HEALING THE SCAR?
IDEALIZING BRITAIN IN AFRICA, 1997–2007

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the British government’s commitment to Africa during Tony Blair’s time as Prime Minister. Drawing on interviews with politicians from across the political spectrum and with officials involved in Africa policy, it shows how British work and relationships in Africa are described in thin and highly idealized ways, depicting a project seemingly able to transcend ordinary politics. The article suggests that this idealization of Africa has been valued by state actors for the ways in which it appeared to connect them to a ‘good’ and ‘noble’ cause, and in particular the way it enhanced their perceptions of the capacity and potency of the British state.

DURING TONY BLAIR’S TIME IN OFFICE – 1997–2007 – AFRICA became, if not a central concern for the British government, then at least an important symbolic policy area, underwritten by significant levels of financial and political capital. During this period, Britain engaged militarily in Sierra Leone; tripled aid to the continent; made Africa the priority issue of its presidencies of the G8 and European Union in 2005; cajoled the G8 donors to sign up to writing off bilateral African debt; and convened the Commission for Africa to develop a new plan for rescuing the continent from its development impasse.1

In addition to the considerable commitment to Africa from key members of the government – Blair himself, Gordon Brown in the Treasury, Clare Short at International Development, and, less specifically on Africa but contributing the idea of an ethical foreign policy, Robin Cook in the Foreign Office – significant numbers of MPs became involved in Africa

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through All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs). Increasing political interest in Africa was reflected in Whitehall where the continent became a bigger priority for the FCO, while DfID’s role in Africa extended and its influence and standing in London increased. Thus a significant number of actors clustered in and around the state – politicians and officials – were actively involved in the concerns of the British project in Africa, and began to characterize it in particular ways.

Blair explicitly developed an approach to Africa which set it apart from other more fraught policy areas.

In all the things that I deal with in politics, and the things that make people cynical and disengaged from the political process, when I come and see what is happening here [in Ethiopia] and see what could happen, I know that however difficult politics is, there is at least one noble cause worth fighting for.

In differentiating Africa from ‘difficult politics’, Blair expressed the way in which this ‘noble cause’ came to be viewed as something apart from politics as usual, as a way of tapping into a form of ‘good’ rather than ‘political’ activity.

Various interpretations and explanations of this increased engagement in Africa exist. Some take the Blair government’s commitment to Africa largely at face value, accepting that recent British policy there is different from ‘politics as usual’. Criticism from this quarter centres on the effectiveness of the policy, or depth of commitment to it, rather than questioning


3. Peter Penfold, former High Commissioner to Sierra Leone, at the end of a career in the FCO was able to observe: ‘Within the Foreign Office for many years, the two forgotten areas were Africa and South America: they were the backwaters…. Now, credit to Tony Blair, for whatever reasons he really decided to put Africa way up on the agenda…. And as a result, Africa began to get the attention it deserved.’ Interview, London, 3 July 2007.

4. International development was given its own department and cabinet minister in 1997, and over the following years, DfID posts in African capitals saw budgets and staff numbers grow to the extent that in many instances they effectively took the lead over the FCO in directing the British relationship with Africa. At the same time, DfID officials felt they enjoyed unprecedented financial and political support: ‘A golden age,’ as one official suggested. Interview, DfID official, London, 4 May 2007.

its provenance. Other accounts explore alternative or ‘hidden’ motivations behind British engagement. Some of these provide explanations that focus on various forms of self-interest. In David Chandler’s interpretation, for example, Blair courted a policy of doing good in Africa to appeal to those on the left of the Labour Party, as a counter to his unpalatable domestic programme. Paul Cammack, in a discussion of the Commission for Africa, argues that its chief objective was to promote congenial capitalist structures in Africa to encourage ‘competitiveness in the global capitalist economy’. Yet other accounts stress the difficulties of escaping national interests, or the benefits derived from the Africa policy for Britain’s reputation, or for power-relations internationally. A third approach has examined the effects of the British discourse on Africa, looking, for example, at the ways in which approaches towards security reform and conflict resolution have tended towards the ‘securitization of development’, thus pulling British work in Africa within the ‘war on terror’.

