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Lifted Lines and Lacks Vision: Cameron's Guildhall Speech on Britain's Global Role

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By Inderjeet Parmar

It is said by many informed commentators that David Cameron's recent speech on Britain's global role was partly lifted from one delivered by former PM Gordon Brown and also lacked "vision". USBlog contends that is an impoverished and superficial conclusion from Cameron's speech.

"We have the resources – commercial, military and cultural – to remain a major player in the world. We have the relationships – with the most established powers and the fastest-growing nations – that will benefit our economy. And we have the values – national values that swept slavery from the seas, that stood up to both fascism and communism and that helped to spread democracy and human rights around the planet – that will drive us to do good around the world."

So spoke David Cameron at Guildhall last week. Britain is strong, capable, and a Force for Good in the World.

Those lines owe their origins not to Gordon Brown, or Tony Blair, or Margaret Thatcher – their provenance reaches back into British history – an imperial mentality forged over generations. Lord Palmerston said it in the 1860s; George Canning said it even earlier; Gladstone and Disraeli said it in their own ways in the 1870s and 1880s; the Foreign Office's Eyre Crowe sort of said it in 1907; Clement Attlee said it over and over after 1945, showing that 'de-colonisation' need not interfere with imperialism.

As Cameron acknowledged in his speech, Britain has "a glorious past" of "deep engagement around the world", an imperial "instinct to be self-confident and active well beyond our shores"; it's "in our DNA", no less.

No mention of "empire" of course when he talks about India, and China, and Korea, and Zambia, but "deep engagement" or "centuries-long engagement" which has "left a rich legacy". No mention of the rich legacy Britain left in Afghanistan in the imperial era, or the legacy it is organising there now in that tragic country, with hundreds of thousands dead in their wake.

Britain's national interests appear to focus on big business, as strong a military as Britain can afford (to assist its flexible approach to "threats" through "Brigade-diplomacy"), and the deployment of foreign aid more closely tied to building security and stability. Cameron does not aspire to a "perfect democracy" in Afghanistan, just a place from which "al Qaeda can never again pose a threat to us". The "us" means "US", I think, as 9-11 occurred on US soil.

And the United States remains not just "special" but "crucial" to Cameron's Britain – through G8, G20, NATO, intelligence cooperation, counter-terrorism, and the like. An attack on the US is an attack on "us" – a quiet assumption that has run through British foreign policy since the 1940s and shows no signs of abating.

Cameron's lines have been lifted from past prime ministers' Guildhall speeches; there is a Vision. It just isn't very inspiring for anyone with a sense of history, especially a sense of western interventions in the 'third world'. We have been here before. When will British elites learn that it is possible to be global in outlook, to see the interconnectedness of things, but realise that imperial interventions – for whatever purposes, usually prestige, power, or material gain – are totally counter-productive? Just look at Iraq and Afghanistan.

But what can you do about imperial DNA?

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