



United Kingdom

Assessment: Good

Trend: ⇔

Capital: London

Type of Government: Constitutional Monarchy

Head of Government: Prime Minister Tony Blair
(since 2 May 1997)

Secretary of State for Foreign and

Commonwealth Affairs: Jack Straw

Population: 56,647,790

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 13

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overall, Britain's record of support for democracy worldwide is **good**. It consistently criticizes those situations that compromise democratic values, and often acts upon its verbal condemnation with sanctions, as in the case of Burma, and sometimes even intervention, as seen in its support for ousting Slobodan Milosevic. Typically, Britain's record of support for democracy has been weaker toward countries with which it had or sought strong economic ties, as in China, and/or military ties. For example, it sold arms to Indonesia, which were then used to threaten East Timorese, and has sought to develop trade ties with Iran, despite the theocratic regime's continued blocking of democratic reforms.

While Britain may no longer be the great power that it once was in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, it is still capable of serving as an example of how an advanced, democratic society should act in defense of democracy around the world. Given its leadership role at the United Nations, the Commonwealth, and other international bodies, Britain is in position to influence the international community's approach towards transgressors of international democratic norms, and on balance has exercised that influence decisively.

FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

In previous centuries, Britain held a prominent place in world politics. Today, at the start of the twenty-first century, it still does. A country that occasionally "punches above its weight," much of Britain's influence rests in its close alliance with the United States, its position on the United Nations Security Council, its membership in the European Union (EU), and its legacy of empire. Indeed, Britain played a critical role in forming the United Nations at the end of the Second World War and in instilling the principles of democracy and human rights that help comprise its charter. The British support an enlargement of the EU to serve not only for the economic development of the former Soviet bloc, but also as a "buttress against extremism."¹ London is also a firm supporter of the International Criminal Court, and continues to try to use its special relationship with the United States to bring Washington solidly on board. Nonetheless, the British record is not perfect, and sometimes short-term economic interests have outweighed longer-term interests in promoting democratic values.

Britain underwent a major change in the political arena when voters elected the Labour Party into power in 1997 for the first time in 18 years. With the change in power came, at least ostensibly, a change in foreign policy. Just weeks after entering office, then-Foreign Minister, Robin Cook, issued a mission statement that supplied "an ethical content in foreign policy," recognizing that national interest "cannot be defined only by narrow realpolitik."² The goals within the statement were "vague and uncontroversial," as one



analyst noted, calling for the promotion of security and prosperity for Britain and for the enhancement of the quality of life.³ The statement also pledged Labour to “work through our international forums and bilateral relationships to spread the values of human rights, civil liberties, and democracy, which we demand for ourselves.”⁴

Blair argued, “people say you can’t be self-appointed guardians of what’s right and wrong. True, but when the international community agrees on certain objectives and then fails to implement them, those who can act, must.”⁵ Britain, as a country that is capable of acting to implement certain objectives, often has done just that. When it came to supporting democracy around the world, Britain overall has solidly defended it, in statements and often by deeds, both unilaterally and as a part of an international organization or coalition.

RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

In general, Britain has spoken out against the overthrow of democratically-elected governments, whether by military coups or other means. For example, strong condemnations followed the coups in Cote d’Ivoire (1999) and Ecuador (1999). When the Venezuelan government returned to power after an attempted coup in 2002, London applauded the return to democracy. Indeed, in most cases studied in the survey, the British government issued at least some statement of concern and often led multilateral responses. In Nigeria, Britain went further by denying aid after the annulment of election results in 1993. London supported Nigeria’s suspension from the Commonwealth following the 1995 executions of nine opposition leaders, and endorsed the suspension of Fiji from the Commonwealth after a coup in 2000.

While the British did not have a combative role during the Haiti crisis in 1994, they did offer two ships and 300 soldiers for a two-week period. Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind’s rationale was that the new regime in Haiti was one “of particular cruelty and barbarism” and thus required such measures.⁶ Yet for many observers, British action against Haiti was in response to its special relationship with the United States, “little more than a traditional reflex response to a request from Washington,” was how some British officials saw it.⁷ Whatever the

reason, British resolve was strong, fully supporting both the decision to send American troops and the UN resolution to restore democracy in Haiti.

