Was Blair's Britain a 'Good International Citizen'?

Written by Zahra Yassim

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Has Britain under Blair been a 'good international citizen'?

Introduction

The battle for values which has dominated the Blair government's foreign policy has generated substantial comment and controversy. Robin Cook's ethical 'mission statement' heralded a reorientation that promised Britain would champion its values abroad since 'the national interest cannot be defined only by narrow realpolitik' (Cook, 1997). This 'ethical dimension', injecting 'human rights [into] the heart' (Cook, 1997) of foreign diplomacy sought to align the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) with New Labour's reality of a challenging and modern globalised world. By 2007, however, many contended that the Blair government had presided over a calamitous decade in British foreign policy (Kampfner, 2004). The question arises, how prominent were ideas of morality, or good international citizenship, in driving Britain's external affairs policy? It will be argued that Blair's Britain has been more of a 'good *enough* international citizen' (Williams, 2005) than a 'good international citizen'. The pursuit of an ethical dimension, guided by an enlightened self-interest that would see Britain as 'a force for good in the world', proved problematic because of the gap between foreign policymaking rhetoric and actions.

This essay will consider the utility of Nicholas Wheeler and Tim Dunne's (1998) 'good international citizen' (GIC) concept in assessing the Blair government's foreign policy. First, it will begin by outlining the GIC theory before discussing its limitations. Second, it will apply the GIC to key foreign policy cases. Finally, it will suggest that Chandler's (2003) argument about good domestic politics is a more convincing approach to explaining Britain's foreign policy under Blair before concluding.

The Good International Citizen

Robin Cook's first mission statement for the FCO signalled a 'marked shift' in British foreign policymaking because it explicitly promised to 'put human rights at the heart of foreign policy' (Wheeler and Dunne, 1998: 850; Cook, 1997). This ethical dimension sought to prepare Britain to rise to the challenges of global interdependence and calm the concerns of its citizens who were more aware of global human rights violations due to the rise of global media. Furthermore, the transformation in external affairs was necessary as Britain adapted to becoming a 'pivotal power' (The Economist, 2002).

Wheeler and Dunne (1998) weave New Labour's ethical dimension into International Relations literature by connecting it to the 'good international citizen' concept, which has evolved out of the broader conception of an international society. Originating in the speeches and writings of Gareth Evans, the GIC was the practice of foreign policy that combined realism's advancement of national interest with idealism's pursuit of human rights; far from being 'Boy Scout good deeds' (Evans quoted in Wheeler and Dunne, 1998). In this manner, an 'enlightened self-interest, an expression of idealist pragmatism', could be achieved through an internationalist agenda tackling issues such as peacekeeping, human rights, arms control and the environment through international co-operation (Evans quoted in Wheeler and Dunne, 1998: 854-5).

Wheeler and Dunne advance on this by suggesting good international citizens are required to forsake the '*relentless*

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pursuit' of their own commercial and political advantages when these conflict with human rights issues. In doing so, they assume 'the guardianship of human rights everywhere' (1998: 855-6). These collective states form a 'global alliance' (Blair, 2010: 225) and share common values, norms and beliefs 'based on a shared perception of fairness' (Blair, 2010: 225), agree to be bound to some rules and axiomatically work for the public good e.g. by being a 'force for good' to relieve the Kosovo crisis.

However, the GIC approach bears some important limitations. First, who makes up this international society? Is it predicated on a common welfare that applies to all members of the international society equally? The GIC is difficult to practice in the absence of a political institution that is accountable because many countries are suspicious of states like Britain and America who proclaim that there is an international society with its own will and welfare. For instance, Britain's support of America's activist adventurism post-9/11 was viewed by countries in the Middle-East to be the equivalent of moral and cultural imperialism. Second, the GIC's emphasis on human rights as the litmus test of an ethical foreign policy is problematic. Its assumption that human rights issues will always override other foreign policy commitments such as national prosperity proposes a reductive distinction between morals and interests, which is as unhelpful as it is unrealistic. Good international citizenship should acknowledge the diverse and unpredictable nature of international relations between states. Finally, the GIC is reliant on the British government's discourse than on any radical change achieved in the absence of a clear international agreement on what role morals play in foreign policy.

