

Hilary Benn and the fight against global poverty

The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for International Development, was a guest of the University on Friday, 12th January 2007, and addressed a packed Curtis Auditorium. He was accompanied by Jim Cousins, MP for Newcastle Central. The event was chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Christopher Edwards, who recalled that the week had started well with the Special Honorary Degree Congregation and, in welcoming Mr Benn, expressed confidence that he would bring it to a fitting conclusion.

Dr David Golding was then invited to outline the concerns of the regional campaigning group, Make Poverty History NE, and focussed on its stance on Trade Justice. He quoted Professor Joseph Stiglitz, former Chief Economist of the World Bank, as saying that poor countries had been “cheated”, having “had their arms twisted and got nothing in return”. A visitor to Ghana found families who had previously made a reasonable living growing rice, now reduced to living on a city roundabout. Because of the conditions for debt relief and aid imposed by the IMF, restrictions on importing rice from the West (produced by highly mechanised and highly subsidised producers) had been lifted, with the consequence that these poor people could not even sell their produce in the local markets.

In his opinion, the **enforcement of premature, indiscriminate** liberalisation on poor countries, exposing their puny, uneducated producers to the full force of competition from (often subsidised) multinationals, with their immense financial and technical resources, is folly beyond belief. A ‘level playing field’ is no guarantee of a fair match if you pit a primary school eleven against Newcastle United! In conclusion he quoted the terrible indictment of Western policies by the former Malian government minister, Aminata Traori: “They say they are developing us, but they are lying... They are killing us” and stated that “we will never make poverty history until a vigorous and radical programme of pro-poor trade reform is undertaken”.

Hilary Benn expressed agreement with much of what had been said and gave a wide ranging speech on the challenge of world poverty. He recalled that in 2006, he visited a refugee camp at a place called Wajid in Somalia. “11,000 people who fled the countryside when the drought killed their animals and shrivelled their crops are now living in huts made of twigs covered in pitiful scraps of cloth and clothing and surviving on water and food provided by us, the international community, including Britain as we always do. At the corner of the camp were three large, proper tents which, as I discovered, housed a school run by UNICEF. Rows of children – as many girls as boys – keen and enthusiastic as any pupils I have ever met, enjoying – for the very first time in their lives – the chance to go to school.

“It is experiences like these that have taught me – taught all of us – both why development – people being able by their own efforts to change their lives for the better – is so important, and why unless we tackle poverty, injustice and inequality we will never have a safe and secure world in which to live, regardless of where it is we happen to call home.

“Because the truth is this. Here we are at the beginning of the 21st century. We know that in the developing world, pregnancy and childbirth claim the life of a woman every minute – women who die alone and afraid on the floor of a darkened hut with no midwife or doctor to help. 6,000 children will die today from a lack of clean water to drink. Each year, every year, malaria kills one million people, tuberculosis 2 million people, AIDS 3 million people - every one a human life extinguished: potential unrealised.

“Because we see these things. We cannot claim any more that we did not know what was going on. And we have a choice. Either to say, I am sorry about the condition of humankind, but we can't do anything and I am going to go home and shut the door and close the curtains, and hope the rest of the world goes away. Or we can say – ‘What can we do and how we can do it?’

“Just look at our own history. Remember how we changed things! Go back 200 years to a time of great change in our society... it was the great social reformers who helped change things... The father of public health, John Snow, who in 1854 worked out that cholera was spread through contaminated wells... The dreamers who dared to say that every child in Britain should be able to go to school.

“Campaigns like Make Poverty History are the global equivalent of social reformers of the 19th century. And we have made progress. In the past 40 years, life expectancy in the developing world increased by a quarter. In the past 30 years, illiteracy has fallen by half. In the past 20 years, 400 million human beings lifted out of absolute poverty. We've beaten smallpox, and we are nearly there with polio. The truth is, if our ancestors from 200 years ago came back, they would be astonished. And yet there is so much yet to do... we need to make sure we keep the promises we made in 2005 at Gleneagles! The tide of human will that forced us to make a difference...

“And lastly, we need hope and encouragement. I say that because the thing I fear most of all is not doubt, or criticism, or despair – we all feel these things at different times – but cynicism. If we ever become cynical we will be lost. Trying to give people the chance to transform their own lives is all about putting our better impulses at the service of humankind. It is about being straightforward and unafraid... If we can find the courage to live up to those words, then when our time is over, we will be able to look back and say: ‘This is what we did to make the world a better place’, as we hand on that world to those who will come after us.”

The event concluded with a veritable tour-de-force by the Secretary of State, in which he demonstrated his mastery of his brief by responding to questions ranging from European trade policies to the UK's timetable for meeting the UN target for international aid, and from the impact of conflict on poverty to conditions for Burmese refugees.

Later, the Secretary of State relaxed with a cup of tea and was briefed on the work and vision of DARN, the university's Developing Areas Network (Director, Professor Nina Laurie), before being interviewed by editorial staff of the Courier, the student newspaper.

David Golding