

# Values in foreign policy

*Values in a networked world – Placing human rights and democracy at the heart of Britain's foreign policy and promoting idealism tempered with realism.*

It is hard to imagine a better setting for this speech than a building that evokes over 500 hundred years of British history and the development of British freedoms, all the way from the divine right of Kings to parliamentary democracy, universal suffrage, and the rule of law. To put it into its wider historical context, the walls of this building went up before Christopher Columbus set sail for the New World.

It was also from here that my own hero William Pitt the Younger, aged 21, watched London in flames in all directions during the Gordon Riots of 1780. For five days and nights a crowd of 60,000 laid siege to the Palace of Westminster until calm was restored by 15,000 troops and militia sent in by the King. Pitt was able to make light of the turmoil, writing to his mother in the heat of the action that “several very respectable lawyers have appeared with muskets on their shoulders, to the no small diversion of all spectators. Unluckily the Appearance of Danger ended just as we embodied, and all our military Ardour has been thrown away.” I don’t know if there is a cache of muskets deep beneath our feet in case such an emergency arises today, but I hope that the hearts of the lawyers of Lincoln’s Inn still beat with as patriotic an ardour.

I chose Lincoln’s Inn as the venue for this speech not only because I am proud to be an Honorary Benchers here, but because this setting reminds us that the values of our society have been painstakingly built up over time, and that they owe as much to the influence of thinkers, jurists, campaigners and parliamentarians as they do to the actions of Governments. In fact at times the State has actually been an impediment to change, as William Wilberforce and his colleagues found in their forty year campaign to end the slave trade in Britain and around the world in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

These two insights – the gradual development of liberal democratic societies and the importance of valiant individuals – are at the heart of the Coalition Government’s understanding of British values and our attitude to other countries. One such man was Lord Bingham of Cornhill, a towering figure in public life and one of the leading legal minds of our time, who sadly passed away last week and whose loss will be felt keenly by many here.

## **Distinctive British foreign policy**

Our Government has set a clear direction in foreign policy. First and foremost it will advance British security and prosperity, supporting our economy and making a tangible difference to the lives of Britons. If we simply stand still, these things will become harder to achieve. The emergence of what I call a networked world, of rising economies and new forms of diplomacy, is eroding the traditional means of influence we have enjoyed in world affairs, at a time of serious constraints on our national resources and grave threats to our security. This means that we have to pursue a distinctive British foreign policy that goes beyond our close trans-Atlantic ties and our strong role in Europe, while not neglecting either, and that promotes UK interests in a systematic fashion for the

long term. We have to work even harder as a nation to maintain the position of the UK economy as a home of investment and business, and we are gearing up the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to do just that. Foreign policy must run through the veins of the entire government, so that domestic departments also promote clear national objectives.

Today’s speech is the third in a series of four setting out how we will protect British security, prosperity and people, working with other countries to strengthen the rules-based international system in support of our values. In the first, I announced a new programme to strengthen our country’s ties with emerging economies in North Africa, the Gulf, Asia and Latin America. In the second I explained the new commercial focus of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the extra effort we are devoting to support the British economy, free trade and sustainable global growth. The fourth speech, which I will give later this autumn, will explain the Foreign Office’s role in contributing to Britain’s security in the light of the Strategic Defence and Security Review.

## **Human rights in our foreign policy**

Some people may be concerned that this clear focus on security and prosperity means that we will attach less importance as a government to human rights, to poverty reduction and to the upholding of international law. The purpose of this speech is to say that far from giving less importance to these things, we see them as essential to and indivisible from our foreign policy objectives. There will be no downgrading of human rights under this Government and no resiling from our commitments to aid and development. Indeed I intend to improve and strengthen our human rights work as I will explain later on in the speech. These and other values are part of our national DNA and will be woven deeply into the decision-making processes of our foreign policy at every stage. There are compelling reasons for this approach. It is not in our character as a nation to have a foreign policy without a conscience, and neither is it in our interests: Our prosperity is linked to that of others. We cannot achieve long term security and prosperity unless we uphold our values. Where human rights abuses go unchecked our security suffers. Our international influence will bleed away unless we maintain our international standing and cultural influence as a vital component of our weight in the world.

