

**RIGHTS IN FOCUS** INSIGHT

# PROGRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICY

**Recommendations  
for the UK government**

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Essays from leading experts explore how the UK government can develop a progressive, human rights-based foreign policy. This thought-provoking collection is curated by **Amnesty International UK**.

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# PROGRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICY

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This booklet is from Amnesty International UK's **RIGHTS IN FOCUS** series which brings together expert insight, lived experience and analysis to shape human rights solutions to key policy challenges.

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# FOREWORD

The world is at a historic juncture. We face an unprecedented number of assaults on our rules-based system, taking place against a backdrop of numerous foreign policy challenges: from widespread inequality, climate change and the closing of civic space, to the spread of authoritarian practices, increasing conflict and persistent impunity for mass atrocities. The sheer scale of these problems requires global solutions – and a strengthening of the rules-based system which makes them possible. A fundamental component of that system is protection and promotion of human rights.

‘Human rights provide a compass to steer us through the challenges of our time, from the climate crisis to technological developments’

Volker Türk, UN high commissioner for human rights, September 2025

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, successive UK governments have committed to promote human rights and the rule of law in their foreign policy, both because it is the right thing to do, and because it is in the UK’s national interest.

Crucially, however, such commitments have rarely been met in full – hampered not only by geopolitical crises and economic downturn, but also a lack of political leadership, and policy and actions that are inconsistent with the UK’s duties under international law. The result is a contradictory approach to human rights – championing them in one context, but disregarding them

when they appear inconvenient.

Take a few examples from the current UK government. On the one hand it has committed to remain a party to the European Convention on Human Rights, provided at least £13.8 million<sup>1</sup> for the investigation of war crimes in Ukraine, and expressly included in the Ministerial Code the overarching duty to comply with international law. But on the other hand it has failed to effectively challenge Israel’s genocide in Gaza, and at home uses draconian measures to restrict freedom of expression and criminalise protest, treating people peacefully opposing genocide as ‘terrorists’. Such instances of hypocrisy and double standards

harm the UK's own interests.

As three top former diplomats put it: 'Our credibility on the international stage depends on greater consistency between domestic and international policies. As an open and highly interconnected economy and society, the UK's future security and prosperity depends on rules and values being

upheld internationally.'<sup>2</sup>

If the government's approach to foreign affairs is to serve UK interests, human rights standards and principles must now be applied consistently. This booklet is part of a series exploring what a progressive foreign policy means in practice.

### AMNESTY RECOMMENDS . . .

Amnesty International urges the UK government to apply human rights principles to every aspect of its international affairs. This would mean the UK:

1. Demonstrates consistency with international law – in particular the UK's obligations under international human rights, humanitarian, refugee and criminal law. For example, the UK consistently opposes the death penalty as a matter of principle but has not been a consistent supporter of international justice mechanisms to address mass atrocities.
2. Upholds principles of non-discrimination and equality – for instance, countering attacks on gender equality.
3. Ensures there is meaningful participation and inclusion, with individuals and communities properly involved in decisions that affect their human rights.
4. Ensures human rights accountability for policy and action, such as requiring human rights impact assessments prior to any trade agreements.
5. Protects human rights at home in order to promote human rights abroad with credibility.

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2 UCL Policy Lab, The World in 2040: Renewing the UK's Approach to International Affairs, 8 April 2024 [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/sites/policy\\_lab/files/the\\_world\\_in\\_2040-\\_renewing\\_the\\_uks\\_approach\\_to\\_international\\_affairs.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/sites/policy_lab/files/the_world_in_2040-_renewing_the_uks_approach_to_international_affairs.pdf)

# LEADING BY EXAMPLE

BY ANDREW GILMOUR

**The UK's double standards at home and abroad are affecting its standing in the world. We need a consistent approach to human rights – and this should be based on international law.**

To use a word mocked by self-styled anti-woke warriors, there appears to be something bizarrely ‘triggering’ about spray paint.

In May 2020, the final year of the first Trump administration, at a time of major civil protests in the USA, Stephen Miller, one of its officials most hostile to human rights urged, ‘Mr President, they are burning America down... You have an insurrection on your hands.’