This article explores a further dimension of the Blair government’s interest in Africa. Taking up the idea of Africa as a ‘noble cause’, I argue that a significant factor behind British policy is the way in which it has represented a connection to a ‘good project’, one that appeared morally unambiguous and able to float, untouched, in the middle of more complex and messy political processes. This connection was valued at an individual level, and because of the way it appeared to affirm the capacity and value of the British state itself. It seemed to reinforce a belief that political work is at least in part a moral activity; and it helped give substance to the idea that the state has the capacity to ‘do good’. This idea of politics – which helped define New Labour as it came to office – was derived by Blair and Brown partially


from religious conviction,11 and resonated more widely through parts of the Labour Party that drew on a traditional party belief that politics is a ‘moral crusade’.12 While this outlook may have become more difficult to sustain in many areas of policy once Labour was in office – undermined by the complexities of governing – it continued to influence the government’s approach to Africa. This ability to characterize Africa as a ‘moral crusade’ draws on popular and historically deep-rooted British conceptions of the continent as needy and helpless.13 Little needs to be known of Africa for it to be seen in this way; indeed, as I will argue, a degree of distance has been necessary to ensure that an idealization – of Africa, and of British engagement there – is preserved. This idealization underwrites the ways in which British policy on the continent has been defined.

This argument provides a modification of Christopher Clapham’s observation that Britain was largely uninterested in Africa once colonialism ended. According to Clapham, involvement in the continent was confined to aid – more or less grudgingly given – and rows over the colonial legacy of racist regimes in southern Africa. This view was driven by British perceptions that Africa was politically and economically uninteresting compared to the more exciting special relationship with the US, the growing European project, and more significant trading partners.14 My suggestion is that while this perception of Africa as politically and economically unimportant did not fundamentally change under the Blair government, there was a shift towards the idea that engaging with the continent on these terms has its own value. Africa became less a burden or a problem for Britain, and more an opportunity for British political elites to engage in meaningful and morally defined activities, and to develop a sense of the state as active in them.

The article is presented in four sections. In the first I describe the ways in which British actors idealize Africa and Africans, while in the second I examine how an empty and ‘flattened’ view of Africa enables the idealization of Britain. The third section explores the extent to which idealization has been maintained in the case of Sierra Leone – which has been a significant focus of British attempts to ‘do good’. In particular, I examine the ways in which British officials working there cope with an idealized role on the

13. The theme appears regularly, from the debates around the abolition of the slave trade to late colonialism as a way to save Africa, and more recently the Live Aid approach. See, for example, James Ferguson’s discussion, Global Shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2006), pp. 1–23.
ground where one might expect reality and complexity to erode idealization. Finally, I examine the ways in which such idealized conceptions enabled state actors to conceive of an enhanced and potent role for the British state.

**Idealized Africa**

As Achille Mbembe suggests, for Westerners Africa has always been the ‘empty continent’ onto which images and narratives can be projected. Such narratives, Mbembe argues, are not about Africa at all, but build a ‘metaphor through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity’. ‘Africa’, then, is a creation that describes ‘the world the West constitutes for itself’.16

What does this creation look like, and what self-image does it help construct? The overtly racist depictions of the colonial era, described by Mbembe, are largely gone from modern British policy discourse. What remains is an idealization of Africa and Africans that is just as flat and vacuous. Western imaginings of Africa have long been stirred by images of primordialism, noble savagery, child-races, and other representations of a place belonging either to the distant past, or somehow outside normal human activity.17 This is the basis for one strand of modern British idealization of Africa which can be described as an ‘Africa as Eden’ type thinking. This depicts the continent as ‘closer to nature’: raw, primitive Africa gives a sense of connection to a ‘promised land’, or a lost Eden, the mythological ‘land flowing with milk and honey’ that, as Isaiah Berlin suggests, forms a ‘central strand in the whole of Western thought’.18 One MP summed up this persisting view: ‘If you’ve been on a safari, or if you’ve been into the wilderness of Africa, you are going back in time in your own head to what it was like millennia ago, when the world was a new and exciting place to be.’19 Untouched, pure, Africa as Eden speaks to a longing to return to the simplicity and purity lost to more complex and fraught modern life.

