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From Liberal Interventionism to Liberal Conservatism: the short road in foreign policy from Blair to Cameron

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Abstract

This article focuses on foreign policy during the Premierships of Gordon Brown and David Cameron, with a particular emphasis on the legacy bequeathed by Tony Blair. It is often assumed that the foreign policy landscape was fundamentally altered by Blair, and that his successors have followed his path, due perhaps to a lack of other options. The article will argue that the Blair doctrine of Liberal interventionism and the emphasis placed on the 'ethical dimensions' to foreign policy was largely a marketing exercise and changed very little in practical terms. The article will consider Blair's approach to foreign policy before assessing whether his successors have genuinely pursued an ethically driven foreign policy or whether they have simply justified their actions in 'ethical' terms while continuing a more pragmatic, self-interested foreign policy. Did they learn the lessons of Blair or have they simply been forced to clear up the mess he left behind? Overall, this article will argue that the pragmatic style of foreign policy making which existed before Blair continued during his time as Prime Minister and has subsequently been adopted by his successors, with any changes in foreign policy being largely presentational rather than representing any type of meaningful change.

Keywords Brown, Cameron, Blair, Interventionism, Conservatism, Ethical,

For many within the field of British Politics, Tony Blair has an almost irresistible attraction, as Thatcher did before him. His achievements, and failures, in both domestic and foreign policy have been obvious for both the public and commentators to see. Gordon Brown has tended to be viewed as his attaché, his deputy, his slightly lumbering, domestically focused sidekick. A Penfold to Blair's Dangermouse; less charismatic, less relatable, less likeable even, a continuation rather than a decisive break, bundled up with the former leader, Brown has been overlooked by many, just as Major was – a successor to a long-serving leader lacking the attributes of that leader, but perhaps also their character flaws.

This is largely understandable, and perhaps even justifiable. Gordon Brown's role as Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1997 and 2007 allowed him to dominate the domestic arena while Blair became increasingly preoccupied with global events and Britain's pursuit of specific aims overseas. His arrival in Number 10 did prompt some observers to wonder whether Blair's globe-trotting, aggressive, 'ethical' foreign policy had ended or whether his successor would follow a similar, perhaps less controversial, path. His successor, David Cameron's arrival at Number 10 in May 2010 was not the result of an electoral triumph, but rather an uneasy alliance between his own Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats with all the policy implications that a coalition implies. This article will consider the foreign policy legacy of Blair, to the extent that we can talk of one, and the inheritance of Brown and Cameron. Did foreign policy making meaningfully change under Blair's leadership, becoming more ethically driven, and what lessons did his immediate successors learn, if any?

When Cameron came to power in 2010 with his Liberal Democrat coalition colleagues, many wondered to what extent the Liberal Democrats would be afforded influence in key policy areas, including foreign policy. As it turned out, while the Liberal Democrats might have had

some small successes in government, in foreign policy terms, the Conservatives dominated. The Conservative Party and their foreign secretary William Hague, before his replacement by Phillip Hammond in July 2014, dominated this policy field. The Conservative manifesto of 2010 very much presaged the direction of policy that was to happen under Cameron and Hague. Liberal Conservatism, the term which both Cameron and Hague used to describe their approach appears to have been at least partially a response to 'liberal interventionism', Blair's ideology in foreign policy, which he so successfully outlined in his Chicago speech in 1999.

This leads us to the question of what has been the immediate legacy of Blair's Liberal Interventionism? Are Blair's successors inevitably more limited in their options than Blair was? Was 'Liberal Interventionism' a real change within foreign policy making, and if it was, did it survive the end of New Labour in government and beyond? This article will briefly examine the doctrine of Liberal Interventionism and will argue that Liberal Interventionism was, in practice, largely a continuation of the pragmatic policy making that already existed in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. However, the extent of Blair's foreign policy actions, and the public backlash over the war in Iraq, limited the actions of his successors and actually encouraged new norms within the policy field, such as the necessity of a UN mandate for war, which had been beneficial before but not necessarily mandatory, and the early steps of a process which enabled the House of Commons to have a vote on military action, a process which did not exist prior to Blair's Iraq war vote.

This article will argue that both Brown and Cameron learnt many of the lessons of the Blair era in foreign policy terms, but that the degree of change in the direction of foreign policy should not be exaggerated. While the balance sheet is not always positive, the collective memory of particularly the Iraq war, but also the closeness of the Anglo-American

relationship, forced both Brown and Cameron to deal with international issues in new ways, some of which were not to their liking. For Cameron especially, his power was somewhat reduced by the precedent which Blair had set on the House of Commons voting on military action. As discussed below, this procedural change was solidified by Cameron after being initially utilised by Blair for his own domestic purposes, and resulted in defeat over action in Syria, a worrying defeat for a Prime Minister. However, while some limited policy changes are evident, continuities can also be identified. William Hague suggested that the 1997 road to Damascus style vision of the Labour Party, which led to an emphasis on the 'ethical dimensions to foreign policy', was perhaps not a true reflection of foreign policy making over the period. Instead, he argued that very little had changed in real terms in foreign policy over the period of the Blair government for either the Labour or Conservative parties, describing the traditional approach of the Conservative Party as 'enlightened self-interest', implying that this approach was continuing under Cameron's leadership. 'It is not in our character to have a foreign policy without a conscience: to be idle or uninterested while others starve or murder each other in their millions is not for us' (2009). Hague was clearly arguing that, despite the rhetoric of the Labour government, foreign policy had traditionally not been solely focus on British interests, something which had continued under the Blair government and would be likely to continue in the future under a Conservative government. In this area, Hague argued 'New' Labour were not so new.

