adjustment measures, and current development orthodoxy accordingly recommends institutional and democratic reforms, as well as continued structural adjustment. This was clearly stated in the World Bank's 1994 report *Adjustment in Africa: Reforms, Results and the Road Ahead*, which argued that 'adjustment is the necessary first step on the road to sustainable, poverty-reducing growth' (1994, p. 15).

The same basic postulates underpin New Labour's development policy. The White Paper speaks of a 'virtuous state' and 'pro-poor' growth, and thus seeks to overcome the old ideological divide between capitalism and socialism (DFID, 1997, 1.16, 2.10). At the same time, the government recognizes that the IMF and the World Bank

will be at the centre of future development efforts and endorses the IMF's contributions to the establishment of 'sound macro-economic and financial policies' in developing countries (DFID, 1997, 2.10).

This representation serves to gloss over the potential contradictions and conflicts between economic liberalism and social justice, which emerge instead as two easily reconcilable goals. This in turn is a central feature of the third way and its effort to bridge the gap between traditional notions of capitalism and socialism. The third way, according to Blair, not only combines economic dynamism and social justice, but each depends on the other. In short, if 'a country generates no wealth, it cannot afford social justice' (Blair, 1999). Following this line of reasoning, New Labour has not only endorsed structural adjustment programmes, but also praised the ANC's shift towards neo-liberal economic policies in South Africa. Indeed, the abandonment of the socialist principles that guided the ANC during the liberation struggle is seen as necessary for economic growth and Blair has argued that South Africa's 'Growth, Employment and Redistribution' (GEAR) strategy has set the country 'on a course to tackle the needs of the disadvantaged, while retaining the confidence of the market' (1999). In fact, Blair was so enamoured with GEAR that he dubbed it the 'Third Way, South Africa style'.

Measured against New Labour's declared commitment to reducing poverty and protecting the disadvantaged, however, such statements are problematic. The negative social consequences of structural adjustment programmes are by now well known and documented, and need no detailed elaboration. Suffice to mention that it is widely reported that such policies tend to worsen the living standards of the already poor by depressing employment and real incomes, and by cutting public expenditure on health, education and other services (see Cornia *et al.*, 1987; Caufield, 1997; Chossudovsky, 1997; Hoogvelt, 1997). Although safety nets for the poor and vulnerable have now been incorporated into the structural adjustment package, the overall design of the programmes remain largely unaltered, and in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa these programmes have significantly increased the suffering of the majority of the population.

A telling illustration of the tensions between the pursuit of economic liberalism and social justice is provided by Zambia, where the economic policies of President Frederick Chiluba's government have led to a dramatic increase in unemployment and poverty. Through one of Africa's most ambitious privatization programmes, designed with substantial assistance and encouragement from Western donors, the government has succeeded in privatizing about 90 percent of state owned companies and public utilities. The result has been widespread retrenchment – nearly 80,000 have lost their jobs since the start of the programme. De-industrialization has emerged as a trend, as trade liberalization has caused small-scale businesses to collapse in the face of foreign competition. Studies by leading civil society groups show that over 70 percent of the population now live in poverty (*The Economist* 1993; Mukwita, 2000).

The criticisms of GEAR in South Africa have been equally damning (see Marais, 1998). Not only has GEAR failed to meet its specified targets (Blumenfeld, 1999), it has also presided over rising inequality, increased unemployment and job insecurity, and has privileged the demands of internationally mobile capital over the



interests of South Africa's poor. Given their position on the relationship between economic dynamism and social justice, however, New Labour is left with virtually no room to criticize the negative social consequences of economic liberalism in sub-Saharan Africa. Instead, economic policies that marginalize large sections of the local population appear as intrinsic to the third way.

