

Is an Ethical Foreign Policy Good Domestic Politics for a Governing Party?

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Critically assess Chandler's (2003) argument that an ethical foreign policy might be good domestic politics from a governing party's point of view.

Chandler (2003) believes that an ethical foreign policy is a useful tool in domestic state-crafting. His argument is that an ethical foreign policy can be used to project the values of a governing party in a clear and uncontested manner. The drive to pursue ethical adventures abroad is not directly related to winning votes, but to an even more basic need of the political instinct – the necessity for governing administrations to have a sense of self-identity, purpose and self-belief (Chandler, 2003). He believes it can be used as a means to encourage internal cohesion by developing a sense of respect towards the governing party. Another benefit is that actions of a political party abroad is not directly felt or seen by the governed population. 'Foreign governments are not accountable for matching rhetoric to international actions. And credit can be claimed for any positive outcome of international policy, while any negative outcome can be blamed on the action or inaction of the government or population of the country concerned' (Chandler, 2003).

My argument however is that ethical foreign policy has been set up and practised in an overly-ambitious way which has caused the public to hold disproportionate expectations towards the governing party. This weakens the governing party's political identity by destabilising efforts of forming a sense of self-identity and purpose. In the first part of this essay, I will show how the initial conception of ethics in foreign policy was based upon weak definitional foundations. This starting point was the streamline for party vulnerability. Without a tangible understanding of ethics in foreign policy, consecutive actions taken and statements made by governing elites are easily misconstrued by the public. Furthermore, this essay attempts to frame how the distortion on party perception is caused by the incoherence of values in foreign policy.

The ethical question of the British arms trade is a clear example of this. The final actions made in regards to an ethical arms trade contradicted early addresses made to make the arms trade as ethical as possible. On the 22nd November 1996 16 Hawk-209 aircraft were licensed for export to Indonesia, despite a recent declaration that human rights would be at the "heart of British foreign policy", according to the new Foreign Secretary (The Guardian, 1999). The hypocrisy within the party caused the public to mistrust the party over time. I will then discuss how the measure of accountability of government action abroad has increased over the last decade, meaning that government actions abroad are no longer unexamined by the British public. Media has played a large role in forcing governments to face the consequences of their actions and Iraq, unlike Kosovo, has received greater media coverage that has enabled the public to be aware of their governments in regards to ethical pursuits. Finally, domestic society as a whole has become increasingly aware of their role as international citizens. Without realising it, the public have identified themselves within the constant hammering of international awareness. They have shifted their views on foreign policy awareness and have become increasingly sceptical on the values held close to the governing party. As a conclusion, this essay seeks to reinterpret the ethical 'dimensions' governments should in fact attempt to promise in their foreign policy.

The Framework of an Ethical Foreign Policy

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In 1997, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook announced in his mission statement that British foreign policy needed an 'ethical dimension' which promotes the need to uphold our political values in business abroad. He went on further to claim that, 'The Labour Government will put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy and will publish an annual report in our work in promoting human rights abroad' (Wheeler and Dunne, 1998). Embracing the politics of ethical foreign policy opened up a more intellectually honest and positive potential for relating to the foreign in a responsible manner (Bulley, 2010). This in effect, opened a debate on New Labour's political identity; from a governing party with a foreign policy based mainly on traditional self-interest to one that is instead, arguably, other-regarding. New Labour had in fact made a significant departure from previous governments in foreign policy. 'As Mervyn Frost notes, the mission statement is almost wholly unrecognizable when looked through traditional realist-pragmatist lenses' (Wheeler and Dunne, 1998). The shift in key speeches left the party to be dissected based on what they then considered permissible action.

Bringing ethics into foreign policy is a risky game. Without a clear conception of ethics, the party is left in a sensitive position as the public can expect just about anything from them. 'Ethics' must be framed strategically to protect the political party from losing their ideological currency. When speaking to the global ethics foundation in 2000, Blair explained that what he meant by an ethical foreign policy was policy based on the ethical value of community and the rights and responsibilities it brings (Bulley, 2010). In other words, the idea of an international community encompassed definitions such as moral responsibilities and the right to intervene once a given list of principles had been fulfilled. This was clarified in the 'doctrine of an international community' in Chicago on 22 April 1999 (Ralph, 2011). This conception fits well with the process of globalisation, whereby the world is inexplicably moving towards a more inter-dependant era. Choices we make can no longer be done in isolation and the well-being of others cannot simply be disrespected. Ultimately, Blair argued, 'values and interest merge. If we can establish and spread the values of liberty, the rule of law, human rights and an open society then that is in our interest too. The spread of our values makes us safer' (Ralph, 2011). But these statements did not encompass just how demanding a definition of ethical the Labour party might have in mind. Despite repeated public statements about the need to put human rights at the heart of foreign policy, the government has not elucidated a conceptual framework for deciding the priority and consistency of the various principles contained in the mission statement (Wheeler and Dunne, 1998). Without such a framework, the general expectations for government involvement abroad are easily manipulated and misunderstood.

This conundrum is exacerbated further by the influence of non-government organisations (NGOs) in outlining the human rights discourse of a government's foreign policy. NGOs, unlike governments, prioritise coercion as opposed to cooperation. NGOs central campaigning method is to publish reports that generate press coverage and place international attention on stigmatised governments (Burgermann, 1998). This conception distorts the criteria of an ethical foreign policy in the long run as it is not based on actions that can be upheld by a governing body. Blair announced that 'the rights of a member of the international community include receiving development aid and debt relief, trading in free markets and the right to experience an unpolluted environment' (Bulley, 2010). The last promise; that of an unpolluted environment is a clear representation of the vague idealistic concept of ethics the international community are to expect. It is this initial set up of ethics in foreign policy that destabilises political parties in the long run. Shed in a clearer light with less over-ambitious promises, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and Tony Blair would have had less of a burden to shoulder. As the idea of ethics has been prompted on such a high pedestal, consecutive action taken regardless of intention can be strongly scrutinized.

Incoherence in Ethical Foreign Policy

It is especially disconcerting when governments make large decisions, only to fail in providing equivalent follow through. Once a guarantee has been made explicitly, failure to fulfil that promise and such little effort to uphold it strongly weakens the 'promisor's' position. The dealing of Britain and its arms industry is an example of this. 'The British Arms industry according to Cook was to be as ethical as possible. However, what began as a confident campaign brought about weak results, leading many to criticise the policy as inconsistent and ineffective' (Mumford and Selck, 2010). Furthermore, Cook asserted in 1997, that 'Britain will refuse to supply equipment and weapons with which regimes that deny the demands of their people for human rights' (Smith and Light, 2001). Unfortunately in the end, in the light of arbitrary economic gain, human rights were once again put aside.

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Despite an EU code of conduct on the arms trade, Whitehall's latest annual report on arms export showed that the value of exports sent to Indonesia has increased 20-fold since 2000 (from £2m to £40m) (Wheeler and Dunne, 2004). Britain is Indonesia's main arms supplier, with sales accounting for 10 per cent of our weapons export (Kampfner, 1997). It is widely known however that Indonesia is also one of the most corrupt and undemocratic states in the world, not to mention the widely-established knowledge that the weapons were to be used against East Timor at the time. This reframed the implementation of the new foreign policy. Indonesia was a test case for Britain to prove its moral standing in the international community. Instead, the government's reluctance to halt arms sales to Indonesia-until it was too late-has done considerable damage to the credibility of Cook's ethical dimension (Smith and Light, 2001). This left the members of the public questioning what exactly had changed since the introduction of an 'ethical foreign policy' and how it differed from previous doctrines, as the change was not at all apparent.

Measure of Accountability

Media has shifted the way in which conflicts abroad have been perceived in the last decade. The public have had an increase in means of engagement in international issues with the increasingly pivotal role media plays in politics. This shift, as well as Tony Blair's persistence of an 'international community', has played an additional part in subliminally increasing the public's awareness of international affairs. Due to the constant resurfacing of the term in daily politics, members of the public have, to an extent, considered their roles as international citizens in the international community and taken a responsibility towards their government's actions abroad. Not only have international conflicts been prioritised by governing parties, the media has also given additional scope for the public to witness governments' rhetoric and their consecutive actions.

When New Labour first introduced the idea of an ethical foreign policy their first major mission was the military involvement in Kosovo in 1999. Kosovo, however, did not immediately generate strong rejection from the domestic sphere. An argument for this was that the public was not exposed to the extent of involvement their governments had chosen. The public were, as David Reiff mentions, 'alienated and uninvolved' in the Kosovo conflict. The war was a spectacle; it aroused emotions in the intense but shallow way that sports do (Bulley, 2010). Over a period of time and further acts in the name of ethics, the public began to mistrust the political manipulation of ethical foreign policy. After Kosovo, the concept of fighting war for humanitarian reasons was increasingly treated with suspicion by both governments and humanitarian organisations (Chandler, 2006).

