

The Cameron Government and Gx Leadership

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Abstract

Despite the plaudits and high expectations, David Cameron's role as a leader and innovator in Gx summitry appears overhyped. Upon closer inspection, his contribution to global summitry has lacked originality, vision, and coherence. This article will bring aspects of UK policy into relief by means of a close reading of the report *Governance for Growth: Building Consensus for the Future*. It will then account for these failings by relating the conclusions of this specific case study to the government's overall foreign policy. The article focuses on the role of David Cameron and the Conservative Party specifically because, on the one hand, Gx summitry is a process that stresses the role of individual leaders; while, on the other hand, the coalition's foreign policy appears to be an area in which the Liberal Democrats have exerted little influence as coalition partners. 'Same bed, different dreams' may be the political reality but little has emerged to suggest that different dreams have impacted on outcomes.

Keywords

global summitry, global governance, G20, G8, international affairs, international politics, David Cameron, Cameron government, United Kingdom, UK, growth, national security

INTRODUCTION

Since coming to power in May 2010 as prime minister of the first postwar coalition government in the United Kingdom (UK), David Cameron has managed to forge a reputation for leadership and innovation in global governance and specifically in Gx summitry. Prime Minister Cameron for instance was commissioned by his G20 colleagues to produce a report entitled *Governance for Growth: Building Consensus for the Future*. This Report was presented to and endorsed by the G20 leaders when they met at Cannes in November 2011 (HM Government 2011). In April 2012 UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon approached Cameron to head a UN high-level panel to define future development goals after the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 (Wintour 2012). The logic of this choice made sense in light of the coalition government's commitment to protect the UK aid budget from 'swingeing' cuts in a time of austerity. And Cameron's 'Hunger Summit,' held in London during the 2012 Olympics, is a further indication the Prime Minister has been prepared to play a leadership role in global governance.

Cameron's reputation for global governance leadership, it would appear, will only be reinforced by the fact that he will likely host the thirty-ninth Group of 8 (G8) summit in June 2013. In the run up to this summit, he has declared the ambitious goal of reaching consensus in principle for a critical free trade agreement between the Europe and the United States (US).

In the past, the UK's hosting of the G8 has marked various milestones in the development and relevance of global summitry. British Prime Ministers have exercised strong leadership in hosting both the G7 and G20. They have encouraged, for example, significant advances in G7/8 collective leadership. For example, at the 1998 Birmingham Summit, Prime Minister Blair oversaw the streamlining of ministerial and leaders' summits. At the 2005 Gleneagles Summit, again Prime Minister Blair managed the integration of the Make Poverty History campaign with the G8 and additionally oversaw the initiation of the G8+5 process – a process designed to extend membership to key large emerging market countries. Although there are shortcomings with all of these initiatives and one should be wary of painting too rosy a picture, the driving force in providing this intellectual and political leadership was the prime minister who hosted these meetings (and the only UK prime minister to host two G8 summits), Tony Blair.

Blair and his successor Gordon Brown were referred to as 'the Lennon and McCartney of the global development stage' by U2's Bono (Payne 2006: 917). As a result, previous summits and UK hosting will no doubt cast long shadows over the 2013 Lough Erne Summit of the G8 in Northern Ireland and

serve to increase expectations of Cameron and his hosting role. These expectations can already be seen in the relaunch of the Make Poverty History campaign that is seeking to keep attention on efforts to combat hunger. To this end, civil society groups and the government have already begun a dialogue as this issue dovetails with one of the UK's priorities at the G8 – food insecurity and the launching of the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, as discussed at 2012 Camp David G8 Summit.

This article nevertheless argues that despite these plaudits and expectations, David Cameron's role as a leader and innovator in Gx summitry appears overhyped. Upon closer inspection, his contribution to global summitry has lacked originality, vision, and coherence. The article will bring aspects of UK policy into relief by means of a close reading of the above-mentioned report *Governance for Growth: Building Consensus for the Future*. It will then account for these failings by relating the conclusions of this specific case study to the government's overall foreign policy. The article focuses on the role of David Cameron and the Conservative Party specifically because, on the one hand, Gx summitry is a process that stresses the role of individual leaders;¹ while, on the other hand, the coalition's foreign policy appears so far to be an area in which the Liberal Democrats have exerted little influence as coalition partners. 'Same bed, different dreams' may be the political reality but little has emerged to suggest that different dreams have had any impact on outcomes.²

CAMERON AND G20 SUMMITRY

Cameron's most high profile contribution to debates surrounding Gx summitry to this point has likely been his effort relating to the report entitled *Governance for Growth: Building Consensus for the Future* ahead of the 2011 Cannes Summit of the G20 (HM Government 2011). The Report merits detailed examination as it may be considered nearly a manifesto explicating the current government's position on Gx summitry and global governance.