In Pakistan, immediately after the coup of 1999, Foreign Office minister Peter Hain said that the British government, leading the international condemnation of the coup, wanted to see that Pakistan was “penalized as strongly as possibly diplomatically.” Indeed, London carried through on its threat to push for Pakistan’s suspension from the Commonwealth. Just a few weeks after these harsh words, however, Britain switched its policy. London contended that General Musharraf and the armed forces had a case for staging a coup, calling the former regime under Nawaz Sharif a “corrupt, dreadful” one that “looted the country....”⁸ The sudden shift can be attributed to the new regime’s warnings that British criticism would drive it to associate itself with Islamic militants. What the British and Pakistanis did, then, was cut a deal: Hain agreed that “General Musharraf the coup leader will find us ready listeners and willing to play a constructive role as long as he gives uncompromising commitments to building a new democracy.” Pakistan, in return, would cooperate with efforts to track down Osama bin Laden, sever links to the Taliban, and sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.⁹ Britain has continued to follow political developments in Pakistan and expressed concern that the May 2002 national referendum, which gave Musharraf another five years as president, was a serious divergence from the path to democracy he had elaborated in August 2001.

RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

As with the overthrow of elected governments, Britain typically was quick to condemn the manipulation of electoral processes. Where Britain had more room to respond with harsher treatment (as with Commonwealth nations), it did. London led the Commonwealth decision to suspend Zimbabwe (2002) and went a step further by supporting the EU’s targeted sanctions against Mugabe and his allies and by opposing “any access by Zimbabwe to international financial resources until a more representative government is in place.” Foreign Secretary Jack Straw also stressed that Britain would continue to support the citizens of Zimbabwe through humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ Moreover, even in the months prior to the election, the British government suspended the removal of



failed Zimbabwean asylum seekers from Britain until after the elections were held. Mugabe, however, has effectively turned the tables on Blair by charging that Britain's real concern is the remaining white farmers whose land has been confiscated as part of a long-delayed land reform program.

In Sierra Leone, a former British colony, Britain again went beyond mere condemnation. As the largest international contributor, Britain donated £3 million to support the March 1996 electoral process. London also sent five observers to monitor the elections. Britain's commitment to Sierra Leone continued after the elections -- it has committed millions of pounds in bilateral assistance to the country, and also has been working with the UN mission there in response to the rebel uprising to build new, democratically accountable armed forces. That commitment includes not only the training of troops but also an Amphibious Ready Group stationed off the coast.¹¹ After the rebels overthrew the government, Blair invited the President of the exiled government to the Commonwealth Edinburgh Summit, where he promised them help in restoring democracy. Some have complained, however, that Britain did not react adequately until the rebels reinvaded the capital and continued their gruesome practice of amputation.¹²

Elsewhere, Britain supported free and fair elections and chastised those that fell short. In Nigeria in 1993, it protested the annulment of the election, suspending some aid. Britain contributed observers to the OSCE's election monitoring in Belarus, which found that country's 2001 elections failed to meet international standards. Similarly, during Britain's presidency of the EU in 1998, that organization both sent election monitors and gave an \$11 million package of electoral assistance to Cambodia in an effort to create conditions for free and fair elections.¹³ With regard to Haiti's disputed elections in 2000, the British joined the EU in refusing to send either aid or observers because of the failure of the Haitians to retabulate votes from the previous election.

PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Britain has on balance a strong record when it comes to the practical support of international democracy. On occasion, however, the rhetoric of condemnations of military coups and botched elections was overshadowed by

suspect arms deals and pandering to dictatorships. On the one hand, the British government supports the strengthening of democratic institutions abroad through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which provides assistance to a variety of programs and organizations. Likewise, Britain offered £200 million over the next five years to help rebuild Afghanistan and foster democracy there, but has promised only £650,000 in funding for human rights projects around the world that encourage free speech and freedom of expression. Britain has supported Angola and Ghana financially as well in their efforts to build a peaceful democracy.¹⁴ Moreover, in its staunch support of the International Criminal Court and of an expansion of the European Union, Britain has further demonstrated its advocacy for a regional and global regime founded on democratic and human rights norms.

