

Three cheers for overseas aid

I am glad the UK spends money on ships and equipment that go to assist countries facing flood and tempest. I am in admiration of our medics and armed forces when they sometimes go to help treat and contain dangerous infectious diseases abroad. I am pleased the UK as one of the leading and richest countries of the world helps alleviate and tackle poverty in the developing nations.

The UK should set out what it can do and what it is good at, and should be generous where need arises and where we have the means to help. I want to see reform of our budgets and our activities in these areas so we achieve more with better value for taxpayers.

I went along with the Conservative leaderships' support for hitting the 0.7% target of GDP, though I have misgivings about such targets. I do not think we should commit to spend a certain proportion of a fluctuating and usually growing number. We should decide on spending on a case by case basis and against our general budget background. We do not pledge to spend a fixed proportion of GDP on health or education or policing, but look at those budgets in the light of needs and costs. I trust the government will now repeal the 0.7% pledge in our law codes.

Labour will doubtless oppose such a change. They averaged under 0.4% of GDP on overseas aid in their period in government 1997-2010, despite pretending to support the international commitment to spend around twice as much as they managed. They never explained why during all those years they did not do what now they say we must do. Those who want to see more overseas aid spent might do better to lobby the EU and its member countries who spend together well below the 0.5% the UK is now indicating as a new temporary level.

Last year the UK again spent 0.7% or £15bn on overseas aid. £10bn of this was spent on projects and activities we chose along with the recipient country in so called bilateral aid. The balance of £5bn was spent by our giving the money to the EU and other multinational bodies to spend as they saw fit in so called multilateral aid. As we leave the EU it is a good time to bring our overseas aid spending back in house and decide on how we can best help those in need. We should also look at the full support we give, which goes wider than the items allowed under international conventions to be called Overseas Aid. Some of our Defence expenditure is aid, being used to help bring peace to strife torn countries and providing assets to tackle disasters.

I want us to identify the areas where we have most expertise and can do most to help. Maybe the UK should specialise in a few areas like the provision of clean water to each home, the provision of primary education to all girls as well as boys in poor countries and the roll out of programmes to tackle infectious diseases.

We should follow certain guidelines. The money should for preference be spent in the country we are trying to help, using as much local labour and skills

as possible. Where we need advanced country inputs these should usually come from people and companies based in the UK. We should work on the principle that it is better to teach a hungry person to fish and farm for themselves rather than sending them food parcels. The aim is to get countries out of poverty, not into dependence. More trade is often of more help than more aid.

It will be great to see us achieve more by concentrating our efforts in areas where we have most to offer, harnessing public and private sectors together, and taking control with more programmes we run for the benefit of the poorer countries. .