Britain in Africa – Book Launch

Speaker: Tom Porteous, Author and UK Director of Human Rights Watch
Discussant: Justin Forsyth, Special Advisor to Prime Minister Gordon Brown

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Why has Africa become a priority for New Labour’s foreign policy? What interests and values is the UK seeking to promote? Why has aid to Africa more than tripled over the past decade? How has the UK’s involvement in counter-terrorism affected its aims in Africa? Expanding on an article originally written for International Affairs, Tom Porteous, who was a conflict management advisor to the FCO from 2001 to 2003, sets out the balance sheet of Britain’s Africa policy since 1997 and explores its disconnects.

This event was held in association with the Royal African Society and Zed Books.

Tom Porteous

There are two kinds of book launch. The first is where you go along and have wine and cheese. The second is the serious kind, where there is a debate about the issues addressed in the book. This book launch is very much the second kind, with wine and cheese provided afterwards!

I would like to start by issuing some words of thanks. First of all I would like to thank my colleagues at the BBC and those working in Zambia, Mali, Kenya, Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa. Thanks to the legendary Robin White who taught me all I know about radio journalism and who indulged me with his knowledge of contemporary Africa. Finally, thank you to my colleagues at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). I would like to say to you that most of my criticisms in this book are delivered in a constructive spirit.

This book began when Alex Vines, Head of the Africa Programme here at Chatham House asked me to contribute to a special issue of the journal International Affairs, leading up to the Gleneagles G8 summit in 2005. It was Richard Dowden who then suggested that I turn that article into a book. I am grateful to Richard for his support as well as to Rebecca McKinley and Alex De Waal, who provided me with notes on my book and allowed me to plagiarise their ideas!

The books theme centres on a tension between the UK government’s need for a message that resonates and the messy political reality of dealing with foreign policy. In many places the government has been able to get away with a simplistic argument, when there is a gap between what they say and the reality on the ground. Although it has been rumbled in Iraq, the government still takes a much more fuzzy approach to Africa.
Tony Blair set up the Commission for Africa in 2004. If you devote some time to the Commission’s report it illustrates the gap between spin and complexity. The report is good in ways, providing some insightful detail. However, the chapter on culture is the one chapter without any recommendations at all. If the Commission were to give recommendations, one of them would have to be that there needs to be a re-examination of development assistance to Africa, which is not really working for Africans. Yet the headline message spun out from the report was that Africa needs masses of aid and we will give it to them. This is an example of development policy as foreign policy. Is this really a sensible approach? What is the true impact of aid? What is its impact on governance? Where is the accountability? Is it a good idea to have one government agency, the Department for International Development (DFID) controlling so many aspects of this aid?

Celebrity humanitarianism is a topic closely linked to the tension I have described. It has good and bad points and it is typical of Tony Blair and his regime. International moral issues do need engagement and people like Bono and Bob Geldof definitely widen the interest on African problems such as Darfur. The downside to this is that whether it is Darfur or poverty elimination, media managers seem to feel that a simplification of the issues is required. This inevitably damages the input and outcomes of high-level decision making. The government has its part to play in perpetuating the process. Another problem is that less-well known experts are not given the same hearing as celebrities. They can instead be charged with being cynical party poopers.

I was working in the FCO at the time of 9/11. Shortly afterwards, I sent an internal memo on the potential impact on African policy of a shift in the UK’s counter terrorism strategy. A year later I sent a further memo cautioning the UK’s policy shift. I resigned from the FCO at the time a decision was taken to go to war in Iraq. With links to terrorist groups in Somalia, Kenya and Sudan, it was inevitable in my opinion that the war on terror would draw Africa into strategic thinking on counter-terrorism.

