

UK government launches new plan for Africa

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The UK government's new plan for Africa, published on March 11, has been hyped as the means of ending poverty in Africa.

The Africa Commission's report entitled "Our Common Interest" calls for total debt cancellation, for aid to Africa to be doubled from \$25 billion (£13 billion) to \$50 billion, and for the rich countries to drop their trade barriers. African countries are urged to make progress toward democracy, to tackle corruption and end armed conflicts on their continent.

Presiding over its launch, Prime Minister Tony Blair declared piously that "it is an obscenity that should haunt our daily thoughts that four million children in Africa will die this year before their fifth birthday."

It is obscene, but so too is the sight of a man responsible for an illegal war of aggression that has killed thousands of defenceless civilians, including children, prating on sanctimoniously as he launches a report that does not offer a single credible solution to Africa's impoverishment.

Blair and the Africa Commission have hijacked the language of compassion in a cynical exercise in deception that for Blair is partly about boosting Labour's vote in the coming election, to some extent about increasing the UK's standing on the international stage, but most of all about extending a new form of colonial control over the African continent.

Chaired by Blair, the Africa Commission included Gordon Brown and Hilary Benn from the UK government, as well as political figures from Africa such as Meles Zenawi, president of Ethiopia, president of Tanzania Ben Mkapa, and Michel Camdessus, former head of the International Monetary Fund. Its most high-profile member was Bob Geldof, the rock musician who set up Live Aid and Band Aid.

Geldof's presence was crucial in creating the illusion that the commission was in some way independent of political influence. Sharing the platform with Blair at the report's launch, Geldof complained that it would cost the United States "f**k all" to end war, poverty and disease in Africa. When reporters asked Blair whether he agreed with this sentiment and would put pressure on President George W. Bush, he squirmed coyly. "Because I'm a politician in a suit," he said, giving one his Princess Diana looks, "I wince at the occasional word, but actually what he said is what I really think."

Charities now muster more support than all the UK political parties put together. The growing global gulf between the rich and poor has produced a mounting response in terms of charity and protest campaigns from Live Aid in 1985 to the Jubilee Debt Campaign in 2000. As G8 summits became the scene of mass protests, governments and international organisations have been obliged to address the question of poverty, especially in Africa where it is at its most extreme.

There was the Arusha Charter in 1990, Nepad in 2001, the USA's Millennium Challenge Account in 2001, the Johannesburg Summit on

Sustainable Development in 2002, the G8 Declaration of 2003, the World Bank's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) and the International Labour Organisation's World Commission on Social Dimensions of Globalisation, 2004. Bush has visited Africa, following in the footsteps of Treasury Secretary O'Neill, who toured the continent with the rock star Bono, and Defence Secretary Colin Powell. Last October, Blair was in Africa, and earlier this year, UK Chancellor Gordon Brown made the now-obligatory pilgrimage to AIDS orphanages.

Despite these initiatives, the condition of Africa has continued to deteriorate. The Africa Commission report is, like the previous efforts, an example of gesture politics. The Africa Commission calls for donor countries to aim to spend 0.7 percent of the national income on aid. This was the same target that the Brandt Commission on global development proposed in 1980 to be met by 1985. Had this been adhered to, aid would have been 1 percent by now. The current level of UK aid is just over 0.3 percent of GDP, so that the report's call for aid to be doubled amounts only to a call for aid to reach levels that were proposed a quarter century ago.

On the question of debt, the commission backs the British government's proposed International Finance Facility. This plan involves floating bonds on the world market that will finance an increased level of aid in the short term but will result in a drastic fall in aid payments later. Poor countries would find themselves even more heavily indebted in the future if the scheme were introduced.

The reality of what finance ministers call debt relief has already been shown by previous initiatives. Twenty-three of the 27 countries that have qualified for debt relief under the HIPC initiative are in Africa, but all of them still have unsustainable levels of debt. Uganda got debt relief in 2000, but its debt-to-export ratio was still 209 percent in 2002-2003 and will be 150 percent in 2012-2013.

Not only was debt relief inadequate, but the programme was used to force poor countries to accept free-market measures that have proved disastrous to their economies and the well-being of their populations.

One significant reason for the indebtedness of poor countries is the collapse of commodity prices. In 1980, the Brandt Commission called futilely for commodity prices to be stabilised, but prices are set in a world market dominated by transnational companies whose turnover is greater than the income of most African countries.

The Africa Commission report cannot offer a solution to the devastation wrought by falling commodity prices and does not even bother to mutter a few pious phrases as previous reports have done. Wholly committed to free market economics, the Commission supports complete freedom of action for the transnational companies, rejecting any suggestion that they should be subject to legally binding regulation and calling only for a voluntary system of self-regulation.