The fact that the media had made foreign policy increasingly highlighted and easily accessible led people to become fully mindful of the decisions of their government. In 2003, the invasion of Iraq did not receive similar consensus. "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was a war fought on live television; the propaganda war was something of a paradigm for the way mainstream journalism will increasingly operate in the modern era' (Putnam, 2003). Unlike Kosovo, the public could observe direct impacts of their government's actions on the television and through the internet. This exposure may have caused an immediate disenchantment for most of the members of the public towards the governing party. This shows Chandler's (2003) argument, that foreign policy is good domestic politics due to the lack of accountability, is not one that stands the test of time. Negative outcomes can in fact ruin a governing party's credibility as they have become more accessible in recent times.

Intensified Domestic Malaise

By the end of Labour's electoral run, members of the public as well as members of the party began to show their dissatisfaction towards the misconduct of the government. The decision to invade Iraq in 2003 disregarded a heavy consensus for a second UN resolution. The result of which made it 'difficult for the UK to claim that, in these circumstances, the war was in the best interest of, or on behalf of, international society' (Ralph, 2011). As for the case of domestic politics, this decision weakened Labour's state-crafting authority even further. 'The Iraq war produced large-scale revolt among Labour members of Parliament (MPs). Blair's decision to support the war and to engage the UK without a second UN resolution defied two strong ancient currents in Labour: a religiously based pacifism and a commitment to collective security' (Kramer, 1998). This misrepresentation caused members to lose faith in their government. The precedent that Blair had in mind was Kosovo, where majority opinion in the Council had supported military action that bypassed the Russian and Chinese veto. The public had in fact learnt not to trust their

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government since Kosovo, and the factors leading up to the Iraq war was completely different.

As more of its members became weary of the government, the Labour party's identity was destabilised as supporters found it difficult to attach themselves to a party lacking a strong conviction. Labour lost the internal cohesion it strived to produce with ethical foreign policy. Further electoral damage was inflicted by the indirect effects of the war. Cabinet and backbench dissent on the issue made the party appear disunited and the disaffection of party activists reduced the intensity of campaigning (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Members of the party were not satisfied by what the party had promised and the actions they chose to take. Analysis of the British election survey (BES) data makes it clear that Labour's conduct of the war caused many voters to switch to the Liberal Democrats (Dunleavy et al., 2006). The controversy of the party's decisions became overwhelming when the initiator of ethical foreign policy itself showed disapproval towards the government's actions. Cook's decision to resign in protest over Blair's push for military engagement in Iraq indicated that governments were not behaving ethically. In Cook's resignation speech, he announced that, 'If we believe in an international community based on binding rules and institutions, we cannot simply set them aside when they produce results that are inconvenient to us' (Wheeler and Dunne, 2004).

An inherent problem of the ethical foreign policy is that it does not stem organically from the desires of the public. Opinion polls consistently demonstrate that the Western public tends to share a narrow view of foreign policy priorities, based on perceptions of personal interests rather than the more ideological 'crusading' perspective often pushed by their government leaders (Chandler, 2006). Ethics were imposed in foreign policy and into the psyche of the general public by governing elites; it was essentially Labour's effort to re-brand Britain. It is generated by influential members of the party and not by international pressure or civil society mobilisation (Chandler 2006). This unsurprisingly leads to the foreseeable instability of the party's conception of an identity, as it did not coincide naturally with the interest of the majority. As hopeful a notion 'ethical foreign policy' is, it is useless unless it is first and foremost upheld by those who chose to represent it.

Sticking to an Ethical Dimension

From 1997 until the beginning of 1999 the government's ethical foreign policy was reasonably well received. The architects of the policy were regularly praised for their courage, and many of their substantive policy commitments were thought to be progressive, including the formation of the Department for International Development (DFID); significant increases to the aid budget and the successful intervention in Sierra Leone (Wheeler and Dunne, 2004). Over time, however, the perception of ethics became distorted, and no longer fit what reality held. Cook's introduction of an ethical foreign policy was fashioned based on the idea of an ethical 'dimension' in foreign policy, not a government that was completely self-sacrificing.

Discussions of virtue imply an awareness of the rules and norms that pertain within social practices. But these are underpinned by certain character traits that individuals interacting within these social spheres must display to sustain the values of those practices (Gaskarth, 2010). The stress on a 'community' and on moral responsibility that indirectly stemmed from an ethical changed the direction that Cook had attempted for foreign policy to overwhelming heights. To protect itself from unreasonable criticism, the government could have done more in terms of setting out the principles underpinning the policy (Wheeler and Dunne, 2004). Ethics, at least for now, at most acts as a mediator in foreign policy as opposed to a motivator. It can limit the damage of the self-interested nature foreign policy inherently embodies. The structure of an ethical foreign policy was therefore based on over-ambitious, idealistic and vague narratives; unrepresentative of the actual dimensions of politics and the party's identity. Pushing for an ethical foreign policy weakened New Labour's reinvented identity and effected domestic politics negatively.

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