I believe that the policies the UK adopted in the post 9/11 environment damaged their African policy. There is evidence for this. Firstly, the UK’s reputation in Africa has been tarnished. Diplomatic leverage is based on a credible threat of military force and also moral authority. The UK’s moral authority was lost because of the decision to go to war in Iraq and also due to the abuses perpetrated by allied forces during the war. The UK had done a lot to increase its leverage in Africa through intervention in Sierra Leone in 2001. Since 9/11 this influence has been completely wiped out. Secondly, engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq has taken up a lot of attention and resources. Although aid to Africa has risen since 9/11, the FCO budget has been cut and the Ministry of Defence has been completely overstretched by its commitments in Sierra Leone, not to mention support for UNAMID in Darfur has been poor. Thirdly, issues of governance and human rights in Africa have been trumped by the counter-terrorism agenda in the Horn of Africa and the east. A blind eye has been turned to Ethiopian abuses in Somalia and the Ogaden and also to the issue of corruption in Kenya.

Having said all that, before I finish I must also underline and repeat that the Labour government must be given credit for making Africa a priority, particularly during Blair’s second term. The UK has done some good work, especially during crisis situations. However, the government has been far less helpful in assisting Africa’s long term needs and some of the main reasons for this are:

1. Limited diplomatic leverage;
2. Limited understanding and not enough knowledge getting through to decision makers;
3. Ministers failing to reconcile competing commercial, economic, social and political objectives, leading them to downplay abuses in corruption by African allies and fuelling the problems the UK is seeking to reduce.

Thank you for listening.

Justin Forsyth

Although I haven’t had the chance to read the whole book, I have grasped that it is very comprehensive. This is to be expected given Tom’s experience as a government insider and outsider.

There are a lot of experts in the audience here who would give a better commentary than me, but what struck me about the book was a general overstating of the UK’s influence in Africa. I would say the UK is one important player amongst many. I have four points to make about what I have read and what you have said here today. The first is about your critique of “spin not substance.” I would say that this is an easy, almost lazy critique to make of Tony Blair. The former Prime Minister had real feel for how to make an issue popular. With the Commission for Africa he was acutely aware that he could not put together an ordinary coalition but had to form a new one which had a global constituent body that pushed politicians to act on their promises. More importantly, he recognised that the issues driving change had to come from a wider range of actors including private, NGO, faith-based groups and civil society. With politics much more susceptible to public pressure, how do you achieve change? You need a base of care and concern, and a progressive coalition of which the celebrity is only a small part. Having met with Bono and Sir Bob I must say that they are both very knowledgeable about Africa.

My second point addresses your assertion that there is too much development foreign policy. Splitting the roles of DFID and the FCO has meant that there has been a lack of strategy that encompasses all aspects of foreign policy; political, diplomatic, trade, human rights and development. The Commission for Africa has stressed the need for tying them all together. There is certainly an issue with regards to aid being the main driver of foreign policy in Africa and I agree that we do need to look at a more coherent strategy. I would also argue that we are seeing examples of this approach more recently in Zimbabwe, Kenya and Darfur. We are not about to start apologising for galvanising huge international effort and impact to help Africa. Debt relief has led to twenty million more children in school and our comprehensive strategy on Malaria and Aids has helped over one and a half million more people; the UK is one part of that change.

A large part of the UK’s foreign policy is the prevention and response to terrorism and conflict. In terms of conflict prevention, the UK has backed a proposal for the civilian agreement of the African standby force, which we believe will assist states who have had long-term instability from relapsing into conflict and help them to manage a transition from being states of conflict to future states of sustainable peace. In terms of knowledge base and capacity I would argue that although the knowledge may not always be joined up, it is certainly there. Spend on Africa has increased considerably under Labour. Tony Blair said that the biggest change in the way foreign policy was conducted during his time was that he sat down at the table with African leaders and had an equal relationship with them. There is now a huge amount of contact between the UK and African countries across ministries and through civil servants. I mean who would have thought that there would be a sub-committee in the Cabinet on Africa.
Question & Answer

Q. As far as Darfur is concerned I believe the issue is a tribal one. There is no need for another conference to be held. The solution is troops on the ground. Who will provide them?

