

# What Shapes British Foreign Policy?

David Wearing  
PhD Research Student  
School of Public Policy  
University College, London

## The democratic deficit in UK foreign policy

- How do we explain the strong divergence between public opinion and fundamentals of UK foreign policy?
  - 63% oppose renewal of Trident nuclear capability
  - 63% say UK-US relationship too close (July 2006)
  - 61% opposed scale of Israel's 2006 assault on Lebanon, which UK supported
  - Less than 10% supported Iraq invasion without 2<sup>nd</sup> UNSC Resolution (February 2003)
  - 77% say Iraq invasion increased terrorist threat. 3% said it decreased the threat
  - 52% say Blair deliberately misled the country on Iraq (23% say he should stand trial for international crimes)

# Public opinion is drowned out by other influences

- Both British society and the international system are characterised by their hierarchical nature.
- Put simply, some people and institutions are more powerful – socially, economically and physically - than others.
- Various concentrations of social and economic power wield critical influence over government policy
- British foreign policy serves the interest of those best able to influence government, not the interests or views of the general public, which is often ignored

# The Roots of British Foreign Policy

- The political economy of Britain and its relationship with the world is the product of historical processes
- Looking at this historical background can help us understand the nature of British foreign policy today
- In the earliest days of the British empire, democratic forms of government were explicitly rejected in favour of the rule of a propertied elite
- The resulting dominance of that elite, while changing and evolving over the centuries, arguably still defines the political economy of Britain and its place in the world

# 1647: Britain at the crossroads

At the end of the English Civil war, the future of Britain was debated at Putney.

The rank and file of the Republican army favoured democracy. Thomas Rainsborough said

*“...the poorest he hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government”*

The Generals and Parliamentarians favoured elite rule. Henry Ireton replied to Rainsborough

*“I think that no person has a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom, that has not a permanent fixed interest in the kingdom”*

By a “permanent fixed interest” Ireton meant substantial property.

# 1647: Britain at the crossroads

- The democrats were defeated through a combination of cajoling, coercion and violence.
- With both monarchists and democrats defeated, the victors of the civil war were “businessmen of state, mercantilists, [and] money-managers [who] invested far more time and energy in preventing any sort of radical change than in promoting it” (Schama).
- Britain and its emerging empire were now run “by a corporate alliance of county gentry and city merchants”.



# The Evolution of Empire

The return of the monarchy could not reverse the rise of the new economic elites, whose power was further entrenched by the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, those elites grew wealthier still from the slave and sugar trades, leading to a rapid expansion in their political power at home, and the state’s military power overseas

During the nineteenth century, a political, economic, cultural and ideological system which largely served the interests of elite power rose into the ascendancy across the globe, at the point of Western imperialism’s bayonet.

The British state took a leading role in this process, while strongly opposing popular domestic movements calling for democratisation

# Imperial Globalisation

Britain set itself up at the centre of a global web of economic activity, as the leading financier and consumer.

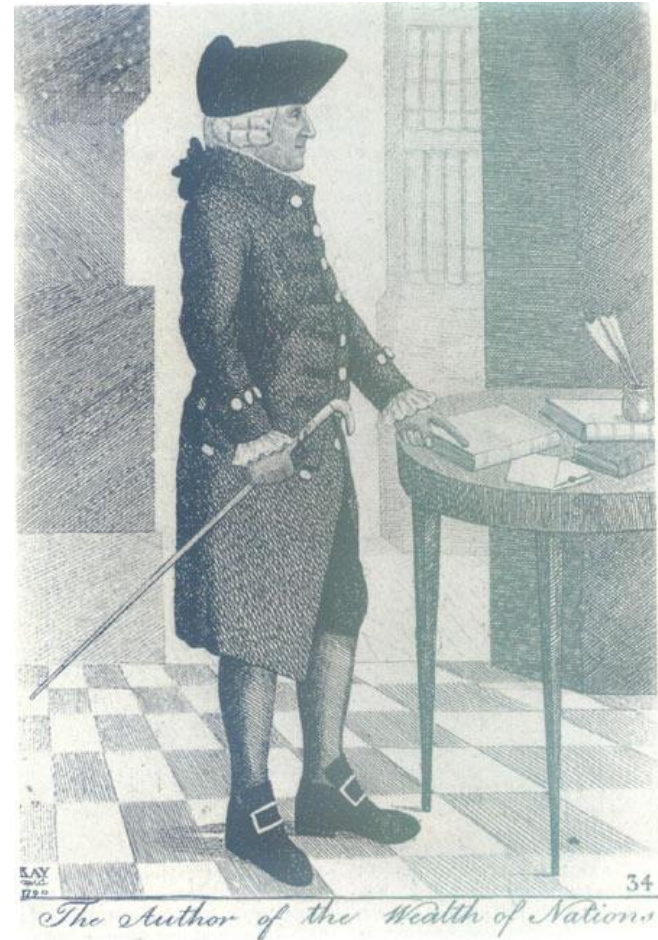
British hegemony had a natural constituency amongst communities of property-holders in the Americas, Europe and the colonised world.

