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Author(s): Paul Williams

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Who's making UK foreign policy?

PAUL WILLIAMS*

Foreign policy is not made in a political vacuum but is shaped by domestic factors (such as public opinion), globalizing pressures (such as communications technologies), integrative tendencies (especially within the European Union) and transnational forces (such as lobbying from NGOs). The logic underlying the UK's foreign policy process, however, has changed remarkably little over the past century. Ideally, ministers, officials and outsiders with relevant expertise should formulate policy on the basis of *informed* discussion of the possible alternatives and after taking due account of the relevant history and precedents, the positions of the institutions involved and the legality of what is proposed. Once formulated, policy needs to be interpreted by official agents and implemented in order to achieve the desired objectives. During all three phases, policy also needs to be presented or 'sold' to a variety of audiences both at home and abroad. Formulation, interpretation, implementation and presentation are thus integral stages of the policy-making process; indeed, it is often difficult to judge where one stops and another begins. The combination of actors, institutions and external pressures involved in this process vary depending on the issue in question, but this ideal of how to make policy appears to have remained constant.

It is also possible to identify some general characteristics of the process in the UK that apply irrespective of which political party is in office. First, while the same goals and commitments can persist for long periods, foreign policy-making is best conceptualized as a dynamic process that exists in a dialectical relationship with the outside world. Second, at times, the process is wide-ranging, involving officials from all areas of government and a (growing) number of outsiders from both foreign governments and NGOs. Nevertheless, the process remains among the most secret in government. It is not just the public who have difficulty finding out where and when foreign policy decisions were taken or what the rationale behind them is. Even on a matter as important

* I am grateful to Alex Bellamy, Stuart Croft, Colin Hay, Sally Morphet and Matthew Watson for their constructive criticisms of earlier drafts of this article.

as the legal basis for war against Iraq, for instance, parliament received only a brief summary of the Attorney-General's opinion as a reply to a written question in the House of Lords.¹ There is also a persistent tension between the executive's desire to lead, coordinate and hence centralize policy-making, and the desire of secretaries of state to retain autonomy for their own departments. In theory, no one entirely rejects the need for a degree of central coordination; in practice, however, no one likes to be 'coordinated'. Finally, the process is coloured by a three-way relationship involving 'temporary' ministers and political advisers, and 'permanent' officials. Ministers and advisers are expected to promote explicitly political goals, whereas civil servants are simultaneously expected to 'know their minister's mind' and exhibit loyalty to the institutions of state rather than just the government of the day. New Labour's foreign policy exhibits all these characteristics and tensions to a greater or lesser degree.

This article is concerned with the ways in which Tony Blair's government has affected the foreign policy process in the UK. It starts by suggesting that it is unhelpful to think of UK foreign policy in the singular, since the government simultaneously pursues multiple foreign policies involving different combinations of institutions, actors and external pressures depending on the issue in question. There is thus no simple or single answer to the question: 'Who is making UK foreign policy?' Nor is it easy to ensure a coordinated or joined-up foreign policy with so many actors potentially involved. The second section therefore explores the problems New Labour has encountered in its attempts to move beyond traditional British pragmatism and develop a conceptual rationale that could form the basis of a joined-up foreign policy. I suggest that, despite a long list of slogans and initiatives, New Labour has failed to provide a coherent and consistent answer to the question: What is its foreign policy for? In practice, its foreign policy has been based upon the rather traditional and often contradictory commitments to multilateralism, Atlanticism and neo-liberalism.

The third section discusses some of the problems that have arisen in the interpretation and implementation of New Labour's foreign policy objectives. These stem from both structural factors, such as political interdependence, and differences of perspective within Whitehall. The final section explores the impact of wider demands for government to be open and accountable to its citizens. I suggest that this has increased the importance of presenting or 'selling' foreign policies to the public. This, in turn, has increased the importance of the media as the battlefield on which the struggle for hearts and minds is taking place. Ironically, the government's unparalleled attempts to sell its foreign policies (both at home and abroad) have opened the policy process up to new levels of scrutiny. It remains to be seen whether the existing structures can bear such scrutiny without dramatic reform.

¹ Iain Byrne and Stuart Weir, 'Democratic audit: executive democracy in war and peace', *Parliamentary Affairs* 57: 2, 2004, p. 456.

Foreign policies and policy-making processes

It is unhelpful to think of UK foreign policy in the singular. In practice, the UK simultaneously pursues multiple foreign policies, some of which overlap and some of which may be contradictory. Consequently, the combination of institutions, government representatives and external pressures involved in the policy process varies from issue to issue. It is thus unwise to generalize about the foreign policy process as a whole from just a small number of issue areas. A brief discussion of three different dimensions of UK foreign policy should illustrate the point.

The economic dimension

In the economic sphere, a combination of politicians, technocrats, central bankers and private firms have helped make New Labour's foreign policy. This can be explained by the party's penchant for neo-liberal political economy and the UK's relationship with the global economy.

As Hirst and Thompson have argued, the UK represents an 'over-internationalized economy in an under-globalized world'.² Relative to other G7 states, the UK economy is uniquely penetrated by international capital: it is highly dependent on inward foreign direct investment, its manufacturing sector is dominated by foreign-owned firms, and its banks, pension funds and investment houses invest a far greater proportion of their domestic capital abroad.³ The UK economy and UK citizens are thus 'uniquely structurally vulnerable' to externally initiated shocks in foreign financial markets and to the decisions of foreign business interests. Hirst and Thompson also make the important point that this scenario was not forced upon UK politicians. Rather, 'globalization' was adopted as policy in the UK well before the so-called hyperglobalist thesis became so popular.⁴ Put another way, successive governments (particularly HM Treasury) and the Bank of England have behaved as if the hyperglobalist thesis were an unstoppable reality rather than a highly contested set of theoretical propositions. In so doing, they have helped make those contested theoretical propositions a reality, at least within the UK.

Given this context, it becomes evident that the economic dimensions of New Labour's foreign policy have been characterized by two contradictory claims. On the one hand, Blair's government initially claimed to be bringing 'third way' thinking into the heart of policy-making. On the other, there has been a far more successful attempt to persuade a variety of audiences (at home and abroad) that New Labour was depoliticizing macroeconomic policy-making in line with the principles of the so-called post-Washington consensus.

² Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, 'Globalization in one country? The peculiarities of the British', *Economy and Society* 29: 3, 2000, pp. 335–56.

³ This situation is not new. See Michael Clarke, *British external policy-making in the 1990s* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 44–52.

⁴ Hirst and Thompson, 'Globalization in one country?', p. 353. For a summary of the hyperglobalist thesis see David Held et al., *Global transformations* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), pp. 3–5.

Despite the initial statements of intent, New Labour's attempts to produce a third way foreign policy have proved largely vacuous. Beyond ill-defined notions about developing a political economy somewhere between the *dirigiste* continental and free-market models, the third way quickly fell by the political wayside. In its place, New Labour continued to support the Thatcherite legacy of political economy that had heavily influenced the party's modernization process.⁵ This has been clearly visible within state agencies such as HM Treasury and the Bank of England. Influenced by the ideological principles outlined in the post-Washington consensus, these state agencies have essentially restructured themselves to become increasingly internationalized institutions that act on behalf of transnationally mobile forms of capital rather than nationally based economic and social groups.⁶ Consider the case of the Bank of England, to which New Labour granted operational autonomy within a week of its 1997 election victory. This policy was not forced upon British officials by foreign interests but was a conscious decision taken by insiders. The primary architects were Gordon Brown and his personal economic adviser, Ed Balls, who stressed that in tune with the post-Washington consensus and in order to gain macro-economic credibility in a world of global capital markets, monetary and fiscal policy should be separated and the Bank be given practical independence. Responsibility for making Britain's international economic policy was thus deliberately handed to central bankers and technocrats whose primary concerns lay in pleasing the City and appeasing internationally mobile forms of capital by building 'investor confidence'.

Alongside the technocrats, private firms are also playing significant roles in New Labour's foreign policy process. Since the 1960s, UK diplomats have been required to devote a greater proportion of their time to trade promotion activities.⁷ As a consequence, private commercial actors have assumed more prominent positions within the policy-making process. At a strategic level, representatives of medium-sized private firms make up a majority on the board of UK Trade and Investment, the joint Foreign Office-Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) institution designed to coordinate Britain's commercial activities and increase inward investment and exports.⁸ At a more tactical level, the government's brand of neo-liberal internationalism accords private firms two key roles: not only do they contribute to the health of the national economy, they are also agents of constructive engagement that can help inculcate liberal values into illiberal states and societies. This is currently the case in Britain's relations with Libya and China, to give just two examples. According to the government, private actors within the China-Britain Business Council, for

⁵ Colin Hay, *The political economy of New Labour* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); John Gray, 'Blair's project in retrospect', *International Affairs* 80: 1, 2004, pp. 39-48.

⁶ Andrew Baker, 'Nébulouse and the "internationalization of the state" in the UK? The case of HM Treasury and the Bank of England', *Review of International Political Economy* 6: 1, 1999, pp. 79-100.

⁷ William Wallace, *The foreign policy process in Britain* (London: RIIA, 1975), p. 36.

⁸ See Donna Lee, 'The growing influence of business in UK diplomacy', *International Studies Perspectives* 5: 1, 2004, pp. 50-54.

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instance, have become (either consciously or inadvertently) agents of political change in China. The British government helps firms obtain contracts within the Chinese market, while the firms themselves become crucial actors in the government's policy of constructive engagement.⁹ Of course, most private actors are (sometimes inadvertently) implementing policies designed elsewhere. But others are becoming an increasingly significant part of the policy-making process, presumably influencing decisions on which states to engage constructively and which to approach in other ways. Nevertheless, there are real limits to the ability of private firms to shape state policy. For example, at least in the short term, concerns about trade promotion generally lose out to strategic priorities when they are in direct competition. Recall how Britain's two largest oil companies, Shell and BP, repeatedly warned the government that a war with Iraq would have a negative impact on their business but they had no visible impact on government policy.¹⁰

The geographical dimension

For all the talk of globalization and interdependence, political geography still matters. Certain parts of the world are accorded far greater priority than others and the policy-making process is affected accordingly, especially in terms of resource allocation (both human and financial). The Foreign Office (FCO) has suggested that, excluding EU members, in the forthcoming decade the UK's most important bilateral relationships will be with the US, Russia, China, Japan and India.¹¹ Issues involving these states are thus likely to gain attention higher up the Whitehall hierarchy than others. Different policy processes are also evident in the UK's relations with the world's different regions. Consider the cases of the UK's relations with other EU members and its policy towards sub-Saharan Africa.

The EU provides a unique context within which to talk about the foreign policy process, given the way in which international relations between its member states have become increasingly domesticated. This has generated a large literature exploring the extent to which the foreign policies of the EU member states have become Europeanized.¹² Within the EU, New Labour's 'foreign' policy has been made through the Prime Minister's Office, the FCO and its relevant ministers, the UK Permanent Representation (UKREP) in Brussels, the European Secretariat within the Cabinet Office, and two Cabinet committees—Defence and Overseas Policy (DOP) and the Sub-Committee on European Issues—which are officially 'shadowed' by the European Questions system of committees.¹³

⁹ Shaun Breslin, 'Beyond diplomacy? UK relations with China since 1997', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6: 3, 2004, pp. 409–25.

¹⁰ Anthony Sampson, *Who runs this place? The anatomy of Britain in the 21st century* (London: John Murray, 2004), p. 301.

¹¹ FCO, *UK international priorities: a strategy for the FCO*, Cm 6052, Dec. 2003.

¹² For example, Brian White, 'The European challenge to foreign policy analysis', *European Journal of International Relations* 5: 1, 1999, pp. 37–66.

¹³ See Brian White, *Understanding European foreign policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), ch. 6.

