

Written evidence submitted by Professor Peter Lawler (INR0027)

Introduction

This submission to the inquiry is authored by Professor Peter Lawler, who retired in August 2019 as Professor of international politics at the University of Manchester and is now an honorary professor in the same institution. The submission is presented under the auspices of Policy@Manchester, the university's policy engagement unit. Professor Lawler has taught and researched international politics for nearly 40 years, primarily in Australia and the UK but also in, Spain, Canada, Russia and Switzerland. His research has been focussed generally on ethics and foreign policy, and specifically on the comparative investigation of the internationalist commitments of a number of Western states - the Scandinavian states, Australia, Canada, and Britain - under the research theme of "Good States in World Politics". The submission is motivated primarily by a concern that a number of recent events raise questions about the future coherence and sustainability of the modest internationalist dimensions of British foreign policy.

The UK as a "force for good"?

In his introduction to the Queen's speech in Parliament on January 13 2020, the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab referred to "Global Britain" being a "force for good in the world", a foreign policy descriptor arguably introduced by the late former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook in 1997, at the beginning of the first Blair government, to signal an explicit internationalist dimension to British foreign policy.

It is a commonplace assertion, with some basis in fact, that post-1945 Conservative governments have historically tended to lean towards a more pragmatic foreign policy orientation that reflects what in my scholarly field would be referred to as a broadly "realist" worldview (not to be confused with the somewhat more brutal and widely misused label "Realpolitik"). Here, the foreign policy priority is seen to be the "national interest" and the justifications for any overtly ethical or internationalist commitments have ultimately to show a substantive connection to that priority. There is perhaps no clearer statement of this point of view than that offered by the last conservative foreign secretary prior to the Blair Labour government era, Malcolm Rifkind, in 1996:

I am not pre-occupied with agonising soul-searching about Britain's historical vocation. Are we a Great or Medium Power; are we Good or Bad Europeans; are our bilateral relations still special: these labels are distractions. They are prisms which distort our vision. They do not throw much light on our real needs and policy choices. The best starting point is Lord Palmerston's dictum: "the furtherance of British interests should be the only object of a British Foreign Secretary.

In contrast Labour Party governments are generally associated with more prominent expressions of an "internationalist" dimension to foreign policy. Prior to the election of Labour to government in 1997, one would not want to exaggerate the differences between previous conservative and labour governments. What 1997 and the arrival of Robin Cook in King Charles Street did signal was a more overt shift towards declaration of liberal internationalist commitments, which did not signal a decisive break with the past but more

a willingness to enhance Britain's internationalist commitments and wear them more visibly on the national sleeve, so to speak. Borrowing the words of the former Australian Labour Foreign Secretary, Gareth Evans, regarding Australian Labour's foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War's end, the internationalist commitments introduced under Cook were, I would argue, about emphasising a commitment to "being and being seen to be a good international citizen". The commitment to "being seen to be" was received rather cynically by Evan's critics, but at the very least it did initiate a public conversation and commit Australian labour government's to making their internationalist foreign policy commitments more explicit, more public and more transparent.

The sincerity, depth, and coherence of the internationalist dimensions of Labour government foreign policies, in either Britain or Australia, has been a matter of considerable political and academic debate. There is little doubt that the decision to join the 2003 invasion of Iraq did considerably damage to British Labour government's internationalist credentials in the eyes of a very significant portion of the British public. It is not therefore entirely surprising that the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party in 2015 was received by a significant portion of the British public as indicative of a potential sea change in British foreign policy. Corbyn was promising a decisive break with not only the long-standing post-1945 foreign policy consensus but also with the New Labour moderate upping of the internationalist ante. Of course, Corbyn was defeated at the last general election and the foreign policy orientation of Labour under the leadership of Keir Starmer remains to be seen, although it is reasonable to assume that it will retain a visible commitment to progressive internationalist values.

As Raab's phraseology cited above remind us, New Labour's internationalist vision appears to have remained with us in some key respects. Subsequent conservative governments retained a number of the key overt commitments introduced during the Blair era and, in some areas, such as the ring fencing of 0.7% GNI to ODA for example, or the commitment to meaningful environmental action, arguably moved them forward somewhat. It would be tempting to suggest, then, that a moderately enhanced liberal internationalist standpoint was now cemented in place. Alongside Raab's introduction to the Jan 2020 Queen's speech, Perusal of the 2018 FCO report entitled *Human Rights and Democracy*, published in June 2019, the latest FCO Single Department Plan, or the 2019 Autumn Ministerial Statement on Human Rights Priority Countries (HPRCs) would seemingly confirm this.