There was more to this system than the formal empire. The colonies did not receive the majority of British exports or investments.

Other areas were subject to an informal imperialism that we might recognise today. In Latin America and the Middle East, for example, access to markets and raw materials was secured through treaties, the exertion of political and economic influence, and the ever-present threat, in the background, of military force.

# The influence of elites

- The 17th century philosopher and political economist Adam Smith was highly critical of the way in which economic elites had been able to influence government policy to suit their own ends
- Smith observed that the “English legislature has been peculiarly attentive to the interests of commerce” because policymakers were continually “imposed upon by the sophistry of merchants and manufacturers”
- Policy was being directed, not by “an extensive view of the general good” but by “the clamorous importunity of partial interests” who were the “principal architects” of policy

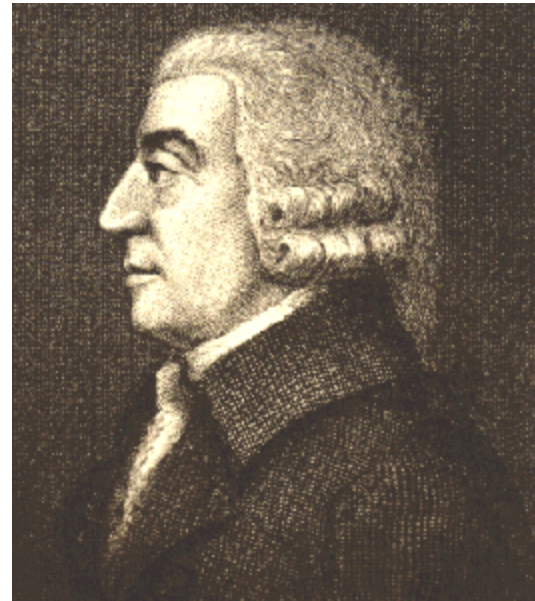


# The “principal architects” of policy

Smith condemned the “particular orders of men who tyrannise the government”, arguing their case “with all the passionate confidence of interested falsehood” and predicting national ruin if their demands are not met

He observed that the politician who supports elite interests

“...is sure to acquire not only the reputation of understanding trade, but great popularity and influence with an order of men whose numbers and wealth render them of great importance. If he opposes them, on the contrary, [he will suffer] the most infamous abuse and detraction..., arising from the insolent outrage of furious and disappointed monopolists”



# The injustices of imperialism

- For Smith “All for ourselves and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind”, and he applied that principle to his analysis of Western imperialism
- The European discovery of the Americas had created a “new set of exchanges”, which might have proven mutually advantageous.
- Instead, the "principal architects" of policy acted in accordance with "the vile maxim", seeking merely their own enrichment. As a result, “[t]he savage injustice of the Europeans rendered an event, which ought to have been beneficial to all, ruinous and destructive” to the original Americans



# Smith & imperialism: scepticism of claimed motives

- Smith was always sceptical of the claimed motives of the powerful, a principal we would do well to apply today.
- For Smith, the Spanish conquests in the Americas were an effort to “take possession of countries of which the inhabitants were plainly incapable of defending themselves. The pious purpose of converting them to Christianity sanctified the injustice of the project. But the hope of finding treasures of gold there was the sole motive which prompted them to undertake it”
- Similarly, we might observe that the British and American conquest of Iraq was an effort to take possession of a country whose inhabitants were also plainly incapable of defending themselves. The pious purpose of liberating them from tyranny sanctified the injustice of the project. But the hope of establishing a client government and military presence in the world’s major energy-producing region was the sole motive which prompted them to undertake it

# Passing the Imperial baton

The economic development of its rivals, and the disasters of 1918-45, brought Britain's domination of the world system to an end.

British elites largely welcomed the US as their natural successor. To them, the maintenance of the world system was more important than the question of which state in particular took the leading role in its management

This indicates the extent to which the global system that evolved under British imperial rule, and continued to evolve under the US after WWII, is as much about the interests of transnational economic elites as it is about narrow state power



# Maintaining “international security”

In the post-war era, Britain helped to maintain and expand the global economic and political system now led by the United States

As was true in the colonial era, maintaining order within the system and suppressing challenges to it resulted in British involvement in a series of ugly historical episodes

- 1953 – supports coup in Iran, after Parliamentary government attempts to nationalise its oil reserves from BP
- 1965 – supports coup and suppression in Indonesia, also to prevent economic independence. Up to 1 million deaths estimated. Indonesian economy then opened up to Western investors
- 1973 – welcomes coup in Chile and subsequently backs General Pinochet’s regime of state-terror
- 1980s – provides Saddam Hussein with military equipment and financial aid
- 1990s – Following the invasion of Kuwait, Saddam seen as unreliable. Sanctions regime imposed, leading to deaths of up to 1 million, half of these children under 5.