That Troublesome Ethical Dimension

In the run up to the general election of May 1997 there was little public discussion of foreign policy, with the obvious exception of Britain's relationship with the EU, the perennial weeping wound. In the 1997 election manifesto, the Labour Party briefly discussed at the end of the manifesto how they would give Britain a leadership role within the EU, their policy on

the Single Currency, Britain's role in NATO, global environmental responsibility, arms control and human rights (Labour Party manifesto, 1997). The policies were, as foreign policy often is during general elections, secondary considerations to the domestic policies being put forward. Less than two weeks after taking office, the Guardian reported on a speech which Robin Cook had given which outlined his 'mission statement'. In that now famous speech he argued that:

> The Labour Government does not accept that political values can be left behind when we check in our passports to travel on diplomatic business. Our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension and must support the demands of other peoples for the democratic rights on which we insist for ourselves. The Labour Government will put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy… (Guardian, 12th May 1997)

But what was an 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy? Cook linked ethics to human rights and certainly the Labour Party manifesto in 1997 linked the two concepts together, along with arms control (Labour Party Manifesto, 1997). However, beyond that, the definition was very vague, with the underlying assumption seeming to be that everyone knew what was 'ethical' and therefore it required no further definition. Vagueness in policy can be very advantageous, particularly if you have something to hide. Were this 'ethical dimension' to be laid out in detail, it would be open to scrutiny from both academics and the media. This would be hugely problematic if the policy was actually not particularly 'new' and offered no concrete rules on what ethical behaviour looked like in practice. Vagueness also avoided tough questions such as what would happen if the 'ethical dimension' conflicted with the British national interest. The implication appears to have been that ethical behaviour was

intrinsically accepted, everyone knew what it looked like in practice, and it required no further explanation. Stephen Dyson argues that both Thatcher and Blair shared a tendency to reduce complex decisions into a black-and-white, good vs. evil decision, removing all the tricky 'grey' areas (2009, 42). This policy announcement might have been a demonstration of this simplicity of thinking.

But what actually is an ethical foreign policy? And what is a dimension of that? Rhiannon Vickers noted that 'the ethical dimension became strongly associated with the issue of human rights' (Vickers, 2011, 163) but can offer no further explanation of what was meant due to a lack of clarity within the Labour government itself. Chris Brown has argued that labelling a government or a policy 'ethical' is extremely difficult and needs to be based on an overview of an entire policy area; you cannot be partially ethical. To conclude whether a nation has acted 'ethically' requires:

> a view to be taken on Britain's stance vis-à-vis the European Union and NATO and the UN family of organisations, relations with Eastern Europe and the successors of the former Soviet Union, with the Commonwealth and the rest of the Third world, and so on (Brown, 2001, 30).

This indicates that an ethical dimension cannot simply exist in one area of foreign policy, but has to exist across all areas, but what are the measures? Concise definitions are not easy to come by, often bound up with normative thinking and linked to human rights, but beyond that there is little clarity. Chandler argues that 'there is a general consensus that western government policy-makers have, in the last decade, explicitly taken on board normative and

ethical concerns, shifting away from a 'realist' approach in which a more narrowly conceived national interest was the basis of policy-making' (Chandler, 2003, 296).

On a more personal level, Jamie Gaskarth asked numerous former Foreign Secretaries for their views on 'ethical foreign policy' and the answers were varied and not favourable. As Gaskarth noted 'it would appear that the idea of "ethical" foreign policy is considered a natural part of the traditional practice of foreign policy – with Cook and Blair's suggestion that they were creating something new or innovative dismissed as "illusion" or exaggeration (Gaskarth, 2012, 197). Lord Carrington described Cook's speech outlining this policy as 'piffle' while Douglas Hurd described it as 'absolute nonsense' (Moncrieff, 23rd October 1997; Watt, 17th December 1997).

The use of the word 'ethical' and its interpretation in the press as something new and unprecedented, painted the New Labour government as a breath of fresh air from the previous Conservative government and all those which had gone before. It also implied, deliberately, that Cook's Conservative predecessors at the FCO had lacked ethics or moral character and had simply pursued a very narrow foreign policy based on national interest, something they unsurprisingly took rather badly. Abrahamsen and Williams pointed out that Labour's '"ethical foreign policy" implies that the foreign policy of previous administrations was somehow devoid of ethical commitments and assumptions. While this may well have been an impression that New Labour wished to create, it is not one that we endorse' (2001, 262). As Wheeler and Dunne noted, the use of 'ethical' to provide a short hand for 'newness' was rather misleading:

> It is commonplace for this 'ethical dimension' to be cited as the principal innovation in New Labour's approach to foreign policy, implying that previous administrations have not pursued an ethical foreign policy. The inference that ethics have been 'added and stirred' into the rest of the agenda underestimates the extent to which British foreign policy has always accommodated a particular understanding of ethics, in terms of both who the community is and how it is to be enhanced or secured (1998, 851-2).

However, Blair inherited a country which had certain constraints upon it. In order to pursue an international policy with human rights at its centre, even if that were more presentational than actual, Britain would have to look to other groups and nations for support, particularly the United States. The 1999 war in Kosovo marked a new era for both Britain and the US. Unlike the Bosnian war, this time Britain and the US became involved in the fighting in Kosovo on humanitarian grounds. As the Czech Republic President, Vaclav Havel so famously said: 'this is probably the first war that has not been waged in the name of national interests but rather in the name of principles and values. Kosovo has no oil fields to be coveted… [NATO] is fighting out of the concern for the fate of others' (Boston Globe, 5 July 1999, A14). David McCourt, focusing on the differing reactions of both Britain and the US to the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo concludes that the key difference between the two responses was not the actions of Blair, but of the US, suggesting that for all Blair's rhetoric, he was able to change little. His influence would only come to fruition if he could persuade the US President to move his position: 'Britain's embrace of intervention cannot be reduced to an effect of Blair and New Labour alone because it was underpinned by wider changes in attitude towards the appropriateness of military force in humanitarian crisis' (2012, 1).

