

My speech during the debate on Official Development Assistance and the British Council

I support the Government's estimate and I look forward to its passage. I also back the Government's judgment at this very difficult time, when so many economies, including our own, have been badly damaged by responses to the pandemic. But I also understand the mood of the House and I understand that a number of my hon. and right hon. Friends whom I respect have misgivings about all this. I would just like to make a few remarks in the spirit of trying to build some bridges between the Government and their critics, who have been very wide-ranging in this debate.

The first point I make is that I do not trust the figures. I think that the Government understate just how much we already do and how much we already spend. We are much more cautious about what we regard as aid expenditure than some other countries we are compared against, even though we usually spend more than they do as a percentage.

Let us take, for example, an area that colleagues have already mentioned. This country has received a very large number of economic migrants and asylum seekers in recent years. In the year to March 2020, the last for which we have official figures, 715,000 people came to live in our country, and many of them came from poor countries that have qualified for overseas aid. We do not fully account, in the way that one might, for the first-year set-up costs—the housing, the public service provision, the top-up benefits and the other assistance that people are rightfully given when they come to live with us and we wish them to live to a reasonable standard. Surely, helping people who wish to come here because they find their own countries so disadvantageous is a very important part of our overseas aid.

We are also too cautious about all the expenditure we make through the Ministry of Defence. Why were we in Afghanistan? Afghanistan is one of the main recipients of our aid, and in recent years we have been spending considerable sums of money on support through our military and the advice we offer. Those things should also be taken into account to get a realistic picture of just how much the Government are spending on necessary assistance abroad.

The second issue that has been raised in the debate is that colleagues fear a loss of influence. I would like to reassure them that surely this year, of all years, is when we have seen a major advance in British influence. We have just taken our full seat with a vote on the World Trade Organisation, and we are busily signing off a number of trade agreements around the world that we could not have done in previous years.

The Prime Minister has just very successfully chaired the G7 and has helped to bring together the seven most powerful western democracies in terms of

economic strength to reach important agreements to improve the world outlook. We have COP26 coming up, when I trust that British chairmanship will be astute and helpful in order to agree something that many Governments in the world talk a lot about, though not all of them do as much as we do to try and see things through. We are very much the second most important member of NATO in terms of contribution after the United States of America, and we are a force within NATO to make sure that it is used for the good, as a force for peace.

On the 0.7% target, I make no secret of the fact that I do not like targets like that. I did not feel at the time it went through that there was any point in trying to persuade Parliament because Parliament was very hooked on such a target. The difficulty with a target like that is, as we have seen, that national income can change quite rapidly in ways that people did not predict—if something like a pandemic strikes, in particular—and it is not always possible, when we get the recovery, to build up the spending as quickly as the GNI, and it would be silly to have to spend money when we do not have really good projects.

Nor do I like the idea of Governments passing legislation to bind themselves. It seems to me completely pointless. What matters is the word of the Government. If circumstances change, they may have to change, and all the time that the Government control a majority, the fact that it is in legislation does not make any difference. The Government still have to decide whether to keep their word or whether force majeure or force of circumstance requires some temporary or permanent change.

In this debate, I think lots of colleagues have all decided to duplicate and replicate one another's speeches by saying how much they dislike any kind of cut in our immediate aid programme. I would like to have heard, from all those who are understandably enthusiastic about the good that aid could do, rather more discussion of what works best when we have limited money—as we always will, whether the limit is 0.5% or 0.7% of our GDP—so that we can do the most good with it. We have had several years of 0.7% but we still have the same list of main countries needing aid, so we know that this is not a simple fix, that we are one of many and that we need to work with other partners around the world. We need to harness the private sector and the charitable sector; it does not all have to come from British taxpayers.

When we are looking at progress, we first need to establish a peace. Quite a lot of the countries that need a lot of aid still do not have a peace; they have a civil war going on. That means that any particular projects may just be damaged or wasted because of the lack of that fundamental condition. It is best if there is a decent Government who can deliver and who are not corrupt. To what extent are we allowed to try to influence Governments in the right direction, because we do not wish to become a neo-colonial power?

We need to harness the private sector more so that the money that our taxpayers and other advanced countries' taxpayers put in is multiplied several times by getting that investment in the water systems, the communications systems or the food systems that are needed, which should come more from commercial work. Above all, I think our message should be that

trade is often more effective as a means of promoting economic growth and prosperity than aid. We, above all, should believe that, now that we are leading advocates of freer trade around the world and back there in the WTO. Is it not much better that we help to offer contracts to people who can organise economic activity, which creates better-paid jobs and things to do, rather than just having one-off amounts of aid to ease the particular problems of not having a decent economy?

This year, above all, surely is the year when Britain can be truly proud of its achievements in this area, because, thanks to our scientists, the NHS and the Government, we are giving to the world the cheapest vaccine, the one non-profit vaccine—often a free vaccine, because our taxpayers are standing behind that offer. This surely sums up the generosity of spirit of the British people, and the success of the British economy and our world influence: that it will be a British vaccine that is so often deployed, and that it was a British vaccine at the heart of the Prime Minister's successful negotiations at the G7 to get other rich countries to get on with the task of vaccinating the world.