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Milley, replied with an expletive, and turning to Trump, said, ‘They used spray paint, Mr President. That’s not insurrection.’ He insisted that the Black Lives Matter protests were ‘not an issue’ for the US military to be deployed on the streets of America.<sup>1</sup>

In 2025, it seems there are sadly no more Milleys either in the US or the UK. In June, some members of ‘Palestine Action’ broke into a RAF base, damaged property and spray painted two aircraft. The UK government’s response was worthy of Stephen Miller. It proscribed Palestine Action as a ‘terrorist organisation’. It

then arrested several hundred peaceful protesters (including elderly vicars) who expressed support for it, in the process making a fool of itself and a mockery of its laws at home and abroad.

‘The decision appears disproportionate and unnecessary,’ declared the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, with what many felt was understatement. ‘It limits the rights of many people... who have not themselves engaged in any underlying criminal activity but rather exercised their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association... that is at odds with the UK’s obligations under international human rights law.’<sup>2</sup>

For a mid-sized country like the UK, there are advantages in being seen to be a strong supporter of rule of law, international justice, human rights, atrocity prevention and accountability. It also fits with the UK’s comfortable image of itself – home to Magna Carta, mother of parliaments, the Bill of Rights, first to abolish the slave trade, lead prosecution at the Nuremberg Trials, founder of

Amnesty International, and a lead role in a number of post-1945 international initiatives to prevent crimes against humanity.

Prior to the UK general election in 2024, there was much talk of how a new UK government would seek to navigate a much more uncertain international environment. This was characterised by threats to global stability by Russia and China, both of which find themselves strengthened when multilateral institutions and international law are undermined. As they also do by the mounting charges of double standards levelled against Western powers who stood by, or actively supported and supplied, the first-ever genocide to have been carried out by a democratic country – and live-streamed over an extended period.

‘A war crime is a war crime, and genocide is genocide – whether it is committed by an enemy or an ally’

As one influential policy brief from Chatham House put it in May 2024, if the UK sought to be a leading voice in global governance, international development and reform of the multilateral system, the next government ‘should recognise the damage to the UK’s reputation and influence that occurs when the country disregards (or threatens to disregard) international agreements’ at home and abroad. Since the UK has historically

championed international law, it undermines other countries’ respect for the rule of law when it departs from such principles itself. And, it went on, the power of example is all the more important in these times, when the post-war system (to which the UK contributed much) is contested so vigorously.<sup>3</sup>

In May 2025, the Attorney-General Lord Hermer gave a notable speech.<sup>4</sup> At the start he announced he would address – in order to dismiss – the critique of those he described as ‘legal romantic idealists’ on the one hand, and proponents of ‘pseudo-realism’ on the other, before arguing that British leadership to strengthen and reform the international rules-based system is both the right thing to do and the only truly realistic choice.

Hermer presented the government’s chosen foreign policy of ‘progressive realism’ as an ideal middle way between the two schools of thought that he professed to knock. Provocatively (and it led to calls for his resignation from the Tory benches), Hermer compared the thinking on the British Right with the unsavoury Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, whose central thesis was in essence the claim that state power is all that counts, not law.<sup>5</sup>

One can understand the annoyance of some of his conservative critics, because Hermer’s heart seemed to lie far more in kicking the pseudo-realists while sympathising more with the legal romantic idealists (though he gave a

deliberately extreme version of the latter group's position<sup>6</sup> in order to be able to attack them too). This aside, Hermer's views, even if he was not the attorney-general, are worth looking at, because they lay out a convincing government case for why it is essential to reject the 'siren song' of rightwing politicians and media that says Britain should abandon the constraints of international law in favour of raw power.

Hermer says there is a temptation among its critics to see international law as something inflicted upon us by others, as something undemocratic and somehow 'foreign'. But this line of thinking (which is shared by leaders like Trump, Putin, Orban and Netanyahu, though Hermer does not list them) leads to a world where 'hunks could be ripped off borders and every dispute be settled by the force of the strong'. It also ignores the reality that states can use international law to protect certain values they hold dear: security of borders, human rights, equality and the rule of law.