Following McCourt's argument to its logical conclusion, human rights and a more 'ethically' driven approach to foreign policy could only be adopted if it was acceptable to the US. He argues that the US did not accept interventionism because of its worthiness, but because it had become an electoral issue, diverting the electorate's attention away from the Monica Lewinsky scandal, which was engulfing Clinton's presidency at the time (2012, 8). This more cynical perspective has been mirrored in Britain where Hague described Britain's approach to foreign policy making as one of 'enlightened self-interest', whereby ethical concerns are considered as part of a broader focus on British self-interest and global security (2009). Blair himself utilised the idea of enlightened self-interest in 2002 when he argued that 'self-interest and our mutual interests are today inextricably woven together' (2002, 120). This demonstrates a different emphasis to the stressing of ethical dimensions and human rights earlier in his premiership.

Liberal interventionism – The Blair Legacy

Blair's 1999 speech in Chicago, often referred to as the 'Doctrine of the International Community' outlined the six principles which Blair indicated would inform British foreign policy in the future and highlighted the centrality of the Prime Minister in foreign policy decision making. Blair outlined five key questions when considering intervention in another sovereign nation. These were not 'absolute tests. But they are the kind of issues we need to think about in deciding in the future when and whether we will intervene' (PBS online, 1999). In the speech, he outlined a form of interventionism based largely upon human rights and the protection of those who would struggle to protect themselves. As Blair explicitly stated 'acts of genocide can never be a purely internal matter' (PBS online, 1999). His wide ranging speech touched on numerous foreign policy issues and specifically named Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic as 'dangerous and ruthless men' (PBS online. 1999). The

purpose of the speech was to encourage the US to abandon any isolationist tendencies they may have had, pledging the support of the British in dealing with overseas dangers.

Jason Ralph argues that Blair 'gave added definition to the so called 'ethical dimension' of British foreign policy' during the Kosovo campaign, culminating in his 1999 'doctrine of the international community' speech (Ralph, 2011, 306). This is undoubtedly true, as Blair offered far more detail in his speech on Liberal Interventionism than was ever available in relation to Cook's short-lived 'ethical dimensions' approach. However, the key questions, which Blair outlined as important to answer before taking action, were not universally accepted and have been criticised for leaving important issues out. For example, Ralph has argued that it was concerning that there was no consideration of whether the case for war could be justified to others, whether they be other countries, other leaders or other international groups (2011, 307). Daddow argues that the whole Chicago speech, including the five tests, were 'devised behind the Foreign Office's back, as one of the key contributors to the speech, Lawrence Freedman, has testified' (2009, 556). Freedman argued, in an interview with Daddow, that the speech was simply the Blair government's 'way of saying something that was distinctively "Blairy"' (2009, 557). Daddow goes so far as to argue that Blair's Chicago speech 'stole the "ethical" clothes of Cook and the FCO…' (2011, 225). This speech demonstrates not only the centralisation of foreign policy around Blair, but also his use of ethics and human rights to justify military action and to keep America from returning to an isolationist position. While he argues that globalisation is a 'political and security phenomenon' (PBS online, 1999) his words and deeds seem to focus exclusively on the US and the EU. These seem to be the important partners, while other nations are mentioned as victims or aggressors. Those cited as aggressors were carefully chosen and some aggressors were omitted who had good relations with the UK or were unsuitable to be acted against for a

host of reasons. Again, this lends weight to Dyson's argument about Blair's black-and-white thinking (2009, 42).

Dodds and Elden describe Blair's foreign policy as being 'a form of idealism moderated by realism' (2008, 359). This author would argue instead, that Blair's foreign policy can actually be characterised as a form of realism tinged with idealism. The differences are more than semantic. While Dodds and Elden eloquently argued that, for Blair, the main characteristic of his foreign policy was idealism and the desire to create a better world, I would argue that Blair's actions were actually based on the desire, first and foremost, to create a safer world for Britain, a far more realist attitude. The need to create an 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy was not done without thought for Britain and its aims. Ethical considerations only came into being when it would not negatively impact on Britain. Realism first, idealism only if circumstances allowed.

If Kosovo is often held up as an 'ethical' war, the same cannot be said of the 1998 Desert Fox bombing campaign of Iraq. This bombing campaign, forcing the Iraqi authorities to co-operate with UN weapons inspectors, was not based on ethics but a realist interpretation of an old enemy, a threat to the Middle East region and the world. The aim of the bombing was not to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people but to force compliance of a UN mandate. The Desert Fox campaign demonstrates that the 9/11 bombings did not derail the moral crusade of Blair, pushing him into a more realist and aggressive foreign policy. The motive for the 2003 Iraq war showed continuity with the foreign policy norm, while the military action in Kosovo was the exceptional conflict; a largely 'ethical' war amidst an otherwise 'realist' policy programme. As early as 1998 Blair was already adopting a more realist approach in his dealings with Iraq. Clearly ethical dimensions and human rights were not the primary driving

force of British foreign policy, even before the events of 9/11, and such a flimsy application of them suggests a lack of real commitment.

