The noble cause: New Labour's legacy on Africa

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JULIA GALLAGHER, APR 15 2011

It was widely regarded as a rare bright spot in New Labour's pretentions to an 'ethical foreign policy'. While domestic reform got bogged down in complexity, and foreign policy in recrimination, British policy in Africa stood for something pure – the 'one noble cause' as Blair himself put it – a policy that wasn't rooted in British interests, but in the higher principles that Robin Cook had originally argued were to guide British foreign policy.

This idea of Africa policy as 'pure' was not new. It drew on a long history of British engagement with the continent that can be traced back to the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 – described by the historian W. E. H. Lecky as 'among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations' – the establishment of Sierra Leone as a home for slaves freed by the British navy which patrolled Africa's west coast after abolition, and the popular view of the colonial project as one of bringing peace, moral and intellectual enlightenment to the continent.

Labour politicians were also very proud of the party's history of engagement with the anti-colonial struggle in the 1950s when they built close relationships with Africa's socialist heroes, Seretse Kharma, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda and Kwame Nkrumah. And, of course, the party's steadfast opposition to what it saw as the Conservative government's expedient and self-interested engagement with the South African Apartheid regime in the 1980s continues to define its ethos and identity.

When Labour came to power in 1997, two early initiatives set the scene for its Africa policy: Foreign Secretary Cook's 'ethical dimension' and the creation of the Department for International Development (DfID). They led between them to real policy shifts towards Africa: aid more than doubled in the ten years of Blair's premiership, much of it going to Africa; bilateral debt to Africa's poorest countries was written off; British military support helped end the civil war in Sierra Leone and substantial material support was committed to help strengthen democratic government there afterwards; and Blair put Africa on world leaders' agendas in 2005 when he inaugurated a 'year for Africa', launched the Commission for Africa and gave Africa top-billing under his presidencies of the G8 and EU.

These initiatives were popular – huge numbers of British people came onto the streets in support of the G8 summit in Gleneagles, while hundreds of NGOs and church groups supported and raised money for the Make Poverty History campaign that ran alongside it.

In politics, too, New Labour's Africa policy brought all sorts of unlikely people together. Opposition spokespeople like the Liberal Democrat's Jenny Tonge complained that 'it was extraordinarily difficult to oppose anything the government did on Africa'. David Cameron promised to preserve Labour's legacy by ring-fencing the development budget. And even left-wing Labour MPs like Jeremy Corbyn found themselves in agreement with Blair on Africa.

In all the excitement and self-congratulation, no one stopped to ask what labeling an entire continent 'the scar on the conscience of the world', as Blair did in his speech to the Labour Party conference in 2001, might actually mean. Few wondered what such a patronizing and disabling appellation sounded like to Africans.

The problem with New Labour's approach was that it was much more about Britain than about Africa. Africa policy mattered because it represented a 'pure' activity, something that transcended politics. It brought everyone together; it didn't involve messy political arguments. In this sense, it fitted Blair's aspiration to 'big tent politics', something that

worked well at the beginning of his government, but which, in everything but Africa, had melted away by the end.

At the same time, this approach meant that Africa itself was perceived as a politics-free zone. Africa appeared to be populated with villains and heroes – Robert Mugabe, Charles Taylor, Sani Abacha on one side; Nelson Mandela and the African poor on the other. British policy was directed at encouraging the 'progressive, good guys' in their struggles with 'the bad guys'. African actors and causes were flattened, presented as 'good' and 'evil'. In this, it often uncannily echoed older ideas of Britain as a civilizing force in the 'dark continent'.

As a result, Britain largely failed to take account of the nuances of political relationships throughout the continent. That's why the re-election of Robert Mugabe, and the support for him from fellow African leaders didn't make sense. It was why Thabo Mbeki, the politician-president was a more problematic partner than Nelson Mandela, the saint-president. And it was why apparently heroic, progressive leaders like Meles Zanawi of Ethiopia, Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda caused perplexity when they tried to crush opposition parties and media.

One of the key ambitions of New Labour's Africa policy was to build and strengthen 'capable states' and 'good governance'. But in such ambitious plans the complexities of African politics and relationships were overlooked. Politics and governing were viewed as a technical exercise, one that could be taught through the transmission of a few simple rules and processes. What's more, few stopped to ask whether developing state capacity and accountability is something that can be achieved by donors from abroad, no matter how well-meaning. By definition, strong relationships between governments and societies must be developed by the protagonists themselves.

Labour's legacy in Africa has been to establish an idea of British policy as pure and disinterested. This desire to 'do good', to make a difference in the world – which rests on a mixture of vanity and genuine concern – does far more to promote British wellbeing than African development. Unfortunately, it appears that this approach is being adopted unquestioningly by the current government and that Africa will continue to be the 'scar on the conscience of the world', in British minds, at least, for some time to come.

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Her book, Britain and Africa under Blair: in pursuit of the good state (Manchester University Press), is published in May