There is one major problem with the attorney-general's speech, and it is not related to the argument. Rather it lies in the fact that the government in which he serves, despite being headed by a former human rights lawyer, seems to have a highly ambivalent approach to law, justice and rights.

It is not clear to what extent politicians on either side of the house have taken on board that Britain's standing in the world – especially when it comes to

taking the country seriously on any human rights or justice issue in the years to come – has taken a major knock from on the one hand calling out the Russian invasion of Ukraine together with its indisputable war crimes, and proposing all sorts of escalating sanctions, while on the other hand being relatively muted on Gaza, resisting almost all sanctions and continuing to provide vital military components and intelligence for the Israeli Defense Forces.

As more and more independent experts and institutions have concluded that the Israeli treatment of Palestinians is not just a series of war crimes and crimes against humanity, but has crossed the threshold of genocide<sup>7</sup> as defined in international law, the UK continues to provide many forms of strong support to Israel. This has weakened the position of Israeli moderates and will go down as the first time in our history that the UK government deliberately and systematically aided and abetted a party carrying out a genocide.

The UK government points out (and it is not alone in this) that international courts need to make a formal ruling on whether what we are witnessing every day on our screens, despite the banning and killing of hundreds of journalists, as well as medics and UN staff members, constitutes genocide. But UK officials are fully aware that the first article of the 1948 Convention on Genocide calls on all state parties not just to punish the perpetrators of genocide after the event,

but also to prevent genocide occurring, if there are grounds for believing that it might be happening. Indeed the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has been explicit since January 2024 that the claim of genocide is ‘plausible’.

To claim that the UK cannot take proper action until the ICJ issues its final judgement – which in light of the court’s notorious slowness might not emerge until 2028, by which time the Israeli government may have tired of the killings and destruction, faced with its growing level of pariah status around the world, and ended them – seems like a deliberate attempt by the UK government to fudge its legal obligation to act to prevent further killings.

At the end of every genocide, the international community and individual governments tend to say they are very sorry and they ‘didn’t know’, but they will work to ensure it ‘never happens again’. The UK government acts in the same manner, but this time the excuse that ‘we didn’t fully know’ will not be remotely plausible – because with modern communication (which was not available during the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Srebrenica and Darfur) the atrocities are live-streamed every day.

Prime Minister Starmer’s human rights background and the attorney-general’s speech suggest there is a high level of awareness of what is in the national interest and also the right thing to do. But there is quite a gap between such awareness and the actual

behaviour we witness. This can be explained by expediency based on real and understandable fears (such as Nigel Farage capitalising on anti-immigration sentiment, or worry about a mercurial and vengeful US president increasing tariffs). On the other hand, such steps as the 40 per cent cut to the UK aid budget, which was devised and announced shortly before Starmer’s meeting with Trump in the Oval Office, the continued provision of components for the F 35 bombers used with such lethal effect in Gaza,<sup>8</sup> and the measures relating to Palestine Action – presumably done also to impress the Trump administration – go well beyond what many observers see as justifiable.

This is why it is of great importance that a Standing Group on Atrocity Crimes has been launched in July 2025.<sup>9</sup> This is an independent initiative dedicated to urgently strengthening the UK’s approach to atrocity prevention and its leadership on international justice. Its goal is to create a unified, effective and enforceable atrocity prediction, prevention and response strategy within the UK government, aligned with existing international legal obligations. It seeks to strengthen UK laws on universal jurisdiction to prosecute international crimes, as well as sanctions legislation.

It is needed because without some impartial mechanism which would make ministers less afraid to call out powerful perpetrators on their own, there will always be attempts to politicise the government’s response to atrocity crimes.



The ideal would be an approach followed by a number of European countries – including Ireland, Norway and Spain – whose leadership has shown the courage to do what they know is right. At the beginning of September 2025, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez in London decried Europe and the west’s double standards over Ukraine and Gaza, describing the latter as ‘one of the darkest episodes of international relations in the 21st century’, and adding that these double standards were unsustainable ‘if we want to increase our credibility when it comes to other sides’.<sup>10</sup>

The Standing Group on Atrocity Crimes is expected to lead to a new tool for handling atrocities and genocide. But far preferable, though not mutually exclusive, from a national interest point of view, would be to have a UK government

that actually followed its own rhetoric and could be counted on to have the moral courage to understand that a war crime is a war crime, and genocide is genocide – whether it is committed by an enemy of the UK or by an ally. And then to take serious measures to prevent the genocide from escalating. Anything short of that implies a level of complicity and cynicism that both the international community and history will find hard to forgive and forget.

