Learning from history

David Chandler is the author of 'Western Intervention and the Disintegration of Yugoslavia 89-99', in which he argued that: "Western intervention in the former Yugoslavia has created a vicious circle where one destabilising intervention has been followed by another as international institutions have set the framework of fragmentation."

He was a Council of Europe election monitor at the Kosovo municipal elections on 28/18/01 and has closely studied the mechanics of the administration of occupied Kosovo. Phil England interviewed him about his new book and recent developments.

Phil England: Your book *Faking Democracy After Dayton*[1] shows that in Bosnia and Kosovo the elected governments and transitional councils are in effect puppets democracies there to rubber-stamp the policy initiatives of the High Representatives and the international community. Can you outline the problems you see with these protectorates and why you think this model will not work in Afghanistan?

David Chandler: Many people say that protectorates are too unwieldy. They argue that the fact that you've got all these different international bodies involved—the UN, NATO, Council of Europe and the European Union—has been a problem that's been responsible for the lack of any progress in Bosnia and Kosovo. How can you work efficiently if all the members have to agree before you can apply a policy?

But I think there's a more basic problem. At the end of the day, you can't nation build or impose democracy or a political system on another country. Any solution has to come from, and be accountable to, the people that live in that country.

In order to bring society together, there is no point in just having a vetted, right-on, liberal parliament. It may look very good on paper but unless these people have any basis in that society, it's going to be very difficult for them to overcome those barriers and to take some accountability for policy making and change the political context.

In Afghanistan, America has got the power to dictate exactly who's going to come to power. Perhaps it will be the old king who hasn't been there for twenty-eight years and some perfect multi-coloured coalition. But what they're really concerned with is how to engineer for the Taliban, the Mujahedeen groups and the Northern Alliance—groups they don't like politically—not to have too much say in some future government. They can do that easily, but the chances of that ever cohering Afghan society or creating a sustainable process of peace building where there's an exit strategy for international bureaucrats? That's never going to work.

Look at Bosnia where you have all these discussions about how to minimise the influence of the nationalist parties and stop people voting on ethnic lines. 'Maybe if we ban some candidates as being potential war criminals or sack a few elected presidents for being obstructionist, then things would be much better.' You can do a lot of imposed engineering, so that in Bosnia today, the nationalist parties aren't in power at the state or the entity levels and superficially you might think that's really good. But then you realise that that's only been the result of people being kicked out of office or the international community fiddling how elections are managed.

At the moment the international community run Kosovo and Bosnia without too much difficulty by imposing what they want. But as long as the political institutions have no accountability or autonomy for taking decisions that everyone inside Bosnia can live with it will be artificial.

The lesson is that foreign intervention is destabilising and doesn't give people the chance to establish a viable political system. Why repeat a failed process of external meddling in other people's affairs?

PE: They're still selling the idea that although these places are protectorates, they are in transition. But from your perspective there is no exit strategy for the UN and no prospect for self-governance in the future.

DC: After six years in Bosnia people are saying, 'Well, we're going to have to be there for a long time.' Whenever there's an opportunity to roll back international rule in Bosnia or to bring some NATO troops out, people say, 'Well it's a matter of principle, if we were to let people have a bit more power now that would give the hard-liners more confidence, it would disempower some of the NGOs and the people we want to support.' And in Kosovo there's an indefinite mandate for the international community.

Also, because of the moral rhetoric that we fought this war to civilise, liberate or empower people the international community can't just leave Bosnia or Afghanistan to govern themselves because the original legitimacy of the war would disappear. They have to paint these societies as being totally incapable of governing themselves, as being run by criminals and warlords, people and governments which are not to be trusted.

My personal view is that until the international community sees the political sphere as a place for resolving issues and getting people together and working across political, regional and ethnic divisions and resolving problems with a degree of autonomy, accountability and responsibility, then we're never going to progress. At the moment all the international plans and strategies are about how to avoid the issues and how to feel more comfortable.

PE: In Kosovo, not only have the international community's attempts to impose democracy failed, the exercise has caused a huge amount of human suffering and cost a huge amount of money. The 'international community' have to stump up to rebuild the country that it destroyed and then someone has to pay for all the staff in the huge bureaucracies that are imposed. Surely non-intervention is some kind of solution?

DC: I'd agree, but we'd be in a minority of two. Today I was at this think tank for the UN and democracy[2] meeting of policy advisers. They say, 'Dave, we can't even have that discussion. It's fair enough to say it won't work or they shouldn't be there or they shouldn't have bombed Afghanistan to start with, but from a policy point of view we have to deal with the world as it is. The reality on the ground is that the UN will be involved whether they like it or not. What we have to think about is how can we manage it.' It's difficult to argue for the principles of democracy, sovereignty or even international law, when there's no respect for them and when there's no real social force in society or even internationally that can put them into practice.

The UN is not acting out of choice in a sense. There's no way that Bush and Blair will want to take responsibility for the mess that they've made in Afghanistan. It wasn't a great place beforehand but after who knows how many weeks of war, everything's going to be totally screwed up. So they're very lucky that they've got this new rejuvenated UN with new priorities that's so desperate for a role in the world that they're going to take on the job of administration afterwards.

