

Features

New Labour, foreign policy and NGOs

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1997 led to a transformation in the government's relationship with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on foreign policy issues, whether international development or human rights. But this closer relationship has brought pitfalls as well as perks, highlighted not only by the Iraq war, but also in smaller operational struggles to shape the relationship with government. As Labour enters into a phase of government in which its legitimacy faces far greater tests, NGOs can play a critical role in establishing the government's ability to cope with dissent.

The promise of 1997

Labour's victory in 1997 was – as Labour electoral wins often tend to be – good news for non-governmental organisations. A party that has a history of knitting civil society organisations into the fabric of its approach to government, New Labour promised to make the corridors of government welcoming to a broad cross-section of organisations whose concerns overlapped with their own. New Labour ushered in a greater mixture of players in its bid to build on its pluralist political past.

The new government was particularly good news for those organisations that focused on international issues. With a new Chancellor that made no secret of his interest in addressing global poverty, campaigners had the first signs of hope that the UK would start to occupy a leading role in combating the gross global inequalities that left the majority of the world's population facing hardship beyond the imaginations of those that made up the world's wealthy minority. Likewise, the changing international landscape arising from the end of the Cold War and the emergence of new, nationalist conflicts on the European Union's doorstep in the Balkans, highlighted the opportunities for the government to establish a new place for Britain in the wider world.

Early signs proved that optimism was justified. Robin Cook promised to bring an 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy and in his early days in post, outlined his proposals for implementing this approach. In part, this articulated the traditional aspirations of a Foreign Secretary – security and trade. But he also highlighted the UK's role in bringing about international cooperation on matters of environmental degradation, and promised 'to secure the respect of other nations for Britain's contribution to keeping the peace of the world and

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promoting democracy around the world' (Cook, 1997). This would include striving to make human rights a global priority, he promised.

At the same time, the Labour government re-established a place for international development at the Cabinet table by creating the Department for International Development (DfID), the long-awaited successor to the Ministry of Overseas Development, which was created during the 1964-70 Labour government, but had its ministerial status revoked after the Conservative election win in 1979. The new department would not only oversee significantly increased spending on international development, but would undertake research to ensure good intelligence underpinned the UK's interventions. From the beginning, the department engaged with non-governmental organisations working on relevant issues, aiming to secure a lasting partnership between the government's own aspirations for international development and those of the non-governmental organisations also working in the field.

An altered relationship

Not surprisingly, this shift re-shaped the sector's relationship with government. From tacit expectations of opposition and resistance from the Conservative administration, the new government increasingly expected officials to incorporate the perspective of NGOs involved in relevant issues. Organisations were confronted with increasingly stringent government reporting requirements and adapted their own processes for measuring success to incorporate government's targets for particular pieces of work. In common with other areas of government, officials and politicians in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and DfID have developed more open and consultative processes for policy development which have at least aspired to involve a much wider constituency in making decisions. These stronger ties, combined with increasingly open recruitment for senior adviser and civil service posts, have also resulted in staff shuttling between roles in NGOs and government.

This shift in the relationship with government also coincided with a change within non-governmental organisations themselves. There were increased expectations of professionalism and expertise within the sector. Academic study in development issues was more respected – and, increasingly, expected – than had previously been the case. Salaries improved significantly. The cross-fertilisation between development and human rights NGOs and the private sector increased, with some high profile individuals moving into senior roles within aid agencies. This trend was a paler echo of a similar transition in the US non-governmental sector, whose influence – especially on NGOs working on international agendas – has tended to outweigh comparable influences from elsewhere in Europe.

But, like other areas of government where involvement of non-governmental actors has been sought, some gains have come at a price, whilst others have been far more superficial in nature than was first hoped.

First, the culture of foreign policy making seems to differ in important ways from other aspects of Whitehall policymaking. Departments delivering education or health are – at least in public – at great pains to consult those implementing policies (teachers, doctors). Increasingly, they also make attempts to reach their 'service users': students in school, patients in hospital. In so doing, there is a tentative acknowledgement that the old school view of expertise in Whitehall was starting to be broken down: quantifying and intellectual-

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ising policy dilemmas was a critical part of identifying solutions, but by no means was it the full story.

Foreign policy lends itself far less easily to having the wall of 'expertise' broken down. Officials have recourse to 'intelligence' behind the scenes to which non-governmental organisations can be given only limited – if any – access. Amplifying the opinions of the people actually receiving assistance is made far harder by logistical and geographical constraints. Sometimes, NGOs occupy a testing middle-ground, in which they are both trying to advocate for the interests of their 'service users' in countries where they work, but also negotiating effective operational relationships with government. Challenging the idea that expertise comes in different forms is far harder when the real practical experience of delivering and receiving services lies so far out of Whitehall's ambit that any sort of substantive engagement is virtually impossible. In addition, many of those working in NGOs do not have radically different experience from those in Whitehall; coherent involvement with, for instance, diaspora communities, which might give a qualitatively different perspective, tends to be rather patchy.