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  - 4 Attorney General Lord Hermer KC, RUSI Annual Security Lecture, 29 May 2025, [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/attorney-generals-2025-rusi-annual-security-lecture](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/attorney-generals-2025-rusi-annual-security-lecture)
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# DEFENDING CIVIC SPACE

BY DANNY SRISKANDARAJAH

Danny Sriskandarajah calls on the UK government to act strategically to expand civil society space around the world.

Keir Starmer's government has made unequivocal commitments to upholding human rights, the rule of law and 'open societies', stating that its efforts to do so will be shaped by a 'progressive realism'<sup>1</sup>. While this has been heartening to hear, if the government is to deliver on this vision, I urge it to bolster this rhetoric with deliberate, strategic action specifically to defend and expand civic space around the world. Defending civic space is a progressive, realistic, cost-effective means of achieving a range of UK foreign policy objectives, delivering real results for the prosperity and security of the British people, for the UK's moral standing and influence on the international stage, and generating tangible benefits for citizens in every region of the world.

Civic space – the enabling environment for people to organise and mobilise to shape the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies – has come under widespread attack on every continent in the last decade. A record number of countries are sliding towards

authoritarianism, with more than 70 per cent of the world's population now living in repressive, authoritarian regimes. According to the latest ratings from the CIVICUS Monitor,<sup>2</sup> a global tool used to track civic space, only 40 out of 198 countries and territories have open civic space. Eighty-one countries and territories are rated in the two worst categories – 'restricted' and 'closed' civic space. These ratings indicate widespread, routine suppression of fundamental freedoms.

'When civic space is restricted, a range of other goals – from sustainable development to social transformation – are undermined'

This unprecedented pressure on civil society manifests itself in a range of ways: from the violent killing of human rights defenders and journalists to attempts to close down the space for democratic dialogue and debate and undermine civic resilience. States intent

on closing civic space are doing so systematically: weaponising emerging technologies to surveil, censor and suppress dissent, using mis- and dis-information as means to erode trust in civil society actors and democratic institutions, undermining the rule of law and criminalising peaceful protest. Evidence of this crackdown can be seen in authoritarian and democratic contexts alike across the world.

When civic space is restricted, a range of other goals – from sustainable development to social transformation – are undermined. Civil society actors are critical to creating desperately needed solutions to local and global problems, including poverty alleviation and reaching the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Civil society provides humanitarian aid, leads reconstruction efforts, collects evidence of corruption and human rights abuses, builds sustainable peace, fights climate change, and catalyses and coordinates international action. We see this today in Ukraine where voluntary initiatives are making a huge contribution to resilience;<sup>3</sup> in Gaza, where Palestinian journalists continue to provide crucial first-hand information despite a relentless onslaught of suffering;<sup>4</sup> and in South Sudan, where youth groups are delivering humanitarian aid in the worst-hit conflict zones, as well as engaging in attempts to advance democratic civilian rule.<sup>5</sup>

Civil society actors successfully

campaign for new legislation and constitutional change, expose corruption, trial ways to tackle the climate crisis, and work to advance the rights of women and girls. They are the on-the-ground, agents of change we need to ensure the sustainable impact of the UK's foreign policy objectives. It is in the strategic interest of any government committed to positive political and social change to support and partner with civil society. By choosing to centre the strategic and systematic defence, support and revival of civic space, the UK government can secure the sustainability and impact of its foreign policy objectives.

Of course, these are straitened times. Instability abroad and shifting geopolitics have already led the government to announce that it will reduce aid from 2027 in order to boost defence spending.<sup>6</sup> The rise of right-wing populist parties is adding to the pressure on centre-left governments to move away from 'globalist' priorities towards a more 'hardheaded' focus on domestic agendas. And, around the world, we're witnessing an alarming retreat from international solidarity as voters buy into prevailing narratives that question the relevance of international issues. In this context, it is imperative that the government makes a clear, strong argument for how its foreign policy improves the lives of British citizens and connects with domestic priorities.