Another strand of idealized Africa is ‘Africans as morally superior’. On a superficial level Africans are ‘full of charm’, ‘optimistic’, ‘cheerful in the

face of poverty and problems’. Underlying this is a sense that Africans, having dealt with heroic levels of suffering, touch a higher moral plane. For example, one MP described her encounters with people in Sierra Leone:

We are bowled over by the fact that you can suffer such terrible atrocities and forgive. We were immensely moved by the reintegration of child soldiers and yet in our society we are so quick to blame children and send them off to a horrible institution. We realized that we were dealing with a group of people who had a capacity [for forgiveness] that we may never have possessed.

Encounters with ‘morally superior’ people, who have suffered and retained extraordinary levels of humanity, provide a feeling of connection to a higher good than can be achieved at home, where materialism, greed, and the pursuit of self-interest make life more morally uneven.

A third strand of idealization stems perhaps paradoxically from the fascination with extreme political or conflict situations, which are contrasted with the idea of morally superior ‘ordinary Africans’. Africa provides a rich landscape of brutal, repressive dictators, which creates apparent clarity and moral certainty. For the Labour Party, in particular, South Africa sums up this depiction.

Apartheid did energize and galvanize everybody. Here is this saint [Nelson Mandela], you know, who came out of years of imprisonment loving everyone including those who’d been torturing and imprisoning him for years. There was a great sense of there is great hope for Africa if there are people of this man’s calibre. But there was a great sense of let-down at the failings of Thabo Mbeki.

Political contest is reduced to a struggle between good and evil, while ideological contest is largely absent. In such descriptions of Africa as ‘politically empty’, British politicians and officials buy into prevailing depictions of African politics as about identity or personality rather than ideology. As such there is a certain British inability to cope with moral ambiguity in Africa, which in turn helps to explain the government’s incoherence and incapacity over Zimbabwe. Once the British government had demonized Robert Mugabe and his regime, it was at a loss to understand remaining

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23. This view was reinforced by many of the British officials I met in Abuja and Freetown, where there were national elections in 2007. These were described as competitions about personality, competence, or progressiveness rather than ideology. Interviews with British officials in Abuja and Freetown, July–August 2007.
local and regional support for him. Instead there was a tendency to avoid Zimbabwe altogether. As one FCO official said, ‘People in the FCO don’t want to hear about options for what to do with Zimbabwe or to understand what is really happening there – the whole thing is just such a mess.’25 Similarly, a political researcher who works closely with MPs involved in Africa suggested: ‘Blair found the whole subject so painful, that he wouldn’t allow officials to brief him. . . . If you’ve got a bit of an idealized view of Africa it [Zimbabwe] really buggers it up.’26

In addition to these assumptions about African (a)political culture, there is the feeling that Africa’s very large problems overwhelm possibilities for alternative – political – approaches:

It’s a lot easier in Sierra Leone reaching a common position, or having shared interests, than in other countries, because everyone is focused on development – it’s kind of the priority. Underpinning development has to be security reform and good government, but underneath it’s really all about how do we develop Sierra Leone. And that’s what the people of Sierra Leone want, that’s what the government wants, and that’s what the international community wants . . . in Sierra Leone it’s quite easy to focus everyone’s minds on what will develop Sierra Leone and get agreement on all that.27

Africa appears morally unambiguous. Alongside the ‘bestiality’ of some Africans leaders, there are ideal objects: morally superior ordinary Africans and the occasional saint-like leader. The apparently apolitical nature of Africa is part of this idealization: it represents the evacuation of ambiguity. It enables Britain to enter a morally clear-cut fray: to defend the good against the wicked. This picture forms a central core of the British description of its project in Africa as ideal, and enables the creation of an idealized self-identity.

**Ideal Britain**

British policy in Africa is constantly compared by officials, MPs, and ministers with other aspects of foreign (and domestic) policy and described as distinct, pure, and good. It is not contentious or rooted in interests; it is not really political. This is clear from the ways in which the policies are characterized by consensus and a relative lack of interests.