As a Government we know that we have to work hard to restore public trust in decision-making in foreign and security policy after the damage wrought in recent years. We have to deal with the extremely complex problems that we have inherited in a way that reassures the public, upholds the law and our obligations, and protects our national security. We have to explain how we will attempt to avoid the mistakes of the past and how our values inform the difficult decisions we take each day. And in some cases we have to reassure our allies, so that they have the confidence to continue working with us in ways that are vital to our collective security. We understand that we will be judged by

our actions and not just by our words. My speech today sets out the direction that we are determined to travel in as a Government.

### Failure of ethical foreign policy approach

There is broad agreement across society and politics that Britain should stand for democratic freedom, for universal human rights and for the rule of law. But there has not been agreement about how these should be reflected in foreign policy, or confidence that they have been consistently upheld by successive governments. The experiences of Iraq and the world since 9/11 have caused a serious erosion of trust in the integrity of British foreign policy, and the widespread view that we fell short of international standards while seeking to combat terrorism.

I wish to be just to the last government. We all welcome the growth of UK aid and development support to other nations, the humanitarian interventions in the Balkans and Sierra Leone, the campaign to decouple the diamond trade from conflict in Africa, and agreement to limit the global use of landmines and cluster munitions. These were important achievements which we must go on to consolidate.

Universal human rights, democratic freedom and the rule of law



But, by their own admission, the previous government fell into a chasm of their own making between rhetoric and action in large areas of foreign policy. Their tenure began, as one newspaper put it, with “a sounding of ethical trumpets”. It ended with allegations of British complicity in torture, an Inquiry into the Iraq War, questions about the conduct of our Intelligence Services, a foreign policy machinery-of-government that had been run into the ground, piecemeal sofa-style decision making in Downing Street, accusations of hypocrisy and double standards in respect of international law and the epic Ministerial mismanagement of the finances of the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. At the end of their period of government Britain was not in a position to be as effective as it could and should have been in dealing with a world marred by tyranny, oppression and injustice.

The ethical foreign policy approach, although praiseworthy in intent, proved to be misguided in application and based on flawed thinking. As Peter Hain, a Foreign Office Minister at the time, said in 2000, “if there was a mistake it was allowing the policy to be presented as if we could have perfection”. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair conceded in his memoirs that he and his colleagues “made a very big mistake in allowing the impression to be gained that we were going to be better than our predecessors, not just better at governing, but more moral, more upright”. The coalition will not make the same mistake. We are determined to do better and to be more realistic. We will replace the sweeping generalisations of ‘ethical foreign policy’ with a clear, practical and principled approach, persistently applied.

We understand that idealism in foreign policy always needs to be tempered with realism. We have a liberal-conservative outlook that says that change, however desirable, can rarely be imposed on other countries, and that our ability to do so is likely to diminish with time. We know that we have to promote our values with conviction and determination but in ways that are suited to the grain of the other societies we are dealing with, particularly in fragile or post-conflict states. As the Prime Minister has put it, we must be “hard-headed and practical” in the pursuit of our goals, working to strengthen the international frameworks which can turn rhetoric on human rights into accountability and lasting change.

### Strategic interest in promoting our values

There are three ways in which our values are indivisible from our foreign policy objectives. I wish to touch on each briefly before going on to explain how they will be woven into our decision-making in practice.

First and foremost, as a democratic country we must have a foreign policy based on values, as an extension of our identity as a society. Any attempt to define our values leads inevitably to the conclusion that they are not derived merely from the state but were developed through the centuries-long struggle for the rights of the individual in this country. Our notions of fairness, of dignity, liberty and justice are part of the rich endowment of our history. They are not the preserve of Governments alone, claiming to be the infallible guardian of a superior set of ethics which can be codified in a manual and imposed on foreign affairs.

