

## Save the corporations...I mean children

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Former Minister of the United Kingdom and Global Legacy Award Honoree Tony Blair (AFP Photo/Stephen Lovekin)

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When Save the Children chose to bestow the Global Legacy Award on Tony Blair, the charity inadvertently revealed the dark underbelly of NGO activity.

When Tony Blair received the Global Legacy Award last week from Save the Children, an organization dedicated to *“transforming children’s lives,”* it seemed like a bad joke to many people. This, after all, was a man who had been willing to use fabricated evidence to launch an illegal war against Iraq during his time as Britain’s Prime Minister, a conflict that irrevocably *“transformed”* the lives of thousands of children by killing them. These days Blair is advising the new military regime in Egypt and doing a sideline in Saudi oil kickbacks. We don’t hear too much about children in either of those countries, but I’m willing to bet that living under military or aristocratic dictatorship isn’t too good for the little mites, especially when, as is the case with Saudi Arabia, child marriage is nothing unusual.

Considering this track record, I would think that anyone who has simply refrained from hurting children would be more qualified to receive an award from a charity dedicated to their protection than Tony Blair.

So how did *“Teflon Tony”* not only get away with murder, but actually get rewarded for it? Did the good folks at Save the Children simply suffer a regrettable overdose of saintliness, deciding to sweep Blair’s past transgressions under the rug, and judge him not lest they themselves be judged? It sounds like the kind of misguided, goodness-orgy that an organization dedicated to helping children might be susceptible to. But if your

idea of charity is still stuck in the age of rending thy cloak in half to clothe the naked, and dividing thy bread to feed the hungry, think again.

These days “*helping*” the needy is big business. Much has (rightly) been made of Save the Children’s direct connections to Blair: UK Chief Executive Justin Forsyth worked for Tony Blair back when he was Prime Minister, as did Fergus Drake, the charity’s UK Director of Programmes. But these two hardly make up the entire decision-making apparatus of the global behemoth that is Save the Children. How did such a disastrous decision slide through the ranks? A quick scan of the current and former occupations of Save the Children’s trustees and top staff shows why the idea of rewarding the former PM slipped down their gullet so effortlessly: Barclays Bank, Unilever, Proctor & Gamble, Xerox, Yahoo, Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer, American Express, Goldman Sachs, KPMG, Coca-Cola, IKEA...the list goes on.



Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Tony Blair (AFP Photo/Andrew Burton)

With a line up like this behind Save the Children, it’s positively shocking that it took the organization so long to hand old Tony his lifetime achievement award. It would be hard to think of someone who has done more for the corporations that many of the trustees and management staff seem to have such a close relationship with. Not least of these favors would be letting them avoid paying millions in taxes by failing to close loopholes (e.g. Proctor & Gamble and [IKEA](#) and [Barclays](#)).

And, while Save the Children is in the news today, its establishment friendly structure is by no means unusual. Many large NGOs are little more than public sector mirrors of private sector interests, with a top staff that has every reason not to rock the status quo.

### **They still fulfill a useful purpose, just not the one projected to the public.**

Governments like to “*involve the public*” by consulting with NGOs so that they can pretend to meet people halfway and “hear their concerns.” Ensuring that no one in a position of power at those NGOs has any truly radical ideas is a good way to control this conversation while maintaining a paper-thin veneer of political inclusiveness. At the same time big corporations, who are allowed to avoid taxes can donate a small fraction of those funds to the right kind of NGO. By “*voluntarily*” giving back to the communities they’ve sucked so much out of, as opposed to the “*involuntary*” way in which everyone else “*gives back*” on their annual tax return, big corporations can adorn themselves with the laurels of their “*community outreach*” and “*proud sponsorship*.” Of course it is only natural for a company that gives such a large donation to be rewarded with a seat on the NGO’s board. Just as it is only

natural for governments to “reach out” to the kind of NGO that has a silver-plated list of trustees and upper management that they already do business with rather than one run by the kind of rabble that make uncomfortable demands. It’s a match made in paradise for everyone involved.

Save the Children’s award to Tony Blair may have stepped over the line and provoked outrage, but this problem has been cruising quietly just under the surface for a long time, as big charities have moved so far into lockstep with government and corporate interests as to become virtually indistinguishable from them. You can’t challenge the establishment when you are part of it.

But NGOs are good for so much more than just siphoning off domestic disgruntlement into the Kafkaesque world of “civil society discourse.”

NGO just means “non-governmental organization,” i.e. all you really need to be is an organization that is not officially part of the government. And you can slice that pretty fine.

Consider the Club of Madrid, composed of nearly 100 former “democratic” Presidents and Prime Ministers (e.g. Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter) and funded by (among others) the cities of Rotterdam and Madrid, the World Bank, the IMF, the Governments of Belgium and Mexico and the International Development Agencies of Australia and Sweden. The “club” also receives sponsorship from [Wal-Mart](#), [Microsoft](#) and [NATO](#). Or perhaps I can interest you in Kenya’s Institute of Economic Affairs brought to you by the Canadian and Swedish International Development Agencies, as well as the European Union and the Center for Private Enterprise. Past donors have included the [World Bank](#), as well as the Dutch and Danish Embassies and the British Council.



Club of Madrid (Flickr.com/ Club de Madrid)

Some NGO’s receive more than 90 percent of their budget from a single government source, sometimes a foreign government. This is particularly prevalent in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

In Kyrgyzstan between 70-100 percent of the budget of a typical NGO is provided by foreign donors and “the overwhelming majority” of NGO officials recognized operating there “that the accountability of an NGO to the donor is a top priority.” A study conducted in Georgia, Moldova and the Ukraine revealed that only one-fifth of NGOs agreed that their strength came from their membership base. The researchers concluded that “the elitist nature of NGOs” could be attributed to the fact that they received most of their funding from foreign sources, citing frequent NGO meetings with foreign embassies. These kinds of NGOs are sometimes called “AstroTurf”, because they

don't have any real support – they're merely a front organizations meant to pursue the agenda of whoever holds the checkbook, often without the full knowledge of those actually doing the work on the ground. These aren't charities but weapons in the endless battle that is global politics, quite literally a fifth column operating behind enemy lines. According to American politician Ron Paul, the US funneled \$5 billion through NGOs active in Ukraine in the service of overthrowing Victor Yanukovich's government. It is pause for thought, especially when one notes the ferocity with which donor nations resist the slightest regulation of NGO activity in foreign nations.

When Russia passed a law in 2012 requiring that NGOs register as foreign agents if they received foreign funding it was touted around the world as proof of Vladimir Putin's insanity. How dare he try to get foreign NGOs to do something as demeaning as register, an action all "real" foreign people already have to undertake when they set up in most European countries, including Russia? My guess would be that one dares these things when foreign-funded NGOs start meeting with embassies from donor nations. That's the kind of activity that rings alarm bells.

There are, of course, real grassroots NGOs out there, somewhere beyond the circle of limelight that encloses the gala dinners and fancy trophies. There are people who do good work, providing relief or a hand up for those most in need, but Blair's Global Legacy Award shows just how much all of their efforts have been hijacked by the fraud that global "charity" has become, an empty shell all too happy to glad-hand those at the top while kicking those at the bottom.

Some of the statistics in this article taken from: Anara Musabaeva "Responsibility, Transparency and Legitimacy of Socially-Oriented NGOs in Kyrgyzstan", International NGO Training and Research Centre, January 2013

Orysia Lutsevych "Briefing Paper, How to Finish a Revolution: Civil Society and Democracy in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine" Chatham House.

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