The UN aren't looking forward to it but they know that if they don't do it they won't get any money from America. The only role that the UN can play today is hand-maiden to NATO and America. They're not playing their old role any more so the whole situation is desperate.

The old UN approach was to be fairly neutral, let people negotiate their own peace agreements, perhaps put in some blue helmets to man a peace line but to respect sovereignty. The UN's Brahimi Report (written by Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN special envoy who is advising on Afghanistan)[3] said that that doesn't work because it doesn't solve the problem. Take Cyprus or other places where you've had partition or you've let people get on with it, you've still got partition and Blue Helmets manning a police line. What these people argue is that protectorates don't just stop the war but also stop the causes of war.

But I think that even the policy makers are beginning to recognise that this new approach doesn't really solve the problem either. And I think that's the real nut that we've got to crack, to explain why these protectorates are even less likely to work than the old style partition.

PE: You say that the turning point with Kosovo was when the local conflict was turned into a humanitarian issue and that that created the justification for military intervention[4]. There was this phoney document that the Germans were supposed to have had called "Operation Horseshoe."[5] And Racak was a set up in a sense[6]. To what extent did NATO force through the military intervention in Kosovo before all the political and diplomatic means had been exhausted?

DC: People would argue that the Rambouillet meetings weren't really face to face talks between the Serbs and the Albanians and that the American state department wrote the agreement, in the same way as the US state department wrote the Dayton Agreement for Bosnia. They'd argue that the US forced the agreement separately on the parties, and the decision to make it a military intervention rather than a diplomatic one was taken by America. I'm not privy to the higher echelons of American planners and why they thought the war worthwhile. Whether they thought they would win it easily and whether they thought it would look good or whether it was another mechanism for putting pressure on Milosevic. But it's true that all the diplomatic possibilities weren't pursued.

Look at Afghanistan—no diplomatic niceties bothered with remotely. That just shows, in our unipolar world America doesn't have to go through that anymore. If you want to start a war, preferably against a state that's unable to defend itself, and if you can dress it up in the humanitarian liberal rhetoric of today, you're going to get mass support for it.

In Kosovo it was wrong for the Albanians to think that because the Americans were bombing the Serbs that everything would be hunky-dory. It's true that Kosovo was historically one of the most poor and run-down regions and maintaining law and order has always been difficult. Tito's policy of levelling the country economically didn't really work. So the origins of the conflict lie partly in historic divisions and partly in a failure of socialist management policies of economic development.

But I think the real problem in Kosovo has been the fact that instead of negotiating and working through a solution, people have been encouraged to fight a war that they knew they couldn't win, but they hoped to draw in the international community. When that

happens it encourages people to refuse to negotiate with their neighbours because you rely on the international community instead.

Unfortunately the only people that are going to be able to rebuild Kosovo are the people that live there and to do that you're obviously going to have to build relationships with countries around you—like Serbia—whether you like it or not.

Very few Serbs remain in Kosovo. The few that remain were too scared to go the polls and boycotted the municipal elections because they didn't respect the international protectorate. There were Serbian representatives on the Transitional Council, although sometimes they'd refuse to attend. In reality the protectorate has overridden even UNSC resolution 1244 which gives respect for Yugoslav sovereignty. When I was there, outside the polling stations there were American flags and Albanian flags. Pretty strange for somewhere that is still supposed to be part of Yugoslavia. Ethnic Albanians have voted in elections so far because they thought it would symbolise a move towards independence. But as the years go by I think you'll see lower turnouts as people realise the farce that these elections are under the protectorate framework.

In Kosovo they have their first provincial elections in November. So you will have the same two tier system that you have in Bosnia where you have an elected government and above them an international administration.

PE: In Kosovo and Bosnia, the organisation responsible for the "democratisation" programme is the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). I don't think many people would know who they are, where they came from and why they exist. But a huge organisation nevertheless. And you've looked at them very closely in your work and you've even worked for them as a monitor in various elections.

DC: The OSCE are an intergovernmental organisation that was set up during the Cold War, I think in 1975, with the Helsinki Agreement. The idea was to put pressure on Eastern Europe around human rights and then there'd be an opening with economics and trade. So it was a Cold War body but the secret of the OSCE's success was that it never had a formal mandate. It was very much an informal series of conferences. With the end of the Cold War it was bodies that weren't tied to the UN Charter or Cold War mandates saying you couldn't interfere in politics and sovereignty. One of the OSCE initial big things was a series of conferences around minority rights where it was agreed that Western powers had the rights to monitor minority rights situations in Eastern Europe and a whole new network and mechanisms of regulation. It was worked out in a very one-sided way—obviously neither the Basque question nor the Northern Ireland question was a concern of minority rights, all the minority rights questions were in Eastern Europe. It was always a problem to phrase it in a universal language and then in the small print say these national questions aren't counted because of violence, or because they are indigenous minorities. Now they've developed a whole way of regulating the political process so you'll see the OSCE monitoring elections and the media in various states. In Bosnia and Kosovo the OSCE don't just monitor the elections, they set them up, they make the laws and regulations and the same with the media as well.

