

Tony Blair

What I've learned

May 31st 2007

From *The Economist* print edition

Tony Blair reflects on the lessons of his decade as Britain's prime minister

TEN years ago, if you had told me I would spend a significant part of my premiership on foreign policy, I would have been surprised, a little shocked and probably, politically, somewhat alarmed. Even today, we all run for office concentrating on domestic issues.

“Foreign” policy rarely wins votes, and can easily lose them. Yet nowadays the reality is increasingly that we are obliged as leaders to think, work and act internationally.

Over ten years I have watched this grow. (If you had told me a decade ago that I would be tackling terrorism, I would have readily understood, but thought you meant Irish Republican terrorism.) The line between “foreign” and “domestic” policy is being blurred.

Climate change is a big issue in developed nations' politics today. It can be beaten only by global action. What happens today in Pakistan matters on the streets of Britain. Mass migration can only partially be managed by individual nations' internal policies.

Economies are shaped by forces of globalisation.

On top of this, the world order is changing. The political power of China is emerging as its economic power grows. India will be formidable. Japan is putting its past behind it. Russia is becoming more assertive by the day.

In this age, foreign policy is not an interesting distraction from the hard slog of domestic reform. It is the element that describes a nation's face to the world at large, forms the perceptions of others to it and, in part, its perception of itself.

We all talk of interdependence being the defining characteristic of the modern world. But often we fail to see the fundamental implications of such a statement. It means we have a clear self-interest as a nation in what happens the world over. And because mass media and communication convey powerful images in an instant across the globe, it dictates that struggles are fought as much through propaganda, ideas and values as through conventional means, military or diplomatic.

My reflections, based on this analysis, are these:

1. Be a player not a spectator

Over the past ten years, Britain has been in the thick of it. There is no international debate of importance in which we are not as fully engaged as we can be. We have attempted to construct the broadest possible agenda that is capable of unifying the international community and is, overtly, values-based. That is why action on poverty in Africa, a good outcome to the world trade talks and agreement on climate change all matter beyond the obvious importance of each individual issue. They are indicative of an attitude, of responsibility to others, an acceptance that international politics should not be simply a game of interests but also of beliefs, things we stand for and fight for. It is also why we should be prepared to intervene, if necessary militarily, to prevent genocide, oppression, the deep injustice too often inflicted on the vulnerable. Britain, in the past decade, has intervened four times: in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq. In each case, regimes of appalling brutality were removed.

Lessons from the Balkans

Earlier this week I visited the people of Sierra Leone, still struggling, but at least able to contemplate a better future. But as important is the next-door state of Liberia, now properly democratic. It might never have been so had Sierra Leone fallen into the hands of the gangsters. Similarly, as a result of Kosovo, the Balkans changed. Countries there can think of a future in the European Union.

So when we come to Darfur, do we really believe that if we do not act to change this situation, the violence will stop at the borders of Sudan? In the early 1990s we could not summon the will to act in Bosnia. It took 250,000 lives lost before we realised we had no option.

It is said that by removing Saddam or the Taliban—regimes that were authoritarian but also kept a form of order—the plight of Iraqis and Afghans has worsened and terrorism has been allowed to grow. This is a seductive but dangerous argument. Work out what it really means. It means that because these reactionary and evil forces will fight hard, through terrorism, to prevent those countries and their people getting on their feet after the dictatorships are removed, we should leave the people under the dictatorship. It means our will to fight for what we believe in is measured by our enemy's will to fight us, but in inverse proportion. That is not a basis on which you ever win anything.

However, the critical point is that we, Britain, should be closely involved in all these issues because in the end they will affect our own future. And the agenda constructed should be about our values—freedom, democracy, responsibility to others, but also justice and fairness.

2. Transatlantic co-operation is still vital

I have real concern that on both sides of the Atlantic there is, in certain quarters, an indifference, even hostility, to an alliance that is every bit as fundamental to our future as it has been to our past. By this I don't just mean the rampant anti-Americanism on parts of the left. In a sense, that is relatively easy to counter.

It is more a drifting away, occasionally a resurgent isolationism that crosses right and left. In Britain now there are parts of the media and politics that are both Eurosceptic and wanting “an independent foreign policy” from America. Quite where Britain is supposed to get its alliances from bewilders me. There is talk of Britain having a new strategic relationship with China and India bypassing our traditional European and American links. Get real. Of course we will have our own relationship with both countries. But we are infinitely more influential with them if we have two strong alliances behind us.

In Europe we wonder: is it worth it to continue such reliance on America? We would be better asking whether the political leaders in America still see Europe as their first port of call.

For all our differences, we should be very clear. Europe and America share the same values. We should stick together. That requires a strong transatlantic alliance. It also means a strong, effective and capable EU. A weak Europe is a poor ally. That is why we need closer co-operation between the nations of the EU and effective European institutions. In a world in which China and India will each have a population three times that of the EU, anything else is completely out of date.