Outside the EU, the FCO has traditionally played the lead role both in multilateral fora such as the UN and Commonwealth and (in the absence of a prime minister's special representative) in the UK's bilateral relations. However, under Clare Short's supervision, the Department for International Development (DfID) began to play a leading role in several aspects of foreign policy, especially in relation to UK policies towards sub-Saharan Africa. Short interpreted her department's remit broadly and as a consequence became embroiled in a variety of departmental turf wars: notably with the Ministry of Defence (over who should lead security sector reform initiatives), the DTI (over the extent to which trade should be defined as a development issue), the FCO (over where to focus the pooled DfID-FCO-MoD funds for conflict prevention) and No. 10 (over the BAE-built military air-traffic control system sold to Tanzania). The UK's Africa policies have also frequently been multi-lateralized, primarily to generate the capabilities and international leverage necessary to deliver outcomes rather than just declarations of intent. For example, from the late 1990s the UK government, working with NGOs such as Global Witness, was instrumental in building the UN's case for sanctions against Charles Taylor's regime in Liberia; the EU and the Commonwealth were both persuaded to impose sanctions on Robert Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe following the 2002 elections; and that same year the UK played a leading role in persuading the G8 states to produce an Africa Action Plan in response to the New Partnership for Africa's Development. In addition, the UK has played significant roles in a variety of contact groups such as that formed in 1998 to respond to Sierra Leone's civil war and the Troika (with the US and Norway) helping to negotiate an end to the Sudan's long-running civil war.

The strategic dimension

While political geography continues to shape certain aspects of the foreign policy process, at present it does not directly impinge on how decisions are made regarding the deployment of Britain's armed forces.¹⁴ Sending British troops into combat still requires the Prime Minister's personal seal of approval, including when the operations are covert, such as Operation Barras in Sierra Leone in September 2000. When formulating decisions on issues of military intervention, Blair, like his predecessors, has preferred to work in small ad hoc committees composed of his most trusted civil servants, ministers and advisers rather than with the cabinet as a whole. Anthony Seldon dubbed these groups the 'denocracy' because they tended to conduct their meetings in Blair's office, 'the den'.¹⁵ New Labour's first military intervention, Operation Desert Fox in Iraq, was agreed through a meeting of the DOP committee. While this may have appeared presidential to some outsiders, it was not out of step with Britain's unwritten constitution and it also ingratiated Blair with the Chief of the

¹⁴ Of course, much could hinge on how the EU's common security and defence policy develops.

¹⁵ Anthony Seldon, *Blair* (London: Free Press, 2004), p. 692.

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Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie.¹⁶ Blair's experiences during the Kosovo campaign reinforced this style, as he grew increasingly suspicious of what he saw as the doubters within the Whitehall establishment.¹⁷ Similarly, in the aftermath of September 11, Blair's strategic decision-making circle was widely reported to comprise his relevant special advisers (David Manning, Jonathan Powell and Alastair Campbell); the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw; the Cabinet Secretary, Richard Wilson; the head of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), John Scarlett; the head of MI6, Richard Dearlove; and the head of MI5, Stephen Lander. However, perhaps to appease concerns about presidentialism within the media and his own party, Blair subsequently convened a War Cabinet comprising seven ministers to coordinate the running of operations in Afghanistan (as had happened for Desert Fox and Kosovo).¹⁸ By the time of the Iraq war, Blair is reported to have found even the DOP committee too unwieldy, preferring to make decisions within a select group of confidants comprising Manning, Powell, Campbell, Scarlett, Dearlove, Sally Morgan, Blair's special assistant, and Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, Chief of the Defence Staff.¹⁹

This dimension of foreign policy has generated particularly stringent criticism that Blair's so-called presidential style of policy-making is overly secretive, ad hoc, informal and susceptible to groupthink.²⁰ The democracy's most controversial relationships have been with the cabinet, the intelligence services and the JIC.

Britain's cabinet system and its plethora of subcommittees has traditionally been cloaked in secrecy and based on conventions rather than strict rules. As a consequence, cabinet behaves differently under different prime ministers and it is difficult for outsiders to gain reliable information about how and where specific decisions are taken. On the other hand, regardless of whose cabinet we are analysing, its members are expected to display collective responsibility and present a united front to the outside world. This can fuel impressions that a prime minister's relationship with his or her cabinet colleagues is akin to that between shepherd and flock. But collective responsibility also means that public dissent and resignation threats can be extremely damaging. This accounts for the fact that historically cabinets have usually attempted to reconcile internal divisions through their own forms of preventative diplomacy before embarking upon a particular course of action.²¹ This appears to have been the case after Clare Short threatened to resign in the build-up to the Iraq war.

¹⁶ Guthrie had been anxious enough about New Labour's defence credentials to seek a meeting with Blair before he became Prime Minister. In turn, Blair's high regard for Guthrie provides part of the explanation for the rise in the MoD's budget in the 2000 spending review. See Seldon, *Blair*, pp. 386, 392, 406.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 580.

²⁰ The debate about whether the Prime Minister's Office has become presidential or even dictatorial dates back at least as far as Gladstone. Unfortunately, it has produced a literature that 'is both vast and inconclusive' since all prime ministers have tried 'to promote co-ordination to curb the centrifugal effects of departmentalism'. Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon, *The powers behind the prime minister* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 1 and 305.

²¹ See Christopher Hill, *Cabinet decisions on foreign policy: the British experience October 1938–June 1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 238.

In relation to the foreign policy process, several features of Blair's cabinet are noteworthy. First, it has lacked powerful spokespersons for the interests of workers or trade unions, which has strengthened the position of advocates of neo-liberalism. Second, the cabinet's foreign policy agenda tends to be composed of issues that are of major importance, controversial or urgent. As such, cabinet's foreign policy business can often have dramatic consequences and necessarily involves difficult issues which, when viewed in isolation, can magnify the divisions within a government. Third, as Jack Straw suggested in 1998, Blair's cabinet resembles a corporate board where ministers are called in to account for their actions.²²

Straw's remark was an early indication of the centralizing tendencies that are now more clearly evident within Blair's cabinet and exemplified by the build-up to the Iraq war. The Iraq case highlights both the positive and negative aspects of increased centralization within the cabinet system. In times of uncertainty and crisis, a degree of central direction and leadership is required if the system is to function effectively.²³ As Kavanagh and Seldon have pointed out, 'The idea of the modern Cabinet as a seminar of dispassionate and well-informed decision-makers is a nonsense, as a reading of the published diaries of many former ministers shows. Most Cabinet ministers are overburdened and barely have time to read their papers. A sense of overall direction has to come from the Prime Minister and their most senior colleagues.'²⁴

Put another way, the cabinet has long since become a body that registered decisions taken elsewhere, most often in No. 10 or in one of its subordinate committees. This is reflected by the fact that although Iraq was discussed at all 28 cabinet meetings in the eight months up to 22 May 2003, challenges to the core executive's position were either absent or ineffective.²⁵ The scepticism publicly expressed by Clare Short and Robin Cook, among others, suggests it was the latter. In this sense, the fact that the democracy exercised a high degree of control over cabinet meetings was neither novel nor *necessarily* unhealthy. However, the way it exercised that control in practice has come under considerable criticism. The Butler Report, for instance, criticized the 'informality and circumscribed character of the Government's procedures', which in the case of Iraq reduced 'the scope for informed collective political judgement'. The report also chastised the core executive for convening ad hoc meetings of

²² Cited in Sampson, *Who runs this place?*, p. 99.