This should first involve a powerful rebuttal of the notion that promoting human rights will somehow undermine our national security or go against national interests. Societies that protect human rights, the rule of law and open civic space tend to be more stable, prosperous and less prone to conflict. They offer less fertile ground for radicalisation and extremism, lessening the risk of terrorism and international insecurity and benefiting the UK's own security and economic interests. Respect for human rights and the rule of law are fundamental building blocks of an environment conducive to investment, innovation and economic growth, including opportunities for UK businesses to thrive. Inadequate protection of human rights creates a damaging cycle of insecurity, instability and poverty.

Being a good faith player on the international stage – acting with moral clarity and leadership – is overwhelmingly in the UK's national interest. Advocating for civil society and upholding human rights strengthens our credibility and soft power, enabling us to engage constructively with other nations and effectively advocate for our priorities in international forums. Failure on the international stage always costs the British people.

Protecting civic space and working to improve the resilience of civil society – as well as having value in its own right – also offers clear value for money

for the British taxpayer. In an era of fiscal constraint, investing in local civil society actors breaks the cycle of aid dependency and catalyses more efficient, sustainable, locally owned development solutions.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has made some good progress in this regard in recent years, including its consultation on how to manage civil society and civic space programming, which contains many excellent recommendations;<sup>7</sup> its newly deployed civic space diagnostic toolkit;<sup>8</sup> its continued commitment to the Lifeline Embattled CSO Fund;<sup>9</sup> and its partnership with Comic Relief on Shifting the Power.<sup>10</sup> But, crucially, the FCDO still needs a cross-departmental strategy to guide its work to defend civic space and a mainstreaming of support for civil society throughout its programming. Without this, opportunities to maximise its impact will continue to be missed.

A new funding model for its work with civil society should prioritise long-term, locally led development with a focus on the provision of accessible, flexible, multi-year, core funding. Support should be tailored not towards project delivery, but towards building the long-term organisational effectiveness and impact of a broad, diverse range of civil society partners in the global south. Moving the allocation of funding closer to the ground in local contexts around the world – and, crucially, devolving

much of its decision-making – would ensure great impact with less money.

Empowering UK embassies to work directly with local civil society organisations (CSOs) and providing more funding and support to civil society networking bodies are two tried-and-tested options here. Factoring in the potential of alternative financing mechanisms such as decentralised funding pools and public-private partnerships should also form part of the FCDO's efforts to build sustainability and reduce donor dependency.

Changing its funding model to be more locally led would also be a crucial step towards achieving the fundamental transfer of power, which needs to define the new development landscape. Going local offers value for money, technical efficiency and development impact, but it also offers the UK government the opportunity to achieve so much more than that. The dominant development modalities of the last two decades have nurtured a cadre of contracted, professionalised civil society organisations, unsuited to disruptive change. Advocating for human rights and social justice is an awkward fit with donors' insistence on short-term measurable projects. The very organisations that should be best positioned to fight back against closing civic space have either been severely under-resourced or have become totally reliant on foreign funding. The dependence we've created

has led to many countries now viewing CSOs as suspicious agents of external forces. There needs to be an honest acknowledgement of the impact of our funding decisions and a commitment to fundamentally transform our approach.

The FCDO should not see civil society organisations simply as aid recipients, programme implementers or sources of information, but as equal, legitimate and expert partners for change. UK diplomats and embassy staff should develop mutually accountable, beneficial relationships with civil society and human rights defenders in country. Such partnerships would enable the FCDO to meaningfully consult with civil society in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies, strategies and programmes and provide the UK government with the knowledge and legitimacy to be outspoken in their diplomatic defence of civic space and human rights.

Of course, a further component to the UK's credibility and success in this area is what it does to protect and enhance civic freedoms within the UK. The launch of Keir Starmer's Civil Society Covenant<sup>11</sup> earlier this year, recognising the crucial role that civil society must play in national renewal, is to be welcomed. But CIVICUS currently rates civic space in the UK as 'obstructed', worse than many other western European and North American countries. At the risk of stating the obvious, getting our own house in order

is a prerequisite to effective advocacy on democracy and human rights issues on the international stage.