¹ The UK's representation has been relatively stable since Gordon Brown attended the first G20 leaders summit in Washington (November 2008). Thereafter, he attended the G20 London (April 2009) and Pittsburgh (September 2009) summits before resigning in May 2010. Concomitantly, Brown attended the G8 summits in Toyako (July 2008) and L'Aquila (July 2009). After the general election of May 2010, David Cameron attended the G20 Toronto (June 2010), Seoul (November 2010), Cannes (November 2011) and Los Cabos (June 2012) summits. Contemporaneously, he attended the G8 summits held in Muskoka (June 2010), Deauville (May 2011) and Camp David (May 2012).

² Although it has not surfaced as a divisive issue so far, the only discernible difference is that 65 per cent of Liberal Democrats believe that ethical considerations should be at least a part of British foreign policy, in contrast to a similar number of Conservatives who believe in the 'keen pursuit' of national interest (Knight, Niblett and Raines 2012).

However, it would seem that much of the Report is best described as ‘old wine in new bottles.’ For example, early in the Report, Cameron sets out his concern that:

[t]he path to more effective governance does not always require the creation of new institutions and processes. There is neither a shortage of international bodies, nor of blueprints to reform the global governance architecture (HM Government 2011: 4).

He highlights ‘clutter’ and argues that the ‘[t]he large number of institutions and processes established has led to poor visibility about what role they are meant to serve’ (HM Government 2011: 36). Whether or not one agrees, this argument can be traced back to a similar plea made by Harold Wilson at the 1975 Rambouillet Summit of the G6. Harold Wilson claimed at this very first summit that there was a glut of international bodies concerned with the same issues discussed at the summit and that the system needed to be streamlined. This initiative was not taken up immediately thereafter (Putnam and Bayne 1984: 141). John Major then picked up the issue again in the summits of the immediate post-Cold War era.

Similarly, Cameron’s Report states that:

[i]nformal mechanisms to generate and sustain political consensus are a valid and essential part of global governance, working alongside and complementing the work of institutions whose members have more formal rights and obligations’ (HM Government 2011: 5).

This is exactly how the G8 has been written about over the decades, as exemplified by the late Michael Hodges writing at the end of the last millennium:

The G7/8 is a forum, rather than an institution. It is useful as a closed international club of capitalist governments trying to raise consciousness, set an agenda, create networks, prod other institutions to do things that they should be doing, and, in some cases, to help create institutions that are suited to a particular task (Hodges 1999: 69).

Cameron argues that ‘[t]he G20’s efforts need to be better coordinated, and backed up by effective governance, to ensure that their political commitments secure growth for the future’ (HM Government 2011: 4). To this end, he makes a number of recommendations that were welcomed by the G20

leaders in their Cannes Summit declaration (G20 2011). In Cameron's words, the G20 must:

- maintain its informal and Leader-driven nature for the foreseeable future, and provide a clear public declaration of its role and purpose within the global system;
- become much more consistent and effective at engaging non-members, international institutions and other actors, welcoming their effective participation in specific areas of the G20's work;
- develop clear agreed working practices to manage and deliver its agenda through time more effectively; formalize the Troika of past, present and future Presidencies; and underpin it with a small secretariat, possibly staffed by officials seconded from G20 countries and based on and chaired by the Presidency (HM Government 2011: 5).

The emphasis is therefore placed on the G20's informality, flexibility, and the opportunity it affords leaders to lead. This is not new analysis, as informality was always the defining quality of the G8; again in the words of Michael Hodges: [t]he G8 is not an institution... Institutions have clear organizational centers, the most important characteristics of which in practice, are often their cafeterias and pension plans (Hodges 1999: 69). Although he resists any measures that seek to formalize the G20, Cameron expresses support for the formalization of the Troika and the creation of a small secretariat to support it, all with the goal of maintaining continuity in mind.

Cameron goes on to argue that the G20's 'role should be to promote and catalyze consensus-building' by:

- providing the space for the key global economies – advanced and emerging alike – to come together on an equal basis to discuss and resolve economic issues openly and in the spirit of enlightened self-interest, without the historical legacy of North–South divisions that may still affect institutions which were developed in a different economic and political context;
- enabling leaders of the world's major economies to find the political will necessary to coordinate and mutually assess their respective economic policies, agree approaches or solutions to the broad economic challenges of globalization, and hold each other to account for the commitments they make;
- sustaining political consensus on a continuous basis, to ensure that commitments from political leaders are followed through over time; and

- setting an example for greater effectiveness and coherence among the range of international institutions, standards and rules that are governing international economic activity (HM Government 2011: 11).