The law is central to our values and is also the product of the same steady process of accumulation. The principles of due process and of no punishment without law are both found in Magna Carta. The law is the ultimate guarantor of the rights of individuals in this country, while international law is the standard against which we judge human rights in other countries - and against which we ourselves are



judged. Yet our values cannot be defined in purely legal terms. They include our belief in political freedom and economic liberalism, our commitment to helping the poor, to granting protection to refugees and to mitigating the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable. Our attachment to the qualities of tolerance, compassion, generosity, respect for others and the right of families and communities to choose how they live within the law, are also part of our values.

## Human rights are part of our national DNA and will be woven into the decision making processes of our foreign policy

In the light of this, our governments should always seek to reflect the best of British society. We must act in a manner consistent with our values, and be prepared to challenge those who repudiate them at home or abroad. The last four annual surveys by Freedom House found that political rights and civil liberties are actually being eroded worldwide, so there are no grounds for complacency. Above all we must be willing as governments to subject our actions to democratic scrutiny and to heed the warnings of civil society. As the Prime Minister said last month, we must “be determined at all times – no matter how difficult – to judge ourselves against the highest standards”. We should always strive to be the first to recognise where we have fallen short, which is why, for instance, fighting tooth and nail to resist an Iraq Inquiry until so close to the end of the last Parliament was such a mistake by the previous government.

Second, we have a strategic interest in promoting our values, which form the essential framework for the pursuit of our security and prosperity. In a networked world we cannot thrive alone. Our security is weakened when others lack the conditions for safety and where the absence of law creates fertile ground for future conflict or terrorism. It is also undermined in the long run by the massive discrepancies in wealth and opportunity that exist today, particularly for women. In Afghanistan we are working energetically to promote human rights and development alongside our national security, as part of the foundations for durable stability.

We ourselves cannot prosper without the laws that protect free and fair trade, property and intellectual property rights. As Thomas Paine wrote in 1791 “there can be no such thing as a Nation flourishing alone in commerce; she can only participate”. This truth is even more resonant now, 219 years later and in ways Paine could not possibly have predicted, when we are highly dependent on global networks of commerce, finance and communication.

More widely, our interests depend on a world system based on law. We need states not to proliferate nuclear weapons, to respect the sovereignty of others, to abide by international treaties and to support legal sanctions by the international community. As our economic weight is squeezed and influence passes more to other governments who may not share our values we will have to work harder to entrench international law and human rights and to promote agreement on issues like climate change.

This is why it is so important that we uphold and reinforce

international treaties such as the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, and support the instruments of international justice including the International Criminal Court and tribunals such as that for the Former Yugoslavia. It should also give urgency to efforts to reform global bodies such as the UN Security Council. As a Government we will make the argument to others that their interests as well as our own depend on a rules-based international system.

The third reason why our values are an indivisible part of our foreign policy is that they are a vital component of our international influence. In today’s world, countries cannot rely on military and economic might to determine their standing in the world. The UK’s standing also rests on the appeal of our culture, perceptions of the openness of our society and of our conduct towards other countries, particularly in a world where others are able to make instantaneous judgements about us. Our standing is directly linked to the belief of others that we will do what we say and that we will not apply double standards. We cannot seek to build up our international influence while neglecting this aspect of our weight in the world.

International Criminal Court case on former Yugoslavia



### **Idealism tempered with realism**

The tension between ideals and actions is written across the history of all areas of human endeavour. Foreign policy is no exception. A foreign policy led by idealism and unchecked by realism will fail to achieve its goals or to make sound decisions. Democracy cannot be imposed on other countries by diktat or design. It was one of the many illusions of Communism that societies can be designed in the abstract and restarted at year zero. They cannot. Our own experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan should also teach us modesty in this regard.

We have to recognise that other countries are likely to develop at different paces. Democracy rests on foundations that have to be built over time: strong institutions, responsible and accountable government, a free press, the rule of law, equal rights for men and women, and other less tangible habits of mind and of participation. Elections alone do not create a free and democratic society. This does not mean that we will sit on our hands or simply resign ourselves to the idea that change in certain countries will not happen for decades, but it does mean that we understand that each country is different. This is what we mean by working with the grain of other societies.