On the other hand, however, Britain also has sent arms to countries with troubling human rights records, including Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, which together account for 25 percent of British arms sales. This is in spite of eight policy pledges that the Labour Government produced during the 1997 election that outlined its view of a responsible arms trade. These pledges included issuing no licenses for arms to regimes that might use them for domestic or international aggression, and strengthened monitoring of end-use of arms. Britain also approved an EU code of conduct on arms exports making them conditional on respect for human rights.¹⁵ And Robin Cook told the Labour Conference in 1999 that the government "rejected every license to Indonesia [from 1997 to 1999] when weapons might have been used for suppression." At the same time, however, Britain issued over 100 export licenses for military equipment to Indonesia, including aircraft spares, aircraft machine gun spares, body armor, and communications encryption equipment.

This episode demonstrates a disconnect when it comes to British policy and British practice. Indeed, in 1997, when asked about the sale of British Hawk aircraft to Indonesia, Cook responded with what seemed to indicate a tougher approach: "If we have evidence that any particular weapons systems—of which that is one—is being used for internal repression, we will not give an export license for it."¹⁶ But just weeks later, London admitted that the Hawk sales would go on after all. The rationale was that Labour could not annul a contract entered into by a previous



government had entered; moreover, it would signal a lack of commitment to the British arms industry.¹⁷ Finally, in 1999, the foreign secretary condemned the “appalling brutality” of the Indonesian regime in suppressing East Timor, and in September of that year suspended the planned sale of Hawk jets to Indonesia. Cook asserted that Britain would “support an EU arms embargo and will take national action to suspend further arms exports.”¹⁸ When it came time to send troops to East Timor to restore peace to the troubled region, Britain was among the contributors—in both troops and money.

In Austria, in the Joerg Haider case (1999), Britain and the other 14 member-states of the EU threatened diplomatic sanctions against any Austrian government that contained Haider’s Freedom Party. His election fed a fear that democratic stability on the continent could be threatened by a rise of right-wing extremism, a concern reinforced by the growing popularity of anti-immigration politicians in France, Holland and Denmark. Britain and the other EU nations saw his rise to power as enough of a danger to democratic values that they saw fit to sanction a fellow member for the first time.¹⁹

POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

Britain’s policy toward entrenched dictatorships has been mixed. While the ostensible purpose of British policy has been to promote democracy in such countries, other interests have been the primary driving force in favor of engagement.

Some positive actions include diplomatic protests (the removal of ambassadors) over the dictatorial policies of Belarus’s President Lukashenko, and the condemnation of Cuba’s human rights policies. Britain’s disdain for Iraq’s flouting of international law and failure to dismantle weapons facilities has resulted in air strikes by both the British and the Americans and support for a U.S.-led campaign to forcibly remove Saddam Hussein from power. Similarly, Britain’s Labour Party dealt harshly with Slobodan Milosevic in the Balkans. Blair insisted that “we have learnt by bitter experience not to appease dictators,” harkening back to the days of World War II to justify a more proactive approach.²⁰ Criticizing his Conservative predecessors for ineffectiveness in the Balkans, Blair lamented that “in Bosnia we waited for years before taking

decisive action.”²¹ When dialogue between the West and Milosevic over Kosovo proved ineffective, Britain rejected further discussion and waged air strikes against targets throughout Serbia in an effort to bring the Serbian dictator to his knees. In addition, Britain has been a strong supporter of the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia as a means of bringing to justice Milosevic and his cronies in the Balkans crisis.

Towards other dictatorships, however, Britain has adopted a somewhat different stance. In line with others in the EU, Britain decided to strengthen diplomatic ties with North Korea in an effort to bring them out of global isolation. Likewise, Blair earlier this year announced the establishment of a special envoy for Sudan. Britain also reestablished diplomatic relations with Iran after the ascendancy to power of the moderate President Khatami, but only gingerly over the course of several years, and only after Iran promised not to execute the fatwa against British author Salman Rushdie. The UN, Amnesty International, and the U.S. State Department all have condemned the dire human rights situation in Iran, which included stonings, unfair trials, detention without trial and torture.²² Britain’s argument, however, was that the improvements made in Iranian society—political debate in the media, the appointment of female judges, and the holding of local elections for the first time since 1979 -- were worth encouraging.²³ The Iranian charge d’affaires suggested another reason for the new British government’s rapprochement -- “its recognition of commercial realities.” Diplomatic relations led to improved trade relations, as Britain adopted numerous measures to promote trade and investment there after the U.S. lifted the threat of sanctions.²⁴