Political consensus on the Blair government’s work in Africa is exceptional: from all angles of the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives – all said that, while they disagreed with the government on many other policy areas, on Africa, Blair and his colleagues had it right. For example, being Liberal Democrat spokesperson on development is

27. Interview, FCO official, Freetown, 6 August 2007.
‘extraordinarily difficult because there is nothing to oppose’. A Conservative MP said: ‘I have significant respect for Blair on his international record: it is his domestic record which is rather more lamentable.’ Two left-wing Labour MPs, who were not usually reluctant to criticize their leaders, said of the government’s Africa policy that ‘I don’t think there’s anybody that disagrees with it’ and that ‘there is a kind of coming together on this’.29

There was wider consensus, too, in support from the development NGOs which have been closely identified with Labour’s development policy. Tony Worthington, former MP and Labour spokesman for international development in the early 1990s, said: ‘I never employed a researcher on international development issues. I didn’t need to. I’d just lift the phone [to one of the development NGOs] and say give us what you’ve got on Nigeria. Done. Incredible.’32 When I asked whether the Labour Party and the NGOs found themselves with different priorities, or if there was ever tension between them, he replied:

No, actually there weren’t really. I mean basically you were doing a job because you were in favour of what they were in favour of. And you might get areas like World Bank policies or something where they might be saying more revolutionary things than you. But it’s pretty marginal stuff. Basically, you’re there as a fan, rather than a critic.33

In government, Labour built on this relationship – which, especially since the Band Aid initiative in the 1980s, has been able to mobilize massive popular support – most notably during its 2005 ‘year for Africa’ when NGOs, religious groups and trade unions gathered into the Make Poverty History coalition found themselves largely in sympathy with the government’s agenda.

The consensus apparently extends internationally to other bilateral donors, to multilateral agencies and to the recipient countries themselves. Officials find this a pleasant contrast to work in other parts of the world. ‘People are always ready to listen to you: we’re coming from a shared position,’ remarked one FCO official. Others contrast it favourably with more overtly ‘political’ jobs. Peter Penfold, who spent much of his career in Africa, finally serving as High Commissioner to Sierra Leone, said: ‘I felt that in places in Africa, certainly the ones I went to, as a result of your efforts

31. Interview, Jeremy Corbyn, MP (Labour), Chair, APPG on Angola, London, 31 January 2007
33. Ibid.
34. Interview, FCO official, Freetown, 6 August 2007.
you could actually make a difference... Negotiating in Brussels, I did that at times, and it was absolutely boring.'35 Myles Wickstead, a DfID official who served as British ambassador in Ethiopia before returning to London to head the Commission for Africa, explained how this consensus was made possible: 'I think in Africa, everything kind of pushed in the same direction, that you actually didn’t have to make those compromises.'36 Africa became the best realization of Blair’s aspiration towards ‘big tent politics’37, as it appeared uniquely able to pull everyone together into an arena of rationality and common sense that transcended division, indeed, transcended politics. This ability to transcend division and politics was consolidated by the relative lack of interests in Africa. Government rhetoric represented relations with Africa as mutually beneficial, in the sense that encouraging development and stability in Africa supported British interests by helping prevent immigration and the spread of war and of terrorism, and establishing trade opportunities. Clare Short described this state of affairs as ‘a delight because you don’t have any confusion, you can just get on with what’s right: it’s in Africa’s interest, it’s in Europe’s interest, it’s in the world’s interest’.38 Such utopian harmonies of interest, where potentially conflicting interests are neutralized, fit with a sense of a rational, ordered world. For Short, and others in the Party, it also answered traditional Labour affection for internationalism, the possibility that international cooperation and organization can supersede narrower national interests.39

The issue of interests needs closer investigation. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Britain’s minimal engagement in Africa flowed from concepts that there were few interests there, a manifestation of Clapham’s contention that British politicians did not find the continent very interesting.40