²³ According to Christopher Hill, executive predominance of the cabinet system is most likely when circumstances require policies that do not sit comfortably with the existing cognitive maps held by cabinet members. See Hill, *Cabinet decisions*, pp. 234–7. The period after September 11 was arguably one such period, as Blair's government needed to develop creative and original policies to adapt to the changed strategic context that had developed primarily as a result of the changes in the George W. Bush administration's foreign policy and the greater emphasis it placed upon notions of prevention in comparison to deterrence.

²⁴ Kavanagh and Seldon, *The powers*, p. 202. The view that cabinet is rarely involved in foreign policy-making is echoed by John Coles, former permanent under-secretary at the FCO, in his *Making foreign policy* (London: John Murray, 2000), p. 92.

²⁵ Sampson, *Who runs this place?*, p. 103. See also the comments by the Cabinet Secretary Andrew Turnbull, in Seldon, *Blair*, pp. 599–600.

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the denocracy rather than the full cabinet or even its formal subcommittees; limiting 'wider collective discussion and consideration by the Cabinet' to oral briefings by Blair, Straw and Hoon; failing to provide cabinet members with the 'excellent quality' briefing papers that had been produced, which reduced the likelihood of informed collective discussion; and altering the relevant structures of the cabinet secretariat, which 'lessened the support of the machinery of government for the collective responsibility of the Cabinet in the vital matter of war and peace'.²⁶ Blair accepted these criticisms and subsequently announced that in future the denocracy would 'operate formally as an ad-hoc Cabinet Committee'.²⁷

The other main source of contention has been the denocracy's publication—and alleged manipulation—of intelligence information. After September 11 and the heated debates over the Iraq war, controversy has drawn the intelligence services and the JIC out of the shadows towards the centre of public debate. The intelligence services have always occupied an important position in the UK foreign policy process, reflected in the degree of secrecy within which they are permitted to operate and the amount of public funding they receive (much more than the FCO, for instance). The perception prevalent in Whitehall (and to an even greater degree in Washington) that the strategic context altered irrevocably after September 11 has given the intelligence services an even greater role, and resulted in new institutions such as the Cabinet Committee on International Terrorism and Sir David Omand's position of security and intelligence coordinator within the Cabinet Office.²⁸ It has also increased interest in the work undertaken by the JIC within a variety of government departments, which have expressed a desire to become formally involved in its operation.

Analytically, four issues are particularly relevant: the quality of intelligence; its ability to reach political leaders; leaders' judgements; and the independent actions of the intelligence services.²⁹ In the months preceding the invasion of Iraq these issues came to the fore of British public debate to an unprecedented degree. This was primarily because Iraq was sold as a 'preventive' war, with the intelligence services in general and MI6 and the JIC in particular taking a crucial role in the decision-making process.³⁰ However, it remains highly doubtful that intelligence—with all its limitations and weaknesses—can support the weight of a doctrine of prevention. It is clear that No. 10 actively focused

²⁶ *Review of intelligence on weapons of mass destruction*, HC 898 (London: The Stationery Office, 2004), paras 609–11.

²⁷ *Hansard* (Commons), 20 July 2004, col. 195.

²⁸ This new post has been criticized on the grounds that while it provides a fast track to the prime minister on security and intelligence matters it simultaneously encourages the bypassing of cabinet on these important issues: *Review of intelligence*, para. 607.

²⁹ Christopher Hill, *The changing politics of foreign policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 66–8.

³⁰ Although the Bush administration has talked of a doctrine of pre-emption and of Iraq as a pre-emptive war, this represents either a basic misunderstanding of terminology or a deliberate attempt to mislead. A pre-emptive war implies a last-minute self-defence reaction to a process already in motion. A preventive war, in contrast, is an option taken to prevent a hypothetical future scenario from occurring. In reality, the Bush doctrine and the Iraq war have been about prevention, not pre-emption.

on intelligence about Iraq from among a very full JIC agenda, which included important developments in Pakistan, Iran, North Korea and Libya as well as Iraq. As to the quality of the intelligence on Iraq, the Butler Report has indicated that it was mixed (broadly accurate on the intentions of Hussein's regime but badly off the mark as to its current capabilities). The political judgements made by the government rightly remain the source of contention. As to the actions of the intelligence services themselves, given the current trend towards publicizing greater amounts of intelligence information, and given the necessary links between intelligence agencies and their political masters (the former need to know what the latter think are important issues), they need to find their own voice and ensure their assessments are presented in the way they intended.³¹ As the Hutton Inquiry and the Butler Report have made clear, this has not yet happened. Over Iraq, No. 10 wielded enough structural power to push the intelligence services into some very uncomfortable positions and appears to have ignored information that contrasted with what now appear to have been settled policy positions.³²

Too much emphasis can be placed on the role of intelligence in foreign policy-making. Even in the apparently exemplary case of Iraq, intelligence analysis does not appear to have been the major factor driving the UK government's decision to participate in the US-led invasion. As the Butler Report concluded, 'there was no recent intelligence that would itself have given rise to a conclusion that Iraq was of more immediate concern than the activities of some other countries'.³³ This suggests that the shift in government policy from containment to enforcement was formulated on the basis of changing threat perceptions in the wake of September 11 and the perceived need to remain 'shoulder to shoulder' with the George W. Bush administration as it embarked upon its new doctrine of prevention. For its part, the JIC allowed itself to step outside its traditional analytical role and produce 'somewhat stronger' than normal assessments that amounted to telling Blair's office what it wanted to hear rather than what it needed to know.³⁴ In doing so, the JIC compromised its 'normal standards of neutral and objective assessment'.³⁵

The discussion so far has highlighted the fact that the UK government simultaneously conducts many different foreign policies and that the process of making them differs according to the issue in question. The large number of actors and institutions involved in policy-making at any given time also makes

³¹ See Lawrence Freedman, 'We must guard intelligence from corruption', *Financial Times*, 15 July 2004.