The above hardly differs from the recommendation made almost two decades ago by the doyen of summit-watchers, Sir Nicholas Bayne, that “the best future approach for the [G7/8] summits is that of catalyst, providing impulses to wider international institutions but not trying to do their work for them, either from inside or outside” (Bayne 1994: 20). So, for Cameron to dedicate a section in the report to the subject of how the G20 can strengthen its engagement with the United Nations is hardly a unique ideology.

Not only is Cameron’s discussion far from original, his ‘vision’ lacks detail. He goes on to highlight “a number of priority areas” including the reform of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (agreed to by the G20 in 2009), the enhancement of the Financial Stability Board’s role and legalization of its position, as well as the strengthening and reform of the WTO’s activities. Cameron emphasizes the need for strategies to appeal to organizations and institutions used to working in their silos and failing to come together to address common challenges. He calls for “powerful incentives that encourage inter-institutional cooperation and coordination in order to achieve common ends” (HM Government 2011: 37). However, this is clearly easier said than done and the Cameron call ends here without any elaboration of what these incentives or strategies might be.

Cameron’s Report appears silent on other issues including G20 membership, which is effectively shelved for the time being. Nevertheless, the Report clearly shows that Cameron believes in the G20 and is willing to work with other like-minded leaders. In fact the need for political will appears to be the central theme in the Report, yet it is largely silent when it comes to how this is to be realized and fostered. Cameron also has little to say on the position of the G8 specifically and the ‘Gaggle of Gs’ more broadly. This is surprising considering that the UK will chair the G8 in 2013 and Cameron’s apparent activity therein. In contrast, his foreign minister, William Hague, has been more explicit in stressing the shift from the relevance of the G8 to the G20 as seen in a recent speech: “[i]n addition to the established ‘emerging powers’ such as the BRICs, many other countries are bursting onto the international scene, powered by a combination of economic dynamism, geographic location, youthful populations, natural resources, sovereign wealth, and the spread of global connectivity thanks to the internet and related technologies. We have moved irreversibly from a G8 world to a G20-plus

world” (FCO 2012). Other divisions between Cameron and Hague will be highlighted below and only serve to reinforce the sense that general consensus appears to lacking within Cameron’s own coalition government.

The behavior of Cameron’s government has at times also failed to harmonize with Cameron’s ‘vision’ and instead has been shaped primarily by the reality of austerity and national interest. Despite his advocacy of IMF reform outlined above and his response to the emerging economies’ proposal to widen IMF powers ahead of the Cannes Summit to prevent contagion emanating from the crisis in the Eurozone, Cameron was unable and unwilling to commit further UK resources. This position placed the UK firmly alongside Australia, Canada, Japan and the US. The US position in particular was that the IMF was already well funded and did not require the contributions of emerging economies, which would inevitably claim a greater voice in the IMF (Giles and Carnegie 2011).

It was therefore clear ahead of the Cannes Summit that Cameron supported a stronger IMF, at least rhetorically, but did not have the resources to back this up. Neither did he possess the support of his own party and the UK public. The House of Commons voted in July 2011 to increase the UK’s IMF contribution by only 32 votes. This small margin of victory – the narrowest since the 2010 general election – was only achieved as a result of some tactical scheduling of the vote (Beattie 2011). Despite its traditional adherence to multilateralism, Ed Miliband’s opportunistic Labour Party voted against, as did a group of whip-defying Eurosceptic Conservatives. This defiance within the Conservative party resonates with UK public opinion polls that display deep-seated suspicions of Europe and immovable opposition to bailing out the Eurozone (Niblett 2011; Knight, Niblett and Raines 2012).

“DOES THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY HAVE A FOREIGN POLICY?”

This lack of originality, vision, and coherence in both thought and deed is reflected in and is a product of the broader foreign policy orientation of both Cameron’s Conservative party and the coalition government. As regards the former, in 2006, an editorial in *The Guardian*, a leading UK paper, went as far as to ask, “[d]oes the Conservative party have a foreign policy? If it does, what is it? No one seems certain” (The Guardian, 2006).

Now halfway through its term in office, the current coalition government remains something of a novelty and continues to receive considerable attention. However, its emerging foreign policy has either been overlooked or doubts have been expressed over its coherence with one

commentator dubbing it ‘kick and run diplomacy’ (cited in Vickers 2011: 216). Initial attempts in the academic literature to take stock of the direction in which the coalition government is headed and establish whether UK foreign policy is changing appear to reach similar conclusions (Beech 2011; Morris 2011; Vickers 2011).