The Brown Government

There has long been an assumption that during the years of Blair's premiership he strode the world stage, while his de facto deputy, Gordon Brown, limited himself to domestic policy. However, as Chancellor, Brown had a very wide ranging role within government. Not only was he essentially second in command, but any funding decisions, whether they be foreign or domestic would need to be put to him, and his reputation as a micromanager suggests that he took a very personal interest in the economic minutia of policy. Brown was an ambitious man, becoming increasingly desperate for his boss to vacate his seat in his favour, so it seems unlikely he excluded himself from foreign policy entirely. As Seldon and Lodge noted:

> Brown was determined to show that he, not Blair, was effectively in charge of the government. If he did not win every new battle against Blair, he descended into a terrible rage. The Treasury was effectively run by a small cabal from the Chancellor's office, consisting of Brown, Balls and a tight group of officials and aids, including Whelan and Ed Miliband (2011, xx).

A more nuanced approach would suggest that while Blair was front and centre in the decision making and planning of foreign policy, his second in command needed to be brought along and support his decisions. As Whitman notes 'Brown was complicit in the key foreign policy decisions of Blair's tenure as Prime Minister' (Whitman, 2010, 836). Otherwise the Blair government would be permanently staring down the barrel of a gun, waiting for the

Chancellor to make his lack of commitment known publically, not something which would aid Blair's justifications for war. As Prime Minister in waiting in 2003, Brown supported the war in Iraq, something Robin Cook noted in his diaries (Cook, 2003, 320). While Brown himself would have been very unlikely to force a war with Iraq in similar, legally hazy, circumstances, Brown did support the war, both before, during and after the campaign. It is not the author's intention to suggest that Brown was a key player on the foreign policy stage under Blair, rather it is to suggest that Brown's experiences in Blair's government shaped his own views and the priorities which he had when he became Prime Minister himself. Rather a poisoned legacy in foreign policy terms, but not one he could easily back away from.

It seems that Brown made a conscious choice to support Blair publically, and his public support continued after he became Prime Minister in 2007. In 2010, when questioned by the Chilcot Inquiry on his views on the war in Iraq he, rather unsurprisingly, argued that the decision to go to war had been 'right' and that 'Everything Mr Blair did, he did properly and I was kept fully informed about the information that I needed to make my decisions' (BBC News, 5th March 2010). To have backed away from Blair's legacy after becoming Prime Minister would have damaged Brown's credibility. Instead, upon becoming Prime Minister, Brown simply accepted Blair's legacy and began to work to deal with the impact of Blair's implementation of his doctrine in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Brown did not outline any international doctrine when he became Prime Minister. Whitman notes that 'Brown sought to introduce nuances into the philosophy underpinning the government's foreign policy alongside the presentational changes that came about through his different demeanour from that of his predecessor' (Whitman, 2010, 836). Instead, he

focused his attention on dealing with the fallout from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and also trying to improve human rights in other ways, continuing the work done under Blair. His ethical dimensions were demonstrated in his commitment to the development aid agenda, including his support of the policy to donate 0.7% GNI (Gross National Income) to development projects overseas, which had been so headline grabbing under the Blair government. It is unclear whether Brown's commitment to development project funding was driven by his religious upbringing, his own moral compass or a combination of the two. What we can say is that Brown remained committed to development aid projects and often spoke of these in terms of human rights. Idealism and morality began to be tempered, although not completely ignored, once again in terms of foreign policy, but Brown's commitment to the US remained as steadfast as his predecessor, although the desire for further war on both sides of the Atlantic had waned, allowing Brown the room to move away slightly from the Blair-Bush legacy to focus on his own area of interest – that of international aid. As Prime Minister for only three years, Brown was constrained in terms of what he could achieve, and his room for manoeuvre was further curtailed by terrorist attacks, the Foot and Mouth crisis and then the 2008 financial crisis. Foreign policy took a backseat to dealing with the fallout from the collapse of the sub-prime market in the US, and Brown had little time or money to deal with conflicts far away from British shores. His time in government was, in foreign policy as well as domestic terms, shaped by events as well as the actions of the Blair government; but that was Brown's legacy as well as Blair's. He may have been buffeted by the political weather, but it was weather he had helped to create.

Cameron and Liberal Conservatism in Opposition

During their time in opposition, the Conservative leadership followed Blair's lead in announcing their own doctrine, labelled 'Liberal Conservatism'. Liberal Conservatism was a

term coined by the party and utilised in a number of policy areas, including foreign policy. Cameron argued that liberalism and conservatism could co-exist. He stated that:

> I am a Liberal Conservative. Liberal, because I believe in the freedom of individuals to pursue their own happiness, with the minimum of interference from government. Sceptical of the state, trusting people to make the most of their lives, confident about the possibilities of the future – this is liberalism. And Conservative, because I believe that we're all in this together – that there is a historical understanding between past, present and future generations, and that we have a social responsibility to play an active part in the community we live in (Cameron, 2007).

Liberal Conservatism in terms of foreign policy consisted of five principles, not an ideology as such, but more a set of issues which were important to consider. Dodds and Elden argue that Liberal Conservatism 'seeks to distance itself from traditional conservative policies' while also tempering 'the more aggressive neo-conservatism of the Bush administration' (2008, 259-60). While the principles of Liberal Conservatism shared certain similarities with Blair's Liberal Interventionism, the five principles, as outlined below, clearly reflected the fallout from the Iraq war and the public unpopularity and condemnation of the motivations for war. The five principles were:

- That we should understand fully the threat we face;
- That democracy cannot quickly be imposed from outside;
- That our strategy needs to go far beyond military action;
- That we need a new multilateralism to tackle the new global challenges we

face;

- That we must strive to act with moral authority (Guardian, 11th September 2006).

