



Recolonise Africa

By Andrew Roberts

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In this provocative article a top historian argues that the British Empire brought huge benefit to Africa and only a new Imperialism can save the Dark Continent from itself.

AS TONY Blair and Gordon Brown gave separate but simultaneous press conferences on Thursday morning, both men promised much for the Third World.

The phrases used - 'comprehensive response'; 'unprecedented action'; 'radical steps' and so on were the usual ones that New Labour directs towards every problem, from motorway congestion to education funding to NHS waiting lists.

One somehow knows that when it comes down to it, the actual solutions proposed will fall short of the monumental task of truly regenerating such a vast swathe of humanity as Africa comprises.

However a small, disparate, yet brilliant group of Western academics and political thinkers is indeed formulating a genuinely 'comprehensive', 'unprecedented' and 'radical' solution to the interlocking problems of Third World indebtedness, lawlessness, corruption, starvation, endemic internecine warfare and genocide.

They are proposing a solution so politically incorrect that the Prime Minister and Chancellor could never be seen publicly to approve it, however much they might privately acknowledge it to be the only long-term answer.

It has been dubbed The New Imperialism and it promotes the benefits of recolonisation.

The Italians are rightly proud of Ancient Rome, the French revere the Napoleonic First Empire, the Portuguese esteem Prince Henry the Navigator - who created his country's empire in the 15th century - as highly as the Austrians do Emperor Charles V, or the Spanish King Philip II.

You won't find a Russian who denigrates Peter or Catherine the Great, any more than you will a Greek who despises the imperial Athens of Pericles.

In Uzbekistan the highest order of chivalry is the Order of Temur, named after their all-conquering hero Tamerlane, and despite decades of official

disapproval, Mongolians still toast the memory of the great Genghis Khan.

Indeed, there is no country or race that is expected to feel guilty about the moment their empire occupied the limelight of history - except, of course, the English speaking peoples.

For us, the fact that first the British and then the American hegemonies have held global sway since the Industrial Revolution is considered to be the source of profound, permanent and self-evident guilt.

Ever since the Sixties, the Left-liberal intelligentsia, academia, and the political establishments across the Englishspeaking worlds have been united in this central mantra: Imperialism equals Evil.

Only this week they all nodded in contrition as President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa launched an aggressive attack on the British Empire's record in Africa.

British imperialists, said Mbeki, carried out 'terrible things wherever they went, justifying what they did by defining the native peoples of Africa as savages who had to be civilised, even against their will'.

He went on to say that the Empire's 'terrible legacy' was a continent divided by race, colour, religion and culture.

What Mbeki signally failed to admit was that there was never a time when Africa was *not* divided by race, colour, religion and culture.

Or that Africa has never known better times than during British rule, whereas beforehand there was anarchy and all too often afterwards, tyranny.

Indeed, far from being the problem besetting Africa, Imperialism could well be the solution.

Might not a reintroduction of the English-speaking world's cultural creed, such as technical expertise, impartial justice, financial rectitude and ethical business practices, be exactly what so many countries - and in particular those in Africa need right now?

**An anarchic
and violent
continent**

No one denies the crisis exists, least of all Tony Blair. 'We know the problems,' he told the Johannesburg summit in September 2002. 'A child in Africa dies every three seconds from famine, disease and conflict. And we know the solution sustainable development.

'We know one other thing: the key characteristic of today's world is its interdependence. Your problem becomes our problem.'

Yet 'sustainable development' is not actually the solution, because the profits from such development can be salted away in an African dictator's Zurich bank account just as quickly as they can be wasted on a 'prestige development project' (ie white elephant).

The true solution is good governance, an impartial judiciary, secure borders, internal peace, healthy agriculture, modern medical practices and an end to kleptocracy - all features of the British Empire in Africa in the many colonies there that this country ruled in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries.

The difference between the governance of Africa then and now is soberingly instructive. Where in today's world does one look for the longest-running insurgencies and civil wars? Algeria, Ethiopia and Sudan. Where does one look for deliberately engineered starvation of the regime's political enemies? Zimbabwe.

Where does one look for the worst human rights abuses? Equatorial Guinea, Angola and the Congo. Where does one look for the world's highest incidence of rape? South Africa.

Where does one look for the world's most bloody civil war of the past half-century? Rwanda and Burundi. How many of the world's 50 poorest countries, according to the OECD, are African? No fewer than 26.

In his Mansion House speech last November, Tony Blair said: 'The best help we can give Africa is not just aid, vital though that is, and opening up trade, but through supporting countries in their desperate and fraught attempts to build the institutions of good governance'.

Yet these institutions all existed before those countries were over-hastily given their independence in the Fifties and Sixties.

They were institutions such as the Sudan Political Service, the district officer, the Royal Navy, The Tanganyika Development Board, the Crown magistracy, the sterling area whereby colonial currencies were linked to the pound, the Rhodes Trust, the Bank of England, the Royal West

Africa Frontier Force, the Overseas Settlement Committee and so on and so on.

These Imperial institutions provided better governance than Africa had ever enjoyed before, in what historians are almost all agreed was formerly an anarchic and extraordinarily violent continent.

More importantly, and controversially, they also provided better governance than has been the case since colonialism ended, when a series of independence struggles, tribal conflicts, military coups and oneparty dictatorships unleashed poverty and tyranny upon almost every part of the continent.