# Maintaining economic order

Through its powerful role in the global economic institutions (the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation), Britain helps to force open the economies of poorer countries to Western trade and investment.

This prevents those countries from nurturing their developing economies and lifting themselves out of poverty

Recent small increases in UK foreign aid and debt relief may mitigate the worst effects of this international regime, but poor countries are still kept subordinate to Western economic interests, and thus kept poor

# What shapes British foreign policy?

British foreign policy is produced by (and itself helps to reproduce, consolidate and extend) a transnational system wherein socio-economic, political and military power is disproportionately concentrated amongst a highly networked group of states, elites, corporations and institutions.

British foreign policy is connected up to that broader web of power in a wide variety of ways.

# Influences: The United States

The United States wields power in the international system in various ways: through its veto on the UNSC, its powerful position within the international economic institutions, and its status as the world's largest economic and military power.

The US has a number of particular forms of power over the UK, via the military relationship between the two states:

- It is the leading member of Britain's principal military alliance, NATO.
- Britain relies for much of its intelligence on US security services .
- The Trident nuclear weapons system which helps the UK to punch above its weight on the international stage relies heavily on US management & technology (which "put's us in America's pocket"; Sir Robert Scott, Macmillan's Permanent Secretary )

The instruction given by Blair's chief of staff to Britain's ambassador to the US, Sir Christopher Meyer, to "get up the arse of the White House and stay there", was an reflection of this dependent relationship.

# Influences: the domestic class system

The comparative lack of social mobility in the UK makes it disproportionately likely that positions of power will be filled by people from wealthy backgrounds. These people are likely to have internalised the general values and outlook associated with that background, and to therefore work in a way that is consistent with the interests of their social class.

This applies, not only to the foreign office and the diplomatic service, but to positions of power in any of the social, political and economic institutions that influence the shape and direction of British foreign policy.

# Influences: the public/private revolving door

An identifiable class of managers, board members and executive and non-executive directors can be seen to move fluidly between senior positions in both the public and private sectors.

At a lower level, firms - including BP, Shell, banks and construction companies - temporarily second employees to many British embassies and government departments, whilst continuing to pay their salaries .

With this blurring of boundaries is likely to come a blurring of public/private priorities, decision making and agenda setting, with what is “good for business” (or businessmen) seen as synonymous with what serves “the national interest” as a whole.

# Influences: lobbying and access

Two years ago the Guardian reported that "the chief lobbyist of Britain's biggest arms company [BAE Systems] was given an official security pass allowing him to wander freely around the Ministry of Defence".

Robin Cook recalled that BAe's chairman "appeared to have the key to the garden door to No 10", and that "certainly I never once knew No 10 to come up with any decision that would be incommodating to British Aerospace".

# Influences: the media

The media is overwhelmingly owned by corporations or wealthy individuals, reliant to a large extent on corporate advertisers for income (increasingly so in the internet era) and produces news coverage that broadly reflects the values and interests of its owners and advertising funders.

The media is able to influence and shape the political agenda, frame debate, help establish policy priorities and embed discursive assumptions . Countervailing progressive elements certainly exist within the media, but these elements are in the minority and largely work against the structural grain.

# Influences: the structure of government

At the core of this constellation of influences and frameworks sits the governmental/ bureaucratic structures and hierarchies that make the final decisions on foreign policy.

Within these structures and hierarchies there occurs an ongoing interaction between Number 10, the Cabinet Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office , the Diplomatic Service , the Department for International Development , the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Ministry of Defence, the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), the Security Service (MI5), GCHQ, relevant Select Committees, the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and the judiciary.

The constitution gives Parliament very little power over policymaking and the Executive in the realm of foreign policy. This, coupled with questions of “national security”, promotes a lack of openness and thus privileges the influence of those not excluded from “the loop”. Thus, the ability of the public to hold foreign policy decisions to account is diminished, and the power of the civil service, senior ministers, and especially the Prime Minister, is promoted

# Influences: You

- Much has changed since the days of Adam Smith
- Civil society activism has enabled the public to force its way into the political arena over the last two hundred years, with the franchise gradually extended over that time to now include all adults over 18 years of age .
- As the build up to the Iraq war demonstrated, government now feels obliged to spend a good deal of energy constructing convincing sales pitches in order to secure public support, or at least to blunt public opposition, to its foreign policies.
- Plainly the extent of our influence over government foreign policy, as citizens, is severely limited. Hence this evening's talk. But we do have a number of important political freedoms, won for us by previous generations through decades of dedicated struggle, that we can use to try and change that equation.

# David Wearing

School of Public Policy

University College, London

- [d.wearing@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:d.wearing@ucl.ac.uk)
- <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/spp/people/research-students/david-wearing>
- <http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/david-wearing>
- <http://twitter.com/davidwearing>