Similar tensions between New Labour's commitment to social justice and economic liberalism resurface again over the issue of free trade. As part of its pledge to promote prosperity in Africa, Britain has promised to demand that African countries get a fair deal in international trade negotiations (Cook, 1998). Accordingly, as the Seattle round of world trade negotiations got underway, Clare Short made the case for this Round to be a 'development Round' that would 'work for the world's poor' (Short, 1999b). There are no contradictions between free trade and the interests of the poor and the poorer countries, according to Short. Instead the trade liberalization that has taken place so far has benefited poor countries. The fact that some countries have failed to reap the full benefits of international trade is primarily because of 'fundamental structural weaknesses in their economies', not because of 'protectionism in industrial country markets' (ibid.).

Many African countries have a different reading of the situation, arguing that the dismantling of trade barriers and import controls frequently benefit the economically stronger countries at the expense of the weaker. During the Commonwealth Summit in Edinburgh in October 1997, for example, the poorer member states initially opposed the call by the richer members for a new round of world trade negotiations. Although the Summit eventually agreed its first economic charter committing the Commonwealth to free market principles, the document entitled *Promoting Shared Prosperity* revealed a clear division between rich and poor member states. While Blair described the charter as 'an important and exciting' opportunity for the Commonwealth to play a dynamic part in global trade and investment, former South African President Nelson Mandela cautioned that the declaration was not binding and that many delegates had reservations about or were opposed to free market principles. Chief Emeka Anyaoku, the Commonwealth Secretary General, also warned that the benefits of globalization had been unequally distributed and that for many developing countries, globalization meant further marginalization (Johnson, 1997). This conflict is telling, in that it illustrates the difficulties of combining a commitment to poverty reduction with the liberal values associated with free trade. New Labour might portray itself as the champion of the rights of the underprivileged in the global market place, but poor countries themselves frequently perceive free trade as a threat to their interests.

To a certain extent, similar reservations apply to New Labour's call for debt reduction for the most heavily indebted countries. According to the proposals, debt reduction only comes into play once a country has followed the economic policies stipulated by the World Bank and IMF. Previously a country needed a record of six years of satisfactory economic adjustment before qualifying for debt relief, but this period will be reduced to three years according to the Cologne initiative. Importantly though, the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies remains a condition for debt relief, and this could erode the benefits of this scheme for the poor. In principle debt relief is linked to poverty reduction, so that the income generated

should be channelled to hospitals, schools and basic services. In practice, however, these services may have deteriorated – and continue to do so – precisely because of the economic conditions set by the international financial institutions, and supported by Britain.

It seems then that despite New Labour's claim to export its domestic values, this does not happen in its international economic policy. New Labour's position on international economics is distinctively less social democratic than its domestic policies (Wilkinson, 2000). As Colin Hay has persuasively argued, despite the party's constant 'invocation of novelty', in practice it has submitted to a politics of 'conspicuous convergence' that accepts both neo-liberal economic principles and the legacy of the Thatcher years (1999). With very few exceptions, 'the Labour government conceives neither of the need for, *nor indeed the possibility of*, ... an alternative to the ascendant neo-liberalism of the times' (Hay, 1999, p. 135).

### **Building Democracy?**

New Labour's third key ambition in sub-Saharan Africa is to promote democracy. The Government has promised to be a 'friend of democracy' on the continent and to 'work for the observance of the Harare principles of human rights and democratic government' (Cook, 1998). In this respect, however, there is nothing particularly new or innovative about New Labour's policies towards Africa. Following the publication of the World Bank's 1989 report *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, democracy or 'good governance' became the buzzword of development discourse. The report identified 'bad governance' as the root cause of Africa's development predicament, and argued, albeit in a rather convoluted manner, that democracy was conducive to prosperity and sustainable development on the continent. Accordingly, the World Bank urged bilateral donors to direct their aid only to countries pursuing sound and sustained reform programmes, and within a year of the Report's publication most major donor countries and multilateral institutions had made development assistance conditional on reforms towards good governance and liberal democracy.

