



Where Next for Progressives? Britain's role in the world

Summary of the main points from Seminar 4 in ippr's *Where Next for Progressives?* series

In the fourth *Where Next for Progressives?* seminar, participants considered New Labour's approach to foreign policy in a globalised age; where Britain finds itself in the new world order; and how progressives should approach the UK's international relations, moving forwards.

This note covers the highlights of that discussion, during which there was not unanimity on every point.

New Labour's foreign policy

New Labour did much good on the international scene. The Department for International Development (DfID) became a flagship ministry, cited as an example around the world. Debts were written off and a fairer deal was sought for Africa. Britain led international campaigns against the death penalty and landmines and for an Arms Trade Treaty. Military interventions in Sierra Leone and Kosovo – where Blair, remarkably, convinced Clinton to intervene out-of-area, after Black Hawk Down – were right, and were effective. And the UK became a significant player in terms of leading the debate on climate change, albeit too late. On the other side of its scorecard, New Labour failed to make the case for Europe – the single most important international project for the UK – and squandered what diplomatic capital it had built in the east of the continent.

But the strategically and politically disastrous decision to go to war in Iraq overshadowed all else. Powerful characters in New Labour thought it would be over in a fortnight. But, after winning the initial war, there was no real plan for the peace. UK involvement in the campaign protected the US right wing: when Kerry said to Bush that the US was isolated, Bush replied that alongside the US stood Great Britain, shoulder to shoulder. Thanks to the war, Turkey, Israel and Iran have emerged stronger, international law and multilateralism are left weaker, and hundreds of thousands have died.

The Chicago Doctrine of 'liberal interventionism', developed by Lawry Freedman and given voice by Tony Blair, commanded widespread international support. But its misapplication in Iraq has discredited it. In the wake of Iraq, and in today's straightened circumstances, it is hard to imagine in the years ahead there being the public or political appetite for further military intervention, and yet failed states proliferate, humanitarian catastrophes threaten, and Bosnia is hanging by a thread. More likely is that, in the future, Chicago finds its Beijing equivalent, on very different terms.

New world order

Debt transfers power from the borrower to the lender. The West has been borrowing from the East for years. The global financial crisis has accelerated the diffusion of power from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific rim. This has made for what is now a complete mismatch between the actual distribution of power in the world and the formal structures of power embodied in the major multilateral institutions. A gap has opened up between the old countries who no longer merit such institutionalised power and emerging countries who have been denied it so long. This gap is exacerbated when, for example, the recent Turkish/Brazilian initiative towards Iran is so readily rubbished in London or Washington.

The UN is not fit for purpose and is not resourced or structured to do the jobs it was created to do. Its Secretary General is hopeless, and probably got the job because the major powers knew he would be. US\$1.5 trillion per annum is spent globally on arms – more than the GDP of the whole of Africa – but the proportion spent multilaterally is tiny. The UK's permanent membership of the UN Security Council appears absurd, given today's geo-realpolitik, but it leads to the equal absurdity of our costly Trident renewal. On the big tests that lie ahead – forging a new economic era, nuclear non-proliferation, energy security, climate change – multilateralism is in danger of failing, as Doha and Copenhagen demonstrate.

On Europe, the Coalition Government is more pragmatic than many Conservative members would like. It recognises it as a potent trading bloc with eight million under arms, albeit in national armies which are largely ineffective on their own. William Hague makes much of the Commonwealth, but it is an outdated institution in terminal decline, and the nations in it have such markedly different regional concerns that it is unable to act as a meaningful collective. British governments in the past have always wanted either to own it or disown it, but now it hardly matters. And the 'special relationship', until recently axiomatic, now looks like part of an older order: Obama has no nostalgia or romance for the UK – cue 'British Petroleum' – even if in military terms we are still one another's ally of first choice, not least because we know one another's armies will actually fight.

Striking a new international pose

All of this may seem a gloomy picture for a middle-sized power in relative decline: Little Britain, Big World. So, with the road out of Afghanistan now begun, where next for progressives?

First, we have to face some facts. Despite seeming pretensions, we are no longer an empire. We are the new Denmark. And in facing many of the global challenges in a fundamentally interconnected world, going it alone will rarely be an option. We can't afford full-spectrum military capability, like a mini-US, when there's already a multi-billion pound black hole in the Defence budget. We can't do much to mitigate climate change by ourselves. It is hard to lecture the world on nuclear weapons when we are building the next batch of our own. But a declinist thesis is a dead-end politically. We need a positive, hopeful narrative which describes a future international posture that the people of Britain can buy into. We have professional strengths that we must play to – law, diplomacy, finance. We have cultural and educational institutions that remain the envy of the world – the BBC, the British Council, our universities. And we have the English

language – *lingua franca* of the information age. Organised for influence, we can bring all this to bear.

But how should this national interest be enlightened? What might a progressive – even ‘ethical’ – foreign policy look like for Britain in the years ahead? Essentially, it will need to advance the causes of justice, democracy and sustainability in an increasingly multipolar world. This should mean a commitment to: reformed multilateralism, fit for the 21st century; global social justice; flexible alliances, looking beyond our traditional friends; understanding others’ viewpoints; and the sharing of responsibility for safeguarding a destiny that is also shared.

To give it domestic political purchase, this foreign policy will need largely to be issue-based – remember the mass support for Make Poverty History – rather than structure-oriented: people can relate to transnational issues much better than transnational institutions. When the Foreign Secretary is asked what is on his or her mind, the answer ought to be a set of world problems and possible solutions, not a list of countries or intergovernmental organisations.

Foreign policy, done right, can resonate with people. A different role for Britain need not mean a diminished one, if we are prepared to re-imagine ourselves in a new light. Progressive foreign policy is possible, provided we are clear about our values and we can articulate them, in place of fear, to a proud nation in a changing world.