The UK government must face down a global retreat from international solidarity; it must stand against deepening authoritarian influence and fast eroding freedoms, and it must keep faith with a postwar human rights system under severe strain. The shrinking of civic space is not an abstract concern, but an existential threat to the future of democracy, prosperity and

international stability. In a multipolar age, overcoming our global challenges will take coordinated, collective action. For this, we need a vibrant, healthy civil society that can build power from below and connect beyond borders.

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# RIGHTS AND REPARATIONS

BY AFUA HIRSCH

Righting the wrongs of colonialism is in our long-term national interest. So why does the UK drag its feet?

In 1985 the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) convened in Nassau. It was a fitting location for a colonial relic in a changing world. Like so many Caribbean nations, the Bahamas' identity was shaped by its British imperial past. But proximity to America and a realigning world order were rapidly reshaping its future. The main item on the agenda for that reshaping was economic sanctions against apartheid South Africa. Which all 48 of the other Commonwealth members were ready to impose.

Not Margaret Thatcher, however. At her insistence, only Britain voted against. No doubt she believed she was acting in Britain's interests. But when it comes to matters of foreign policy, there are the immediate interests of transactions and short-term gains. And there are long-term interests of values, relationships and standing in the world.

By 1985 it had become predictable that apartheid was going to fall. The ANC was going to come to power,

and South Africa was going to change. The only thing hard to envisage was how much. South Africa is now the most advanced, diversified, and productive economy in Africa<sup>7</sup> – an 'upper-middle income' country, a leader among emerging economies on a number of key issues, and an influential member of BRICS.

It also, a British diplomat based in South Africa told me, continues to harbour a long-term grievance against the UK. 'One of the principles of South African foreign policy is what would the Brits like us to do? Let's do the opposite. And it's all because of Thatcher's support for the apartheid government.' Nobody now thinks that Thatcher's approach was, in any way, in the long-term interests of the UK.

If this sounds familiar, it should. Forty years on, the 2025 CHOGM in Samoa was a new variation on an old theme: racial justice, and Britain's refusal to acknowledge it.

Reparations were to 2025 what apartheid was to 1985; the issue that

could not be ignored. Yet somehow, Britain attempted to ignore it. After even King Charles acknowledged the centrality of the issue, publicly recognised the ‘painful’ history of the British Empire’s role in slavery, member states led by Barbados, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Jamaica insisted the time had come for discussions on reparatory justice.

These members spoke publicly about how insulted they felt when UK prime minister Keir Starmer said discussing reparations would lead to ‘very long, endless discussions’ about the past. Instead, echoing David Cameron’s disastrous trip to Jamaica in 2015, Starmer suggested the emphasis should be on ‘looking forward’.

The 56 Commonwealth members included the demands anyway, the declaration<sup>8</sup> produced after Samoa noted ‘. . . calls for discussions on reparatory justice with regard to the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans and chattel enslavement and recognising the importance of this matter to member states of the Commonwealth. . . the time has come for a meaningful, truthful and respectful conversation towards forging a common future based on equity.’

Engaging in calls for reparatory justice should not be based on Britain’s short or long-term economic and political self-interest. Like ending apartheid, the case is easily made using

the values Britain purports to be its own. As Hilary Beckles, the Barbadian scholar who has been central to the 10-point plan put forward by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) says: ‘The reparations movement is going to be the greatest political movement of the 21st century. There is nothing that can stop it because it is embedded in the search for justice, equality and democracy.’<sup>9</sup>

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However, the fact that these demands lie so firmly in Britain’s self-interest only makes the failure to enter a dialogue more remarkable. I visited Beckles’ office earlier this year in Jamaica, at the Centre for Reparatory Justice at the University of the West Indies campus in Kingston. Like Barbados, whose prime minister Mia Mottley in 2021 led the nation to become a republic, removing the Queen as head of state, Jamaica may soon follow suit. Perhaps the King, who is losing territories over which he is the monarch, has a keener grasp of the urgency required. He has gone further than any elected UK prime minister in expressing regret for the painful history underlying such transitions.