37. David Marquand characterizes Blair’s wider political approach and style as driven by the belief that rational discussion would achieve consensus, and eschewing notions of politics as inherently conflictual. Instead, Blair’s followers adopted the approach that there ‘is one modern condition, which all rational people would embrace if they knew what it was. The Blairites do know.’ David Marquand, The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Blair, 2nd ed. (Phoenix Giant, London, 1999), p. 226.
40. The exception was South Africa, where economic interests did exist and were allowed to take precedence by the Conservative government over the imposition of economic sanctions on the Apartheid regime. For critics – many of them in the Labour Party – this was a blatant example of British selfishness being promoted over what was right and good, and a symbol of the moral decay of the government. The approach was rejected by Robin Cook when he became Foreign Secretary. See Robin Cook, “Foreign Policy Mission Statement – Speech at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, 12 May 1997,” Guardian Unlimited: www.guardian.co.uk [14 December 2005].
Current arguments about interests rest on the idea that new interests have arisen to stimulate British engagement in Africa since this period. It is still difficult to find conventional British interests in most of sub-Saharan Africa. Trade is tiny: 2006 figures show that British exports to sub-Saharan Africa are only 1.8 per cent of total exports and imports just 1.6 per cent, and those percentages drop by two thirds when South Africa is removed from the equation. At the same time, it would be incorrect to say that British interests are entirely absent, as illustrated for example by the sale of an expensive and apparently unnecessary military air-traffic control system to Tanzania in 2002, which critics argued did more for the interests of Britain’s arms industry than for Tanzanian development. Although Africa’s geopolitical marginalization persists, it has been suggested that the war on terror is beginning to direct British policy in ways that put British interests above those of Africa. Thus, Tom Porteous argues that after 9/11 the British government, alongside the US, allowed security interests to influence relations with Sudan and Ethiopia, whose regimes were viewed respectively as the potential promoters of terrorism and partners in the fight against it.

These examples suggest that government motivations were complex and not always as ideal or harmonious as presented. However, conventional interests and recent concerns with terrorism remain relatively marginal and cannot alone explain the Blair government’s policy in Africa, particularly in countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda which are economically marginal and not viewed as presenting a terrorist threat to Britain, and all of which receive significant British support. Although officials state that by ‘promoting British values’ in largely Muslim areas such as northern Nigeria they may prevent anti-western extremism in the future, those officials interviewed maintained that this objective had a minimal impact on their work. As one official charged with investigating possibilities for terrorist organization in Africa observed: ‘Radicalization of this kind is not really very African.’

It is striking, therefore, how often state actors talk up British interests in Africa. Why promote a ‘harmonies of interest’ line if British interests are in reality relatively weak? One benefit derived from the argument that helping Africa serves British interests is that it lends development policy

42. Policy towards South Africa remains exceptional, characterized by greater complexity and acknowledgement of political content than the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.
43. Officials from the World Bank, as well as many advising Blair, suggested that the system was a waste of Tanzania’s limited resources. See Porteous, Britain in Africa, p. 127.
44. Ibid., pp. 127–9.
a harder, more immediate edge and bolsters the importance of DfID and wider government work in Africa. In a similar way, as a former minister for Africa suggested, the interest argument might also be used to make policies more palatable to the electorate:

In a way, to make our policy attractive to the British public we sometimes have to argue for it [the terrorist connection] especially to the more sceptical elements of the public. You might have to play that up. But if we’re being frank, there’s not real self-interest for the UK in helping Rwanda, for example, a tiny country, or Burundi, or the Congo.47

Harmonies of interest can therefore be seen as part of a political discourse, a narrative that explains the Blair government’s engagement in Africa in particular ways for particular audiences. As one close government watcher and supporter commented:

Certainly in the 19th Century, it would be argued, and probably well into the 20th Century, the British Government’s line was to dress up its venal interests in moral claims. But we’ve flipped. So now what we do is dress up moral direction, which I think is mostly what Tony Blair is interested in, as sort of in our economic interests.48

The way interest arguments are used and characterized is complex. The relative lack of substantial British interests in Africa has enabled an Africa policy that can be idealized as disinterested. The idealization, and engagement on these terms, remains fragile; if substantial interests intrude in the future, such an approach might well give way. But at the moment it persists, in contrast to other parts of the world where more substantial interests are allowed to inform and dictate policy.

