

TRANSCRIPT OF DEVELOPMENT DRUMS [EPISODE 27 – TONY BLAIR]

Host: Owen Barder. Guest: Tony Blair

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Owen Barder

Thanks for downloading Development Drums, a podcast about international development issues with me, Owen Barder. My guest today is former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. I met Mr. Blair in his office in London and we talked about his work supporting three African governments and his views about development, the importance of democracy, the role of the U.K.'s Department for International Development and the doctrine of liberal interventionism. You can subscribe to Development Drums free of charge on iTunes or you can listen to it on the Development Drums website. You can also join the Development Drums Facebook group where you can suggest guests for future episodes and where you can put your question which you would like me to ask.

Tony Blair, welcome to Development Drums.

Tony Blair

Thank you.

Owen Barder

I'm sure many of our listeners will know of your role as the representative of the Quartet in the Middle East. But they probably won't know all the range of other things you're doing, your work on governance in Africa, on sport, on faith. So, what is it about these different things that you do that – what made you choose them as opposed to any of the other things that you could be doing?

Tony Blair

I mean I chose these activities for two reasons. The first is they were all issues that I worked on in government, but where I came to a view that we had significantly to change global policy in respect of. So, for example climate change, I don't think you will succeed in this debate unless you mobilise business and industry to develop the science and technology of the future. In respect of Africa, my conclusion by the end of it, even though we were responsible for big uplifts in aid was that governance was as important as aid. In the Palestinian issue, my view was you have to build the Palestinian state from the bottom up, as well as negotiate from the top down and so that's what I – I work on these different range of issues. Then in respect of the Faith Foundation, that's very much about my view is the 21st century will not be a century of ideological, political struggle, but could be religious or cultural struggle and so the idea of bringing different cultures and faiths together is important and the second thing is it is all about making globalization work.

Owen Barder

So, is there an overarching Tony Blair view of how to make globalization work? Is there – because all these different things in some way relate to globalization and many of them relate to development. Is there some overarching set of principles that you're bringing to these different bits of work?

Tony Blair

Yeah, I basically believe the 21st century belongs to the open-minded. So, the reason why it's important to educate people, to give them opportunity, is so that their minds are open to innovation, to change, because the single biggest characteristic in the world today is the change is being driven by the Internet and by technology. And if we want people in Africa, for example, to succeed today, it's not an old style kind of paternalistic approach, the wealthy countries give money to the poor countries, that's not what's going to

work. What is going to work is those countries systemically changing the way they govern themselves so that they are releasing the talent of their people by educating them, by bringing in intellectual capital from outside, by creating that sense of an open-minded country, and, even in the poorest countries, where you do that it works.

Owen Barder

So, let's come then to the governance initiative which is your particular focus on how to – helping countries to improve their governance. Tell us about what it is and what it does.

Tony Blair

We operate, at the moment the Africa Governance Initiative in three countries are Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Liberia. We'll probably take on another two this year. But essentially what we do is we put in teams of people full-time alongside the presidents of those countries and that they work on building capacity at the centre, and then in the other departments training up the people in that country, and it's been remarkably successful actually in each of these three countries I would say we're making ...

Owen Barder

So, the three countries at the moment are Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Liberia. And do you know yet where you might expand?

Tony Blair

We've got – you know, we're in the process of discussing that. It's probably better not to disclose it until we conclude those discussions but I – we've now got, over the last three years, sort of empirical evidence and test bed of...

Owen Barder

A working model.

Tony Blair

Yeah. And there is no doubt at all. This is absolutely key. I mean it's making a real difference in those countries.

Owen Barder

When you spoke at the Center for Global Development, you made a distinction between development assistance which is palliative, improving people's lives, and development assistance which is transformational. I assume that in New Labour speak, you would see this as a hand up rather than a handout but the intention is to make a permanent difference to governance and – in these poor countries.

Tony Blair

Absolutely, yes. So, that's what it is about. So, it's about empowering people to help themselves because in the end, as I often say to the presidents of the countries I work in, I mean the ambition is to wave the donor community goodbye.

Owen Barder

The issue then is whether you've formed a model or formed a way of working that does actually do that permanently, because the learning in the development industry has been that this is very hard to do, that technical assistance sometimes works at filling gaps, it helps governments to achieve things while the technical assistance is there. But it's very rarely successful at actually building the capacity of the country itself, of the civil service and so on. What is it that you're doing that you think is likely to be more effective than previous approaches that haven't worked...

Tony Blair

Right, it's a really good point. The reason why our model works is because we do it quite differently from normal technical assistance. I think the problem with technical assistance is that it's like and people often say to me, look, you've got to train the civil service of the country in order to be able to do the things they

need to do. I personally think you can spend literally hundreds of millions of dollars doing that, and nothing much come out of it.

Owen Barder

And we do.

Tony Blair

And we do. What we do is different in three crucial respects. The first is, we combine a political interaction alongside the technical one. So, I interact directly with the presidents and with the ministers. I have deputies who will do that as well politically. That makes all the difference in the world because you can give people a great technical vision, but it's not politically achievable for the country, or it doesn't take account of the political realities, it's hopeless.

The second thing is, we prioritize. This is about delivering programmes. You see, a lot of people in my view, and I base this all on my own experience in government in a developed country, that people have this view that if you train up the service, the civil service, then they can deliver the programmes. My view is you actually work on delivering specific prioritized programs and you will get out of that, the capacity that you then require and can transfer to other things. But it's in the practical prioritization in doing things.

Owen Barder

So learning by doing in context.

Tony Blair

Absolutely, that makes the difference. The third thing is, we have the teams – our teams live in the country. They work alongside their counterparts in the country, there is a very strong interaction. So, for example, when we first came to Rwanda, you know, we were building capacity in Rwanda. The president is someone with a very strong, good vision, it wouldn't work otherwise. But now, I go back and I get presentations when I'm there from Rwandan civil servants who are the – particularly if they are the young and up-and-coming generation, who are fantastic. But that's because they've worked alongside people and my teams have worked in, they might have worked in Downing Street or McKinsey's or whatever, they are really able, able people and they live there and they work there.

So it's a quite different model from a sort of piece of technical work, technical assistance. We also place a huge emphasis on getting quality private sector investment in. I think this is of enormous importance because the whole point about governance today, and this is what's both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is: what works is absolutely simple, there's no doubt at all, if you have a system of predictable rules, absence of corruption, business that comes in is helped to come in, you throw your doors open to quality transparent private sector investment, you're going to do well. The hard thing, the challenge is doing it, because a lot of these countries don't have those systems at the moment.

Owen Barder

Who pays for this? Does money come from the government or is this funded by donors or?

Tony Blair

We actually raised – at the moment, we raised most of our money through foundations, the Soros Foundation, for example, and the Gatsby Foundation, we got early help from Bill Gates' Foundation. So we raised it from a variety of things. I mean I raise money myself. I've helped, funded myself as well the core costs particularly. But – fundraising is always an issue, but I think we're getting to the point now where we're also going to be mainstreaming a lot of this funding, since there is no doubt at all it can work.

I mean just to give you an example, we were just working with Sierra Leone, with their healthcare sector to deliver their child mortality and maternal mortality program. Now, again, the president agreed that we would prioritize this. Right? You could fix everything to do with the health service but actually, let's just fix this, so introduce the program. I mean the results in the short space of time, within a year have been dramatic. I mean something like three times as many kids have been treated in hospital, then 80% reduction in deaths from malaria, it's amazing, the reductions in maternal mortality. And that's because we just

systematically went through, what needed to be done to deliver that program. Now, what then comes out of that, is the people in that health department learn from that experience. They also think, we can do things, it's not impossible. And then so, you're in a completely different mental – state of mental confidence, if you like, when for a long period of time, people trying to sort these systems out and get nowhere.

Owen Barder

There's a story that if you drop a frog into boiling water, that the frog will jump straight out again, but if you put a frog in cold water and then heat it up slowly, the frog never notices that the water has got hot and dies in the water. And I wonder sometimes with these relationships with leaders, whether we are the slowly boiling frog, that as things gradually get worse, democratic space closes, leaders have been in power for too long. And one of the countries where you work, people say that they are in danger of doing that. How do you know – how do you judge when – what kind of leadership is sufficiently democratic, sufficiently accountable? And is there a danger that you stay too engaged for too long? Because, like the frog you haven't spotted that the water has got too hot.

Tony Blair

There is a risk of this and you've got to exercise your judgment about that. Now in respect of Rwanda and Paul Kagame, I mean I believe in him and I admire him. And I think he's doing the right things for Rwanda. Now, there will come a point in which it's right that the system in that country to evolve. But we've got to understand that they have been through this genocidal experience, it's still fragile and there is absolutely no doubt about the progress Rwanda has made under his leadership. So, yeah, now, I've watched this very carefully though. Now, my judgment about them is the judgment I've made and there would be other situations, I won't mention them, in Africa, I don't want to be undiplomatic, where I would I say, 'No, this is a leader I can't work with'.

Owen Barder

So, one of our listeners actually asked me to ask you about Meles Zenawi who you once hailed as a new breed of African leader. Who again – he's – if he serves out his current term, he would have been in office 24 years, and again it's a country in which there are worries about democratic space. Is he still a new breed of African leader, or is he getting to the point now where you think his time might be up?

Tony Blair

No, again I would be supportive of him. I think that – it's a country that achieved, what, 11% growth rate last year? If you look at Ethiopia today and compare where it was when he took it over, when it was literally a, well, it was a by-word wasn't it? It was the symbol of a desperate and poor Africa incapable of getting on its feet. So you've got to give him credit for that.

Now, again, I think this is a process of evolution that's going to have to be gone through, and the lesson, by the way, from all over the world now – is systems have to evolve. If they don't, at some point the people say 'enough'. So it's very much in the interest of those leaders, like Paul Kagame and like Meles Zenawi, to – at a certain point they've got to realize when it's necessary for that evolution to happen. But I also think we've got to be realistic. And some of these countries are in a position of which – if they haven't had that strong continuous leadership, they wouldn't be in the position they're in today. So you've got to get that balance right.

Owen Barder

So this comes directly to a question that another listener asked, Joe Powell. He wonders whether your experience suggests that liberal democracy is not the right governance structure for some developing countries at some stages of their development? And you seem to be saying that strong continuity and a willingness to work hard to deliver for people is perhaps more important than democratic accountability in this stage. Is that – are you tending to that view?

Tony Blair

It's a really difficult question. No, I would always been in favor of liberal democracy. In other words, if – I would always opt for that as the choice. I am just trying to measure realistically in circumstances in which

that hasn't happened, how do you judge the leader? And I think you judge the leader by asking, 'is he really trying to do the best for his country and is that succeeding?'. So...

Owen Barder

So although you prefer liberal democracy, you would tolerate a little less of it for leaders that are delivering...

Tony Blair

I – to put it in a different way, I would say that I still think it's worth working with leaders, especially in circumstances – especially you know I think, Rwanda is obviously a very special case because of the genocide, but I would still think of working with them to achieve good if they are basically motivated by the desire to do good and are doing good. So, you know, the trouble with Mugabe and Zimbabwe, and you can make all sorts of points about the democracy, but the single biggest thing is he's wrecked his country. Now you can't say that about Mela Shaw [ph] or Paul Kagame, I mean it's just so...look, is it difficult to make these distinctions in a very logical way sometimes and saying 'this person is worth working with, this person isn't'? No – it's matter of judgment in each case, but I would feel very confident about working with either of those two leaders.

Owen Barder

You said that one of the things you wanted to do is to bring the lessons that you learned in government to your work in this and in other fields. So what are the lessons from your time in government that you are bringing to the government initiative?

Tony Blair

There is one very simple lesson, which is today what matters is efficacy not ideology, that's the thing. In this sense, a developed nation is no different from a developing nation. What all governments face today is the challenge of fast changing times, the need to change your country quickly, the need for often systemic change. And the tough thing is doing it. It's not working out what you should do, because actually what succeeds today is – the lessons are that what works is pretty obvious, frankly. So you look at developed nations, what works in terms of say, let's say education reform today, is really quite clear by the way. But doing it is enormously hard. In the developing world the challenge is different but the process is the same. It's about focusing on what your priorities are, stripping them down to things that are realizable and practical, objectives like boosting agricultural small holders, getting certain infrastructure down. If you are a Liberia or Sierra Leone, changing your port – your main port, right? Making it work effectively, putting in the basic systems of education and healthcare, tracking private sector investment, allowing people to start businesses properly and engaging with proper predictable rules for people, basic elements of law and order. Right – all of these things, by the way, are doable. Any country can do them. It's doing it that's hard. So you have got to prioritize and get these basic things, priorities, defined. And then what you've got to do is – you've got to find effective systems of delivery. And that's what's...

Owen Barder

These are all technically doable. I mean, we know how dredge to port for example. But often the reason why they don't get done isn't because we don't know technically how to do it. It's because somebody's brother-in-law is making a lot of money from the old system or there is some powerful group of industrialists who benefit from trade barriers and so on. It's often not to do with how would you reduce trade barriers or improve your tax system. It's that there are vested interests, powerful political and economic groups who benefit from the status quo. So what is it that you do? And if you are a poor country, you can't afford to buy those people off in the way that sometimes you can in rich countries. So is the kind of doable that you are talking about doable in the technical sense, or is it also – are these things also, in your view, politically doable?

Tony Blair

Yeah, very good point. And that's why the difference that we do with the African Governance Initiative is we work this politically as well. So, politically, the answer is, probably, 'if you decide to do that thing you can do it', right? And if you decide to do another four things along with it, you can do it. If you decide to do 50 things, and I would say to the leaders I interact with, 'if you show me a priority list with 50 things on

it, I promise you, you'll do nothing'. If you decide you're going to do five things, and get them done on your terms, you can do it. And you've got to decide which of those things that are really important.

Now, it's like – look, from a different perspective what I do with the Palestinians – well, we worked out that the Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, there in Palestine was – whatever else he had to do was get the militia off the streets and get security forces in. I'd say he prioritized that. Now, that then laid the foundation for the fact that – I feel that the trouble you've got in the politics of the Palestinian issue at the moment, you've actually got strong economic growth. Because the security was – there's a proper security on the streets today in the West Bank. So, for me, when I'm interacting with the Presidents, the first thing we do is focus on priorities and if you say, for example in Sierra Leone, and indeed, also in Liberia, get the lights on in the capital city. Whatever else they're going to then say when you go run the place, is you say 'well I got the lights on, for the first time we've got electricity' and that's a basic thing. And then the country also gets the sense politics can deliver things.

Because the worst thing – you can have a democratic system – you see this is my real point about efficacy. You could have a democratic system, but if government doesn't change anything then even the democracy in a way becomes corrupt. I don't mean in the sort of literal sense but I mean the sense that people run for elections based on families and tribes and ethnicity and all the rest of it. Whereas the stage in which your democracy is grounded is when someone runs on the basis, 'I can do a better job than the other person for you, whoever you may be'. And that's when you are getting critical mass.

Owen Barder

You are listening to Development Drums and my guest today is former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. If you're interested in international development you may also be interested in the Global Prosperity Wonkcast, which is a shorter, rather snappier podcast each week by my colleagues at the Center for Global Development and you may also enjoy the Guardian newspaper Focus podcast which often deals with development issues. You can find all these on iTunes and there are links on the Development Drums website.

Here's another question from a listener Dan, who says, 'look a lot of the problems in developing countries are put there by the rich world. It's the financial crisis, our failure to agree, trade deals, climate change, all these problems that make it hard for developing countries' and the question he asks is shouldn't you – you seem to be blaming the victim, telling them they've got to sort out their problems, but shouldn't you be using your political weight on the world stage to try and change these global things that are affecting developing countries rather than going and telling them how they should sort out their problem?

Tony Blair

This is a really important argument to take on. I mean, first of all, by the way, in 2005 we did put this problem right at the center of the G8 Summit and got huge commitments on aid and debt relief, which have been significantly implemented by the way. But actually I just disagree in the end that the problem is the problem of rich nations and the way they treat poor nations. I don't think that – I always say to people who I work with in any part of the world, no nation was ever created from a sense of victimhood. Yes, are trade barriers for the rich world a problem? Yes, although the European Union and others have now got very liberal policies. But how about trade barriers in East Africa, between African countries? How about countries that have got problems of corruption and the absence of a rule of law and what that does to put off private investment? How about situations where the basic services can't be delivered by – competently by government. I mean, in the end also, and this is what I think is exciting, the reason I'm an optimist about Africa at the moment is I noticed about Africa what I started to notice about India maybe 15 years back, which is actually there's a new generation of younger Africans who are coming into positions of leadership, doing things in business who are saying 'yeah, the colonial past is a terrible thing. But you know something? I'm really going to focus on the future now and I'm going to – we are going to take the future into our own hands.'

And when that psychological shift happens that's when a country starts to move. And, so, look, there are things that we can do from the wealthy nations of course. But I'm afraid if I had to, based on the experience

that I have working in countries, I actually think Africa shouldn't regard itself as dependent on what the wealthy world does. I mean, I think it's a lot more about taking its destiny in its own hands.

Owen Barder

I think as you said a lot of Africans listening to this would agree with that and resent the...

Tony Blair

One of the things I've learned and this has been really important education for me actually in these last few years, through the Africa Governance Initiative, is how many really smart people there are on these countries. So all they need is systems that work and then they'll do the rest.

Owen Barder

A lot of the people who listen to this podcast and not from the UK and many of them are a bit baffled about how it is in the UK we've built such a strong consensus around development. And I wondered if there's something you've learned as you've traveled around thinking about development, talking about development that would explain to other people why it is that the UK has been so firm on increasing aid, on having a department for international development that has cabinet status and is independent of the foreign office. What – is there something special about the UK? What has enabled us to have that political consensus here?

Tony Blair

I mean the consensus is a great thing and I regard it actually is an achievement of the previous Labour government. And you know, to be fair I think it's been really important that the new government that's come in has committed itself to maintaining that position. I think we built the consensus because we didn't keep it just as a political consensus and here's where people like Bob Geldoff and Bono and others were incredibly important, the churches, and the faith community. I mean this was a civic society consensus, not just a political consensus.

And it also became a source of pride, and then the fact that the Department for International Development was created, and there was a lot of controversy about it and I mean to be frank even at times I used to find DfID hard to deal with because they were kind of – they regarded themselves almost as an independent part of government, which was difficult from time to time. But as a result of that they had a sort of spirit of endeavor, they were innovative, and whatever the differences – clearly the difference has been between myself and Gordon Brown on this issue and on development and everything, we were absolutely as well.

Owen Barder

In retrospect would you have done that differently, because this is a live issue in some other countries, should they have an independent department working on development issues? You said that it's – sometimes it was difficult to work with, would you have done it a bit differently? Should it have been a bit more within the Foreign Office and the broader foreign policy community?

Tony Blair

Yeah, funny, when I was Prime Minister I often used to think maybe I should have done that differently, when I was running a government. Now I'm part of the development world as it were I'm very convinced that it was right that it was separate, because I think it just gives it – it gives it a position and it gives it a – as I said, the best way I can describe DfID is that it had a spirit about it different from any other part of government. It was, I thought, often prepared to be innovative, creative, it was independent but sometimes in the best way, for example was very, very strong on untying aid. Clare Short to be fair did a good job on that. And we also – and this is one of the reasons why we achieved the consensus I think, because it became, if you like, a kind of market leader in development, I think that also helped the way that people viewed our position. We were proud of the fact that we were leaders in development, I don't think that would have happened if you kept it within the foreign office. So I won't say from time to time as Prime Minister I didn't get a bit frustrated with it, but...

