UK-Africa

UK-African Relations: the background to Labour’s Africa policy

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Despite contacts with the continent that go much further back, the origins of relations between the United Kingdom and the states of independent Africa lie, obviously enough, in the colonial era, when the UK imposed its rule on much of sub-Saharan Africa, and on the majority of Africans. A look at the map of Africa, marked out according to the nationality of its colonisers, actually understates the importance of the British presence, since other colonial powers – notably France, but also Belgium, Portugal and Italy – occupied large areas of the continent that were very sparsely inhabited. Of the ten most populous states in sub-Saharan Africa, no fewer than seven were British, whereas none were French, the three non-British ones being Ethiopia, Congo, and Mozambique.

Given the critical role of colonialism in creating African states in the first place, and the centrality of the colonial relationship – in, for example, language, state structures, economic linkages, and the personal connections between the generation of leaders who took over at independence and the former metropole – one might plausibly have expected the UK to continue to play an important and even dominant role in the international relations of post-colonial Africa. In fact, however, this never happened, and the reasons are worth noting, because they provide an essential backdrop to the attempt to create more prominent links after 1997.

For a start, the British were not particularly interested in maintaining any close relationship with Africa in general, and with the formerly British-governed parts of it in particular. They retained an element of immediate post-colonial responsibility, indicated by their intervention to suppress the 1964 East African mutinies, and by covert support for the federal government in the Nigerian civil war, but their main interests lay elsewhere, in the ‘special relationship’ with the United States, and the perennially vexed issue of British relations with Europe. Even within the Commonwealth, Africa was historically outweighed by India – always the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the British empire – and what were then called the ‘white dominions’ of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and indeed South Africa, whereas for the other European colonial powers – France, Portugal and Belgium – the post-colonial relationship was essentially an African one.

It is worth reminding ourselves, indeed, just how trivial was the UK relationship with Africa by the late 1980s, by which time only just over 3% of British exports went to Africa, and less than 2% of the United Kingdom’s imports came from it. British aid to Africa was financially on a level with Sweden and Canada, and stood at merely one-third of Italy’s, and one-sixth of France’s, aid to the continent. From an African viewpoint, likewise, the British simply did not provide the peculiar mix of support and subordination that the francophones received.
from France, while the fact that the key formerly British countries were so much bigger that the formerly French ones meant that they were not, and did not see themselves as being, in the same kind of dependent relationship. No way was an African superstate like Nigeria going to see itself as a British client, while a relatively high proportion of the more radical African leaders at independence, including Nkrumah, Nyerere, Obote and Kaunda, governed Commonwealth African states. These, rather than British-oriented rulers like Banda or Seretse Khama – or even the leaders of more substantial states like Kenyatta or Balewa – made the running in the African fora, notably the Organisation of African Unity, within which continental attitudes to the outside world were increasingly defined.

But most of all, the entire post-colonial relationship between Africa and the United Kingdom was soured and dominated by the issue of minority rule in southern Africa, first of all especially in Rhodesia, and subsequently in South Africa, which African Commonwealth leaders felt to be a British responsibility, and which British governments, Labour or Conservative, either did not, or felt that they could not, do anything about. Commonwealth meetings in particular, far from providing a forum for British leadership, instead became one in which African leaders were constantly nagging the British government, and British prime ministers in the 1960s and 1970s came to loathe and dread them. Even the Zimbabwe settlement of 1980, orchestrated by the Thatcher government that came to office in 1979, provided little relief, because the focus simply shifted to South Africa. One enormously important legacy that the Blair government inherited in 1997 was therefore that the era of white minority rule in Africa had definitively ended, with the transition in South Africa, and it therefore became possible to re-establish the UK-African relationship in a context from which the most damaging legacies of colonialism had been removed.

A second key element in creating a new relationship was the emergence of Africa in the British and wider global consciousness as the major site of humanitarian concern, and the creation of a significant domestic constituency that viewed Africa as a source of moral responsibility on the part of the citizens of the world’s wealthier states. This is not, to be sure, an entirely new perception of the continent, but dates back to the Anti-Slavery Society and the identification of Africa as a key site for the work of Christian missionaries – and of course includes the role of the anti-apartheid movement. But in its recent formulation, it can be dated precisely to Michael Buerk’s famous BBC broadcast in November 1984: ‘Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem, it lights up a biblical famine, now, in the twentieth century’. This was over twelve years before Labour came to power, and was reflected in the politics of the time, as for example in the BandAid phenomenon, and the role of Linda Chalker as the first real British minister for Africa. It was given further resonance, both by the end of the Cold War, which removed Africa from the realm of superpower competition, and in the process enhanced the moral context of the relationship, removing it from the arena of crude realpolitik, and by further traumas, most important of which was the Rwandan genocide of 1994. As a result, there existed by the mid-1990s the opportunity to create new kinds of relationship between the UK – and the West as a whole – and Africa, from those that had existed in the post-colonial, Cold War, pre-famine, apartheid era that laid the basis for relations between Africa and the outside world in the three decades after African independence.