When seeking to understand why the Conservative coalition fails to have a coherent foreign policy, Vickers (2011) reminds us not to forget the context: from the two contrasting periods of the Blair government (the pre-9/11 optimism associated with Blair’s policy of liberal interventionism, as opposed to the post-9/11 uncertainty and pessimism), to Brown’s less ambitious policies predicated on the use of the economic tools of foreign policy. In the case of Cameron, although committed to the traditional touchstone of UK foreign policy – the bilateral US relationship – Cameron signaled a shift away from the role of close associate of the US as early as 2006. In its place Cameron expressed a desire to build stronger relations with emerging economies, especially China and India, and ultimately work in the national, rather than international interest (Vickers 2011). This is an aspiration that is all the stronger in an age of austerity and “[i]n a world of shifting economic power and increased threats, [where] the UK stands to lose a great deal of its ability to shape world affairs unless we act to reverse our declining status” (The Conservative Party 2010: 103).

Thus, “Cameron has developed a classically British foreign policy posture, themed around what he calls ‘liberal Conservatism’” (Daddow 2012). Cameron himself defined a Liberal Conservative approach to foreign policy as being founded on five propositions:

- First, that we should understand fully the threat we face;
- Second, that democracy cannot quickly be imposed from outside;
- Third, that our strategy needs to go far beyond military action;
- Fourth, that we need a new multilateralism to tackle the new global challenges we face; and
- Fifth, that we must strive to act with moral authority.

(The Conservative Party 2006)

In other words, Cameron’s main priority in formulating a foreign policy position has been shaped by the desire to differentiate himself from his predecessors, particularly former Labor Prime Minister Blair. He has sought to do this by calling for a recasting of the relationship with the US, reducing the onus on political ideology and values and instead extending the instruments of foreign policy to embrace economics and multilateralism.

However, alongside the poor evaluations of journalists and scholars mentioned above, there has been little public support for, or understanding of, Cameron's foreign policy as demonstrated by two recent opinion polls conducted by Chatham House-YouGov. After the first year of the coalition government, Niblett (2011) demonstrated that the promotion of UK business and trade was well supported both by the public and opinion-formers. However, the strengthening of key bilateral relations with emerging economies was not similarly supported with most people wanting these relationships to stay the same (only 18 percent favored stronger relations with Brazil and 19 percent with India). China proved to be the exception with 34 per cent favoring stronger relations despite holding a relatively unfavorable view of the country (Niblett 2011: 1).

A year later, Knight, Niblett and Raines (2012) highlighted the public's eventual recognition of the importance of strengthening relationships with emerging economies. However, this was where the good news for Cameron stopped. Although there may have been alignment between the public and the government's view of the world, there was little belief that the government has done a good job: 32 percent of the public regarded conditions as having worsened, and only 6 percent perceived an improvement.

Similar damning conclusions were drawn by a House of Commons Public Administration Committee report released six months into the coalition government entitled *Who Does UK National Security*: 'we have found little evidence of sustained strategic thinking or a clear mechanism for analysis and assessment. This leads to a culture of fire-fighting rather than long-term planning' (Vickers 2011: 208). Or, in other words, exactly the lack of originality and vision seen in the specific example of Cameron's contribution to the work of the G20 discussed above.

When accounting for the lack of coherence in Cameron's foreign policy, it is also important to consider not only the prime minister but also the impact of William Hague as Foreign Secretary. In some ways, his involvement has been beneficial as suggested by Oliver Daddow (2012):

Cameron has also benefitted from his partnership with Foreign Secretary William Hague and the restoration of a more equal balance in the foreign policy process between Downing Street and the Foreign Office, after the secrecy and over-centralization of decision-making during Blair's 'sofa government'.

Nevertheless, tensions emerge when it comes to the importance of multilateralism. As demonstrated above, Cameron has at least paid lip service

to multilateralism and global governance. In contrast, Hague stresses the centrality of bilateralism:

All foreign relations are bilateral, because multilateral meetings are the playing out of bilateral alliances and friendships. And I think that has been neglected somewhat, and needs re-accentuating (Crawford 2011).

This would appear to run counter to Cameron's Liberal-Conservative view of the world as well as the G20 Los Cabos statement on the value of the forum:

Despite the challenges we all face domestically, we have agreed that multilateralism is of even greater importance in the current climate, and remains our best asset to resolve the global economy's difficulties.

In short, the paucity of Cameron's Gx leadership appears to be a microcosm of the broader picture of the inadequacies of the current government's foreign policy.