So, how useful a conceptual framework is the GIC to consider the nature of New Labour's foreign policy? The rest of the essay will argue that it restricts judging Britain's policy choice and implementation to that of a good *enough* international citizen.

Moral Britannia?

Britain under the Blair government sought to take a Third Way approach to external affairs and reorder the world around democracy, economic globalisation and freedom whilst championing the protection of human rights. To this end, it produced the Annual Report on Human Rights, supported the creation of the International Criminal Court, reshaped Britain's foreign aid policy with the creation of the Department for International Development, sought environmental justice and pioneered *humanitarian* interventions. A discussion of three policy cases that challenge the Blair government's application of good international citizenship to British foreign policy follows.

Arms Trade

Good international citizenship necessitates the regulation and prevention of arms-exports to countries in gross violation of the human rights of its citizens (Dunne and Wheeler, 2000: 64). Notably, the Blair government signed the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel land mines and it committed itself to transparency by publishing annual reports on its arms sales. However, the strength of this commitment to promoting international peace and human rights was challenged by 'the maintenance of a strong British military-industrial complex and also the extensive arms exports this entails' (Edgerton, 1998: 126). For instance, it lobbied for UK arms exports to countries like Indonesia, China, Zimbabwe and Saudi Arabia (Williams, 2005) who bore unsatisfactory human rights records throughout Blair's premiership.

Dunne and Wheeler (1998: 868) concede that the Blair government 'failed over Indonesia' by sacrificing human rights for economic interests. Labour approved the sales of 64 export licenses in its first year (Death of a Nation, 1999) which included Hawk jets (The Guardian, 1999) despite Indonesia's state-sponsored terrorism against East Timor. However, it was not an isolated case as the 'Arms to Africa' affair followed where Sandline supplied weapons and advisers in support of Sierra Leone's President Kabbah with the FCO's knowledge. This breached the UN arms embargo and exposed the failings of Cook's policy in West Africa, prompting an apology and feeble promise to reform the FCO.

It is inevitable that elements of realism, or more specifically pragmatism embracing the economic interests of the arms industry, would factor in New Labour's arms trade policymaking. Throughout the Blair decade, Britain engaged

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in a rhetoric that emphasised the importance of human rights yet it did not champion the Arms Trade Treaty and instead bolstered the success of its arms trade, which remains one of the most lucrative in the world (The Economist, 2011). Its policy actions commit Britain more to the status of good *enough* international citizen than the GIC as it left a lot to be done.

Liberal Intervention

Perhaps no policy tests Britain's GIC credentials more than New Labour's liberal interventionist agenda, particularly the contrasting examples of just intervention in Kosovo and the controversial invasion of Iraq. Kosovo defined the ethical dimension of military intervention against sovereign states that were creating humanitarian disasters. However, it revealed an international 'desire to pacify, but not to resolve' (Blair, 2010: 227). Despite an unclear UN mandate and Russian objections, Britain and America's NATO intervention of Kosovo is seen as 'a just war, based not on any territorial ambitions but on values' (Blair, 1999). Its success encouraged Blair to go on record as being in favour of the opportunity of deposing dictators because 'when you can, you should' (Stothard, 2003: 42) since it is, after all, the ethical thing to do.

In his 'Doctrine of the International Community' speech in 1999, Blair went on to outline a structure of international responsibility founded on five criteria to judge the appropriateness of humanitarian intervention; criteria the Blair government did not use to arrive at the Iraq war decision. Following the tragedy of September 11, Britain felt duty-bound to reorder the world, and consequently 'adopted the crisis as its own, and universalized its significance' (Coates and Krieger, 2004: 43). The return to Atlanticism over Internationalism to benefit British security (Dunne, 2008: 341) and Blair's 'presidential style' of leadership (Theakton, 2002: 306) would lead Britain into a 'comedy of errors' that it could not control or justify to the UN Security Council, and to the sceptical British public. Britain's efforts maximised its ability as a 'bridge' to Europe and the world to get a second resolution agreed at the UN despite tensions between the Americans and China, Russia and France; the latter objected to intervention on the principle that it would destabilise the international system.

