

Jenny Tonge on: Aid for the Developing World

REPORT OF THE ALDES FRINGE MEETING AT THE SPRING 2004 CONFERENCE

This proved to be both a fascinating and challenging meeting. Drawing on her professional expertise as a doctor and her parliamentary experience visiting developing countries seeing aid projects first hand, Jenny made a number of key points in her presentation and in answers to the stream of questions after.

Currently only the Nordic countries give the UN recommended 0.7 % GNP of aid each year with the UK barely half way there. The USA lags at < 0.1% and even this is tied to purchases of US made equipment and services. Moreover use for family planning, safe motherhood, or prevention of AIDS is prohibited due to pressure from the evangelical lobby.

However while money was important it was not sufficient in itself. Clearly it needed to be spent wisely but this is rare. Aid actually comes from a great host of national government departments and literally thousands of NGOs, all working single mindedly to their own agendas, frequently competing with each other. Jenny had visited Ruanda 4 years after the genocide and found chaos. Land rovers from every aid agency in the world seemed to be there yet the Ruanda Government, who needed to build institutions and confidence in their administration if the hard work was to bear fruit over the long term, had no water, electricity or photocopier in their offices, and no means of deciding priorities in their own country.

Jenny proposed 5 fundamental changes. First, the 'aid industry' had to be structured and simplified. Instead of everyone piling in everywhere it should be possible for single countries (and NGOs) to become partners with single governments with specific and more comprehensive commitments. Thus the British Government might fund primary education in one country. One NGO, not 25, might be responsible for rural water supplies in, say, Malawi.

Second the 'West' must foster trade. It made absolutely no sense to undercut local farmers by exporting food and even more stupid to do so with the help of US or EU subsidies.

Third, there had to be programmes to improve health, especially malaria, diarrhoea etc. and AIDS. Of these AIDS was the most urgent because, while most diseases took the frail old and very young, AIDS decimated the economically active backbone of a country.

Fourth, there must be more control of

small arms. On a visit to Southern Sudan Jenny had found it easier to buy weapons than food. Dealers could source weapons in the old USSR countries and ship them by roundabout route to Africa operating from a mobile phone while walking down Richmond High Street. Where there were problems getting whole weapons across borders, dealers were simply arranging that they be shipped in parts. Lastly, and most important of all, one had to invest in education. Without



education individuals cannot upgrade their skills, women appreciate how to plan their families and neither men nor women understand the value of organisation, institutions and democracy.

However Jenny added that we should not be over optimistic at the speed democracy could take root. After all Britain had struggled with different forms of government for 2000 years and our system was still not perfect. In Kosovo she said candidates wanted power for itself: they had no concept of offering alternative programmes to the electorate. We have to remember said Jenny that democracy depends on stable and secure societies where there is sufficient trust between parties for them to accept the potentially dangerous notion that the different groups should actually 'take turns' to have power. In Uganda, where progress was being made, the President had refused to countenance political parties. Instead he had created a pyramid structure of representation where elected villagers in turn elected others to districts and so on in steps up to parliament. This was probably more appropriate at this time

Similarly, said Jenny, one should not exaggerate the pace at which economic progress can be expected. Essentially it requires the raising of skills (human capital) and the substitution of labour by machinery (financial capital). Unemployment will leap if the pace of change is too rapid, and intermediate steps are required. Jenny gave an example of one 'intermediate' solution: a borehole pump driven by a roundabout. Water was raised as the children played!

Jenny also commented on the good example set by many multinational companies. She pointed out that Britain's education, health and government had developed *after* the industrial revolution and been facilitated by the wealth created by it. Currently de Beers were 50:50 partners with the Botswana Government in the diamond business. This was resulting in free education and health care and corruption-free government in that country. The 2 parties had a mutual interest. For example De Beers need AIDS under control otherwise they could lose one trained worker in 3. In Kenya, Brooke Bond was providing housing, schools and health care for workers on its tea plantations. TESCO, sourcing mango touts in East Africa, was also acting responsibly.

We should not, said Jenny, damn multi-nationals for being multi-national. Rather, through persuasion and shareholder pressure, raise the profile of social and environmental responsibility in more companies. The great advantage of supporting companies was their commitment to the long term. Too frequently aid projects foundered through corruption, lack of skills or neglect when funding ended. Accra's water supply and the Owen Falls hydro electric dam in Uganda had both struggled with maintenance.

There were other lessons to be learnt from the UK's industrial revolution. Early 'education' was directed to learning basic skills and was largely technical in nature. Embryo industries were small and local. Credit was arranged on a micro scale often through co-operatives, and examples were given where similar initiatives were working well today. It should be possible of course for developing countries to learn from 'the West' and progress faster. Jenny mentioned a team of doctors who were giving time to transfer skills and facilities to fellow doctors in Sudan. The catch was that once a third world individual attained professional status he or she was tempted by better prospects in the West. The morality of this intellectual theft was something we in this country must think hard about.

The aid 'business' has been developing for 50 years. There are now many examples of both failure and success. It is time to stand back and make some unsentimental decisions about how to move forward. Jenny's presentation shone much light on where one should look.