Notwithstanding those inadequacies, Cameron's pledge to act with moral authority, a more stubbornly and sincerely held commitment to international aid has emerged as characteristic of his foreign policy. To this end, the final chapter of the manifesto was dedicated to this topic, which discusses the commitment to increase development aid and to lock in this level of spending; it also notes the importance of increasing the control held by recipients and the British people over how aid is spent. The chapter emphasizes the need for a trade deal to bring growth and infrastructure to developing nations. Continuing on this topic, it also states:

The global downturn has shaken up rich and poor countries alike. For poor countries, it threatens to undermine a decade's growth and poverty reduction. For rich countries, it puts new pressures on household and government budgets – nowhere more so than in the UK, where Labor's appalling mismanagement of the economy has saddled us with unprecedented levels of debt. But we should use this opportunity to reaffirm, not abandon, our values – which is why we will continue to increase the level of British aid. We will do so because it is in our national interest, as well as being the right thing to do.

(The Conservative Party 2010: 117-8)

This appears to be the one area of foreign policy in which Cameron has acted with conviction and consistency in the face of considerable opposition, especially reflected in public opinion polls. Niblett (2011: 2) demonstrates that the government's attempt to redefine the factors that contribute to UK security to include development assistance failed to strike a chord with the public (only 27 percent supported the argument). A majority of the public (57 percent) believed that too much was spent on developing countries and the public was in favor of radically cutting development assistance, although opinion formers took the opposite view. A year later, Knight, Niblett and Raines (2012) reinforced this by pointing to a majority of 56 percent of the public who believed that the UK should give no or very little development assistance, thus making the government's commitment to increase aid to 0.7 per cent of its budget challenging.

CONCLUSIONS

What might explain this anomalous example of clearly articulated leadership in committing to protect the international development budget from the Comprehensive Spending Review and the austerity inflicted on other areas of government spending - that faces opposition both within the Conservative party and UK society? Cameron's desire that 'we strive to act with moral authority' appears to make sense in this context and his actions have been cast by some (Morris 2011) as falling within the international relations English School's definition of 'great power' status.

To quote Morris (2011: 328-329) and his treatment of Hedley Bull's work, a great power must be "...recognized by others to have, and conceived by their own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties" (Bull 1977, 201-202). The importance of this latter point stems from the notion that great powers are not just unusually powerful states, but collectively constitute an institution of international society. Accordingly, great powers must conform to certain behavioral expectations and in particular must 'manage their relationships with one another in the interests of international order' (Bull 1977, 202).

In Bull's classic formulation, great powers have "a special mission [as] ... custodian[s] or trustees[s] of the interests of international society" and are required to "accept the duty, and are thought by others to have the duty, of modifying their policies in the light of the managerial responsibilities they bear" (Bull 1977, 202).

In other words, Cameron is exhibiting the *sense of responsibility* that the English School identifies as one of the defining qualities of great power

status. Clearly the impression persists that the UK is still a great power and even if it is evidently one in relative decline, certain responsibilities remain that are constitutive of this status and thereby shape behavior. It was during Parliamentary debates of Great Britain's House of Commons that this now famous adage was first said – “the possession of great power necessarily implies great responsibility” (Hansard 1817). Cameron believes that the UK should act not only as a Great Power but also as a ‘Great Responsible’ One (Morris 2011: 329).

However, when it comes to the fourth principle of Liberal Conservatism that demands “a new multilateralism to tackle the new global challenges,” particularly through Gx summitry, Cameron's record is something of a curate's egg – good in parts. On the one hand, he has clearly articulated a belief in Gx summitry and multilateralism. On the other hand, his leadership has tended towards the rhetorical – exhibiting lip service towards issues like reinvigoration of the G20 and IMF reform. The Cameron position with respect to the former presents little new thinking; and the latter position ultimately has been undercut by the reality of the government's budgetary situation in an age of austerity.

Ultimately, Cameron remains something of a mystery as a leader. He has taken a principled stand on domestic and international issues that are highly unpopular with the public and his own party. Yet, at other times his government appears to lack a coherent and consistent program of reform and indeed any idea of what it wants to do with its power and position. U-turns have been one characteristic of the first two years of coalition government and as the above-cited House of Commons Public Administration Committee reported, the government has displayed short-term fire fighting. In contrast to Blair's advocacy of a particular moral position and his persona as a true believer, Cameron has been described ‘an empty vessel waiting to be filled’ by the economist Irwin Stelzer, often characterized by opponents as Rupert Murdoch's right-hand man (Dodds and Elden 2008: 354). In any case, a fair summing up of the Cameron years so far, especially in contrast to the Blair years, might be: ‘Call it naïve. Or call it radical. But it's certainly different’ (cited in Vickers 2011: 216).

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