Crucially, despite Britain's claim that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was a threat to global security (Dunne and Wheeler, 2004: 30), the invasion of Iraq f*ailed* to meet Blair's Chicago principles (Murray, 2006). It highlighted that Britain's soft power was insufficient as it struggled to gather a 'coalition of the willing', and led to facetious perceptions of Blair as 'Bush's poodle', and the resignation of Robin Cook and Clare Short on the grounds that the war was unethical. Britain had been acting in the guardianship of the world's values, and perhaps Iraq is a much better place without Saddam. However, Britain is perceived as a transgressor across the Middle-East and Muslim world. The recent symbolic conviction of Bush and Blair by a Malaysian tribunal for 'crimes against peace' and other war crimes against Iraq (Grenwald, 2011) illustrates the difficulty of identifying a universal common welfare for good international citizenship.

Climate Change

Blair identified climate change as '*the* global challenge' (Blair, 2010: 225) facing the international community since it affects rich and poor countries alike, with the latter group being least equipped to respond to its threats. Unsurprisingly, it became a great test to British foreign policy's 'ethical dimension'. However, tackling climate change required multilateral and long-term action. Britain's publication of the Stern report, endorsed by the UK Treasury, helped frame climate change within 'the ideological narratives of the party's economic and social agendas' (Khatri, 2007: 576), which suggested that the solution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions could be achieved without sacrificing economic interests. Blair was able to significantly raise the salience of the issue domestically and internationally as an issue of environmental justice. For instance, his government advocated the use of scientific fact and discourse to promote climate change at the 2005 'Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change' conference at the Hadley Centre in the run-up to the 2005 G8 summit (Khatri, 2007: 577). Blair also utilised the 'special relationship' to persuade Bush to alter his stance on carbon limits and sign 'a Kyoto-lite agreement' (Williams, 2005: 161).

Despite being a collective action problem, the international community is reluctant to sacrifice the indomitable pursuit of their national interests by adhering to a global solution because of high sunk costs in individual nation states. As

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realpolitik triumphed recently the Kyoto Protocol languished in its 'death throes' (Reuters, 2011), it must be conceded that Blair government deserves credit for elevating climate change to a mainstream and constant domestic and international concern.

Britain's actions, however, have not been enough 'to address the extent of the problem indicated by the scientific evidence' (Carter and Ockwell, 2007) as CO_2 emissions have increased since 1997. First, Blair himself noted 'that the commitments reflected in the Kyoto protocol and current EU policy are insufficient' to have any major impact (Williams, 2005). Second, policy change was limited in the absence of a committed and coherent drive cutting across government policy to address environmental issues; individual ministries such as transport and energy continued their pursuit of interests with little consideration of the environment. Third, the Blair government has failed to act on the change in public opinion. For example, MORI polling in 2006 found people were willing to see 'the doubling of air passenger duty – including among those who fly frequently', complementing a Guardian/ICM poll in 2007 that showed 63% of respondents approved of taxes to discourage behaviour that harms the environment (Khatri, 2007). Ironically, a consequence of British government's environmentally ethical discourse was the British public's condemnation of the Blair government's actions as unsatisfactory (The Observer, 2007). This supports Williams (2005) argument that Blair's government defined solutions catered to the political economy and interests of large firms. So, in this too, Britain amounted to only a good *enough* international citizen.

Britain under the Blair government found it difficult to definitively break from the established foreign policymaking of its predecessors. Patterns that were ethically dubious and Atlanticist remained, contradicting the GIC's focus on moral and multilateral foreign policy action; the latter point relied entirely on US action to offset 'Europe's impotence' (Blair, 2010: 231). Mumford and Selck (2010: 308) correctly argue that the 'proposal of a GIC, and a stronger role for ethics based on New Labour rhetoric represents an instance of jumping the gun' since Wheeler and Dunne's 'marked shift' was little more than grand rhetoric eliciting inconsistent action. Indeed, the UK media's framing of Cook's ethical dimension in terms of an 'ethical foreign policy' (Dunne, 2008: 341) highlights the central problem with the GIC – its bias to morals acts as a constraint by inviting overambitious appraisals of Britain's international performance.