Three elements in this new relationship are worth picking out. First, it was driven by a popular resonance that was largely independent of traditional drivers of foreign policy, such as strategic and economic self-interest, and that was expressed notably in the NGO phenomenon, by BandAid, War-on-Want, Oxfam, Amnesty, and similar organisations.
Second, it broke the Commonwealth mould, in that some of the key sites of the new politics of Africa, notably Ethiopia and Rwanda, lay outside the Commonwealth, so that these two states, for instance, emerged as two of the most important recipients of UK aid, in a way that would have been inconceivable in the earlier period. Third, while the relationship between Africa and the developed world had always been, and remained, a thoroughly unequal one, the bases of inequality changed. In place of the crudely economistic structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s came an emphasis on governance as the critical driver of development. This derived in large part from the economic as well as political collapse of Soviet-style regimes, and the establishment in much of central Europe of liberal democratic multi-party regimes which offered the prospect of rapidly expanding economies, and emphasised the critical links between governance and public welfare. It was all too easy to assume that a similar transformation could be brought about in Africa, and this assumption was reinforced by demands for multi-party democratic regimes that emerged from within Africa, and appeared to provide indigenous support for policies favoured by the West. And while democracy, good governance, human rights and so forth are widely and rightly regarded as universal public goods, their pursuit did involve external states and other actors in much more direct engagement in the domestic political processes of African states than before. The myth of ‘sovereignty’ was no longer sustainable.

The unequal nature of the relationship was indeed emphasised under the post-1997 Labour government by the emergence of the Department for International Development essentially as a ministry for Africa, predicated on aid as the key linkage between the UK and the continent, with the peculiar and in many ways invidious mixture of patronage, pressure and unctuous do-gooding that this almost necessarily involved. In the process, DfID largely displaced the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – a department, certainly, with problems of its own, but one which however operated, formally at least, on the basis of equality between its own representation in Africa, and the embassies or high commissions of African states in London – as the ‘lead department’ in British relations with Africa. This was strikingly illustrated by the role of Clare Short, the Secretary of State for DfID, as the key mediator seeking to resolve the tensions between Uganda and Rwanda – two major recipients of British aid – over support for rival movements in the DRC from May 1999 onwards. This was a classic ‘diplomatic’ engagement that one might conventionally have expected to be handled by the FCO.

I am sure that this research project will have a great deal to say about DfID by people much better qualified to do so than I am. But by far the most important thing about DfID, in my view, is its budget, which affects the UK’s relationship with Africa in at least three ways. The first is simply just the amount of money at DfID’s disposal, which easily outweighs the FCO’s budget in Africa, and gives it a level of leverage both within Africa and in Whitehall that, I suspect, may have led the FCO to disconnect itself from Africa, both in terms of seeking to develop policies towards the continent that are independent of the aid relationship, and possibly in the quality of the representation that they were prepared to devote to it. The second is the constant need to justify this budget, in a way quite unlike most other departments – such as Health, Education, Defence, or the Home Office – whose functions are taken for granted. This justification must in turn be geared essentially to a domestic constituency in the UK, which is vividly illuminated by the DfID website, which almost inevitably promotes a view of the relationship between the United Kingdom and aid recipients – principally in Africa – that emphasises British benevolence, and in the process reinforces its unequal nature. The third is the need to spend this budget, which promotes a view of Africa conceived in terms of the places that give British taxpayers the biggest visible
returns on their money, and hence to a concentration on those indices that provide the most
evident impact. That two thoroughly authoritarian African states, Rwanda and Ethiopia,
should qualify as major recipients of British aid is in large part because their very
authoritarianism rests on efficient hierarchies that enable them to spend the money in a fairly
visible and accountable way, while the British government becomes, in a sense, the client of
its own recipients, given that any actual insistence on the ‘good governance’ criteria that in
principle underlie the aid relationship would threaten its own ability to disburse the amount of
money that it receives.

One final point that I would make about the UK relationship with Africa, especially as this
emerged under the New Labour government after 1997, is to ask to what extent this
relationship is actually concerned with Africa, rather than being geared to political
presentation – ‘spin’, in a word – within the United Kingdom. Under Labour, Africa policy
became intimately associated with Prime Minister Tony Blair’s ‘mission’ to ‘save’ Africa, in
a way that identified the continent as the object of his personal benevolence, and was
thoroughly offensive to many of its peoples. And one can see something of the same
preoccupation with the domestic political scene in the maintenance of the DfID budget by the
succeeding coalition government, essentially as an attempt to ‘detoxify’ the Conservative
Party. That the primary function of foreign policies, in the United Kingdom every bit as
much as in African states, should be to help assure the survival of the government in power
will come as no surprise to any political scientist, but it is nonetheless something that needs
to be constantly borne in mind.