Owen Barder

In retrospect you still think it was the right thing to do?

Tony Blair

I do yeah.

Owen Barder

Good. Can I switch to different subject, one of our listeners, who is a former diplomat and also happens to be my father...

Tony Blair

So that's an important question, yes.

Owen Barder

...asked – right that's an important question – asked a question about the responsibility to protect that was agreed in 2005 at the special UN Summit. And the question he asked is, is that commitment roughly what you were envisaging when you gave your Chicago speech in 1999? Is that kind of – does it give the West the kind of mandate to act, particularly in developing countries, that you were envisaging in Chicago when you were talking about failed states?

Tony Blair

Yes, I think it does give that mandate. But you will always have a huge debate over individual instances of where people will argue of whether you should or should not intervene. But I can't look back on Rwanda and think that we shouldn't have. And actually if you talk to Bill Clinton, he's very open, very honest about this. And I was always on the – I'm on the intervening side of the debate. I don't think you could have allowed – I think what France did recently has been important as well.

Owen Barder

You mean in Libya?

Tony Blair

In Libya, I think also in Côte d'Ivoire. It's important that the election results stood. So I think –

Owen Barder

So the experience since then has made you – has if anything reinforced your view that we should err a bit more on the side of intervening?

Tony Blair

Well, because I think – you see, part of the trouble with the way world works today is if something's not flashed across the television screen the whole time we don't think it's happening. But, actually in circumstances where there is a brutal oppression of people, their lives are just ruined.

Owen Barder

But, you wouldn't recommend intervening today in Zimbabwe, say?

Tony Blair

I mean I don't think it's feasible to intervene militarily at all; no, of course not. But I am in favor of taking as strong action as you possibly can. And, by the way, one thing I think is very important for African countries is to call time on their own folk who are behaving badly. So, it's not – you should not be in a situation where people are brutally suppressing citizens in their country and the world just stands by. And I think that the notion of a responsibility to protect, as I say you'll have a vast amount of argument over each individual instance, but I think anchoring that principle at the heart of the United Nations has been important.

Owen Barder

Last question. You're a young man.

Tony Blair

Thank you.

Owen Barder

The managing directorship of the IMF is vacant. I haven't heard signs that you're standing for that. Would – if there was an international job like that, would you take it?

Tony Blair

Well, if the presidency of the European Union had been offered, I would have done it for sure. Not that the IMF or the World Bank's not...

Owen Barder

You don't think the World Bank would be it for you? Secretary General of the UN?

Tony Blair

No, I don't think that's likely either. I mean I keep an open mind in these things. But at the moment I'm building a different type of organization. And funnily enough in the areas in which I am working now I would say – I don't have the same power that I did as Prime Minister but I probably have more influence on – in shaping events. So, in the Middle East, for example, I do more – I probably have a greater influence in what's happening today than I did when I was Prime Minister. Likewise in Africa, I feel the work I'm doing now is very different from, say, getting people to agree a big uplift in aid and so on and so forth, but actually on the ground I feel I'm having, if anything, more effect than I had before. So, I find this – the new life is different but it can be very fulfilling though. And it's just a different way of making a difference.

Owen Barder

Tony Blair, thanks very much for coming on Development Drums.

Tony Blair

Thank you, Owen. Thank you.

Owen Barder

You've been listening to Development Drums with me, Owen Barder, and my guest today has been Tony Blair. If you enjoyed this discussion, I hope you'll subscribe free of charge to Development Drums on iTunes or on the Development Drums website and that you'll join the Facebook group. My next guest on Development Drums is Tim Harford. His new book, *Adapt*, has many lessons for people who think and work in development. Until then, thanks for listening.