NGOs also suffer from many of the more common complaints associated with close working with government. Funding suffers from acute short-termism, with funding streams making a mockery of aspirations for sustainable engagement in communities with long-term, entrenched difficulties. The more stringent reporting often comes with burdensome bureaucratic requirements, which place strain on organisations that are often reporting to several funders (sometimes from more than one part of government) at any given time, and rarely receive costs to reflect the staff-time inherent in doing so. The insecurity associated with constantly seeking funding also breeds high staff turnover, which itself has an impact on service delivery. This is only made worse when staff are often working in extremely challenging and sometimes dangerous conditions outside the UK.

Equally, very prescriptive funding streams can affect the way in which projects are designed, and identifying common criteria that are fitting for widely varying contexts can be difficult to achieve. NGO advice and analysis can start to take on the worst characteristics of government policymaking process: excessive focus on minutiae, failure to question the assumptions upon which major decisions are routinely predicated and an analysis which offers little in the way of fresh approaches.

The problem of capture

Perhaps most importantly, the increasingly close relationship enjoyed between some leading organisations and government raises difficult questions about capture, or the extent to which those organisations are able to step outside their close relationships with government to criticise existing government policy. For organisations with a campaigning or advocacy dimension in their work, a crucial part of their function is to challenge and re-balance policy in favour of its own priorities, expose promises that have been made but not kept, or highlight cases where the government's actions are ineffective, or are being over-sold.

Where an organisation is also drawing upon financial support from the government, however, being highly critical can present problems. There are obvious issues with biting the hand that feeds you, and the implicit threat that this might jeopardise future support for the work. Even anecdotally, however, it is difficult to find examples of organisations that are

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confident that this was a primary motivation for financial support being withdrawn from their work.

In fact, the problem of capture works in two slightly more subtle ways. First, some more 'radical' organisations seem to remain entirely outside the ambit of dialogue with government, embracing a policy of self-exclusion that effectively skews the NGO outlook that government hears about.

Second, organisations do make the decision to steer a path around very negative messaging about government policy, due to an understandable political calculation: public criticism that jeopardises the majority of a broadly supportive government may end up helping an opposition party that has a far shakier track record on international issues. These organisations will challenge government, but often to take actions that are consonant with existing policy frameworks. 'Aspirational asks', that call on government to push well beyond its previous boundaries, become thin on the ground. Measuring delivery on the agreements achieved through advocacy or major campaigns is patchy and risks eroding the extent to which government feels answerable to the NGOs by which they are targeted. NGOs shy away from doing serious damage to a government they believe may be the best option in terms of achieving their wider goals.

The decision to go to war in Iraq put some of these dilemmas particularly starkly into the spotlight. Iraq profoundly undermined the government's credentials on human rights and international governance and alienated significant numbers of its supporters. Advocating development and human rights in some parts of the world, whilst eroding them elsewhere, rang hollow to many of the most starry-eyed supporters of this government's extremely credible record on development.

But mainstream organisations were not at the forefront of the campaign to stop the war. For some, the lack of operational presence in Iraq will have been a stumbling block. For others, the presence of left-wing groups on the coalition may have been a deterrent, as may have been some of the more aggressive tactics and rhetoric emerging from anti-war groups. But it left the movement with a very specific political stripe running through it, when in fact it represented a far larger section of supporters of the political mainstream. There was a larger role for organisations seen to be from the mainstream in articulating a coherent dissent to Westminster, and doing so in a way that could avert a political and humanitarian disaster, without calling upon those organisations to return to the bad old days of oppositional relations with government and knee-jerk tactics that made the 'amateur' label stick so easily.

The value of dissent

It is embracing this aspect of their role – in articulating constructive dissent, and in forcing the government to engage with its opponents outside Westminster, as well as within – that will see NGOs come into their own within the UK's political processes.

As others have previously stressed, including Rachel Briggs in this journal (Briggs, 2007), New Labour has consistently struggled to deal with dissent. No matter how loud critical voices become, government has been reluctant to engage in a concrete fashion with those who disagree, especially if those voices originate within a part of society that is seen as traditionally supportive of Labour. They must learn to, however, because in doing

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so they will demonstrate the political maturity that is their most obvious advantage over the opponents that now appear to be snapping so persistently at their heels.

NGOs have a vital role to play in ensuring government is listening to dissent from within their own political mainstream, as well as from the fringes, emanating from smaller but more voluble groups. Answers to questions about how far the government has gone on its international development commitments, as well as facing the issues associated with our involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan (not to mention the knock-on effect that these deployments have on our ability to take an active role in international military efforts elsewhere, such as the peacekeeping mission in Darfur), are vital precursors to reminding voters about Labour's long-standing record on international issues.

Despite appalling consequences arising from dubious decisions in recent years, the enduring commitment to addressing international issues remains at the centre of the Labour Party's agenda. Avoiding the thorniest dilemmas is no longer a viable way for the government to re-establish its reputation with the electorate. NGOs can, and should, play a part in making sure that it is difficult for them to do so.

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References

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