³² For instance, a JIC assessment prepared in February 2003 stated there was no intelligence that Iraq had provided Al-Qaeda with biological or chemical weapons. In addition, it warned that military action against Iraq leading to the collapse of Hussein's regime would heighten the threat posed by Al-Qaeda to western interests since it 'would increase the risk of chemical and biological warfare technology or agents finding their way into the hands of terrorists, including al-Qaida'. Cited in Sampson, *Who runs this place?*, p. 154.

³³ *Review of intelligence*, para. 427.

³⁴ Lord Hutton, *Report of the inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr David Kelly CMG* (London: The Stationery Office, 28 Jan. 2004), para. 228. See also Seldon, *Blair*, p. 600.

³⁵ *Review of intelligence*, para. 463.

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it extremely difficult to coordinate foreign policy. New Labour's solution has been to try to create a 'joined-up' foreign policy by giving a strong central lead. In short, it has tried to develop some big ideas about the purpose of its foreign policy.

New Labour's big ideas

Before New Labour's arrival in government, the party's relevant documents suggested some new directions in foreign policy were likely to follow an election victory.³⁶ After nearly two decades in opposition, the party caucus was weary of Britain's traditional mantra of pragmatism in foreign policy, seeing the development of a more principled approach to foreign policy as one area where it could clearly differentiate itself from the Conservatives and gain an electoral advantage into the bargain. On taking office, the new Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, also seemed keen to enhance his own radical credentials within the party and reform what he saw as the rather conservative, 'stuffy' and opaque culture within the FCO.³⁷ As it turned out, New Labour has created more foreign policy slogans than even its most clairvoyant spin doctors could have envisaged during its 1997 election campaign. Under New Labour we have been told, the UK government would be a force for good; a friend of democracy; and at the heart of Europe. We have heard how its ethical dimension would go beyond narrow *realpolitik*; how it would put the promotion of human rights at the heart of its diplomacy; how it would find a third way between capitalism and socialism. It would eliminate world poverty (or, rather, halve the number in absolute poverty by 2015); it would make globalization work for the poor; it would be a pivotal power and a bridge-builder between the US and Europe; it would champion a new doctrine of international community; it would fight wars for values, not territory; it would cancel the debts owed to it by poor countries; it would be strong in the world; it would actively engage with and reorder the world around it as a way of winning the 'war on terrorism'; it would take steps to improve Africa's shameful predicament; and, most recently, it would fight the forces of evil and barbarism and prevent hypothetical problems becoming serious and current threats. On closer inspection, this reads like a list of aspirations rather than policy. Moreover, most of these aspirations were neither as radical nor as novel as New Labour portrayed them; and most enjoyed only a short spell of 'most favoured soundbite status' in the party's foreign policy discourse.³⁸

³⁶ For example, Labour Party, *A fresh start for Britain: Labour's strategy for Britain in the modern world* (London: Labour Party, 1996); also New Labour's 1997 election manifesto, *Because Britain deserves better*.

³⁷ See Mark Wickham-Jones, 'Labour party politics and foreign policy', in Richard Little and Mark Wickham-Jones, eds, *New Labour's foreign policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 107; John Kampfner, *Robin Cook* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 129.

³⁸ One potential conceptual rationale for New Labour's foreign policy proposed in this journal does not appear to have made much practical headway. See Nicholas J. Wheeler and Tim Dunne, 'Good international citizenship: a third way for British foreign policy', *International Affairs* 74: 4, 1998, pp. 847–70.

While New Labour's spin doctors have worked overtime to emphasize the party's radicalism and its novelty, in practice the three main principles underlying the party's foreign policy have been rather traditional. They have also, at times, been contradictory. The first is a commitment to multilateralism. The second is the desire to be America's closest ally (what I refer to as Atlanticism). The third is support for neo-liberal principles of political economy. All three have influenced both the content of UK foreign policy since 1997 and the process of making it.

A central theme of ministers' statements throughout New Labour's period in office has been that political interdependence and globalization (understood in liberal terms) have placed many issues beyond the control of national governments acting alone.³⁹ In this sense, New Labour has echoed Keohane and Nye's description of complex interdependence as involving mutual sensitivity and vulnerability to events generated elsewhere in the international system.⁴⁰ As a result, New Labour has understood multilateralism, pursued in a wide variety of institutions, as necessary for achieving the UK's foreign policy objectives. As disagreements have emerged within several multilateral institutions, notably the UN over Kosovo and the UN, NATO and the EU over Iraq, Blair in particular increasingly referred to the need for *effective* multilateralism and the looser, less institutionalized notion of partnerships in foreign policy, such as those between business and government, between the G8 and certain African leaders, among the 'coalition of the willing' in Afghanistan, or between the West and reform-minded governments in the Middle East.⁴¹

New Labour's second big idea, Atlanticism, also emerged from the current structure of world politics and the question of how the UK should relate to the world's one remaining superpower. Like many of its predecessors, Blair's government decided that UK interests were best served by remaining America's closest ally and encouraging 'effective US leadership' to strengthen international institutions.⁴² It sought to do this by becoming a trusted voice within Washington politics, primarily through Blair's close relationship with first Bill Clinton and then George W. Bush and Colin Powell, and by exploiting the British embassy's renowned ability to lobby the US government effectively (at least relative to the embassies of other states). Even before September 11, the underlying rationale was clear. As Blair put it, the UK would have more influence on the US if it was at the heart of European decision-making, and it would be stronger in Europe because of the special relationship with the US.⁴³ This

³⁹ See esp. Tony Blair, 'Doctrine of the international community', speech to the Economic Club of Chicago, 22 April 1999.

