

Save the Children Trying to “Contain” Damage from Tony Blair Award: Leaked Email

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Tony Blair with Abdulfattah al-Sisi, the leader of the July 2013 military coup that toppled Egypt’s first democratically elected president. ([APA images](#))

[Save the Children](#) is trying to tamp down coverage and “contain” the damage from the award given to former UK prime minister [Tony Blair](#) by its US arm.

A leaked internal email to staff from the international charity’s chief executive Jasmine Whitbread does not indicate, however, that the charity intends to withdraw the “Global Legacy Award” Blair received at a glittering New York gala on 19 November.

On Tuesday, *The Guardian* [reported](#) that Save the Children staff were in revolt over the award.

“We consider this award inappropriate and a betrayal to Save the Children’s founding principles and values,” more than 200 of the charity’s staff wrote in an internal protest letter sent to management.

Leaked email

In an internal email to the charity’s staff leaked to The Electronic Intifada, [Jasmine Whitbread](#), chief executive of Save the Children International acknowledges that the uproar over the award “touched a nerve close to our sense of identity.”

She says, “We are all frustrated and disappointed about the situation we are in,” but blames the crisis on Save the Children US, which failed to consult with the rest of the charity’s units.

The American wing of the charity “simply did not anticipate anything sensitive,” Whitbread writes, “in the USA Tony Blair is widely seen very positively for his contribution to international aid.”

But rather than right the wrong and withdraw the prize to a man regarded by many as a war criminal, Whitbread seems more concerned with suppressing criticism and press coverage.

“Urgently, right now, a team is trying hard to contain the situation and stop things escalating further, detracting from our wider work for children,” she states. “The point has been made and more coverage of the issue will not help children.”

She complains that, “Sadly there have also been leaks of internal emails to the media.”

Whitbread's full email is below.

International outrage

The award has been strongly criticized by Kenneth Roth, director of Human Rights Watch who tweeted that Blair was a “well-paid dictator’s PR agent.”

200 staff are furious [@SavetheChildren](#) honored Tony Blair, well paid dictator’s p.r. agent. <http://t.co/JoqVlreCWX> pic.twitter.com/lx6hKYGreT

— Kenneth Roth (@KenRoth) [November 25, 2014](#)

Blair is widely reviled for his role in the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, which cost [hundreds of thousands of lives](#) and left the country devastated.

Since stepping down as UK prime minister in 2007, Blair has become notorious for reaping millions in shady deals with shady regimes [including the Egyptian dictatorship](#).

He has also been accused of using his role as envoy for the so-called [Middle East Quartet](#) as a means to gain access to powerful people to [advance his private business interests](#).

More than 110,000 people have signed an [online petition](#) calling on Save the Children to revoke the award to Blair.

Jasmine Whitbread's email in full

To: SCI all staff

Dear colleagues

I wanted to write to you directly about the concerns over the recent award given to Tony Blair by Save the Children US at their annual gala dinner in NY. In the scheme of all the critical work we are doing for children around the world some of you might ask why I am focusing on this issue, but it has touched a nerve close to our sense of identity and as such I think it's important that we have a shared understanding of how this happened, what we are doing about it, and how we will come out of this together.

First, understanding how this happened...

We are all frustrated and disappointed about the situation we are in, but I think we can understand how this happened: In our current structure, members make their own decisions about their marketing and fundraising as long as these are in line with our brand and other agreed guidelines. If there is a sensitive question then they consult, and this does increasingly happen. In this case, SCUS simply did not anticipate anything sensitive – in the USA Tony Blair is widely seen very positively for his contribution to international aid. Carolyn asked Justin to deliver the invite and he did so because he wanted to be helpful to Carolyn. I first heard about this when it became public and was immediately in touch with Justin and Carolyn, who agreed with me that there should have been a better process of consultation and risk assessment and that we must learn from this.

Simultaneously, staff in different parts of the world began to express concerns. We respect your views and want to hear from you. It was very helpful to hear

from those of you who communicated internally and we appreciate being able to engage directly. Some staff chose to express themselves by signing a petition which I believe we can expect tomorrow. Sadly there have also been leaks of internal emails to the media.

What we are doing about it ...

We have to address things on two levels – both urgent and important. Urgently, right now, a team is trying hard to contain the situation and stop things escalating further, detracting from our wider work for children. The point has been made and more coverage of the issue will not help children.

Importantly, we must safeguard and rebuild the trust and commitment to our shared values that we have worked so hard on over the last few years. This will take time and effort. We will want to design a process to reach out widely to staff and use this opportunity to really bottom-out our beliefs and strengthen the kind of culture we want to have in Save the Children. Your contribution to this will be vital.

While I can't pretend I'm not very concerned about this situation, I'm confident that we can pull together to come out of it in a better place. There is so much that is amazing about what we are doing together for children – our signature programs, our campaign, our humanitarian responses are reaching millions of the world's most marginalised children. We have to keep focused on this. We are still in the early days of working together as One Save the Children – we have come so far, but we still have a way to go. Let's use this experience, painful as it is, to inform our next strategy. We have a unique opportunity to forever change the world for children by 2030 – but only if we learn from experience, build a shared culture and align all our efforts behind our mission for children.

Thank you for listening. I also want to listen to you, so do feel free to reply as always, plus I will be holding open calls to hear your thoughts and perspectives.

Yours

Jasmine

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