3. Be very clear about global terrorism

I fear the world, and especially a large part of Western opinion, has become dangerously misguided about this threat. If there was any mistake made in the aftermath of September 11th, it was not to realise that the roots of this terrorism were deep and pervasive. Removing the Taliban from government seemed relatively easy. Removing their ideology is so much harder. It has been growing for over a generation. It is based on genuine belief, the believers being people determined to outlast us, to be indefatigable when we are weary: to be strong-willed and single-minded when we have so many other things to preoccupy us (and when the comforts of our Western lives seem so untouchable by the activities of what are naturally seen as a few fanatics).

People make much of the fact that in each area of conflict, the extremists take a different shape. They point to the historical absurdity of, for example, Iranian elements linking up to the Taliban. Above all, they say, their weapons, numbers and support are puny compared with ours.

This misses the central point. Revolutionary communism took many forms. It chose unlikely bedfellows. But we still spent decades confronting it. This new terrorism has an ideology. It is based on an utter perversion of the proper faith of Islam. But it plays to a sense of victimhood and grievance in the Muslim world. Many disagree with its methods. But too many share some of its sentiments. Its world view is completely reactionary. But its understanding of terrorism and its power in an era of globalisation is arrestingly sophisticated and strategic.

It means that it can go into any situation where peace is fragile or conflict possible. It can, by the simple use of terror, break the peace and provoke the conflict. It has worked out that in an age of mass media, instantly relayed round the world, impact counts: and nothing makes more impact than the carnage of the innocent. It has learned that as states respond to terror so they can, unwittingly, feed it.

In the Middle East right now, it stops progress in Iraq. It defies the attempts at peace between Israel and Palestine. It is making Lebanese democracy teeter on the brink. That is significant in itself. But far more significant is the way in which the terrorists have successfully warped our sense of what is happening and why. They have made us blame ourselves.

We can debate and re-debate the rights or wrongs of removing Saddam. But the reality is that if you took al-Qaeda (in Iraq before Saddam's fall) out of the conflict in or around Baghdad, without the car bombs aimed at civilians and the destruction of monuments like the Samarra Shrine, it would be possible to calm the situation. Events in Anbar Province, where slowly but surely Sunni opinion is turning on al-Qaeda, show it. And down in Basra, what is poisoning the city is the violence and criminality of Jaish-al Mahdi and other groups—supported, financed

and armed by elements of the Iranian regime. Remove al-Qaeda, remove the malign Iranian activity, and the situation would be changed, even transformed. The truth is that the conflict in Iraq has mutated into something directly fuelled by the same elements that confront us everywhere. Yet a large, probably the larger, part of Western opinion would prefer us to withdraw. That is the extraordinary dulling of our senses that the terrorism has achieved. In the Palestinian question who gets the blame for lack of progress? The West. In Lebanon—a crisis deliberately provoked by, again, the same forces—who is held responsible? Israel.

In Afghanistan it is clear that the Taliban is receiving support, including arms from, again, elements of the Iranian regime. They have learned from elsewhere. They believe if they inflict enough chaos, enough casualties of Western soldiers, we will lose the will. It will become another “mess”. And if it does, the problem will be laid at the door of the Afghan government and its Western allies.

In the past few weeks alone we have seen terrorist bombs in Morocco, Algeria, Pakistan, India, and arrests in Saudi Arabia. Not a single major European nation is immune. In Africa, Sudan, Somalia, even in places like Nigeria where Muslims and Christians live together, terrorism is active.

There is no alternative to fighting this menace wherever it rears its head. There are no demands that are remotely negotiable. It has to be beaten. Period.

4. We must stand up for our values

We will not succeed simply by military or security means. It is a political challenge. Terrorism recruits adherents on the basis of an appeal to human emotion. It can be countered only by a better, more profound, well-articulated counter-appeal.

Being a player

But this won't happen unless we stand up for our own values, are proud of them and advocate them with conviction. There is nothing more ridiculous than the attempt to portray “democracy” or “freedom” as somehow “Western” concepts

which, mistakenly, we try to apply to nations or peoples to whom they are alien. There may well be governments to whom they are alien. But not peoples. Whoever voted to get rid of democracy? Or preferred secret police to freedom of speech? These values are universal. We should attack the ideology of the extremists with confidence: their reactionary view of the state; their refusal to let people prosper in peace; their utterly regressive views on women. We should condemn not just their barbaric methods of terrorism, but in particular attack their presumed sense of grievance against the West. We need to support and help mobilise moderate and true Islam in doing so. There is nothing more absurd than the idea that removing the Taliban in Afghanistan, or Saddam and his sons in Iraq, and replacing their regimes with the chance to vote, supervised by the UN, is somehow an assault on Muslims. We should point out that those killing Muslims by terror are actually other Muslims and that doing so is completely contrary to the teachings of the Koran.