Britain’s relations with China have followed a similar logic -- much of Sino-British relationship centers around business and trade, sometimes at the expense of democracy and human rights. When the two countries were arranging for the turnover of Hong Kong in 1997, negotiators sought to preserve Hong Kong’s basic political freedoms and institutions, not only because the British respected these as important values to uphold, but also because the Chinese saw them as critical to the continued economic success of Hong Kong.²⁵ In general, the transition was deemed a success, as there were no disruptions. However, while Hong Kong’s freedoms remain



essentially respected by China, there have been threats to its autonomy and judicial independence, as well as signs of censorship. Yet what was evident during the transition was a darker side to British diplomacy that raises concerns about Britain's commitment to maintaining solid business relations—Britain is the largest European investor in China—at the expense of democracy. For example, when elections were first held for Hong Kong's Legislative Council in 1995, Britain refused to let foreign observers in to monitor them, "in an attempt to stave off embarrassment and avoid China's anger."²⁶ Similarly, when Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao met with Blair in October 2001, talk focused on trade links and not such

sensitive topics as Tibet.

In Latin America, Britain was in the thick of one of the most controversial human rights cases in recent years when former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet was arrested in London in 1998. When then-Home Secretary Jack Straw decided to allow Pinochet to return to Chile for health reasons, he caused an uproar among human rights activists and the international legal community. In spite of the final decision, Britain took a major risk in straining relations with Chile by allowing his arrest in the first place; some in the region charged that London was engaged in "moral colonialism."²⁷

¹ "Straw: re-uniting Europe is 'number one' EU priority." FCO Bulletin 30 June 2002.

² Wickham-Jones, Mark. "Labour's trajectory in foreign affairs: the moral crusade of a pivotal power?" in Little, Richard, and Mark Wickham-Jones, eds. New Labour's Foreign Policy New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. p. 4

³ Speer, Joanna. "Foreign and Defence Policy," in Dunleavy, Patrick, et al, eds. Developments in British Politic New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, p. 277-278.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁵ Wickham-Jones, p. 15.

⁶ Mason, Trevor. "Haiti Invasion Plan Splits Parties." The Press Association 16 Sep. 1994.

⁷ Black, Ian and Richard Norton-Taylor. "Britain Cool on US 'Muscle-Flexing'?" The Guardian 17 Sep. 1994.

⁸ Lamb, Christina. "Britain ready for deal with Pakistan's military rulers." Sunday Telegraph 28 Nov. 1999.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Government of the United Kingdom. Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Statement by the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, House of Commons, Thursday March 14, 2002. <www.fco.gov.uk>

¹¹ Government of the United Kingdom. Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Sierra Leone: Attempts to Restore Peace Dec. 2000 <www.fco.gov.uk>

¹² Duval Smith, Alex. "On the Sierra Leone Border, A Human Crisis Unfolds, and Britain is Nowhere to be Seen." The Independent 26 Feb. 2001.

¹³ Government of the United Kingdom. Foreign and Commonwealth Office. FCO Daily Bulletin 25 June 1998

¹⁴ See Gyimah-Boadi, E. "A Peaceful Turnover in Ghana." Journal of Democracy 12.2 (2001): 103-117.

¹⁵ Bourne, Angela and Michelle Cini. "Exporting the Third Way in foreign policy: New Labour, the European Union, and human rights policy," in Little, Richard and Mark Wickham-Jones, eds. New Labour's Foreign Policy. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. p. 174.

¹⁶ Wickham-Jones, p. 12

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Dunne, Tom and Nicholas J. Wheeler, "The Blair Doctrine: advancing the Third Way in the World" in Little, Richard and Mark Wickham-Jones, eds. New Labour's Foreign Policy. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. p. 67.

¹⁹ "The rise of the far right in Europe." <<http://www.europe.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2000/eurounion/story/haider>>

²⁰ Reynolds, David. Britannia Overruled. New York: Longman, 2000. p. 293.

²¹ Wickham-Jones, p. 16.

²² Miller, Davina. "British foreign policy, human rights, and Iran." in Little, Richard and Mark Wickham-Jones, eds. New Labour's Foreign Policy. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. p.193.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²⁵ Overholt, William. "Hong Kong: The Perils of Semidemocracy." Journal of Democracy 12.4 (2001).

²⁶ Field, Catherine. "Britain Bars Monitors from Hong Kong Poll." The Observer 17 Sep. 1995. p. 20.

²⁷ Wilson, Jamie. "The long road from Surrey to Santiago." The Guardian 3 March 2000.