⁴⁰ See Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and interdependence* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), pp. 11–19.

⁴¹ See e.g. George W. Bush and Tony Blair, 'Effective multilateralism to build a better world', joint statement, 20 Nov. 2003. See also Jack Straw, 'Foreword', in FCO, *Departmental report 2004*, Cm 6213, April 2004, p. 5. Elsewhere, New Labour's multilateralism has been referred to as 'offensive' rather than 'effective'. See David Coates and Joel Krieger, *Blair's war* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), pp. 105–10.

⁴² FCO, *UK international priorities*, p. 26.

⁴³ Tony Blair, speech to the Associated Press Luncheon, London, 15 Dec. 1998.

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strategic alignment culminated in Blair's announcement in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks that the UK would stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with the US administration.

The problem has been that this strategic orientation has often sat uncomfortably with the idea that political interdependence requires multilateral solutions to the UK's major foreign policy challenges. Indeed, for all the talk of a 'special relationship' on the eastern side of the Atlantic, the recent evidence from Iraq suggests that Blair's government is simply clinging to the *illusion* of such a relationship.⁴⁴ Admittedly, the UK appears to have a louder voice in Washington than any other European state; but it remains hard to detect where Blair's government has reaped tangible concessions from either the Clinton or the Bush administration. Arguably, two of the most significant concessions were getting the US to stop vetoing the renewal of UN peace operations because of the absence of a clause granting US personnel serving under UN auspices immunity from prosecution at the International Criminal Court, and the passing of Security Council Resolution 1441, which by all accounts would have been highly unlikely without repeated UK requests to the Bush administration.⁴⁵ On the other hand, pressure from the UK government was unable to engineer significant changes in US foreign policy on a variety of issues such as the Kyoto Protocol, anti-personnel landmines, the UK citizens detained at Guantanamo Bay, the timing of the invasion of Iraq, or the need for the Bush administration to take the 'road map' to Middle East peace seriously.⁴⁶ Moreover, there is a broad stream of opinion within the UK and the Labour Party that considers Blair's government has been too supportive of the Bush administration on several key foreign policy issues, including unconditional acceptance of the label 'war on terrorism'; shifting the international focus away from Afghanistan towards Iraq, leaving most of the former country in a state of shameful neglect; the idea of preventive war; and ignoring the growth of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and its subsequent export—with Saudi backing—throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe and Africa.⁴⁷ In sum, while New Labour's second big idea may be founded upon an illusion, the Iraq war has inflicted some very real damage upon the three key multilateral institutions of UK foreign policy, namely the UN, the EU and NATO.

As noted above, New Labour's third big idea in foreign policy has been to promote the brand of neo-liberalism associated with the post-Washington consensus. This has had several effects. First, it has defined the acceptable limits

⁴⁴ Jane M. O. Sharp, 'Tony Blair, Iraq and the special relationship', *International Journal* 59: 1, 2003–2004, p. 86.

⁴⁵ See Bob Woodward, *Plan of attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), pp. 177–9 and 183; and Seldon, *Blair*, pp. 575–7.

⁴⁶ Concern about the Bush administration's lack of interest in the Middle East peace process was reportedly evident in a recent joint DfID–FCO assessment of the 'Palestinian crisis'. See Patrick Wintour, 'Alarm at US drift over Middle East', *Guardian*, 21 July 2004.

⁴⁷ On Saudia Arabia see William Dalrymple, 'The terror the West cannot face', *The Tablet* (online), 3 July 2004.

of 'credible' policy on a range of issues both at home and abroad, including, for example, the government's approach to the issue of Third World debt relief.⁴⁸ Second, it has provided the conceptual impetus for New Labour's ideas about the appropriate relationship between business and government, including a justification for the roles private firms can (and should) play in UK foreign policy. In conjunction with wider demands for government to be transparent and accountable to the public, it has also placed greater emphasis on management, decentralization and operational efficiency. In response to these pressures, New Labour and the civil service have borrowed heavily from new public management theories which also emphasize decentralization and the need to 'managerialize' decisions.⁴⁹ A more pronounced management mentality, complete with a proliferation of glossy mission statements setting out targets and evaluation mechanisms, has also become the norm, not just within HM Treasury and the Bank of England but also in other departments, including the FCO and MoD.⁵⁰ In short, neo-liberal principles have encouraged a search for operational efficiency that is producing a policy-making process increasingly concerned with managing UK Inc. There are, however, at least three problems with this. First, it remains unclear what exactly the UK brand stands for. Second, the priority accorded to issues of management and administration detracts from the time ministers and civil servants have to engage in strategic reflection about policy.⁵¹ Third, while New Labour's strategic choice has been to side with the US, in economic terms the UK's future is firmly tied to Europe.⁵² In line with Blair's argument that any choice of one orientation over the other would be 'false', UK foreign policy has avoided choosing between the two.⁵³ Whether economic logic will eventually make this position untenable remains to be seen.

Interpreting and implementing foreign policies

Conducting foreign policies within an interdependent and globalizing world, where the achievement of concrete results is the exception rather than the rule, is surely a source of almost constant frustration for a second-term government concerned with 'delivery'. Delivering results is further complicated by the existence of different interpretations of what policy actually entails and the best way to implement it.

⁴⁸ See Colin Hay and David Coates, 'The internal and external face of New Labour's political economy', *Government and Opposition* 36: 4, 2001, pp. 447–71; Rob Dixon and Paul Williams, 'Tough on debt, tough on the causes of debt? New Labour's third way foreign policy', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 3: 2, 2001, pp. 150–72.

⁴⁹ See Neil Williams, 'Modernising government: policy-making within Whitehall', *Political Quarterly* 70: 4, 1999, pp. 452–9.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Coles, *Making foreign policy*; William Hopkinson, *The making of British defence policy* (London: The Stationery Office, 2000).

⁵¹ See Coles, *Making foreign policy*.

⁵² See the figures presented in FCO, *UK international priorities*, pp. 37–8.

⁵³ See e.g. Tony Blair, speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet, London, 10 Nov. 1997.