They also recognised the long-term commitment which was needed in countries which had had their governing infrastructure removed in order to allow home-grown democracy the space and time to develop, as reflected in point number two. The legacy of Blair, and the international arena in which he operated, in the creation of these principles cannot be under-estimated. As Dodds and Elden have pointed out:

> traditionally, the political right has been hesitant to intervene in such conflicts without an explicit British benefit. The Major administration (1992-1997) in the midst of the Bosnian conflict provides one example of Conservative hesitance (alongside other European governments) with regard to providing a more robust form of humanitarian intervention in the light of the desperate plight of Bosnian Muslims (2008, 348-9).

To that, we could also add that Conservative governments also tended to seek UN authority to take action, as seen by resolution 502 issued before the Falklands War, although whether those UN resolutions covered all possibilities of conflict is rather more contested.

The Cameron Doctrine – The Coalition Government

The 2010 election failed to produce a majority government and the Conservatives were forced to enter government with the Liberal Democrats. Historically, in terms of foreign policy, a certain degree of continuity between the main political parties has been assumed. However, governments are buffeted by global events, meaning that for all their rhetoric and

determination, they may find themselves in unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. Internally, changing personnel at the FCO and in Number 10 can have a big effect on foreign policy aims and the level of preoccupation on foreign policy often changes from Prime Minister to Prime Minister. As Vickers explains 'to argue that foreign policy basically stays the same, regardless of which party is in power, is overly deterministic … Actors within the state can have an impact on foreign policy' (Vickers, 2011, 9). It is important for governments of any political persuasion to be able to read the international weather, and that is often dependent on the actions of their predecessors.

The 2010 coalition agreement produced a banal if laudable section on foreign policy. Few would find fault with the coalition's aims to protect serving military personnel in Afghanistan and elsewhere, support plans for a Middle Eastern peace plan and continue with the Anglo-American relationship. Also included were plans to reform the UN Security Council seats, to include a permanent place for, amongst others, Germany and Japan (which both Blair and Brown had supported while in office), and also a promise to strengthen relations with China and the Commonwealth (Coalition Agreement, 2010, 20). While none of these items may have been surprising, they very much represent the foreign policy priorities of the Conservative party, although none of the policies outlined in the manifesto would have given their Liberal Democrat partners cause for concern (Coalition Agreement, 20). The Liberal Democrat 2010 manifesto contained many foreign policy commitments which were largely accepted by the other two main parties. These included a commitment to spend 0.7% GNI on development aid projects (2010, p.62), support action from the international community to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons (2010, p.68) and continue working towards the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals (2010, p.62). The section on 'your world' focussed on combatting climate change and reinvigorating relations with the EU,

widely accepted policy priorities for the Liberal Democrats. One policy area which might have caused concern for those considering a coalition agreement was a pledge not to support a like-for-like replacement of the Trident Nuclear Weapons system, but this was not a significant stumbling block for the coalition agreement when it was written. There were certainly very few policy surprises in the Liberal Democrat manifesto and there were many areas of agreement between the Liberal Democrats and both the other main parties. The terms of the coalition agreement not only highlighted areas of agreement, they focused on the key global priorities of the Conservative party, with only limited discussion of the tricky issue of Europe.

The Conservative party, with their brand of 'Liberal Conservatism' and the appointment of heavy hitter William Hague as Shadow Foreign Secretary certainly appeared to be the more dominant party in foreign policy terms. The Foreign Office is usually considered a 'big prize' in the distribution of cabinet positions in coalition governments, so it should be no surprise that the majority party took the seat in the 2010 coalition government, with only limited input from the minority partner. But the important question is, how much of Cameron and Hague's thinking before the election was implemented after the election? How did their 'Liberal Conservatism' influence their actions in Libya and Syria?

What is clear is that many of the policy aims the Conservatives supported in opposition were, unsurprisingly, taken into government, such as their commitments to maintaining the Anglo-American relationship, continuing the 0.7% development funding threshold and opposing the use of torture overseas. Continuity was perhaps to be expected in this policy area, especially on some of the larger, longer-term issues, such as the Anglo-American relationship, a touchstone for both Britain and the Conservative party. Beech has pointed out that many of

the old stalwart foreign policies of the Conservative party have continued to be dominant in the Cameron government:

> Given their lack of affinity for the European Union – a supranational, intergovernmental, political, economic and diplomatic power bloc – they are compelled to steer Britain into the sphere of influence of the US. This is why NATO is repeatedly mentioned and why Conservatives in the post-Thatcher era equate 'Atlanticism' and the 'special relationship' with a Conservative reading of British diplomatic history and, more broadly, with a Conservative assessment of Britain's national interest (2011, 353-4).

While there has been a cooling of the Anglo-American relationship during the Cameron-Obama years, Britain remains one of the US's most stalwart allies and the 'special relationship' shows few signs of decreasing in significance for the UK.

Beech continues by arguing that in addition to these traditional themes in Conservative foreign policy making, there are additional new themes. The legacy of the Iraq war, the introduction of Liberal Interventionism and a more overtly 'ethical' dimension to foreign policy, alongside the creation of the principles of Liberal Conservatism all impacted on the party's overall approach. Thus, 'the partnership of liberal ideas with conservative ideas – of idealism and realism – seems different to the general approach to foreign affairs practised by the Thatcher-Major governments' (Beech, 2011, 358). As outlined above, Lord Carrington and Lord Hurd would take exception to this viewpoint, but perhaps it is an issue of degree we have to consider here. As discussed above, Dodds and Eldon argue that idealism became the dominant force in foreign policy making under Blair, tempered with some realism, a wholly

different form of foreign policy making to that which had gone before. In both practical and policy terms, we can see long-term continuities between the approaches of Cameron, Brown and Blair and their predecessors. British interests, be they economic, territorial or political, always come first, with other ideological interests, such as human rights, coming in a not-so-close second. Daddow argues: 'for "conservative" in "liberal conservative" read "realist"…' (Daddow, 2013, 116). This would suggest that for the Blair, Brown and Cameron governments, the overriding approach to foreign policy making has been largely realist, with some ideological elements when these did not conflict with British self-interest; a continuation of foreign policy making under previous administrations prior to Blair. For all the fanfare over the Blair government's new approach to foreign policy making, very little substantively changed, although there were exceptions to this rule, such as the war in Kosovo in 1999.

