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Regenerating Leadership or Rhetoric?

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Regenerating Leadership or Rhetoric?

Abstract

The new coalition government in the UK is expediting efforts to mark a differentiation from its predecessor. In regards to foreign policy, the Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs, William Hague, has identified human rights as the “irreducible core” in his initial speech of a four-part series intended to outline the new government’s priorities and approach.

Keywords

Human rights, United Kingdom foreign policy, Economics, Government spending, Military actions

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Regenerating Leadership or Rhetoric?

by Marc Alexander C. Gionet

The new coalition government in the UK is expediting efforts to mark a differentiation from its predecessor. In regards to foreign policy, the Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs, William Hague, has identified human rights as the “irreducible core” in his [initial speech](#) of a four-part series intended to outline the new government’s priorities and approach.

It is interesting that Secretary Hague would choose “irreducible core” to describe a term which appears only once in a speech containing over 5,000 words. In comparison, “security” appears eighteen times and “influence” twelve. If human rights are indeed to form the core of British policy, this aspirational goal must be weighed against a few inherent realities which are currently challenging the government.

In Secretary Hague’s [second speech](#) within the series, delivered in Japan on July 15, 2010, the phrase “humanitarian assistance” was mentioned once, “human rights” was not mentioned at all, and “economic” and “economy” combined were mentioned 38 times within the 3,425 word speech.

The true potency of human rights as the nucleus of policy development will be dependent on the level of priority the government places on this ambitious objective and there are competing priorities, especially on the domestic front. The temptation to simply apply the rhetoric of human rights and not the substance will be overwhelming given the level of resources that the protection and promotion of human rights demands.

A practical example of this is the coalition government’s renewed commitment to [meet 0.7% GNI in foreign aid](#) by 2013. If this were an easy objective, the previous UK government (along with its G8 counterparts) would have satisfied the commitment long ago. Justifying such resource allocation in recessionary times when domestic [social security cuts](#) are inevitable will be challenging to say the least. The G8, which includes the UK, has already acknowledged that [2010 AIDS treatment targets](#) will not be met following the Summit in Toronto. Accomplishing the 0.7% foreign aid goal or continuing the aspirational rhetoric will be indicative of the government’s true priorities.

In terms of utilizing a moral authority in foreign policy, the UK's self-proclaimed high ground as a rights respecting nation has been visibly eroded following the military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as government complicity in torture and renditions following 9/11. Prime Minister Cameron has made overtures to increase accountability, announcing [a judicial inquiry](#) into torture and renditions, almost one year exactly after Gordon Brown announced the [Iraq Inquiry](#).

In terms of Afghanistan, the new coalition government is encountering the problem of declaring a departure from the previous foreign policy approach while still maintaining existing foreign policy commitments. On July 21, 2010, [Secretary Hague reported](#) to the House of Commons the results of the Kabul Conference, during which he fully endorsed the Kabul Process and the UK’s combat role for the next five years.

If the new coalition government truly wishes to establish human rights as foreign policy's "irreducible core," a substantial effort (even in terms of paying lip service to the idea) remains to be seen. At such an early stage in its mandate, the only praise the UK government can expect is a cautious endorsement of the concept.

Marc Alexander C. Gionet is the Director of the Atlantic Human Rights Research and Development Centre housed at St. Thomas University where he also lectures within the undergraduate human rights programme. Mr. Gionet is currently teaching courses on Humanitarian Law, NGOs and Human Rights and Terrorism and Human Rights. His [most recent publication](#) discusses the transfer of Canadian captured detainees to third parties in Afghanistan.