A further aspect of Britain’s role as ‘ideal’ relates to the way in which its historical involvement in Africa is heavily edited. Colonial experiences in Africa might be expected to endow a more complex set of relationships, but even Labour MPs who argue that the British state should feel responsibility or even guilt, manage to distance the Blair government. For example: ‘There may be a bit of colonial guilt around . . . although the Labour Party’s record on decolonization’s quite good actually. I’m not sure the Labour Party has that much to feel guilty about.’49 The point is echoed by another former Minister for Africa:

Colonialism in the past was about the use of power and abuse of power in order to pursue advantage for this nation – actually, it wasn’t about the advantage of the whole nation because the truth is that people from backgrounds like mine never got much advantage out of colonialism, unlike the rich.50

Instead, what is remembered is the successful movement for the abolition of slavery\textsuperscript{51} and, for Labour MPs, the party’s identification with the anti-colonial movement. Tony Lloyd, for example, described his meeting with an elderly Kenyan:

He said, “I love Fenner Brockway” . . . He’d been part of Mau Mau, and he was sentenced to death, and it was Fenner Brockway who had campaigned on his behalf and as a result the sentence was commuted and he went to prison instead . . . My heart grows to something like three times its normal size when I meet someone like that because I’m proud of the fact that the people who gave me my values also still echo into the world.\textsuperscript{52}

As can be seen from this discussion, the perceived ‘lack of politics’ in Africa is reflected in the apparent lack of politics involved in Britain’s relations with Africa. Involvement in Africa is valued because of its ability to represent a pure space in the middle of the British state’s activities: it brings all parties together, and it largely floats free of self-interest. Richer conceptions of more complex or fraught relationships engendered by shared colonial history are airbrushed away. Through UK work in Africa, these actors create the sense that Britain is connected to something good.

\textit{Detachment through opposition}

Thus far I have outlined a broad government approach to Africa which is essentially thin and idealized. In this next section I discuss how such a depiction is realized or adapted by British officials who live and work in African capitals. Staying out of messy politics is essential for preserving the purity of the British contribution to good in Africa. Yet officials engage in Africa explicitly in an attempt to effect reform, to improve policy and governance. Even if these are seen in technical, ideologically neutral ways, they are still likely to hit obstacles or be forced into compromise when implemented in the real world. So how do British officials manage to engage with attempts at political reform and retain this sense of a connection to purity?

Idealization is in danger if it is confronted by engagement of any depth, as it was most notably in Sierra Leone. The answer to this problem lies in which relationships are to be idealized, and in a largely imagined relationship with the African poor. In interviews, British officials presented their role as one of representing ‘ordinary Africans’ and attempting to induce their political representatives and officials to ‘do the right thing’ by them.

\textsuperscript{51} Malcolm Moss, MP, believes that the ‘strong connections’ Britain has with many African countries derive from the movement for the abolition of the slave trade and the creation of Sierra Leone as a colony for resettling freed slaves. Interview, Malcolm Moss, MP (Conservative), Chair, APPG on Botswana, London, 6 February 2007.

\textsuperscript{52} Interview, Tony Lloyd, MP (Labour), Minister for Africa, 1997–9, London, 10 July 2007.
In a number of countries you don’t or you haven’t had the systems whereby governments can be electorally accountable with strong parliaments and whatever. So in a way I think the donor community has historically acted as a little bit of a proxy for the electorate in those countries and tried to stand up for the ordinary person, saying [for example] these sugar prices are penalizing your people and shouldn’t you do something about that? So I think in a way, for perfectly honourable motives, the international community has acted as a proxy and an advocate of people.53

While African ministers and officials can be criticized,54 an idealization of the ‘ordinary person’ is relatively easy to maintain, especially when officials admit they feel rather cut off from the lives of most Africans. Officials in Abuja make the joke that they live ‘three miles from Africa’, and the daily round of engagement with officials and ministers in the capital is a long way from the lives of the people they are there to help. In Freetown the city is divided into the centre and the east, where the ‘ordinary Africans’ live and work, and the western hills, where the government offices and residences, the embassies and large NGO compounds, and the expatriate walled and gated residences can be found. In these situations, officials often have to assume that there is a close affinity between their conception of progress and that of Africa’s poor. This is ideationally reinforced by basic cosmopolitan assumptions about human nature that have long informed Britain’s relations with Africa:

They want what all people want. They want security and they want to be one government, they want education for their children and they want to live longer and have a general sense of prosperity. I think these are all human aspirations and it’s quite easy to see when these aren’t being met in their most extreme forms. And in that case it’s quite easy to act as an advocate for them.55

The position of an advocate is essentially one of constructive opposition to the African state. It allows a critical engagement with the state on behalf of the people, but a distancing from implication in the actual business of governing. The way in which advocacy is framed also assumes some sort of a right or facility to speak for Africans which, when challenged, officials are hard-put to explain.

British activity in Sierra Leone since 1997 illustrates some of the possibilities and problems of maintaining idealization. British military engagement and subsequent development assistance are thought popularly to have played a significant role in ending the war in Sierra Leone.56 In the

54. An untypically undiplomatic example came from British High Commissioner to Kenya, Edward Clay, when in 2004 he accused unnamed corrupt officials of behaving ‘like gluttons’ and ‘vomiting on the shoes’ of donors. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3896971.stm [18 December 2008].
56. See Michael Kargbo, British Foreign Policy and the Conflict in Sierra Leone, 1991–2001 (Peter Lang, 2006).
early stages of the war, the British High Commissioner, Peter Penfold, had been viewed by many people in Freetown as a protective, paternal figure, in a climate where little protection was to be had from the state. He describes his role as being about standing up for ordinary Sierra Leoneans, as he did when the 1997 coup took place:

I summoned Johnny Koroma and his people to my residence the next day, along with the Nigeria High Commissioner and the UN special representative, and we told them that we weren’t going to accept this. Not because we were the international community telling them this, but because the people themselves were not accepting it. We could see the reaction in the streets: people didn’t want it.57

His confidence that he, as a British official, could step into the situation and take responsibility, was in the mould of an idealized colonial official.58 During a period of acute crisis in Sierra Leone, it was possible to do this credibly and with popular support. ‘People needed something to happen, so when white men in uniform came down, went into the bush and started fighting, it had a huge impact.’59 Penfold was, and remains, overwhelmingly popular in Freetown – the embodiment of idealized Britain in Africa:

He’s not an ordinary human being. I don’t really care what people in the UK said about him. When he came here, he saw that the people of Sierra Leone were crying, and he did something about it. He’ll always be welcome in this country.60

However, by the time of the 2007 elections, the British were no longer viewed in such a positive light. In exile, Penfold had formed a uniquely close relationship with the Kabbah regime, ‘almost too much’, one official commented. ‘It was almost like we were part of government, rather than supporting government.’61 After the war, when the government was restored and faced with the task of governing, this deep involvement of the British High Commission and DfID in government policy meant they would be directly implicated in its failures. Five years after the end of the war, with much trumpeted levels of aid and support, Freetown did not look very different from how it looked immediately after the war. People were angry that there was still no mains electricity supply, little or no employment,

58. Michael Kargbo, a Sierra Leonian academic who has written about the British military engagement, described his first meeting with Penfold: ‘I didn’t know him before I went to London. So he walked through the door and what I saw was this colonial officer. And I said, okay, straight away, that’s what we’re dealing with… He would say there’s a substantial part of the population that would want to be re-colonized by Britain. So he had a sort of confidence that what he did was very powerful.’ Interview, 4 August 2007, Freetown. Indeed, Penfold himself told me: ‘If you went to these countries in Africa, they were very proud of their colonial past, particularly in a country like Sierra Leone. Many Sierra Leoneans would say their downfall started on the day of independence.’ Interview, London, 3 July 2007.
59. Interview, Sierra Leonian who worked for the FCO, Freetown, 11 August 2007.
60. Ibid.
and only rudimentary state services. The motivations and effectiveness of the British, as key supporters of the government of Sierra Leone, were beginning to be questioned and trust in British intentions had begun to tarnish. For example, a common gripe centred on the luxurious standard of living provided for the British soldiers who were there to train the new Sierra Leonean army. Growing resentment was expressed over the comparison between the ‘concrete houses’ for the British soldiers and the ‘mud houses’ being built for the local soldiers. Some criticized the British for continuing to provide direct budget support to a corrupt regime, others for suspending it in the run-up to the elections which was perceived as showing favouritism towards the opposition.