The Action in Libya

The Arab Spring and the conflict in Libya were among the first instances where David Cameron's foreign policy was tested, and we can observe lessons learned from the Iraq war. Libya was considered to be an old enemy, brought into the fold of the international community by Blair in 2004. However, despite its return to the international community, Gaddafi was viewed with some suspicion. Putting aside the considerable issue that was the Lockerbie bombing and the bomber, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, held in a Scottish jail before being released on humanitarian grounds, the human rights record of Libya under Gaddafi's leadership was reported to be appalling, making for a very uneasy relationship between Gaddafi and Blair, the self styled human rights champion. So why draw Libya back into the fold? Libya was undoubtedly a worry, especially for European nations due to its proximity to the southern coast of Europe. By drawing Libya into the international community, and

reducing the nation's ability to develop nuclear technology further, there would be benefits for the global community, whilst it also enabled Blair to demonstrate his foreign policy credentials in a more peaceful way.

Despite Blair's 'glad-handing' of Gaddafi, Libya did not become a large supplier of oil to Britain, perhaps demonstrating the suspicion with which Libya was viewed in the UK. Leech and Gaskarth noted that 'British security and intelligence relations in this period [during Blair's term in office] later proved highly controversial following allegations that Britain had shared intelligence and co-operated with operations that led to the rendition of individuals to Libya and their subsequent torture' (Leech and Gaskarth, 2015, 146). However, as the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East, the position of unpopular dictators became very vulnerable. Oil-rich Libya, with its geographical proximity to the southern shores of Europe and its erratic leader, were of particular concern. With Cameron in Number 10, and Gaddafi desperate to hold onto power, it was unsurprising that Cameron's response to Gaddafi's violent attacks on the rebels was to begin pushing for a 'coalition of the willing' to begin supporting the Libyan rebels.

Hague and Cameron both sold the action in terms of ethical considerations, just as Blair had sold action in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq in similar terms. However, the question to be asked is 'why Libya? Why not one of the other Arab Spring nations, such as Bahrain or Yemen? The UN mandate, Security Council Resolution 1973, and the NATO banner under which the action took place undoubtedly provided the action with more legitimacy, but the fact remained that numerous NATO members were again becoming embroiled in an internal issue in an oil-rich country. Libya's human rights record had been considered appalling for many years, but military action had not been forthcoming from either Britain or the US, with

the focus of action being on economic sanctions. Morris points out the irony of this situation when he notes that Cameron and Hague distanced themselves from neo-Conservatism to create 'room within which to criticise Labour's highly interventionist policies, especially under Blair', before then undertaking a high-interventionist policy themselves (Morris, 2011, 340). While Britain did not buy substantial amounts of oil from Libya, France, which took part in the bombing campaign, along with numerous other European nations, certainly did and it could be argued that their energy security was a consideration in their willingness to participate in the campaign (Leech and Gaskarth, 2015, 150). Additionally, while Britain did not buy a great deal of Libyan oil in the run-up to the conflict (Leech and Gaskarth estimate about 4% of Libya's oil exports went directly to Britain (2015, 150)), there was no guarantee that it would continue not to buy from the Libyans, especially if Gaddafi was removed. Putting oil to one side, were there other reasons for taking action in Libya while failing to take action in other nations also experiencing an Arab Spring, such as Bahrain?[1]

It could be argued that Libya was a perfect place for certain key NATO members, primarily the US, UK and France, to demonstrate their limited willingness to support the Arab Spring and protect human rights, while also protect their own interests. Libya's geographical location on the northern coast of Africa made it relatively easy for NATO nations to reach it from European bases. The weather conditions were suitable for bombing raids, something which had influenced the timing of the Iraq war because of fears over intense heat and sandstorms. Gaddafi was considered an erratic leader, having few friends either in the international community or in his region. Libya was a relatively easy target and military action there could provide a useful platform for the Cameron government to demonstrate their Liberal Conservatism, while building good relations with other NATO nations keen to take action, including France. However, as Daddow argues 'Cameron has been at pains to

inform the watching public that Libya will not mark for him a step on the same dangerous path of democracy promotion through the use of force that characterised the post-11 September Blair era' (Daddow, 2013, 114).

Daddow and Schnapper have written on the evolution of the Conservative Party's thinking on foreign policy, highlighting the fact that Liberal Conservatism is in many ways a 'back to basics' policy. They argue that the Conservative Party have always looked to global organisations for support: 'This return to essentials was a result of Cameron's obvious intention to distance himself from Blair, as the Conservative Party sought in turn to distance itself from New Labour's perceived recklessness in foreign policy' (2013,332). Daddow and Schnapper argue that both the Conservative and Labour parties make decisions within a framework of 'bounded liberalism', which sets limits on decision making which are largely accepted without question. This approach indicates that the scope of action for successive British governments is fairly limited and therefore the scope for ideological foreign policy making, outside of the accept parameters of policy is unacceptable to the British public and political elites alike. That is not to say that differences between the parties do not remain: 'Cameron has been more cautious than Blair in setting down conditions for violations of the Westphalian notion of state sovereignty that might lead to a form of moral crusade that mired Britain and the US in Iraq' (Daddow and Schnapper,2013, 333). Ultimately, the doctrine of Liberal Conservatism can be side-lined and minimised if the decision-making might of the UN fails to support it and the impact on the domestic electoral front would be too great, creating a lack of legitimacy within this 'bounded liberalism'.[2] What a difference a decade makes.