A. Justin Forsyth. The UK is engaged to find a resolution in Darfur, not just to hold conferences for the sake of it. It doesn't win us votes in the UK to hold a conference on Darfur but we will do it if we feel we can make strides forward. In the mean time we give our backing to UNAMID, the AU/UN hybrid force.

Q. With the end of the Cold War, there is no more scramble for proxy turf. Does this explain why there has been disengagement with Africa?

A. Justin Forsyth. The UK hasn't disengaged with Africa since the Cold War ended. If anything the opposite is true. Overall aid has gone from two billion to over four billion under the Labour government.

Q. A question on UK leverage in Africa. With the enquiry into BAE and the Saudi arms deal are we not laughed at by Africans when we mention corruption in their countries?

A. Tom Porteous. The British have grappled with the issue of leverage. They have given support to a number of initiatives around the issue of corporate social responsibility. There are a plethora of voluntary guidelines out there which need regulation but the UK government has never considered regulation even remotely feasible. Voluntary principles are only cosmetic ways of making multinational's feel good about them selves.

A. Justin Forsyth. I don't think that BAE can be used too much as an excuse for corruption in Africa. We are not talking about money going into the pockets of individuals in government. In terms of our engagement in the fight against corruption, the UK subscribes to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and the Kimberley Process as well as having a police corruption unit on Africa working with DFID.

Q. Do we not still have quite a brash colonialist outlook in our relations with Africa? In some SADC meetings Mugabe is still applauded and seen as the great saviour.

A. Justin Forsyth. I do not think so. In Kenya for example we did not take a high profile role. We supported John Kufour and Kofi Annan in their efforts and spoke also with Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga at government level. I think that the general view of the Zimbabwean public of the UK role is that by interfering we would do more harm than good. Zimbabweans do not need the UK to speak out. Take the events that have occurred recently with the arms shipment headed for Zimbabwe. That pressure came from very diverse positions.

A. Tom Porteous. The UK comes with colonial baggage and this is more important to some countries than to others. The UK feels now that it has nothing to apologise for but many in the African world would agree to differ. Despite having an active role behind the scenes in conflict prevention and also in Sierra Leone the UK has a problem with leverage in Africa.

Q. The UK seems to rely on anchor states in different regions of Africa: Kenya, South Africa, and Ethiopia. These states have many problems and benign influences in their regions. Therefore is this a good strategy for the UK to have?
A. Tom Porteous. I am not aware that this is a UK strategy. It is very much a US strategy but the UK tends to pick its engagements based on where they can make a difference, such as Rwanda and Sierra Leone. British development assistance to Nigeria is now almost irrelevant given their oil revenue and doesn't affect positive outcomes. South Africa is a success story in the last fifteen years and has had good leverage in the region apart from its troubles with Zimbabwe. Even there, Mbeki's options for resolving the crisis are far from obvious. For me there is a broader issue with these key states. Museveni, Kagame and Meles Zenawi have all received aid. The UK should speak out against the abuses that these leaders perpetrate. What message does it send about the promotion of human rights and democracy to the victims of these abuses?

A. Justin Forsyth. We are talking about a huge amount of forces that are driving change: civil society, the media and private organisations. We have to move beyond this DFID/FCO approach to a progressive multifaceted foreign policy. It has to be about equal relationships, African capacity, reducing poverty, backing political change while of course protecting our interests too, on issues such as terrorism, climate change and trade. Clearly, it is often other issues that drive the agenda.

Q. I agree that we have an unrealistic expectation of UK foreign policy in Africa. There has been a vast increase in aid but it is no good expecting diplomats or the UK government to make sure it is spent well. What we need is for aid contracts and terms to be made available to African parliaments and African public accounts committees. Such institutions would make a big difference in holding African governments accountable.

A. Justin Forsyth. I agree. I can't see why it should not happen.

A. Tom Porteous. Similarly, there are also problems in the extractive industries where there is no provision for expenditure transparency to see how aid is being spent.

End.