PE: The OSCE was accused of meddling in the Belarus elections last month. You were a monitor at the elections and wrote a piece on that[7]. There was also a piece in the Guardian on the US manipulation of the Belarus elections ("Operation White Stork") and the fact that and that it was modelled on what they did to get Kostunica into power in Belgrade[8]. At a Committee for Peace in the Balkans public meeting recently, Ann Mahon MP was warning that NATO now has Belarus in its sights. The US through the National Endowment for Democracy has been manipulating foreign elections quite some time, quite systematically[9]. Covert funding and election management seems to make a mockery of pretensions of encouraging democracy.

DC: There's a load of different so-called 'democracy' approaches. One traditional one is to fund political parties or independent newspapers or give them campaigning advice which on one-hand is a fairly traditional meddling approach. You could be generous and say, well at least there's an element of democracy about it because they argue that there should be a level playing field, that in these "transitional states" the governing party owns all the press, they've got all the publicity and all the rest of it.

With Belarus, the US Embassy and the OSCE permanent mission played a big role in getting an opposition candidate together who they thought could do a Kostunica. They persuaded the main five opposition groups to unite behind one candidate. But it was the candidate that they didn't want to unite behind—Goncharyk—who they saw as being a Trade Unionist and maybe he could win a few votes from President Lukashenka. But all that happened was that it undermined the choice for Belarussian voters. Also, once the international community gets behind one party or one faction, their policies become much more geared to the international community than to the electorate. In Belarus it was hilarious in a way that as soon as they knew they had international backing from the opposition they weren't really worried about winning the election. They just complained that the elections weren't really fair, they were fraudulent and tried to get the international community in to overturn the result and appoint their person. On the day of the elections when the other candidates were out campaigning, Goncharyk was at the Hotel Planeta talking to parliamentarians from the OSCE and the Council of Europe as opposed to the electorate. So that approach failed and I think it was very detrimental to democracy in Belarus.

PE: What is the point you are making in your new book about the connection between human rights and international interventions?[10]

DC: A lot of interventions today are based on protecting the rights of other people. Once you call an issue a human right what you're saying is that this right is so important that it should be policed, monitored or administrated independently outside the sphere of politics, democracy and accountability. An international institution can act for the rights of people in Kosovo but the people in Kosovo have no say over what is done in their name. At the same time, the British public have no say over what the government does in their name. The government says, 'We're not acting on your behalf, we're acting on behalf of other people'. So these universal rights are very different from political rights because they don't have a lot of accountability attached to them. So no matter how much the international community might screw up a situation with political intervention, military intervention and then protectorate style intervention, it's never their own fault. That's why these policies are repeated.

Quite often the slippery concept of human rights gives power to the already powerful. It's giving the US and other Western states more power to intervene in smaller states in other parts of the world outside of a framework of international law, outside of a framework of the equality of political sovereignty—and to create a new, pre-1945, pre-UN framework. By throwing away that Cold War framework we are very much entering the framework of might is right.

The more we see the end of international law and the end of respect for sovereignty the more conflict we'll see where people will be intentionally trying to bring in the international community because they'd rather have a protectorate than face a democratic mandate or negotiate from a position of weakness. Some people might argue that it's a license for minorities who want to separate but at the end of the day, it's the major Western powers that decide which campaigns they're going to support and which countries they're going to undermine. I worry that there's going to be more Kosovos, Bosnias and Afghanistans, wars allegedly fought for the protection of human rights and dressed-up in the liberal terminology of empowerment and we're basically going to go back to an old colonial era of enslavement—a few independent rich and powerful states while everyone else is going to be dictated to.

Clinton, Bush and Blair love going in on a white charger saving the victims, but there's very little thought given to what happens afterwards to the consequences. It's very short-termist. The lesson we've seen time and time again is that the international community isn't really concerned with human rights in Kosovo or Afghanistan. They're either concerned with their geostrategic interests or, more likely, with getting a good sound bite for domestic audiences.

Notes

1. David Chandler Bosnia: Faking Democracy After Dayton (Pluto Press, 2nd Edition, 2000).
2. Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).
3. General Assembly Security Council, Report of the Panel on United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, 21 August 2000, http://www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations/
4. David Chandler "Western Intervention and the Disintegration of Yugoslavia" in Degraded Capability: The Media and the Kosovo Crisis Philip Hammond & Edward S. Herman, eds (Pluto Press, 2000).
5. Foreign Affairs Select Committee Fourth Report: Kosovo, paras 93-98.
6. Hammond & Herman, eds, ibid pp 117-120.
7. David Chandler - Dictating Democracy in Belarus http://www.spiked-online.com/articles/00000002D26F.htm
8. Ian Traynor "Belarussian foils dictator-buster... for now", The Guardian, 14/9/01.
9. Eg William Blum "Rogue State" (Zed Books, 2001) pp. 168-183.
10. David Chandler From Kosovo to Kabul: Human Rights and International Intervention (Pluto Press, forthcoming March 2002).