

Speech by O' Donnell on ODA

29th June 2005

Liz O Donnell T.D. Dáil Éireann Private Members Motion

Ceann Comhairle, I welcome the opportunity contribute to this timely debate. I note the Minister's lengthy and informative contribution to the House last night in which he comprehensively addressed the motion before us, and dealt with all the cross-cutting issues which affect the global poor.

I fully recognise the comprehensive nature of the tabled motion, dealing as it does with issues of aid, arms, trade and the environment- all topics atop the G8 summit agenda - but in the time available to me, I would like to focus on Ireland's overseas development aid programme, in the context of our foreign policy.

Like it or not, and it may be uncomfortable for those of us on the Government side, the issue of Ireland's aid budget is the dominant issue for public discussion, and has been for some time, since it became clear that the Government had allowed the target of 2007 to slip.

As former Minister with responsibility for that area of policy for 5 years, and as the person who brought the proposal to Cabinet, that Ireland would reach the UN target of 0.7% by 2007, and stood with the Taoiseach in New York as he announced it, I feel a particular responsibility and personal disappointment that for reasons that have never been properly explained, this policy decision has been reversed. Certainty was removed and our intentions left open ended. Worse still, there has been a slow unravelling of the principle of reaching the UN target in some quarters, and this doubt will persist until a new date is set.

This was no ordinary policy imitative made on the hoof, or spun in a press release. Extensive pre-Cabinet negotiations, preparations and arguments were undertaken, over a protracted period. The decision was in accordance with the then Programme for Government. Moreover it enjoyed the support of all parties in the Dáil and the social partners, churches, trade unions etc.

Following the Cabinet decision, I chaired an extensive year-long review involving stakeholders, representatives of international organisations, Secretaries General of three Government departments, and other eminent persons; and put in place a comprehensive blueprint to underpin the expansion of the Programme.

Issues looked at covered the geographical spread of the programme, the capacity issues, staffing and resource issues, the mix of activities which comprises our programme, a review of our model of aid, and a limited range of new policy areas, specifically a focus on HIV and AIDS.

We decided to stay, and deepen our engagement, with Africa to increase the capacity of the missionaries and NGOs who depend on our resources for their excellent work, and to carefully expand into other poor African countries on a gradual basis. A new priority country was to be East Timor, and we also looked at developing a programme in Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia.

All of this is laid out in the review of the aid programme set out above, and I say this not to be unhelpful but to make the point to colleagues that those who say the decision was unplanned or in some way un-evolved or premature, are wide of the mark.

Looking at the motion, as amended, there is much agreement to be found. The motion calls on the Government to set a new target date, and an important concession is there from the Government, that they will set a new target before the Taoiseach attends the Millennium Summit in New York in September. That is certainly good news. The question is what the timeframe will be.

Understandably, abandoning the 2007 date has met with acrimonious criticism. I think that whatever appraisal we make of Ireland's performance on ODA, we should make it a fair one. The truth is important in these matters.

It is fair to say that this Government has moved away from meeting the UN target by 2007. That is fair, true and regrettable. However, I will not attempt to justify it as others have done.

For myself, it is indefensible as a political decision, and the Government has been rightly criticised, including by Members from this side of the House and by the Foreign Affairs Committee.

However, it is also fair to say that the Ireland's aid programme has risen by €387 million, from €158 million in 1997 to €545 million since 1997, and it is true that Ireland remains a leader among nations of the world in terms of the contribution we make per capita to ODA.

Our aid figures are certainly respectable and above EU averages, and indeed greater as a percentage of GNP than any of the G8 countries, as the Minister outlined to the House last night. Our focus on the least developed countries is commendable, as is our position on debt cancellation. And of course, that all our aid is untied is to our credit.

But, Ceann Comhairle, this does not take away from the political reality that a solemn commitment made to the international community, by Ireland, has been reneged upon. The Taoiseach says we are not alone in this. The aid field is littered with broken promises.

Many promises and undertakings have been dishonoured by others, and it should be remembered that the UN target from 30 years remains unreachd by all but 6 countries. But, we decided in our senses to buck that trend, and it was our way of marking the millennium, and representing a testament to our civilised values as a nation. We cannot now seek cover, by hiding with other defaulters.