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Arguably the most controversial example of the potential problems involved in interpreting the specifics of the government's foreign policy was the so-called 'arms-to-Africa' episode (1997–8). Here, FCO officials and the British High Commissioner in Sierra Leone were charged with colluding with a private military company (PMC), Sandline International, to deliver 30 tonnes of arms and ammunition into Sierra Leone in contravention of a UN arms embargo, the terms of which had been drafted by the UK. Several issues proved contentious, most notably whether the UN arms embargo on Sierra Leone applied to the government in exile; whether the interpretation of this embargo conveyed to parliament by UK ministers and officials was misleading; what the nature of the relationship between the UK government and a PMC was; and whether officials had briefed ministers appropriately. The Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FAC) concluded that although the high commissioner acted in good faith, his actions went beyond the confines of policy set by ministers and that several FCO officials, including the permanent under-secretary, failed to brief ministers adequately about the relevant issues.⁵⁴ Annoyed at the Foreign Secretary's inability to limit the subsequent negative publicity, Blair eventually defused the issue by giving deposed Sierra Leonean President Kabbah his unequivocal support and suggesting that the ends (returning an elected president to power) justified the means (turning a blind eye to private efforts to supply Kabbah's forces with the arms necessary to defeat the murderous rebels). Nevertheless, the 'arms-to-Africa' affair stands as a salutary example of the potential difficulties of interpreting policy.

Implementation of policy in an interdependent world is no simpler. As Christopher Hill has observed, the implementation phase of policy-making has two distinct aspects: slippage between political decision and administrative execution (as in the 'arms-to-Africa' affair); and having the capacity to do what is intended.⁵⁵ Whether or not the UK has the capacity to achieve its objectives depends on how well it can deploy its available resources, capabilities and instruments. Resources represent the basic forces of foreign policy, derived primarily from history and geography and including such factors as territory, minerals, population and industrialization. Capabilities are operational resources such as armed forces, GNP, technology, a diplomatic service and communications media. The instruments of UK foreign policy derive from its resources and capabilities and can be used for a variety of purposes ranging from physical coercion to cultural influence. They include diplomacy, military force, economic statecraft and culture (not least the English language and the BBC's World Service), and are normally deployed 'either in combination or with some potential held in reserve'.⁵⁶

One of the main reasons why implementation is so difficult is the fact of political interdependence. Interdependence offers some novel opportunities for

⁵⁴ FAC, *Second report: Sierra Leone, Session 1998–99*, HC-116-I (London: TSO, 1999).

⁵⁵ The following paragraph draws from Hill, *The changing politics of foreign policy*, pp. 127–38.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

issue linkage but is more often depicted by politicians as a source of political constraint. At the global level, five main sources of such constraint can be identified: the institutional web of international organizations, international law, informal norms, other states' foreign policies (especially of those states that derive substantial benefits from the existing order of things), and the actions of international NGOs and other transnational pressures within what English School theorists refer to as world (as opposed to international) society.⁵⁷

As Blair's government has repeatedly acknowledged, interdependence means there are few areas of foreign policy where bilateralism is enough. Indeed, in most cases, implementation requires multilateralism, either of a formal kind through established international organizations or through informal coalitions of the willing.⁵⁸ In practice, New Labour has used a combination of both formal and informal multilateralism. In the economic sphere it has been an important player within the major formal fora of the global political economy such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. However, on issues of international peace and security there has been a marked increase in informal multilateralism under New Labour, including through the use of contact groups (as in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, the Sudan and the Middle East peace process) and coalitions of the willing (based on either an international organization, as in Kosovo, or on more ad hoc coalitions of the willing, as in Afghanistan and Iraq). This informality has been facilitated by two developments: first, the government's stance that UN Security Council authorization, while desirable, is not necessary for the collective use of force for so-called 'humanitarian intervention';⁵⁹ second, the acquisition in recent years by the UK government of a greater range of instruments through which it can (theoretically) conduct military intervention, most notably ad hoc coalitions, NATO's Reaction Force, the EU's Rapid Reaction Force and the European battle-group concept.

Selling foreign policies

New Labour's period in office has witnessed an intensification of demands for more open and accountable government. Taken alongside the greater transparency that has been evident under New Labour, not least in terms of regular publications about arms exports and human rights policies, this has meant that the presentational phase of the foreign policy process has become more important. In turn, this has increased the importance of the news media as the battlefield on which the struggle for hearts and minds is taking place. This does not mean that New Labour has voluntarily removed all elements of secrecy

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 174–83.

⁵⁸ Although the UK government intervened unilaterally in Sierra Leone's civil war in May 2000, it would not have been able to achieve its objectives without the support of the UN forces already present within the country. In this sense, this episode represents an example of informal multilateralism.

⁵⁹ See e.g. Robin Cook, 'Guiding humanitarian intervention', speech to the American Bar Association, London, 19 July 2000.

from the foreign policy process; far from it. But it has engaged to an unparalleled degree in publicly presenting the results of that process and the rationale behind certain policies.

New Labour has tried to sell its foreign policies to several audiences. At home, the main target audiences have been the voting public in general and the Labour Party caucus in particular. Abroad, it has tried to influence a variety of different audiences depending on the topic in question. The major difficulty with trying to send different messages to different audiences is that this has been rendered virtually impossible by the existence of a 24-hour, global media environment. This, in turn, has heightened the need for central coordination of the government's media management. New Labour's system of media management was personified in the figure of Alastair Campbell, Blair's Director of Communications and Strategy, until his resignation in September 2003.⁶⁰ Shortly after Labour's 1997 election victory, the Privy Council approved a special Order in Council granting Campbell, among others, the authority to instruct civil servants. Campbell's remit was to deal primarily with matters of presentation and image, seeing his role as helping 'to make his boss's case stand up'.⁶¹

Nevertheless, Campbell was too shrewd an operator not to appreciate the inextricable relationship between policy, process and presentation. Arguably, his direct input into the implementation of foreign policy reached its zenith when he began advising NATO on how to make its case more effectively during the Kosovo campaign.⁶² Blair's Kosovo campaign was fought with one eye constantly on public opinion polls back home—and by late April 1999, on opinion within the US and NATO states more broadly.⁶³ The war saw ministers engaging in a flurry of press conferences and doorstep and television interviews, writing numerous newspaper articles and making an unusual number of statements in parliament. However, NATO's media machine was not as well oiled as New Labour's, and on 16 April Campbell was dispatched to NATO with a team from the Downing Street press office to smarten up the public presentation of the war. Campbell called on his counterparts in Bonn, Paris and Washington to do likewise. The result was the setting up of NATO's Media Operations Centre and a new regime of twice-daily conference calls for NATO leaders and press spokespersons to coordinate their public messages. This was all done on the assumption that the way the war was presented mattered almost as much as the way it was actually being conducted. As it turned out, this change in process had the desired effect, and support for Blair's position rose in the domestic opinion polls.

⁶⁰ Since Campbell's resignation, Downing Street's media operations have been coordinated at the strategic level by a senior civil servant while responsibility for day-to-day operations has been split between a political appointee (David Hill) and a civil servant. Hill has not retained Campbell's powers over civil servants.

⁶¹ Seldon, *Blair*, p. 311.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 406.

⁶³ The following draws on Rhiannon Vickers, 'Blair's Kosovo campaign', *Civil Wars* 3: 1, 2000, pp. 63–6.

But NATO's Kosovo campaign was not the only example of the importance New Labour has attached to presentation. From Cook's initial multimedia launch of the FCO's new mission statement in May 1997, New Labour has actively engaged in a variety of attempts to sell its foreign policies to the UK public and to audiences abroad on issues as diverse as Third World debt relief and the need to impose sanctions against Charles Taylor's regime in Liberia. Of course, such media management and presentation are hardly novel, as a brief survey of Bernard Ingham's role as Margaret Thatcher's press secretary would demonstrate. Where New Labour has been innovative is in the use of public dossiers to justify the adoption of a particular course of military action. It is noticeable that New Labour has not felt the need to justify non-military policies publicly in a similar manner. Dossiers were published in the lead-up to Operation Desert Fox; to declare Al-Qaeda's responsibility for September 11 (thereby paving the way for Operation Enduring Freedom); and, most controversially, to press the threat to western interests posed by Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq (discussed above).⁶⁴ A particular novelty lay in persuading the JIC to produce a public dossier as part of the policy process on Iraq.⁶⁵

New Labour's willingness to engage in selling its foreign policies is part symptom and part cause of the growth in the importance of the news media for the presentation phase of the foreign policy process. In addition, because politicians are increasingly concerned about the likely electoral impact of foreign policies, and because their perceptions of public opinion on these issues are largely shaped by the news media, journalists are also playing a greater, albeit indirect role in the formulation phase of the foreign policy process. This has raised at least two challenges for those making UK foreign policies. First, policy-makers must decide how best to get their desired message across to the intended audience within a ratings-driven news environment increasingly dominated by contradictory pressures for speed and accuracy.⁶⁶ Second, New Labour's willingness to make public more and more information about its policy process has subjected its foreign policies to unprecedented levels of public scrutiny. It remains to be seen whether, in the aftermath of the Hutton Inquiry and the Butler Report, the UK foreign policy process can bear such scrutiny without substantial reform.

Conclusions

Since the UK pursues multiple foreign policies simultaneously there is no single answer to the question of who is making them. Although an ideal vision

⁶⁴ For a critical discussion see Lawrence Freedman, 'War in Iraq: selling the threat', *Survival* 46: 2, 2004, pp. 7–50.

⁶⁵ The JIC dossier was unprecedented inasmuch as it was the JIC's first public document; it was the first time a British government had drawn explicitly upon a JIC document to make the case for military action; 'and the authority of the British intelligence community, and the JIC in particular, had never been used in such a public way'. *Review of intelligence*, para. 461.

⁶⁶ James Staney, 'Politics and the media: a crisis of trust?', *Parliamentary Affairs* 57: 2, 2004, p. 420.

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of the decision-making process can be detected, the institutions and actors involved in making UK foreign policy vary according to the issue in question. The potential proliferation of the actors and institutions involved makes it difficult to coordinate the joined-up foreign policy envisaged in many of New Labour's pronouncements. This helps explain New Labour's repeated attempts to move beyond the UK's traditionally pragmatic approach to foreign policy and devise a framework that would allow both a more principled and a more joined-up approach to be pursued. The party was also convinced that such an approach would prove popular with the electorate. Of the various slogans and initiatives that have appeared since 1997, some have proved more successful and durable than others. However, beneath the hype, New Labour has consistently operated according to three rather traditional foreign policy ideas: multilateralism, Atlanticism and neo-liberalism. Each has influenced the foreign policy process, although it is arguably New Labour's commitment to neo-liberalism, with its attendant emphasis on management, decentralization and operational efficiency, that has had the biggest impact on the institutions involved in making foreign policy. Although not necessarily contradictory, at times these three ideas have sat uncomfortably together, especially since George W. Bush's arrival in the White House. In particular, there has been a trend towards the UK pursuing informal types of multilateralism, and a tension remains between the Blair government's vision of a strategic future in close alignment with the US and the statistics indicating that the UK's economic future is tied increasingly tightly to Europe.

Coherent or otherwise, foreign policy visions do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they need to be interpreted by official agents and implemented by deploying the UK's foreign policy instruments. These phases of the foreign policy process have proved consistently difficult to manage within an interdependent world and have, at times, been controversial. Foreign policy is accordingly an area of government where 'delivery' is particularly difficult. During New Labour's period in office the presentation phase of the foreign policy process has been given greater prominence, especially in relation to strategic issues, where the government has pioneered a novel technique of using public dossiers to sell its foreign policies to the public. Ironically, it appears that this innovation has dramatically backfired over Iraq. For different reasons, the government's decision to invade Iraq precipitated the Hutton Inquiry and the Butler Report and allowed them to shine lights into the traditionally dark recesses of the strategic dimensions of the UK foreign policy process. Together, those documents confirm a familiar conclusion of foreign policy analysts: when the formal decision-making structures are bypassed, regrettable consequences usually follow.⁶⁷ This was the case in both the appeasement of Germany and the Suez invasion, generally considered among the biggest failures of UK foreign policy in the twentieth century. Whether the decision to invade Iraq will occupy a similar status in the twenty-first century remains to be seen.

⁶⁷ See e.g. Wallace, *The foreign policy process*, p. 21.