Good Domestic Politics

By overemphasising the importance of an 'ethical dimension' to Britain's foreign policymaking, Wheeler and Dunne not only overestimate the 'marked shift' in policy action terms they overlook a crucial aspect of the nature of the Blair government – its commitment to winning elections. It is worth noting that by April 2000, Foreign Office Minister Peter Hain had admitted that the term 'ethical dimension' had 'obscured the very big advances we have made' (Brown, 2001: 174). This essay proposes that by exercising Chandler (2003)'s argument that the Blair government's ethical dimension was good domestic politics a more convincing explanation of the gap between Britain's ethically activist discourse and often wanting actions can be provided.

In 2007, *The Guardian* noted that the biggest change of the Blair decade was how 'foreign policy is no longer foreign policy'. International issues such as terrorism and the gross violation of human rights crept into the domestic policy agenda to the extent that 'it has been a defining feature of the Labour government' (Bulmer-Thomas, 2006). For instance, Labour's 2005 election manifesto *Britain: Forward Not Back* asserted that 'the best defence of our security at home is the spread of liberty and justice overseas'. This development allows governing elites to 'seek to manage the impact of external forces on the domestic political scene such that their general interests [attaining and maintaining power] are positively promoted or not adversely affected' (Bulpitt, 1988: 182).

As dealignment led to British party elites finding it difficult to produce policy programmes that could inspire a sense of political purpose (Chandler, 2003), governments turned to external affairs to provide the collective cohering vision and self-identity missing from their domestic affairs.

New Labour under Blair weaved its Third Way values of justice, citizenship and community into its foreign policy, and explicitly announced its 'ethical dimension' as the harbinger of a new foreign policy for New Labour's New Britain. The political discourse of Cook and Blair constructed an appearance that was morally superior to New Labour's Conservative predecessors. Put another way, the explicit talk of an ethical dimension appeared to 'restore Britain's

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pride and influence as a leading force for good in the world' (Coates and Krieger, 2004: 12). Most importantly, it enabled the Blair government to cast accountability for any failure onto international institutions. This manufactured a good image of the government as a relevant, pivotal power, and inspired consensus within the party and electorate. Being a good *enough* international citizen made good domestic politics, under the right conditions as Labour's pledge to save Africa through development aid and Fair Trade at Gleneagles in 2005 demonstrates.

Conclusion

The story of Britain's foreign policy under the Blair government is not just one of an ethical dimension but of transformation as Britain reshaped its anxiety over its world role in the 21st century. The decade 1997-2007 was fraught with clear tensions: between traditional and 'modern' foreign policy commitments and between Prime Minister and the FCO. This essay has argued that Britain under the Blair government has been a good *enough* international citizen insofar as its GIC extended more to its rhetoric than to its foreign policy action.

While the Blair government advocated the centrality of an 'idealism [that] becomes realpolitik' (Blair, 2007), the pursuit of an ethical dimension proved difficult to consistently deliver. Using the problematic GIC concept to judge Britain's foreign policy actions through the human rights litmus test overlooks the diversity and nuances involved in foreign policy. The ideas of morality create a rhetorical straitjacket, and provide an inadequate evaluation by inviting harsh criticism. Conversely, the insights proffered by Chandler's argument about good domestic politics presents us with a more convincing explanation. It addresses the blur between external and internal affairs, actors, self-interest and morals in the purpose of governance, and as such, accounts more for the shades of grey between self-interest and morality that constitute the unpredictable terrain of international relations, as Chris Brown (2001) points out. Britain under Blair's stewardship made some respectable contributions to international affairs, but its discourse and the expectations that it roused found it wanting. It had promised too much, so could only amount to *good enough*.

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