The sad political reality is that aid budgets in every Government are the most vulnerable to attack and plunder from competing domestic demands. That is precisely the reason why, as Minister, I argued for and achieved a multi-annual financial package, and an agreed schedule of incremental allocations to bring us to the year 2007, thus liberating the programme from the annual estimates wrangle, where the aid budget is pitched against other domestic priorities.

Notwithstanding that agreed programme, slippage was allowed to happen, and we now hear our aid programme again enmeshed and competing with legitimate domestic funding priorities.

I welcome the fact that guaranteed increases have been agreed for a three period, amounting to a total of 1.8 billion. But in my view these must be seen as minimum increases, and additional funds will have to be allocated, if a credible advance towards the UN target is to be achieved, by a newly set date.

I've said before, that the global poor do not march on parliaments; they are out of sight and out of mind. At times the squalor and hopelessness of their lives renders them and their plight unthinkable and forgettable. Thankfully an alliance is growing amongst our citizens, young and old, based on activism and idealism, which we will see tomorrow, and I welcome this as a solid contribution to government policy, from our civil society.

As Jeffrey Sachs has pointed out,

"we cannot simply close our eyes and hope that Africa's problems will resolve themselves, because they will grow steadily worse if we continue to ignore them. That is not good for anybody, neither for Africans, nor for rich countries. Right now, Africa has 900 million people, most of them impoverished, but in one generation, that number will exceed 1.5 billion people struggling against disease, instability, hunger, and violence. So the problem will not go away on its own. We must help solve it".

Kofi Annan said in Dublin recently that coming to the aid of the global poor is not just about charity, but about enlightened self-interest. We ignore the global poor at our peril, in a world that is increasingly inter-dependent.

The central point I want to make is not really to do with percentages, or absolute values of aid. It is to do with solemn commitments, and the integrity that underpins them.

Ireland gave a solemn commitment, made a promise in our full senses to the international community that we would meet the target by 2007. Making that commitment meant first winning the argument that it was the right thing to do. We won that argument- in Cabinet, with NGO's, the social partners, and gained cross-party support. Winning that argument was and is the central principle that underpinned the commitment.

In all this debate we must be resolute on this side of the House. We cannot re-open the argument on the principle of solidarity with poor countries. We cannot begin to unstitch the basis for the commitment to 0.7%. It was the right thing to do when the commitment was made and it remains the right thing to do.

We cannot stop believing in the aid endeavour, or be sidetracked by those who were never believers, in the capacity of the poor countries to develop with our assistance.

I look forward, Ceann Comhairle, to the Government announcing a new target date before the end of the summer, in advance of the UN Millennium Summit in September.

This is a critical point. It is the point on which Ireland's bona fides will be judged domestically and internationally. The European Union recently agreed to new targets on

ODA. Member States, which have not yet reached a level of 0.51% of GNP on ODA, should individually reach that level by 2010.

They have also undertaken to achieve the UN target of 0.7% by 2015. As far as I, and the Progressive Democrats are concerned, 2015 is too late a target for Ireland at least, and we should not allow ourselves to be lapped in this fashion, because we lack resolve.

It's too late for the people ODA assists, too late for the agencies doing the great work on the ground, and it is too late for Ireland. If Ireland wishes to maintain its position as a world leader in terms of ODA, we must set an earlier target date.

Our dynamic economy makes possible an earlier target date of 2010, and that is what we must aim for. But to show good faith and credibility on this, we must frontload the increases.

People want their Governments to do more, to stretch themselves. Bob Geldof, Bono, Jeffrey Sachs- they realise the choices faced by Governments- will it be spending on A&E, CIE, the HSE, RTE or on ODA? Our people will, I believe, accept reductions and support shortcomings at home to help those living in abject, pitiful poverty.

I have said on many occasions that once you have seen suffering abated, hunger sated and fear give way to hope, because of aid funding, you cannot turn away. When you have seen the scale of unmet needs, when you know that lives are saved by intervention, it becomes not a choice but a moral imperative.

Aid is Ireland's most important foreign affair, as a non-aligned neutral country. We are known for our humanitarian relief and peace-keeping.

That moral imperative, which drives our foreign policy, should be the context for decision making at Government, EU, UN and G8 level. Over the years, Irish people have demonstrated that they allow that humanitarian and moral imperative to shape their own actions, giving as generously as they do as individuals, both their time and money, to so many causes.

As Bono has said in relation to Africa, and I applaud him for his sincerity and advocacy on this, we could be the first generation that can unknot the whole tangle of bad trade, bad debt and bad luck.