In the post-Cold War era then, the promotion of a particular form of liberal democracy has become an integral part of most countries' foreign and development policy (see Robinson, 1996; Sørensen, 1993). The previous Conservative government in Britain was in fact one of the first to endorse this new agenda. Already in June 1990, former Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd announced that 'Countries which tend towards pluralism, public accountability, respect for the rule of law, human rights, [and] market principles should be encouraged'. At the same time he warned that governments that persist with repressive policies 'should not expect us to support them in their folly with scarce aid resources' (in ODI, 1992, p. 1). In line with this reasoning, most donors have attempted to direct their development assistance towards areas that can help build and sustain an open and free society, including the provision of electoral monitors, funding for civil society associations, support to establish independent judiciaries, training for journalists, and help in tackling corruption.

On the issue of democracy New Labour can thus be seen not only to follow in the footsteps of the Conservative administration, but also to be in broad agreement

with most multilateral and bilateral donors who all regard democracy as central to development. In contemporary development discourse, democracy appears as an unproblematic concept, an unquestionable good about which there is little or no difference of opinion. This is also the case in New Labour's policy pronouncements. While recognizing that Africa is a diverse continent, and claiming respect for that diversity, New Labour regards certain principles and values as universal. Referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, these rights include people's ability to choose their leaders, their basic freedoms and the rule of law. Again the notion of global interdependence informs the government's position; these are 'rights that we claim for ourselves and which we therefore have a duty to demand for those who do not yet enjoy them' (Cook, 1997c).

What disappears from these representations is the contested nature of the concept of democracy. Far from being unproblematic or unitary, democracy is one of the most contested and controversial concepts in political theory. Put simply, there is not one, but many, frequently conflicting, democratic discourses and democracy can mean different things to different people (see Abrahamsen, 2000; Gallie, 1955/56; Held, 1987). In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, New Labour and other aid donors can be seen to promote and advocate a particular form of liberal democracy that is compatible with continued economic liberalization. While this vision of democracy may well be endorsed by domestic elites in many African countries, it is not necessarily the form of democracy sought by the majority of the continent's poor people.

On the contrary, it has been widely reported that popular movements for political change in sub-Saharan Africa frequently originated in a deep dissatisfaction with deteriorating standards of living, and that 'bread and butter' issues dominated many campaigns for political reform (Bratton and van de Walle, 1992). In other words, popular protests were not only directed against African incumbents, but were also revolts against structural adjustment programmes as a main contributor to the escalation of poverty and suffering. This was clearly the case in Zambia, where mass riots against President Kenneth Kaunda's one-party state were first triggered by the decision in June 1990 to remove food subsidies in accordance with demands from the Bretton Woods institutions. As a result, the price of maize meal (the staple food) more than doubled, and at least thirty people died in the ensuing civil unrest in Lusaka and in other regional towns on the Copperbelt (Ihonvbere, 1996; Baylies and Szeftel, 1992).

Popular demands for democracy in Zambia, as well as in many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa were not only demands for political rights, but also for concrete social and economic rights. For the thousands of people that took to the streets in Lusaka and other towns and cities, democracy was not only about the right to vote, but also about the right to a decent standard of living for themselves and their families. Lest we should be misunderstood, this is not to dismiss electoral democracy as unimportant, nor to say that poor people are not concerned about how they are governed. Democracy may offer protection against oppression by a tyrannical state and this is of course of immeasurable importance. But so is freedom from hunger, ignorance and ill-health. The majority of impoverished people value political and civil rights not only because it offers protection from oppression, but also because

it opens up political space for demanding social and economic rights. Seen in this light, political rights are a means to the end of a decent way of life.

The contested nature of democracy is thus apparent. Whereas popular demands for democracy in many African states embodied clear social-democratic, welfarist aspirations, the international financial institutions and the Labour government regard democracy as intrinsically linked to economic liberalism. By locking democracy to continued economic adjustment in this manner, New Labour and the international donor community in general may rule out reforms towards a more just and equitable social order. In this way, the democracy advocated by New Labour may not only be at variance with the vision of democracy held by the majority of people, but it may actually increase the suffering of vast sections of the population, at least in the short term.