There are however a number of connected reasons to reflect critically upon the sustainability and the coherence of Britain's stated internationalist commitments, let alone any further enhancement of them. These include:

1. A need to reflect upon the broad impact on public attitudes and political debate of the long running debate leading up to Brexit. As numerous commentators have argued, the debate was not only highly divisive, it was also accompanied by a rise in the public expression of strongly nationalist, inward-looking sentiment and the placing of immigration (not just from other EU states) at the centre of public debate. Senior pro-Brexit members of government endeavoured to distance themselves from the more unsavoury expressions of hostility to refugees and immigrants that accompanied the debate, through such things as emphasising that their opposition was to EU membership and not close association with

Europe in other respects and the deployment of slogans such as “global Britain”. Nonetheless, the EU is the most advanced form of multilateral cooperation between sovereign states in modern international history and it is not hard to see why Britain’s exit from it can easily be interpreted as a sign of a turning way from a cooperatively-minded multilateralist global outlook, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

2. Developing upon point 1, the Brexit debate revealed significant divisions within the conservative parliamentary party and various commentators have suggested that there is a connected and ongoing division within the Government over the general tenor of British foreign policy. Raab’s statement suggests continuity with previous conservative governments regarding the general foreign policy stance, but there are some commentators who have questioned the sustainability of such continuity. I can illustrate the general point by way of the following comment (written a year prior to the last general election) by Thomas Raines, head of the Europe Programme at Chatham House:

(T)here seem to be shifting currents within the party, with some supportive of a harder-nosed, more interest-driven policy, echoing the more nationalist tones of Ukip, the UK Independence Party, with scepticism about aid, climate change and immigration, and a more positive attitude to the administration of Donald Trump ... Party politics may come to offer a more direct version of the tension that has long been at the heart of British foreign policy, between an interest-driven approach under the Conservatives and a more explicitly values-driven one under Labour (Thomas Raines “Foreign policy: it’s all change”, *The World Today*, Dec 2018 -Jan 2019, p.32.)

3. A need to examine the implications flowing from the urgency to develop a post-Brexit international trade policy, not least through closer trade alignment with the US, for the government’s wider foreign policy orientation. I have little doubt that a significant section of the British public, sitting across party political lines moreover, will have real concerns if a US-UK trade agreement results in pressures to forge a closer alignment with US foreign policy more generally (regardless of the long-standing yet also long debated assertion that we have always had a “special relationship”). Of course, the extent of such concerns will in part be dependent on the results of the forthcoming US Presidential election.

4. More pointedly, there is an explicit tension between Britain’s stated foreign policy values and the marked increase between 2018 and 2019 in British arms sales to countries that are on the Government’s own list of Human Rights Priority countries, notably Saudi Arabia (“Britain boosts arms sales to repressive regimes by £1bn”, *The Observer*, 25 April 2020). In the case of Saudi Arabia, the use of Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs), supposedly intended to facilitate the sale of “less sensitive goods”, has over the last 5 years enabled the sale of Storm Shadow and Brimstone air-to-surface missiles and Paveway IV bombs to the Saudis (to the combined value of £330 million, according to SIPRI) which have been linked to attacks on civilian targets in Yemen (“UK hides extent of arms sales to Saudi Arabia”, *The Observer*, 23 June 2018) . The tension was confirmed by the June 2019 High Court ruling in favour of the Campaign Against Arms Trade, which resulted in the temporary freezing to arms sales to Saudi Arabia. I have little doubt that the Government’s rationality for such sales will cite “strategic” concerns and the value of maintaining leverage over Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the former conservative Foreign Secretary effectively made this case in a 2019

article where he also asserted that Britain has “some of the strictest arms control export guidelines in the world”. The need for urgent reflection on the coherence of British arms sales policy with its wider foreign policy aims is surely amplified by Hunt’s claim that in 2019 Britain had provided £200 million in emergency aid to Yemen to address food shortages and child malnutrition (Jeremy Hunt, “Yemen crisis won’t be solved by UK arms export halt”, *Politico* March 26, 2019). If it is the case that British bombs attack civilian targets in Yemen, while at the same time British aid works to ameliorate civilian suffering in the conflict does this not raise some profound ethical and political questions, not easily swept away by claims of strategic necessity or the need to maintain political leverage?

5. Finally, over the last few years we have seen the emergence of a range of national leaders - Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte, Orban, etc - who are explicitly anti-multilateralist and anti-internationalist. Coupled with the rise of populist, ultra-nationalist, and openly xenophobic political parties and social movements across Europe and elsewhere over the last decade or so, this creates a challenging international environment for governments professing adherence to broad liberal multilateralist and internationalist values.

In conclusion, I think, firstly, it is vital that the Integrated Review takes a close and critical look at Britain’s current internationalist commitments and their future prospects. Are they coherent? are they robust? Will they stand up to critical scrutiny of their application? How is the tension between strategic policy and ethical policy to be reconciled? Is there need for a more fulsome statement and explanation of the Government’s foreign policy outlook and the worldview that underpins it?

Secondly, I would hope the review would also examine the Government’s communications strategy concerning British foreign policy for both domestic and international audiences. One of the common complaints during the 3 years of debating Brexit was the lack of public knowledge about the EU. Only some of the blame for this can be sheeted back to the public itself. How willing and prepared is the government to communicate and, indeed, publicly debate the assumptions that underpin its foreign and security policies? If it is authentically committed to widening public participation in the Integrated Review, then what would be the best ways to facilitate this?

When the late Robin Cook announced New Labour’s foreign policy vision more than 20 years ago, it attracted a mix of approval, criticism, and derision from across the political spectrum. It also set a benchmark by which to judge Britain’s foreign policy conduct. Whatever one’s views of its substantive content, it was at least out there for us all to see and debate. I sincerely hope that this government will consider doing likewise, not only to render their foreign policy more transparent but also as contribution to the invigoration of British democracy.

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