But there is something worse even than the blatant corruption and thieving of dictators like Mobuto of the Congo - who by the time of his downfall in 1997 had salted away a personal fortune and owned palaces in Zaire, Morocco, South Africa, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain and Portugal, as well as a wine collection worth £ 1. 5 million.

Something more insidious still than the grotesque behaviour of President Bokassa of the Central African Empire who reportedly liked to eat people and had a deep freeze in his kitchens where he kept bodies.

Emperor who kept bodies in a deep freeze

This was the doctrine of African socialism adopted by post-independence leaders such as Nkrumah of Ghana, Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Kaunda of Zambia, Nyerere of Tanzania and many others - for it utterly destroyed competitiveness, rewarded inefficiency, wrecked agriculture, encouraged corruption and brought several states to the brink of bankruptcy.

The pity of post-independence Africa has been that so many of the disciplines of market forces, rights of property, attitudes towards law, and the energy and impetus of the colonial era were lost, without anything so useful and inspiring taking their place.

Rhodesia was once the bread basket of Africa, yet today much of what's now Zimbabwe is threatened with mass malnutrition and worse. Kenya, once held up as Africa's great success story, redistributed vast amounts of white-owned land among ministerial henchmen, with disastrous long-term results for its agriculture.

The ex-president Daniel Arap Moi, once hailed as Africa's premier statesman, has been revealed to have been just as corrupt as so many of the other post-independence African leaders.

This is why I believe that a New Imperialism - by which the old system of 'informal' empire is re-instituted across the Dark Continent - would, if vigorously pursued by the English-speaking peoples, spell disaster for the corrupt elites and hope for millions of ordinary Africans.

In books such as Professor Niall Ferguson's *Empire: How Britain Made The Modern World* and the newly published *In Praise Of Empires: Globalization And Order* by the distinguished Indian-born and Oxford-educated economist Professor Deepak Lal, the arguments for an updated, modern form of Imperialism are set out cogently and convincingly.

Transatlantic intellectual journals such as *The National Review*, *The New Criterion*, *Foreign Affairs* and *The National Interest* have put together a compelling case for a return to the 'informal empires' of the past.

Imperialists are regularly denounced as racists and white supremacists - witness President Thabo Mbeki's outrageous outburst yet that accusation can hardly be made against Professor Lal, whose own uncle was imprisoned by the British during the Quit India demonstrations of the Thirties, and who later became a mayor of Delhi and a cabinet minister under Jawaharlal Nehru.

Yet Professor Lal insists that the British Empire was a great force for good in the world, and something along the same lines should be speedily re-instituted.

Of course, this needn't be accomplished with much bloodshed, as earlier Imperial adventures occasionally were. So unpopular are many of Africa's despots that the mere arrival on the horizon of an aircraft carrier from an English-speaking country would occasion their overthrow.

Robert Mugabe, senior British Army officers will acknowledge privately, could probably be toppled by a single brigade, for example, and the downtrodden people of Equatorial Guinea are desperate to see the back of their reputedly cannibalistic dictator, President Obiang.

I would also argue that the blood-letting of the Old Imperialism has been overplayed. Although the Battle of Omdurman, by which Britain established dominance over the Sudan, cost the lives of 11,000 Sudanese tribesmen in 1898, thereafter there was a relative degree of peace under the British for the next 59 years. By terrible

contrast, some 70,000 people have perished in the genocide committed in Darfur in the past two years of post-imperial 'freedom' and 'independence'.

For most Africans, regular food supplies, gainful employment, property rights, security against inter-tribal warfare, regional peace and political stability, matter far more than the colour of their rulers' faces.

If the New Imperialism could deliver better lives to ordinary Africans, most would welcome it as a huge improvement on the present catastrophic situation pertaining right across the continent.

'Despite nationalist and Marxist cant,' Professor Lal courageously writes, 'the British Empire was hugely beneficial for the world, particularly its poorest.

'It saw the integration for the first time of many countries in the Third World into a global economy and the consequent first stirrings of modern intensive growth.'

All this could take place again, so long as it was spearheaded by the United States and Britain, and enthusiastically supported by such countries as Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

It should be restricted to these nations for I'm afraid the fact is that the record of many other countries' experiments with Imperialism has been so poor that they should not be allowed to become involved in this great continent-saving project.

France's experience in Algeria in the Fifties and Sixties, and its long history of self-serving post-independence interventions - most recently and murderously in the Ivory Coast invalidate its credentials.

Equally, the German massacre of the Herero and Bondelswarts tribes in German South-West Africa (modern-day Namibia) in 1904-6 similarly disqualifies them.

Mugabe could be toppled by a brigade

Worst of all, the Belgians' notorious record in the Congo whereby millions were slaughtered - means that Africans would not want to see the return of their style of Imperialism.

Rather it is the 'boyish tyranny' of the English-speaking peoples that Africa would

welcome, bringing with it the overall memory of justice, sound money and fair dealing.

That there would be volunteers enough from the English-speaking peoples for this vital, historic and life -enhancing task can hardly be doubted.

Consider their contribution to the tsunami relief effort already: there is a giant largely untapped fund of goodwill, expertise, idealism and generosity among our peoples that could be harnessed - given the political will - to the betterment of the people of Africa.

That political will must not now be dissipated in ultimately futile personal wrangling between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.