

Experts + Opinions: David Chandler

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Foreign affairs & the desire to impose tolerance: David Chandler is having none of it

By Will Parkhouse

The University of Westminster's Professor of International Relations offers us a drink: "Coffee? Or some whisky?" We think David Chandler's joking about the booze, until we spy a large bottle of scotch sitting atop the filing cabinet in the corner of his office. He smokes roll-ups too. Cool.

Rock and roll lifestyle aside, Chandler's been teaching at Westminster for three and a half years now, and has published a rather fearsome line up of books: from his most recent *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building* to 2002's *Human Rights and International Intervention*. His writing has asked questions such as: When is it right for countries to intervene abroad? How do we go about building states? Is the rise of human rights campaigning a good thing? That kind of stuff. And if that wasn't enough for you, in 2007, he'll be launching a journal called the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*.

Many would answer a question about their political inclinations with a two or three well-worn words, but Chandler aims for a bit more precision, calling his politics "a challenge to the new culture of bureaucracy and administration, in favour of rescuing a view of the political and our capacity to engage". So engage away, people.

LET'S START WITH IRAQ. THERE'S BEEN A LOT OF PRESSURE RECENTLY FOR BRITAIN AND THE US TO CHANGE THEIR FOREIGN POLICY. WILL THERE BE A RE-THINK?

It's a difficult one for Bush and Blair, because from the beginning of the invasion, there was always a reluctance to deal with the consequences. There was this idea that they weren't really fighting

an enemy but were liberating the Iraqi people - it wasn't viewed as a traditional conflict. I think it was Simon Jenkins in The Times who said it wasn't so much occupation, more squatting; the main aim was to go there and come back and it wasn't clear what the goals were. That idea was reflected in the so-called handover of sovereignty in June 2004, which was obviously very artificial. So I don't think it's really right to see it as a change of strategy now; there wasn't really any real sense of commitment from the beginning.

DO YOU SEE THE COUNTRY'S FUTURE AS FAIRLY BLEAK?

It's always difficult to predict these things, but one thing that seems clear is that the society is fragmenting. To recreate a sense of collectivity, the people need to have some sense of ownership, some cause. Toppling the statue of Saddam, or his symbolic capture, or maybe even his symbolic execution, will be just that: purely symbolic. Such acts won't actually reflect the realities of the situation. What can be sold as a success in the West doesn't look like such a success if you're in Iraq and just shows how dangerous it can be to try to resolve other people's problems.

WOULD YOU SAY IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO IMPOSE DEMOCRACY ON OTHER COUNTRIES?

It's a controversial issue. I've argued for quite a few years that 'imposing democracy' is a contradiction in terms. Democracy by its very nature implies autonomy, self-organisation and self-government. Paddy Ashdown, who's now the high representative of the international community in Bosnia, recently argued that it was much better to impose the rule of law and provide a level playing field that way. In theory, people would then choose democracy once the safeguards were in place. But in my personal opinion, you can't impose the rule of law any more than you can impose democracy - law must consist of rules generated by consent. When a major power intervenes on the basis of protecting or liberating someone else's rights, as we saw in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, often it results in even more limitations on people's capacity, autonomy, democracy and self-determination. You can't liberate or empower other people, unfortunately.

DOES THAT MEAN INTERVENTION IS NEVER RIGHT?

I wouldn't say that. My main point is that interventions in the political sphere generally produce unintended consequences. External interference to try and promote 'the good guys' tends to skewer the political process, recreating divisions or institutionalising them. In Bosnia, for example, they banned some political parties and sacked certain politicians, but that didn't really solve the root problem. The point is, those parties and individuals were elected because they reflected something about the concerns or needs of the people in that society.

YOU ONCE WROTE: "TODAY IT APPEARS THAT EVERYONE IS AN INTERNATIONALIST". IS THE INCREASING NUMBER OF VOICES CAPABLE OF HAVING A SAY IN WORLD AFFAIRS A GOOD THING?

We have this sense that NGOs and human rights groups are good, because they seem to be less connected to power and interests, but it's unsafe to give legitimacy and credibility to groups which have got nothing at stake in the process. As much as we might want to criticise traditional policy-making that's based on interests, at least it's forced to engage with the societies it's dealing with.

YOU'VE ALSO WRITTEN ABOUT A NEW SENSE WE HAVE OF MORAL OBLIGATIONS TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY. IS THAT WHAT'S DRAWING US TOWARDS WORLD AFFAIRS THESE DAYS?

One of the reasons that we're drawn to the international sphere is unfortunately a negative one: a sense of alienation from our domestic society. Our own society appears to be oppressing us: the fact that we have to win arguments, be elected and then be held to account seems to restrict our political possibilities. But the global sphere looks like it offers us freedom where we can act as individuals, as a place where you're not required to build a collective movement or be affiliated to one party. You're never really held to account because you can always blame the failure of your aspirations on America, or on the UN, or on politicians in Africa. So you're basically picking and choosing your causes to create an

identity for yourself.

In the past, there was a sense that if we actually wanted to change things, we had to do it collectively, which involved respecting and engaging with other people. I'm not saying that people who are involved in global issues and global politics aren't genuine and serious – but it's just much easier to do now as an individual. It seems that engaging with other people is something that's oppressive to us rather than liberating.

SO PEOPLE ARE ENGAGING WITH INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AS A WAY OF FORGING AN IDENTITY?

Some people are still interested in proper intellectual discussion, but for many, it's like saying: "I'm anti-war, I'm not to blame" – it's not a spur to collectively get engaged, to try and change the world, it's more like saying "stop the world, I want to get off". I see that as being anti-politics. In a way it's misanthropic: it's saying "my fellow human beings are scum, I don't really want to get involved with them".

The whole idea of awareness is interesting. In their campaigning, people's aim is to make others aware, or demonstrate that they themselves are aware. But what does awareness mean? It's not about actually changing something, it's just about saying "I'm better than you because I'm aware of poverty", or whatever the issue is. If you ask my students what theories they support, their answers are to do with their self-portrayal, rather than how they understand international affairs. People are more focused on their own identities than finding out about and changing other people's views and the world itself.

With Iraq, the neo-cons didn't win the arguments domestically and failed to reassert a sense of American identity at home, so they attempted to recreate one in the Middle East through intervention and war. I think we can see the same with the UN and its desire to send in its peacekeepers. It's supposed to be a sign of how much we care about people – we want to send troops and make a statement of our commitment – but really it's a superficial act that

says more about us than anything else. That's the worst aspect of what's called ethical foreign policy. It's a peculiar and twisted situation.

ARE YOU OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE OF WORLD AFFAIRS?

It seems that international affairs are becoming increasingly central to the way that we see and understand ourselves and even the way that domestic politics plays out. Much as we might criticise previous projections of power abroad based on interests, at least there was a framework to constrain the more irrational aspects of policy. Today, we have an anti-foreign policy, one which gives us the freedom to talk about ourselves and our values. As the international sphere increasingly becomes a place where we can attempt to construct or create an identity, the more irrational and destabilised it will be. So I guess I'm pessimistic.