### Concluding Comments

When New Labour took office in May 1997, Robin Cook vowed to make Britain 'a force for good in the world' (1997a). Britain was to become 'a champion of the oppressed', a defender of peace and democracy (Cook, 1997b). Despite such radical claims, until recently, relatively little attention has been devoted to addressing the implications of the third way in foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> This is partly because of a deep-seated scepticism about the possibilities for a significant shift in British foreign policy (Hill, 1996, pp. 152–3; Martin and Garnett, 1997, pp. 82–5). The former Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd gave voice to this scepticism when arguing that, despite all the rhetoric, New Labour had merely adjusted the foreign policy compass by 'two or three points'. What Hurd found most annoying was the pretence 'that a shift of two or three degrees is a shift of 180 degrees and that all [New Labour's] predecessors were immoral rogues' (1997, p. 25).

To a certain extent, our discussion confirms Hurd's point. The Labour government has been extremely successful at 'branding' itself as ethical and caring, and by implication as *different* from previous administrations. However, not only is there relatively little new about New Labour's policy towards sub-Saharan Africa when compared to previous Conservative administrations, but in the post-Cold War era most Western countries have incorporated democracy and human rights into their foreign policy rhetoric. As such, New Labour is not alone in adding an 'ethical dimension' to its foreign policy. The problem arises in translating such rhetorical claims into practical policies, and as this article has shown many of New Labour's 'ethical' promises have yet to translate into concrete action and financial commitments. Sierra Leone is perhaps the major exception, although the government's response to the political mayhem instigated by President Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe may also be seen as conforming to its third way approach.

A third way foreign policy has proved intrinsically difficult to implement. It may sound both honourable and reasonable to say that in an interdependent world the same principles must apply to domestic and foreign policy. To translate this into practical policies however, is fraught with complexities, difficult dilemmas and tough choices. While a government may in principle feel committed to improving the conditions of foreigners, it is elected and more importantly *re-elected* by its own citizens. Unfortunately, domestic responsibilities frequently clash with commitments

to promote human rights abroad. The perceived need to protect jobs in Britain's defence industry versus the desire to promote peace is only one example of such a dilemma, and illustrates how adherence to a third way foreign policy could necessitate political choices that might ultimately jeopardize Labour's chances of re-election. The willingness (or otherwise) to commit soldiers to dangerous peace keeping missions in far-away places also highlights how foreign policy can run into conflict with domestic commitments and responsibilities.

Another obstacle to implementing a third way foreign policy arises from a long-standing, unresolved issue within liberal philosophy, namely how to balance a commitment to liberal political and social values with a commitment to economic liberalism and market freedom. The third way is marketed as an attempt to transcend the binary opposition of capitalism versus socialism, but New Labour has failed to address, let alone resolve, this issue. Beyond the rather simplistic and formulaic statements that economic dynamism and social justice are mutually reinforcing, New Labour has neglected the deeper tensions contained within their liberal internationalism. As a result, their social welfare goals in Africa are frequently undermined by the desire to expand the market and further economic globalization.

For all its inconsistencies and deficiencies, New Labour's third way has placed ethics at the centre of foreign policy debates and this is perhaps its greatest (if at times unintended) achievement. New Labour has succeeded in giving Britain a higher profile and more active role in international humanitarian affairs, as for example during the negotiations for debt cancellation for the world's most heavily indebted countries. It has also provided commentators and activists with a yardstick against which to assess foreign policy. Once the ethical dimensions of foreign policy were laid bare in such an explicit way, ethical questions could no longer be dismissed as irrelevant but had to be confronted head on. In this sense, the 'ethical dimension' constitutes a lever that pressure groups can use to persuade the government to adopt certain courses of action or abandon others. From this perspective, even a purely rhetorical commitment to a third way foreign policy would be better than no such commitment at all, as governments may find themselves 'trapped' by their own rhetoric and compelled to act in particular ways.

