

Blair, human rights and the Barcelona Process

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The 10th anniversary of the Barcelona Euro-Med conference will take place during the period when Britain holds the presidency of the European Union (June-December 2005). The British have already indicated that events to discuss the Barcelona charter will be a priority of their term and that they expect to be working closely with Spain on the agenda. It is, therefore, important for both Spanish and the wider European participants to understand recent directions in British foreign policy.

Beyond the coincidence of the 10th anniversary, there are several reasons behind Tony Blair's decision to put Barcelona on the agenda for the British presidency. Whilst Blair remains unapologetic for British military involvement in Iraq he is also aware of the need to find ways of reconnecting with European partners working in the region. In addition, Barcelona is consistent both with an approach to international relations which he has been pursuing during the last 7 years and with some of New Labour's core values which emphasise the role of community, duty, rights and responsibilities and education.

Since he became Prime Minister in 1997 Blair has been developing arguments to justify an interventionist foreign policy. The roots of this approach may be found in the fact that Blair is a committed Christian and impressed by the parable of the Good Samaritan. Or it may be part of a long-standing school of thought on the left which led, for example, some British socialists in the 1930s to come and fight for democracy in the Spanish civil war.

Whatever the motive New Labour thinking is infused with a mixture of altruism and self-interest. The crudest formulation of this thought can be found in a phrase used frequently by Blair himself - he will intervene when it is "the right thing to do". As a predictor of what Britain will actually do - let alone when, how or where - the phrase begs as many questions as it answers. But it does reveal that the New Labour approach is governed by more than simple perceptions of immediate, short-term British interests (although those should never be discounted).

A series of speeches and statements by Blair and his ministers give a more revealing picture of what the Prime Minister's moral imperative actually means in practice. Within days of taking office in May 1997 the new Labour foreign secretary, Robin Cook, launched a Mission Statement to explain what was new in his foreign policy and how it would be different from what had gone before. Cook pledged

"We shall work through international forums and bilateral relationships to spread the values of human rights, civil liberties and democracy which we demand for ourselves".

Cook's Mission Statement signalled a vigorous, new interventionist approach and was widely described as a radical departure from the isolationism which the outgoing Conservative government had demonstrated - most notably in the Balkans. Echoing Blair, the Statement repeated that foreign policy would, at least in part, be a values driven exercise in which a positive correlation would be drawn between the promotion of British values and the promotion of British interests.

In practice it was difficult to meet all the expectations raised by the media headlines which reported the launch of the Mission Statement but there were important advances. Cook announced a series of measures - from total ban on the British manufacture or sale of anti-personnel land mines to restrictions on small arms sales and support for an International Criminal Court - all of which contributed to subsequent wider, international action. Human rights work was stepped up either directly or through support for NGOs – and some of who's staff were seconded to work at the Foreign Office. To monitor the new policy Cook promised to publish an annual Human Rights report to ensure more policy transparency and accountability.

An early consequence of this policy was active British participation in the international force to protect the Muslim population in Kosovo. It was a conflict which prompted Blair to reflect further on the nature of responsibility and community – favourite New Labour themes. Blair developed this thinking in a speech expounding the 'Doctrine of the International Community' (1999). The Prime Minister argued that Globalisation was driving nation-states to an ever-greater level of interdependence and that this was not just economic but also a political and security phenomenon. In a classic example of New Labour triangulation Blair synthesised self interest and moral values:

"In the end values and interests 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 interests too. The spread of our values makes us safer."

It is a doctrine which Blair has been repeating since – most recently in keynote speech (Nov 2004) in which he emphasised that "...lasting security against fanatics and terrorists cannot be provided by conventional military force but requires a commitment to democracy, freedom and justice."

Speaking specifically about the Middle East and reform in the Arab world (April 2004), Foreign Secretary Jack Straw repeated the message that British policy is formed by a mixture of duty and self-interest

"...we are bound to take an interest in the matter, given that Europe and the Arab world are neighbours, and our interests in many areas, such as our economies and our security, are international and inter-dependent."

Throughout his term Blair has frequently shown the extent to which he is willing to defend the values of – "democracy, freedom and justice" – through the instruments of both 'hard' and 'soft' diplomacy. He has committed British troops to action five times in his seven years as Prime Minister. This is a record without precedent for any modern British Prime Minister in particular for one from the centre left. It is all the more extraordinary given that on no occasion have troops been deployed in direct defence of British interests as, for example, did Mrs Thatcher in the Falklands/Malvinas.

Blair has also been anxious to use the instruments of "soft diplomacy" – The British Council, the BBC World Service and new Foreign Office initiatives. Where Mrs Thatcher sought to axe the BBC world service, for example, under Blair it has had substantial increases in funding – and, in particular, has been encouraged to expand its Arabic service.

Under New Labour there has also been a blurring of the distinction between traditional foreign policy and domestic policy on immigration and integration. There are now, for example, some 2m Muslims living in Britain and Foreign Office ministers such as Jack Straw and Denis Macshane have substantial Muslim communities living in their constituencies. In very New Labour style Blair himself

has let it be known that he frequently reads the Koran and keeps a copy by his bedside. All three have emphasised that the successful integration of, and participation by these communities in the UK is an important adjunct to British foreign policy in their countries of origin. Or, to reverse the proposition, New Labour firmly believes that if there is a failure to integrate immigrants into the British political system the negative consequences will not be confined to the ambit of domestic British politics.

The most important area of "soft diplomacy" however is the work being done to promote civil society throughout North Africa and the Middle East. The Foreign Office has allocated some €6m this year for the programme Engaging with the Islamic World which has been created to strengthen the rule of law, promote good governance and emphasise the role of women. The Foreign Office has also been active in working with other EU countries in the much larger MEDA programme to promote similar values.

The content of the agenda for the Barcelona + 10 later this year is still being formulated. President Zapatero has called for a wide ranging 'dialogue of civilisations' although the British will probably want to focus progress on economic reform and education (both favourite New Labour themes). Whatever the final shape of the agenda Barcelona + 10 offers Europe a chance to resolve some of the evident policy differences on Iraq.

Now that the Anglo-American action has been revalidated in terms of democracy building rather than the elimination of weapons of mass destruction a re-launch of Barcelona would be timely even if it were not the tenth anniversary. By engaging with the region as a whole across a wide range of issues the Barcelona process appears to compliment President Bush's aspirations for greater democracy in the Middle East and Blair's desire to 'do the right thing'.

Whilst the New Labour is hesitant to talk about interventionism in terms of domestic politics or the economy the reverse is true in foreign policy. Without doubt the Blair government has been the most interventionist of any Labour government in British history. The commitment to Barcelona should be seen in that context and as yet another example of that approach.

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