But regret is not enough. The global movement for reparatory justice is



gaining momentum, demanding a profound shift from a long-standing posture of regret to one of active accountability and systemic repair.

What does that repair look like? Downing Street officials have told me the figure they most fear is one calculation which puts the amount owed by Britain to the descendants of the enslaved and colonised at £18 trillion. However, this only shows how little they have been listening to the real demands that have been set out.

The CARICOM plan for reparatory justice is more subtle and complex, comprising elements including a full and formal apology, repatriation programmes for those desiring to resettle in Africa, development programmes for Indigenous Peoples, and investment in cultural institutions to preserve heritage and identity – including supporting national archives where the documentation surrounding this history is in jeopardy due to a lack of resources.

There are also important demands for alleviation of public health crises – not least since so many chronic health problems among Caribbean populations are directly linked to the intergenerational legacy of enslavement, literacy and technology transfer. Debt cancellation – which continues to cripple many of Britain’s formerly colonised Commonwealth ‘partners’ – is a key pillar which was also emphasised in Samoa and will

resurface at the next summit in Antigua and Barbuda in 2026.

The irony is that Britain already engages in many of these activities in lower income countries, understanding that to do so in general enhances its standing in the world and helps build relationships. In the case of the Commonwealth, these are partners who are already in Britain’s ‘sphere of influence’, as diplomats like to describe it, sharing a language, legal system and other institutional ties that descend from them being colonised in living memory.

It is clear that Britain is not averse to the individual requests in the reparatory plan, but averse to admitting it owes them. I have written in the past about how senior cabinet figures told me that their fear is any admission paves the way to legal liability in court. However, Foreign Office lawyers have pored over this question for years and are yet to find any legal reason why admitting the full and formal apology Caribbean nations want, would equate to a legally meaningful admission of guilt.

In any event, the guilt is already established, as a matter of historical fact. The British enslaved 6 million Africans, both imported and those who were born on their plantations. For West Africans enslaved in Jamaica, for example, life expectancy was seven years. The period of enslavement and wealth extraction and colonisation

meant that on achieving independence, even more than a century after the end of enslavement, the population was impoverished, illiterate and vulnerable to extremely poor health.

While those descended from this legacy are deeply aware of its impact, those in Westminster are not. The same cannot be said, however, of all British institutions. From International Court of Justice Judge Patrick Robinson deeming the refusal to pay reparations ‘not legally sustainable’, to the Church of England announcing its own reparatory justice fund of £100m, many others realise their credibility rests on moving with the flow of history. The *Guardian* newspaper, the National Trust, Glasgow University, as well as individual families who profited from enslavement, are among those thinking about how they can meaningfully implement reparations of their own.

These are British institutions thinking not about foreign policy, but about their relationships at home. Reparations, perhaps more than any other issue, explodes the binary between Britain’s domestic and foreign policy. As an imperial power, Britain extracted people as well as commodities and land, encouraging many of the people affected to migrate to the UK.

It has been well documented how unequal the terms of that migration were, and the extent to

which hierarchies of racial disparity are evident across the UK, from the criminal justice system to healthcare, education and the media. Ignoring these injustices on the international stage sends a potent message to diverse communities in the UK: that the government does not see the interests of these racially minoritised Brits as among those it represents on the world stage. A message that deepens divisions and undermines trust.

Perhaps British politicians have calculated that they no longer need the Commonwealth, that they can afford to alienate its members and preside over its fragmentation. However, in a post-Brexit world where Britain frequently referenced the group as an alternative trading bloc to the EU, and a stalwart of its influence on the world stage, that interpretation is unlikely.

More likely is the reality that Britain has not thought this through – that it has not engaged with the real demands for reparatory justice, nor their world-building power for those who advocate them. The world Commonwealth members want to build is one that *does* look forward, meaningfully creating a just global order. This involves dismantling unsustainable 500-year-old hierarchies and ‘unravelling the racial-caste system on which they were based’,<sup>4</sup> positioning the UK as a progressive actor in shaping a more equitable international system.

That would not only be the right thing to do. It might just be the only way to show that Britain is capable of earning the kind of moral legitimacy it sees for itself in the world – and to further its own long-term interests.

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## **PROGRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICY**

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Published September 2025

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