On the other hand, this raises the important question of 'who is foreign policy for?' At one level, foreign policy is clearly for domestic consumption, and Cook's proclamations upon taking office were undoubtedly motivated by a desire to differentiate New Labour from past administrations. New Labour may well have a genuine interest in pursuing a third way foreign policy, but the invocation of ethics was also a way in which it could appeal to influential domestic constituencies. As such, it may well be more important for New Labour to be seen to be 'doing something' about the injustices of the world, for example the atrocities in Sierra Leone, than to have a clear strategy for international reform or a substantial policy for Sierra Leone's reconstruction.

After four years of trying to implement its third way foreign policy, New Labour seems no closer to resolving the antinomies inherent in this approach. The government has responded by toning down its foreign policy rhetoric in line with its actual practices, rather than trying to ensure that its practices live up to its admittedly grandiose pronouncements. The 'ethical dimension' is now said to have become a

'millstone' around the neck of the Foreign Secretary, an unfortunate phrase that left Labour open to repeated attacks and criticism (*The Guardian*, 4 September 2000). This retreat demonstrates the limits of New Labour's commitment to a third way foreign policy and the inability of British citizens to persuade their government to have the courage of its convictions.

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### Notes

- 1 We prefer to speak of a 'third way' rather than an 'ethical' foreign policy, as the latter implies that the foreign policy of previous administrations was somehow devoid of ethical commitments and assumptions. While this may well have been an impression that New Labour wished to create, it is not one that we endorse. As this article will show, many of the so-called 'ethical' aspects of New Labour's foreign policy were evident in the policies of previous administrations. Moreover, even a foreign policy primarily designed to defend the 'national interest' through *realpolitik* entails a range of ethical choices that privilege citizens over foreigners, order over justice, and interests over values.
- 2 Similar concerns about ethics were also discernible within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) (Robertson, 1997, p. 2) and the Department for International Development (DFID) (DFID, 1997). While we acknowledge that a degree of inter- and intra-Ministry wrangling has occurred over the 'ethical dimension', most notably perhaps over the construction of the Ilisu dam in Turkey, we choose in this article to focus on the content of British foreign policy rather than the process by which it came about.
- 3 An important question in this context is of course the extent to which one country single-handedly can make any substantial difference on the international arena. The issue of power and influence in international relations has long been controversial (e.g. Baldwin, 1989; Strange, 1988; Joffe, 1997), but however one chooses to define power Britain possesses a number of qualities and occupies several positions that enable it to wield influence in the international system. Through its membership in key organizations such as the IMF, the Commonwealth, the G8, the UN Security Council, the 'ethical dimension', most notably perhaps over the construction of the Ilisu dam in Turkey, we choose in this article to focus on the content of British foreign policy rather than the process by which it came about.
- 4 An important question in this context is of course the extent to which one country single-handedly can make any substantial difference on the international arena. The issue of power and influence in international relations has long been controversial (e.g. Baldwin, 1989; Strange, 1988; Joffe, 1997), but however one chooses to define power Britain possesses a number of qualities and occupies several positions that enable it to wield influence in the international system. Through its membership in key organizations such as the IMF, the Commonwealth, the G8, the UN Security Council, the WTO, UNCTAD, the EU and the World Bank, Britain has a unique potential to act as a pivotal agent with regard to international arrangements and policies that affect Africa.
- 5 For instance, during the nine and a half years the UN conducted operations in Angola (from 3 January 1989 to 30 June 1998) it spent some \$1.06bn on UNAVEM and MONUA, whereas in just over four years (from 12 January 1992 to 31 March 1996), UNPROFOR's operations in the former Yugoslavia cost the UN some \$4.62bn. Figures obtained from [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).
- 6 This is not to say that outsiders alone can solve the problem of African conflicts. Far from it; without significant change in the attitudes and policies of some African states, international initiatives will have relatively little impact on a continent where in 1997, only eight countries submitted an entry to the UN register of conventional arms.
- 6 One exception was Wheeler and Dunne (1998).

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