

# The Pearson Commission On International Development

The Report of the Commission on International Development was published under the title Partners in Development. Praeger, distributed in Britain by Pall Mall Press, 1969. 18s. The following articles discuss some aspects of the Report.

## HOW WILL BRITAIN REACT TO THE REPORT?

by Frank Judd\*

The aid lobby has never been more politically articulate. Gone are the days of charitable appeals alone. Ministers and M.P.s of all parties are finding themselves subjected to a constant flow of well argued and effective pressure. The Voluntary Committee on Overseas Aid and Development and its political power house, Action for World Development, combining the efforts of the principal voluntary agencies and the Overseas Development Institute, are endeavouring to put aid at the centre of the pre-election stage.

It is not so long since the sophisticated "in group" on the fringe of Whitehall used to argue that it would be disastrous to make aid a political issue. This, it was said, would flush the opponents into the open and prove counterproductive as the general public became aware of their taxes being channelled off to Africa and Asia. Of course this view was wrong. In an age of consensus politics with even Labour governments playing hard for the middle ground sensitivity about public expenditure has led to a steady fall in the proportion of GNP allocated to aid and development programmes. The advocates of aid therefore have no alternative but to build up public pressure. As Enoch Powell and the other short-sighted little Englanders begin to play to the gallery the challenge has to be accepted. There are few

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painless short cuts in a democracy.

The policy of the pressure groups is very much in line with Pearson. The Action for World Development manifesto and the recent sign-in largely based on churches have called for the early fulfilment of the 1% of GNP UNCTAD target. There is nothing very original about the Pearson report and the academics will inevitably have countless reservations, but it does bridge the gulf between the initiated experts and the wider cross-section of committed activists. In succinct and hard hitting form it gives them precisely the ammunition, and the encouragement, for which they have been looking. First it demonstrates that nothing could be more false than the image of passive, lazy native populations sitting back waiting for manna from the industrialised world. Growth rates in the economies of the developing world outstrip growth rates in the earlier stages of industrial revolution in the West and set a pace to be envied by the present generation of British Chancellors! Outside assistance is critically important but it is marginal. More than eighty per cent of the resources for progress come from the developing countries themselves. Both these points can make a vital contribution to transforming public attitudes by helping to undermine popular misconceptions. However, the strongest plank in the Pearson platform is that far from our being confronted by a bottomless pit the problem could prove finite. If six per cent per annum growth rates can be maintained in the developing world, self-sustaining growth should be reached by the year two thousand. One of the essentials in order to achieve this is the provision of one per cent of GNP by the industrialised world. Pearson has now made plain that whatever the contribution to be made by private investment at least 70% of the aid programme must be official. Indeed he points out that without sufficient official effort the essential conditions for private investment will be lacking. This proposition has been quickly absorbed and deployed by the activists. They can also argue that if we accept the need for aid nothing would be more wasteful than to provide too little.

Where the aid lobby remains at least a little uncertain is in its self-conscious preoccupation about its motivation. Some believe that the only acceptable reason for aid is pure morality. Aid is right. Not to give aid is wrong. Others, worried about the realism of politics, dismiss the moralists and present the case simply in terms of enlightened self-interest. They claim that capital and interest repayments taken together with export orders placed in Britain as the result of the international aid effort mean that we are already gaining. Increasingly there is a third line of thought, somewhere between the two. It is frankly socialist. This holds that the relevant philosophy is the acceptance of interdependence. In a highly complex national and international society it is impossible to look to your own well being as an individual or nation without looking to the well being of the wider community of which you are a part. For strategically and economically vulnerable Britain this seems particularly sound.

The pressure from outside Parliament is reflected in pressure within the House of Commons. After publication of Pearson and before the cabinet's recent decision on aid almost 120 Labour backbenchers signed a motion calling on the government to meet the 0.7% of GNP target. After the cabinet's decision seventy Labour backbenchers, led by Reg Prentice, again signed a motion, this time recording profound disappointment. The positive views are not limited to the Labour side. Most of the Liberal bench is favourable and a number of Conservatives led by members like Bernard Braine, Sir George Sinclair and David Crouch forcefully support the cause. Most members of the Select Committee on Aid, chaired by Peggy Herbison, appear to be well disposed and its eventual report following the previous work of the Select Committee on Estimates should prove helpful.

In the meantime there is no room for complacency. In the shadow of the Pearson Report and the last UNCTAD

commitment, not to mention the unanimous vote at the last meeting of the Socialist International which called for 1% of GNP by 1972, the government's forward planning on aid as announced in the White Paper on Public Expenditure is disappointing. While during the past five years almost all other aspects of public expenditure have maintained or increased their share of GNP, aid has fallen from over 0.5% to a little over 0.4%. The government's new projection of the aid programme would mean that far from any likelihood of reaching 0.7% by 1980, let alone 1975, we shall be lucky to reach 0.5% by 1975 and we shall only do so if what some have described as "wishful thinking" comes true. There is to be a minimal increase in aid in the immediate future - so small that it may well decline still further as a percentage of GNP - but we are asked to believe that there will be a significant upswing at the very end of the five year period covered by the White Paper. This sudden improvement in the curve would have to continue into the last half of the decade if there was to be any hope of arriving at 0.7% by 1980. Scepticism can surely be forgiven. The aid lobby was looking for a meaningful improvement next year.

It is as well to remember that things might have been a good deal worse. Rumour has it that the Treasury had hoped to freeze aid at its current level in money terms for the next five years. It seems that there were intensive and revealing discussions in the Cabinet which amongst other things demonstrated that a number of our political leaders had not done their homework and just did not know how unsatisfactory our record had become. In the event, when after several postponements the decision was made, the majority in favour of advancing even a minute distance on the Treasury position may have been as small as one. The fact that there was a majority at all is almost certainly related to the work of all the pressure groups. Their task now is to regroup and prepare for the Second Front. It would be tragic if just when dialogue is being established the lobby were to disintegrate. The opportunity should be

taken to improve the range of argument, moving for example into the realms of international trade structure and of well-informed discussion on the implementation of the Jackson Report on the United Nations and its agencies. It is also essential to extend the ranks of support. More Trades Unions and enlightened industrialists should be in the fight. At the moment the quality of pressure is not matched by quantity. In each constituency in the country every candidate must be compelled to face up to the issue of aid before the next election.

Just after devaluation in 1967 a public opinion survey revealed that aid was by far the most popular item for cuts in public expenditure. The aid lobby must direct its educational campaign at the general public as well as at the government. This may yet prove to be the more exacting task.