Inevitably, a closer involvement in governing had exposed Britain to messy political processes and was beginning to undermine its self-perception as standing above politics. The ambitious approach taken in Sierra Leone – focusing as it has on a very close involvement in governance – is in danger of undermining the British image of itself in Africa. As this brief discussion demonstrates, detachment is a vital component in preserving an ideal; over-involvement can undermine it. The British appear to have managed to successfully detach themselves from significant historical engagement in Sierra Leone, though more recent events have led to far closer relationships which appear to be eroding the idealization. In African countries where the relationship has been less intense in recent years, detachment may be preserved more effectively.

Conclusion: the capable state

I have argued that British state actors, in attempting to ‘do good’ in Africa, create and project idealizations onto the continent, enabling the formation of a conception of the British state as involved in a disinterested, idealized project. This is enabled by the way the historical engagement is sanitized, by the relative lack of British interests in Africa, and by the apparent consensus which extends across political, sectoral and national boundaries. All of this lends British policy in Africa a moral rather than a political tone.

Engagement in Africa on these terms feeds the sense of an enhanced British capacity. This supports Mbembe’s observation: narratives of Africa are really the narrative Britain creates for itself, about its history, identity and role in the world. During the Blair government the manifestation of this narrative of Britain was about its connection to and identification with a ‘good’ and ‘ideal’ project. In particular, the idea of what is ‘good’ and ‘ideal’ in relation to actors’ sense of the state itself was expressed in terms of its capacity and potency. Recent donor work on development in Africa has concentrated on the importance of the state, and has focused on developing
state ‘capacity’ and promoting ‘good governance’.62 British policy discourse in this regard projects a sense of British capability or capacity: in Africa, things can be done and Britain can do them. One former minister for Africa put it this way: ‘I think there is general agreement about what needs to be done and how to do it . . . It’s pretty clear. You could set down on one sheet of paper the four or five things that need to be addressed.’63 Such a statement could not be made about a more subtly understood and described political project. This is less about an overt feeling of aggression or superior physical strength, than of the power of competence, of knowing how to repair and make good where others have failed continuously and catastrophically. ‘We’ can see what the problems are; ‘we’ know what to do. This reflects the wider development remit adopted by the donor community at large which, according to Mark Duffield takes a much closer interest in social affairs than in the past.64 Highly ambitious and over-arching donor plans for the continent now take in attempts to reform the politics, social organization and even culture of Africa.

The grand ambitions and apparent ease with which they might be resolved bring a powerful sense of potency. This is summed up by a former FCO minister, in his suggestion that western powers – under the ‘neutralizing’ umbrella of the UN – could take over small failed African states and sort them out:

People don’t think colonialism was a terrible time in these countries because everything since has been worse. And in Sierra Leone, they don’t want us to go. They tell you that in the street: don’t go . . . Liberia’s not a poor country; Liberia’s a rich country that has been grievously mismanaged. So you could manage it, you could take all your costs, you could train a new generation, not just over an electoral cycle but over a long period, because there is a distinct shortage of honest, capable Liberians in Liberia. There are a few you can bring back from abroad, and there are some still inside the country, but there aren’t that many and you’re going to need to train up more, certainly when it comes to soldiers and police.65

Liberia, ‘grievously mismanaged’ is empty of ‘honest, capable Liberians’. The people themselves want a new form of colonial authority – the benign, capable state – which will know how to ‘manage it’, and will re-populate the country with a ‘new generation’.

In this way idealization offers British political actors a way to connect themselves and the British state to an ideal activity, from which they borrow

a sense of renewed capacity which perhaps feels lost in the context of messy domestic political activity, or under threat from the pressures of globalization. As such, the recent British fascination with Africa and the idealized ways in which it is viewed appears to have more to do with a sense of anxiety about the role, function, capacity, potency of the British state than with African needs and development.