This is entirely in keeping with membership of the commission. As the IMF's managing director between 1987 and 2000, Camdessus was

responsible for introducing Structural Adjustment Programmes in Africa, eastern Europe and the former USSR. These involved maintaining a tight control of the money supply, privatising state-owned companies and services, opening up the home market to foreign imports, and removing restrictions on investment and capital movements. In every case, the effect was to make workers and small farmers pay for the profits of big capitalist concerns by destroying the gains made in social welfare and subsidies to small producers.

IMF structural adjustment programmes have resulted in de-industrialisation in a number of sub-Saharan African countries because they have been forced to open up their economies to imports from more highly industrialised countries with which they cannot compete. The effect has been to make them even more dependent on primary products whose prices have collapsed.

Blair's vision for Africa is that it can be incorporated into the world market as a source of cheap manufactured goods and agricultural produce as well as a source of oil and other minerals. To achieve that, British aid funds are increasingly being spent on employing companies like the accountants KPMG and PriceWaterhouse to advise African governments on privatisation schemes and the Adam Smith Institute to help train African journalists to write favourable reports on free-market economics.

The commission made much of the need to stamp out corruption in African governments, which is presented as the key to ending poverty on the continent. There is a good deal of hypocrisy involved here, as it is Western companies that pay the bribes to African officials and Western governments that allow their illicit fortunes to be salted away in off-shore accounts. About half of the 63 tax havens worldwide are in British protectorates or former colonies. KPMG, the same company that advises on privatisations, also offers its clients advice on tax shelters.

A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report severely criticised the UK for failing to take action against British-based companies accused of bribery. The UK government has never yet prosecuted a company for bribery overseas.

The Blair government is at its most sanctimonious when it is discussing arms. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has called for a legally binding international treaty that will control the sale of conventional weapons, including small arms. At a convention on arms control in March he said, "Relatively cheap and simple conventional weapons, whether the guns of bandits and rebels, the bombs of terrorists or the tanks of repressive regimes, account for an enormous amount of avoidable human misery across the world, and hit the poorest and most vulnerable worst of all."

A similar tone can be heard in the commission report. But at the same time, the Department of Trade and Industry underwrites the export of weapons with export credit guarantees and relaxed the rules on bribery this year following pressure from Rolls Royce, BAE systems and Airbus.

Britain is the base of choice for arms dealers, according to *Africa Confidential*. A Sussex-based firm is responsible for supplying many of the Congolese militias, and two other British-based companies supply arms to the Sudanese government for use in Darfur. The All Party Parliamentary Group on the Great Lakes recently named 18 British-based companies it said had assisted armed groups in Congo either directly or indirectly. John Bredenkamp, who is the commission agent for BAE Systems in southern Africa and supplies arms to the Zimbabwean army, has been granted indefinite leave to remain in Britain.

Conclusive proof of Blair's cynicism and duplicity emerged when it was revealed that even as he was announcing the commission report, he knew Bush had appointed US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to head the World Bank. UK Chancellor Gordon Brown was reported to be "incandescent" with rage, after being tipped for the presidency only months ago. International Development Secretary Hilary Benn was said to have written a letter of protest to Blair. Benn and Brown are on the World Bank board, but neither had been consulted or informed of the appointment, and Blair did not see fit to enlighten them.

Most of the proposals contained in the Africa Commission report will never be put into practice either because, like raising aid contributions, they were never intended to be applied or because they conflict with US interests. Wolfowitz's appointment is a sign that the World Bank is to be enlisted into Bush's "war on terror," and that priority will shape whatever measures are adopted in Africa.

In one respect, however, the commission report reflected the changing attitudes that Bush's re-election has brought about among the political elite. Its emphasis on faith-based charity is entirely new in a European or UK context but is already familiar in the US, where Bush has been able to rely on an already firmly entrenched Christian right. Blair feels he has an opportunity to promote religion on the question of African aid, because the social and economic crisis on the continent forces people to rely on religious organisations for welfare assistance and psychological support in the absence of any progressive political movement that offers them a prospect of changing their conditions.

Guardian columnist Madeleine Bunting noted, "Some of the most original and arresting sections of the report...deal with religion." The report argues that nationalism is exhausted in Africa and that religion has stepped into the vacuum left by the failure of the nation state. This part of the report is said to be Geldof's own contribution, and it is a point of view that clearly appeals to the *Guardian* journalist. "Whether it's mosques in Sierra Leone or churches in Nigeria," writes Bunting, "they have succeeded where the state has failed." Even animism is praised by Geldof for having a "profoundly benign dimension."

Neither Geldof nor Bunting care to examine the reactionary role of religion in apartheid, the Lord's Resistance Army of Uganda, the campaign by the Catholic Church against birth control, or the Islamic sharia courts of Nigeria that condemn women to be stoned to death for adultery when they are raped. The belief that religious organisations hold the solution to Africa's poverty is a wilful abdication of rational thought and a retreat into superstition and the most retrogressive ideologies.

The Africa Commission report has taken over a year to produce and amounts to 450 pages. Britain may no longer lead the world as an economic power, but this document makes it the world leader in sanctimonious word-mongering and hypocrisy.



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