It also does not mean that we will overlook human rights abuses in some countries while protesting about them in others. Arbitrary imprisonment, political and religious persecution or the denial of women's rights are unacceptable to us at any time in any place. We should never turn a blind eye to countries which display the trappings of democracy while violating basic human rights, or that lay claim to the rule of law while lacking the independent courts and proper systems of accountability and transparency to prevent abuses of state power. But we do not have the option, unlike Gladstone or Palmerston, of dispatching gunboats and relying on the power of the British Empire. We must guard against arrogance in our dealings with other countries. Nor do we have the choice, as we protect our security, of only working with the handful of countries in the world which have values and standards of criminal justice as high as our own.

The Foreign Secretary outlines London 2012 Olympics' commitment to sustainability and diversity



All our efforts to advance our values must involve working with others, whether speaking out against abuses and rallying other countries to do the same, using our own conduct to set an example or encouraging young people who are seeking a say in how their countries are governed. The practical promotion of human rights does not therefore lend itself to a rigid formula, but there are four themes I wish to draw out today, which will characterise our policy.

### **Dealing patiently with the difficult issues**

The first is that where problems have arisen that have affected the UK's moral standing we will deal with them patiently and clearly. We will act on the lessons learnt, and tackle the difficult issues we currently face head on.

An enduring strength of our democracy is our ability to shine a light on our faults and to learn from the mistakes of the past. That is why we called for an Iraq Inquiry for a full three years before the then government established one. That is why we have made a particular focus on the need to shore up stability in the Western Balkans, having learnt the lessons of the 1990s. That is also why we have announced, as one of our first actions in government, an Inquiry into whether Britain was implicated in the improper treatment of detainees held by other countries in the immediate wake of 9/11. As the Prime Minister made clear when he announced this Inquiry, our intention is to clean the stain from our reputation as a country, to get to the bottom of what happened, and do everything possible to enable our Intelligence Services to do the job that we desperately need them to do.

We have also finalised and published, for the first time, the consolidated guidance given to intelligence and military personnel in the interviewing of detainees held by other countries. It makes public the longstanding policy that our personnel are never authorised to proceed with action where they know or believe that torture will occur. It requires them to report any abuses they uncover to the British government so that we can take appropriate action to stop it. And it establishes a clear line of Ministerial authority.

The Home Secretary, Defence Secretary and I take responsibility for authorising the actions of our personnel in the difficult situations where the risk of mistreatment is unclear, but where taking no action may have dire consequences. Any idea that we take these decisions without our values and obligations being at the forefront of our minds is simply not true. We will never authorise action where torture will occur. We ensure that credible and effective steps are taken to mitigate the risks of mistreatment, if necessary through our own personal intervention. And where despite these efforts, a serious risk remains, we consider all relevant factors, including our legal obligations, before taking a decision on whether to proceed.

Our use of government-to-government assurances in deporting terrorist suspects is one way in which we meet a pressing national security need while upholding our values and international human rights commitments. We recognise the concerns that this raises but will work hard to ensure that assurances are honoured. Our policy is clear, as is the law: we will only deport someone if it is compatible with our obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights. And it is absolutely right that our decisions are subject to appeal and scrutiny by our own courts and by the European Court of Human Rights, which has upheld the principle of using diplomatic



assurances on treatment. The Special Immigration Appeals Commission recently found in favour of our latest assurances arrangement with Ethiopia by dismissing the appeal of a man, who has been found to be a threat to our national security, against his deportation to Ethiopia.

We have also taken steps to improve the way decisions about foreign and security policy are made in Britain. As Gladstone once said: "Here is my first principle of foreign policy: good government at home". We have set up a new National Security Council which brings together strategic decisions about foreign, security and defence policy, to restore the proper processes of government, to return the Foreign Office to its place at the centre of decision-making and ensure that foreign policy does run through the veins of the whole administration. A good example of the impact of the NSC is that it was able to finalise and publish the consolidated guidance in less than eight weeks after the General Election, reaching agreement on a text that the previous government had been unable to deliver.

### **The practical promotion of human rights**

My second theme is that we will raise our concerns about human rights wherever and whenever those concerns arise, including with countries with whom we are seeking closer ties. Some will say that it is not possible to seek strengthened economic and political links with the emerging economies while raising human rights. We disagree. Conservative governments of the 1980s were resolute in opposing Communist dictatorships and highlighting the plight of dissidents while engaging constructively with the USSR, supporting a peaceful move to democracy, a market economy and the rule of law. Realistic and practical approaches, based on good bilateral relations, are in some cases more likely to achieve more in encouraging other Governments to change over time.

We will promote human rights painstakingly and consistently. Our starting point for engagement on human rights with all countries will be based on what is practical, realistic and achievable, although we will always be ready to speak out as a matter of principle. We will be candid about our engagement with countries which do not fully share our values or are violating their international human rights obligations, and open about where we disagree. We will use our considerable experience in this country in education and civil society and the building of institutions such as the police and judiciary to help foster positive change in countries in need of such assistance.

Our Foreign Office Minister of State Jeremy Browne has lead responsibility within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for pursuing our human rights and democracy agenda. He has consulted MPs and NGOs to decide where the UK can and should have the most impact. He will drive work forward this work in a range of areas such as promoting democracy and freedom of expression, pressing for criminal justice reform and encouraging the UN and EU to become more effective in this area.

I can announce that I have decided to convene an advisory group on human rights which will draw on the advice of key NGOs, independent experts and others. It will ensure that I have the best possible information about the human rights situation in different countries, and can benefit from outside advice on the conduct of our policy. It will meet regularly and have direct access to Ministers.

I am also determined to strengthen the FCO's institutional capability on human rights at home and overseas, building on the work of previous governments. Following the publication of the consolidated guidance to intelligence officers and service personnel, the FCO is re-issuing its guidance to its own staff on the need to report any alleged incidents of torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment that they encounter in the course of their work, and we will for the first time publish this guidance.

We are determined to continue the Foreign Office's work to document human rights abuses on an annual basis. But I also want to improve that work. Rather than the current expensive glossy publication we will now report annually to parliament by Command Paper. The scope and quality of the reporting will not change, and indeed we want to make more of that information available to the public in real time on our website. Our diplomats will continue to raise human rights cases week by week across the world from our global network, and so will our Ministers. In our opening months we have pressed for fair elections in Burma, access for humanitarian aid to Gaza and lobbied Iran over women's rights, religious freedom and the use of the death penalty, in particular the case of Sakineh Ashtiani.

### **Powerful advocates of British values**

Third, we will seek to influence others through our soft power and membership of international institutions and by being an inspiring example of a society that upholds human rights and democracy. We must be powerful advocate of our own values. Britain was one of the foremost architects of the European Convention on Human Rights, and in the coalition agreement this Government committed to promote a better understanding of the true scope of these rights and traditional British liberties.

The British Council and BBC World Service play an invaluable role promoting British values overseas, reaching millions of people in the process. Their work helps maintain our country's reputation for openness, transparency and liberty and as a great place to study and do business. There is understandable concern about how the current economic

The Foreign Secretary speaks at the UN Human Rights Council condemning abuses in Libya



climate will affect the reach and resources of these organisations. Last week I was asked by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee about reports of the closure of the World Service's broadcast into Burma. I said then that as someone who has spoken on platforms alongside Burmese human rights activists and been interviewed by the World Service about Burma it is hardly likely that I would agree to ending broadcasts into one of the most secretive and repressive countries in the world. It follows naturally from our desire to have a distinctive British foreign policy that builds up our influence in the world and supports our values that we should want to preserve the reach of the British Council and the BBC World Service as much as possible, as well as our overseas network of Embassies.

