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Exporting Soft Power

Abstract: The focus of this chapter is on foreign policy. The ‘liberal’ conservative approach of the coalition government is characterised by a ‘soft’ rather than ‘hard’ approach, seeking to spread influence abroad via international aid and cultural programmes rather than through military intervention. This liberal approach masks authoritarianism since, rather than furthering the interests of local peoples, humanitarian intervention is primarily used to further British interests, enabling the state to project a positive image abroad and British corporations to benefit from new contracts providing consulting services to developing states and investing in newly privatised industries and services.

Keywords: Europe; foreign policy; liberal interventionism; soft power

While the discourse of ‘freedom, fairness and responsibility’ was most readily identified with domestic policy under the coalition government, these values were also to inform foreign policy (HM Government, 2010, p. 20). As in other policy areas, it was important for the Conservatives to mark a break with the policies of both the former Labour and Conservative governments, as part of their modernisation project. They thus attempted to combine the classical conservative ‘realist approach’ to foreign policy with a new emphasis on its humanitarian/ethical dimension, as promoted by Robin Cook as Foreign Secretary under the first Blair government from 1997 to 2001. The ‘realist’ part of this approach entailed being sceptical about the possibility of implementing any kind of grand plan or following any distinct ideology; the acceptance that appeasement cannot work; and recognising the need to work within the confines of international structures which can confer legitimacy on foreign intervention (Daddow, 2013, p. 116). As for the humanitarian aspect, this was enshrined in the commitment to spread the values of freedom and democracy and to uphold human rights across the globe. This dual approach was summed up as ‘liberal conservatism’, a concept most famously outlined in Cameron’s 2006 speech as leader of the Opposition (Cameron, 2006b). It meant realistically assessing the threats to Britain from abroad, accepting ‘that democracy cannot quickly be imposed from outside’, understanding that military action alone will not suffice, and recognising that foreign policy must be informed by multilateralism. But, perhaps more idealistically, it meant acting ‘with moral authority’ (ibid.). Although outlined by the Conservative leader, the policy also sat well with Liberal Democrat policy, summed up in their 2010 manifesto as putting ‘British values of decency and the rule of law back at the heart of our foreign policy’ (Liberal Democrats, 2010).

In government, this has been one policy area ‘where unity between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats has been almost flawless’ (Auda-André, 2014, p. 246). Indeed, there was broad consensus within the government about the need to intervene in Libya in 2011 in order to stop the Qadhafi regime’s attacks on civilians which the UN Security Council had judged ‘might constitute crimes against humanity’ (UN Resolution 1973). Most recently, there was approval across the Coalition for the decision taken in September 2014 to carry out air strikes against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq.