

Aid and Africa: what it means for politicians to “do good”

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Syerramia Willoughby, editor of the [Africa at LSE blog](#), reviews Julia Gallagher’s book on Tony Blair’s passion for Africa, touching also on David Cameron’s impressive financial commitment to aid despite Britain’s debt.

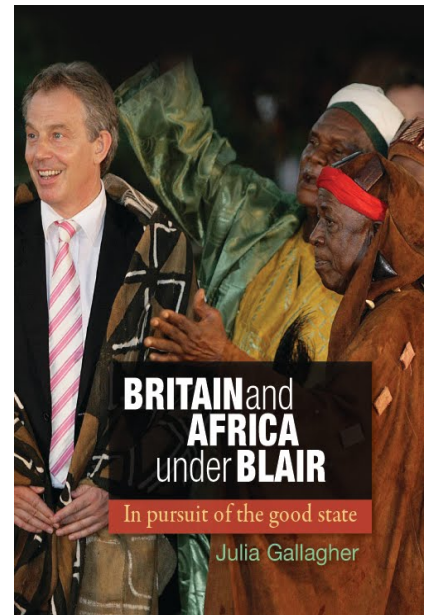
Britain and Africa under Blair: In Pursuit of the Good State. Julia Gallagher. Manchester University Press. April 2011.

Tony Blair’s passion for Africa led to military intervention in Sierra Leone’s civil war during his time as the British Prime Minister. He also sanctioned an immense amount of aid to get the country back on its feet. In Julia Gallagher’s first book, *Britain and Africa under Blair: In Pursuit of the Good State*, the [Royal Holloway lecturer](#) looks at the motivating force that led New Labour to eschew all self-interest in their foreign policy on Africa and instead seek simply to “do good”.

Gallagher is writing from a position of strength given that she witnessed first-hand New Labour in action while working for the Foreign Office in the early 2000s. We read first that shortly after being appointed Foreign Secretary in 1997, Robin Cook revealed his plan for an ethical foreign policy.

For this book, the author has chosen to concentrate on Britain’s relationships with Sierra Leone and Nigeria. In the case of the former, Britain’s ethical intervention between a “decently elected government and a criminally led rebel movement” as well as financial and technical support “was accepted at home as unambiguously clean and right”. On the other hand, Nigeria, which “was ruled by a particularly brutal dictator, typified Cook’s description of the democratic and human rights abuses he wished to overcome”.

Britain and Africa under Blair is ultimately a well-researched book which draws on International Relations theory of the political and the good, the history of Labour ideology concerning Africa as well as the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein as she explores what it means for politicians to “do good”.



Gallagher points out that back in the nineteenth century before minerals were discovered, West Africa was viewed as economically and strategically marginal. It became a focus for abolitionists to “do good” in Africa by resettling recaptured slaves in the new colony of Freetown. That desire was continued by the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain in 1895 who was insistent that the state develop the colonies and Governor Lugard in Nigeria about whom the author says “no colonial governor so well represented the idea of the noble state as Frederick Lugard”.

One of the strengths of the book is the interviews conducted with key British politicians of all parties. It is striking that Africa was one area where there was no difference of opinion between the three major parties. It is a matter of great interest whether the current Prime Minister, David Cameron will continue the commitment of Blair and his successor Gordon Brown in Africa. Gallagher points out in this book that there was no interest in Africa during Conservative governments from the sixties to the nineties, with development aid before 1997 at 0.26% of the country’s GNI.

The British Prime Minister recently made his first trip to the continent, although it was cut short due to the domestic [phone-hacking crisis](#). There are other clues that may give us an indication on where Cameron and his coalition government stand. Even though there are deep cuts across the board in an effort to tackle Britain’s vast debt, Cameron increased aid spending to 0.7 % of the country’s GDP. Recently, he pledged £1.5 billion to Bill Gates’ child vaccine programme – five times the contribution of USA.

In addition, Gallagher also presents the views and experiences of British officials working on the ground in Sierra Leone and Nigeria while New Labour was in power. I found the arguments linking the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein to the political less convincing.

In conclusion, this book would be of interest to anyone interested in British foreign policy in Africa as well as the ethics of international relations.

This review was originally published on the [British Politics and Policy at LSE Blog](#).

Syerramia Willoughby is editor of the [Africa at LSE blog](#), and was appointed in May 2011. Syerramia joined the School after over ten years in journalism, largely for the BBC. She grew up in Sierra Leone, West Africa and in recent years spent a five-month career break in Ghana. You can follow the Africa at LSE Blog on Twitter at [@africaatlse](#). [Read more reviews by Syerramia](#).

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