The Lack of Action in Syria

While action in Libya might have been acceptable to some parts of the British public and other NATO nations as part of a coalition, the situation in Syria was considerably more complex. The Syrian leader, Bashar al-Assad had succeeded his father in 2000. He had been considered the modernising, more liberal face of the Middle East. Syria, a former French colony, was considered to be a relative success story in the region, being relatively peaceful and suffering from relatively few religious uprisings, while being ruled by the al-Assad family. An authoritarian ruling family is not particularly unusual within the Middle East and the stability this afforded was viewed fairly favourably by numerous Western nations. Along with his British born and educated wife Asma, Bashar al-Assad was flattered by the Western media and fated as the future for the Middle East. As Zisser pointed out in 2003 al-Assad's image was 'of a reformer, of a man of the world familiar with Western ways and views' (Zisser, 2003). It was, therefore, not expected by the international community that the response to internal strife within Syria would be such violent repression.

As stories leaked out of Syria of extensive human rights abuses and violence authorised by the government against its own people, the Cameron government again began to take the political temperature in relation to military action. However, this time despite the human rights violations, there was considerably less appetite within the international community for action. Syria enjoys a strong relationship with Russia, which uses parts of the Syrian coastline as its warm water port and has trading links with the nation, meaning that a war with Syria would never receive the support of the UN Security Council. Additionally, it would add to already difficult relations between Russia and the Western Nations (the US, UK and France) who had already spoken out about Russia's foreign policy expansion in places like Georgia (for an example of the news reporting on these issues see Rosenberg, 2008). Leech and Gaskarth highlighted Blair's difficult relationship with Bashar al-Assad and noted that

'Syria's close relations with Russia and Iran, two powers with which Britain has endured negative relations, have hampered closer ties' (Leech and Gaskarth, 2015, 147). As David Cameron outlined to the House of Commons before the vote on military action in Syria:

> It is clear that Russia has military interests in the port of Tartus and that it still feels very sore about its belief that it was sold a pup over Libya. We are not likely to get Russian support in the Security Council, nor are we likely to get Chinese support there, either. We cannot allow a situation whereby the international community's ability to implement international law is thwarted by a constant veto by Russia and China (HC Deb, (2013) col. 1454).

Cameron argued, as he had with Libya, that the human rights violations warranted military action. But, again, why Syria, rather than some of the other Arab Spring nations with appalling human rights records? Could it be due to Syria's close ties to Iran and Russia? Could this have tipped the balance in favour of action? There had been 'ethically justified' wars before which had lacked UN mandates, such as the 1999 war in Kosovo, so it was not impossible for military action to take place in such circumstances, but Cameron, still mindful of the lessons of Iraq, put the issue to a vote in the House of Commons. Strong argues that Cameron 'felt constrained… to follow past practice, and in the process surrendered control over his own foreign policy' (Strong, 2014, 14). After a hard-fought battle from both supporters and opponents of military action in Syria, the House of Commons voted against action by 285 to 272, preventing the UK from joining US-led strikes in Syria (BBC, 30th August 2013). This was a crushing defeat for the government's foreign policy. Regardless of the fact that the coalition government had put the decision to the House of Commons, the expectation was that the House would confirm the policy of the government and authorise

military action. Such a defeat was unprecedented for a government, particularly a government in the middle of their governing term, rather than a lame-duck government creeping towards election-day. It essentially confirmed that, in some circumstances, the government was not in control of their own foreign policy.

The governmental defeat and the lack of British military action in Syria have signalled several things to the international community and the domestic electorate. Firstly, some of the lessons of Iraq had been learned by the Cameron coalition government, and therefore Parliament will be expected to have more of a voice in plans for future military action, sometimes with very uncomfortable results for the governing party or parties. Strong has written on the increasing necessity of a Commons vote on military action, precipitated by Blair's Iraq vote. This necessity for a vote was confirmed by Cameron's willingness to gain political consensus for his action in Libya. This meant that a new norm had been created, requiring Prime Ministers to gain Parliamentary assent for military action. As Strong points out: 'while the prime minister retains the legal freedom to direct the armed forces as he sees fit, in terms of practice parliament now wields a political veto over that freedom' (Strong, 2014, 14).

Secondly, the case for war cannot simply be made in elite circles with the acquiescence of the voting public and backbench MPs being assumed. Instead, the case for war needs to be made more vocally and more widely as a lack of domestic support will not only make military action unpopular, it could actually make military action very difficult. Confidence in the ruling elite in foreign affairs has been eroded by the war in Iraq and now the case for action needs to be made much more explicitly. Hennessey argued in 2007 that 'the case for a public legal opinion is made', concluding that the case for war needed to be made to the public and

that the conclusions of the Joint Intelligence Committee should be separated from the opinion of the Prime Minister (Hennessey, 2007, 347).