But, and it is a mighty but, such an approach only counts if it is applied vigorously and in a manner that is even-handed. Here is where I have always felt that the normal politics of left and right are a hindrance. The trouble is that the right is correct on the need to stand firm militarily and in support of freedom; and the left is correct on the need for justice.

The assault on the ideas behind terrorism won't work unless it is seen to be motivated and stirred by a commitment to justice. That is why trying to resolve the Israel-Palestine dispute is so important—not only for its own sake, but because the absence of peace causes suffering that is exploited by this extremism. Ask yourself why parts of the Iranian regime try so hard to prevent a settlement; and then understand why it is crucial to settle it.

We are faced with a challenge derived from a world view. We need our own world view, no less comprehensive but based on the decent values we believe in.

5. It's about tomorrow's agenda too

The importance of such an agenda is that it allows us also to shape the common value system of a world in which, very soon, the new powers and interests will have the strength to influence greatly the path the world takes. So such an approach is a bulwark against extremism but it is also a civilising force in a future in which Western economic and political weight will be less than hitherto. We need a sufficiently strong basis, founded in a clear and even-handed commitment to our values, for the world as it changes to adopt these values, universal as they are, to guide us.

Meanwhile, at home

This article is for a global audience, and has focused mainly on international policy. But there are some interesting lessons from domestic policy also.

1. "Open v closed" is as important today in politics as "left v right". Nations do best when they are prepared to be open to the world. This means open in their economies, eschewing protectionism, welcoming foreign investment, running flexible labour markets. It means also open to the benefit of controlled immigration. For all nations this is a hugely contentious area of policy. But I have no doubt London is stronger and more successful through the encouragement of targeted migration. Isolationism and protectionism now cut across left and right boundaries. They are easy tunes to play but pointless in anything other than the very short-term.

2. The role of the state is changing. The state today needs to be enabling and based on a partnership with the citizen, one of mutual rights and responsibilities. The implications are profound. Public services need to go through the same revolution—professionally, culturally and in organisation—that the private sector has been through. The old monolithic provision has to be broken down. The user has to be given real power and preference. The system needs proper incentives and rewards. The purpose should be so that public services can adapt and adjust naturally—self-generating reform—rather than being continually prodded and

pushed from the centre. Public-sector unions can't be allowed to determine the shape of public services. In Britain we have put huge investment into our public services. But we are also opening the health service to private and voluntary-sector partnerships, introducing a payment by-results system, creating competition and allowing hospitals to become self-governing trusts. The new academies and trust schools will have the freedom to develop as independent but non-fee-paying schools, with outside partners like businesses, universities and charities able to sponsor and run them.

3. Welfare systems work only if there is shared responsibility—the state to provide help, the citizens to use that help to help themselves. The pensions' reforms Britain is now putting through will, over the decades, give us a system that is affordable and fair between the generations, by ensuring that, though each citizen is guaranteed a basic pension, they will be expected to top that up with their own finances.

4. Law and order matters in a way that is more profound than most commentary suggests. It used to be that progressives were people who wanted an end to prejudice and discrimination and took the view that, in crime, social causes were paramount. Conservatives thought crime was a matter of individual responsibility and that campaigns against discrimination were so much political correctness. Today the public distinguishes clearly between personal lifestyle issues, where they are liberal, and crime, where they are definitely not. It is what I call the pro-gay-rights, tough-on-crime position. It confounds traditional left/right views.

5. Social exclusion needs special focus. From 1979 to 1997 the incomes of the richest 20% in Britain grew faster (2.5%) than the incomes of the poorest 20% (0.8%). That has been reversed. Since 1997 the incomes of the poorest have risen faster (2.2%) than the richest (2%). However, this masks a tail of under-achievers, the socially excluded. The rising tide does not lift their ships. This issue of social exclusion is common throughout Western nations.

6. Finally, political parties will have to change radically their modus operandi. Contrary to mythology, political parties aren't dying; public interest in politics is as intense as it ever was. As the recent turn-out in the French election shows: give people a real contest and they will come out and vote. But politics is subject to the same forces of change as everything else. It is less tribal; people will be interested in issues, not necessarily ideologies; political organisation if it is rigid is off-putting; and there are myriad new ways of communicating information. Above all, political parties need to go out and seek public participation, not wait for the public to be permitted the privilege of becoming part of the sect. So, membership should be looser, policymaking broader and more representative, the internet and interactive communication the norm. Open it all up.

Over to you

That is a very short synopsis of what I have learned. I don't presume to call it advice to my successor. I have been reasonably fortunate rarely to receive public "advice" from my predecessors.

The job is difficult enough as it is, and, knowing that, I have nothing but support to offer my successor.