The same applies to our commitment to aid and development programmes around the world. Under the leadership of Andrew Mitchell, the International Development Secretary, we are targeting the funds where they are most needed. For example, we have increased DfID funding in Afghanistan by 40% over the next four years. We have led the way in supporting the victims of the floods in Pakistan, along with hundreds and thousands of members of the British public who have made donations. Next week the Deputy Prime Minister will head the UK delegation at the Millennium Development Goals Summit in New York, where we will encourage other countries to match our level of ambition for the world's poor. We want to ensure that wherever and however we spend our aid it has the greatest impact on global poverty and that it assists the economic growth and independent development which are the bedrock for more stable and democratic societies.

I have long championed the Commonwealth as an overlooked and undervalued vehicle for the promotion of democratic values. Critics of the Commonwealth have often questioned what such a disparate organisation can achieve. But it is in fact an unparalleled network which could play a greater role in advocating human rights and democratic development and supporting conflict prevention. Its 54 member states subscribe to a common framework of democratic norms and institutions and have reach into regions, like Africa, where many pressing foreign policy challenges arise. We have often pointed to Zimbabwe as a country where the Commonwealth could play a future role. So we will work with other members to reinvigorate the organisation. We will support its Legal Services division which helps promote judicial administration and the rule of law, since entrenching these things in developing countries, alongside democratic government is the best guarantee against human rights violations.

Action against climate change must also be a central objective of a foreign policy informed by British values. It not only affects our security and our prosperity but also engages our responsibility towards others. The countries that will be hit first by the consequences of climate change are those that are poorest and least well-equipped to respond. It is a problem that is not susceptible to hard power solutions but the problems it can create, such as conflict over resources, would require far more costly intervention. It is also a problem that cannot only be dealt with by individual governments clubbing together. It requires a truly global response that engages a network of business, faith groups and civil society. It will, for example, be high on our agenda for discussion when Pope Benedict visits the UK later this week, and I will speak about climate change in New York during the week of the UN General Assembly. We will

support climate finance for the poorest and work with them to avert the worst impacts of climate change, while being ambitious about our own national targets.

As we seek to promote our values we have to reach out to global audiences as well as influence other governments. In Iran we are using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to communicate with the Farsi social media community and promote the debate on human rights, and we are replicating this work worldwide. Closer to home, we will work constantly with UK civil society to find creative new means of influencing others, not overlooking the impact that British companies can have while investing overseas by sticking to high standards of ethical behaviour, taking a resolute stance against corruption and investing in their people.

### Supporting a rules-based international system

My final theme is that we will work to strengthen the rules-based international system and will be an active member of international institutions that promote human rights, starting with the European Union. We will encourage the EU to use its collective weight in the world to promote human rights and democracy with the many levers at its disposal. The EU's enlargement to the south and the east, a policy that has cross-party support, has done much to strengthen democracy and the rule of law across Europe. The enlargement process continues to act as a powerful catalyst for progress in these areas. So we will continue to champion the cause of a wider European Union.

We will be the staunch advocate of United Nations Reform, including a more representative UN Security Council and a more effective UN Human Rights Council. We will continue to work towards an Arms Trade Treaty to reduce the risk that defence exports are used to fuel conflict, violate human rights and undermine development. Establishing global standards for their sale will reduce the harm caused by the flow of arms to fragile regions and will benefit British industry. And we will support the pioneering work of the International Criminal Court and work to reinforce its authority, including speaking out when governments that are party to the Rome Statute allow indicted individuals to visit their country with impunity, and insisting on full cooperation with the ICTY.

### Conclusion

So what this means is that we will pursue a foreign policy that remains true to our values while promoting Britain's security and prosperity. We will seek to act in a way that appreciates the complexity and dignity of other nations, that champions human rights in a pragmatic and effective way, that inspires others and that strengthens the global rule of law. It will be a clear approach that puts right previous wrongs that have cast doubt on our foreign policy and that does not hesitate to speak out against human rights abuses while pursuing our interests. We will seek to harness the ideas and impact of NGOs and civil society and will be an active member of international institutions that support our values. In short it will be a foreign policy that is ambitious for others as well as for ourselves. To act in this way is to act in our enlightened national interest. **F**

*Speech delivered on 15th September 2010, The Old Hall and Crypt, Lincoln's Inn, London*