Thirdly, it has highlighted the issue of whether the British public are happy for their government to take on a global role – should Britain be confining its action to only key areas in the world? Should the responsibility to defend human rights fall only to the US and the UK, or to NATO, or should that responsibility be shared more widely with other organisations and nations, such as the African Union? As was seen over the seizure of farms in Zimbabwe, in some places action by Britain or other Western nations might not necessarily be the best course of action or the most successful, and can generate accusations of neo-colonialism which can be extremely damaging. Should neighbouring nations, in the case of Zimbabwe perhaps South Africa or Mozambique, take more of a central role in the resolution and protection of human rights? As Daddow notes 'the return to pragmatic essentials in British foreign policy is also being achieved through a reconceptualization of where, when and how Britain should use force to achieve its strategic objectives' (Daddow, 2013, 114).

Since the Cameron government lost the vote on action in Syria, we have seen the rise of Islamic State (ISIL), an ideological and religiously fanatical group which is active in parts of Iraq and Syria. While there have been calls for Britain and other nations to take military action against IS, currently action on the ground seems unlikely despite the barbaric actions of the group and incidences of internet grooming of young British men and women. With a majority Conservative government now in Downing Street and new atrocities against British citizens in Tunisia, it is possible that calls for military action could be revived, but with an American Presidential election due in 2016, action seems unlikely and would almost certainly need to be premised upon a new danger or threat. The voting public in both the US and the

UK is perhaps too fatigued for a protracted, violent and ugly war against IS, and this, coupled with military spending cuts in Britain, suggest action would be entered into only reluctantly against such a well established guerrilla extremist group who are difficult to locate.

Conclusion

The legacy of Tony Blair's time in office has been felt by both Brown and Cameron. The world which they inherited is very different to that which Blair himself inherited, but the main planks of British foreign policy making have remained the same. Despite a move towards selling policy in terms of 'ethical dimensions' and 'liberal interventionism', the resulting actions of Brown and Cameron in government have shown very little evidence to suggest that the ideological approach Blair utilised to justify his foreign policy was accepted by his successors. Indeed this piece has argued that neither Blair nor his successors actually accepted ideologically driven policy making, instead each continued to use the existing pragmatic policy making process, highlighting ethical considerations when it made conflict more sellable to the public. One legacy which Blair does have is that his technique of using ethics and human rights to justify action has been continued by his successors, most notably David Cameron, who used a similar justification in the run-up to military action in Libya and in justifying action in Syria. Foreign policy is traditionally a policy area where pragmatism and realism rule and continuity is crucial. For those seeking more radical government reform and action, the civil service are an easy target, representing the continuity of government. The civil service are often blamed for resisting change and overpowering more radical thinking with institutional inertia. However, Blair's much discussed 'sofa style' of government suggests that any continuity we see in policy making under Blair, particularly in a policy area he took such a personal interest in, cannot necessarily be attributed to civil servants and the institutions, as these were secondary forces within the policy debate.

The political fallout from the Iraq war had substantial effects on the political elite in the UK and the policies of both the Brown and Cameron governments reflect a desire to finish the job that was started in that area but not become embroiled in another costly and controversial conflict. One of the notable elements of Cameron's plans on Libya and Syria were that they had a very clearly defined end point. As can be seen in Libya, this was not always successful but it did allow British forces to be removed from the area and an end, of sorts, to be reached. Brown took no new military action during his time as Prime Minister and before a bomb was dropped on Libya, David Cameron ensured the plan was UN sanctioned and operated through NATO. With no UN mandate on action in Syria, Cameron took his case to the House of Commons and lost. This was a very big change from Bush's 'coalition of the willing' and Blair's avoidance of discussion on war in Iraq at Cabinet. Despite the change in rhetoric from Blair, it is clear that his priorities in terms of foreign policy remained the same, and these led him to pursue policy aims that were very traditional and to use methods which were similarly fairly traditional. In the case of the Iraq war, for example, Blair protected the US-US special relationship by following the lead of the American administration into the theatre of war. In terms of the EU, for all his rhetoric and early signs of promise, Blair, when forced with a choice between the EU and the US, looked to the US for coalition rather than the co-operation of the EU.

Both Brown and Cameron have followed the traditional path of pragmatism, putting their faith in the US-UK relationship and continuing to adopt a global outlook. Brown was not forced to take military action, as there was limited cause during his three years in office. For Cameron, when the Arab Spring erupted, causing instability in the Middle East and unsettling old political friends and rivals, he followed the pragmatic path of seeking the best possible

outcome for the UK and using military action to ensure this outcome where necessary. Cameron did follow Blair's marketing methods, selling his policy in humanitarian terms in the first instance, rather than relying on the UK public to accept a more self-interested justification.

For all the talk of 'ethical dimensions' and 'Liberal Interventionism', there was very little change in foreign policy making under the leadership of Blair, Brown and Cameron. Each has adopted their own personal style, focusing on specific areas when forced by circumstance or driven by personal interest, but their aims were largely similar. As in so many policy areas, the real change under Blair, the change which lives on now he has left Downing Street, is his marketing skills, his ability to present policy in a way which was often (although not always) more palatable for both a domestic and international audience. The war in Kosovo is often dealt with as a unique war, one which focused on ethics and the desire to minimise suffering in a country far from our own shores. It is considered unique because the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya which followed it were a return to traditional pragmatic foreign policy making, where the top priority is British interests and everything else is deemed a lower priority. That is not to say that pragmatism is an inherently bad thing, or that Britain should attempt to be the Policeman of the World. However, it is inaccurate to suggest that Britain is pursuing a higher cause in foreign policy making, or that we are inherently on the side of the weak and displaced.

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[1] These issues are considered in greater detail by Leech and Gaskarth 'British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring' (2015).

[2] For discussion of 'bounded liberalism' please see Daddow and Schnapper, 'Liberal intervention in the Foreign Policy Thinking of Tony Blair and David Cameron', (2003).