



A MODEST MEMBER

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How best to aid the have-nots

In my electorate, and I understand all through Australia, there has been a ferment of interest in overseas aid.

The organisation leading the campaign is called Action for World Development.

One of the groups in my area asked me to talk to them. I agreed, thinking that I would be able to blind them with science and skate smoothly around the thin ice.

But this didn't work out that way at all. Many of them knew more about the subject than I and, what was worse, they soon made this obvious. They had done their homework.

I came prepared with all the right answers — how we gave away 0.52 per cent of our GNP and how we were high in the honour roll of aid giving and so on.

Then I gave them a burst about how our aid did not have strings tied to it as did the aid from some other less worthy countries. I thought that this would placate them.

But it didn't really. They admitted that we, and the rest of the world, are doing something, but not enough.

They said that the gap between the standard of living of the poor and the rich countries continues to widen and into this gap civilisation as we knew it will disappear one day unless we could do something to close it.

I thought that this was pretty loose talk — it sounded like an MP speaking. I told them so, in a roundabout, polite way.

But there was a big bloke with whiskers at the back of the hall who pointed out that all the lessons of history pointed to the inevitability of affluence being destroyed by poverty in the end.

“You ought to read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,” he said mournfully. “Cripes, not that again,” I thought!

But I admit all the lessons of the past, and our knowledge of what is happening to us now, point to the inevitability of our fate if we cannot close the gap.

So it is not only Christian charity or our uneasy consciences that should activate us in this matter. It is, even more, enlightened self-interest.

But though it is not hard to demonstrate the reason for doing something, it is far harder to know what we ought to do.

All countries have learnt from bitter experience that giving aid is almost always disappointing in its results in spite of the best endeavours of governments and people.

Almost everyone now accepts that trading with poor countries is the best way to help them.

In 1966 I was in Bombay, and one morning inspected a skim milk factory where they were mixing Australian skim milk powder with buffalo milk, using machinery which had been given to them under the Colombo Plan.

I asked the management if they had any problems.

“Only one,” they said, “and that is to get the foreign exchange to enable us to buy your skim milk powder.”

In the afternoon I inspected a cotton textile factory. I asked them if they had any problems.

“Only one,” they replied, “and that is we can’t get our sheets into Australia over your 55 per cent tariff wall.”

So we wouldn’t buy their sheets which they were good at making, so they couldn’t buy our skim milk powder which we were desperately keen to sell. It doesn’t seem a very sensible way to behave.

And then this brings me back again to shirts.

A year ago I told how the Australian shirt industry was costing us about \$45 million a year in consumer subsidy which worked out at about \$2000 subsidy for every person employed.

I pointed out that the countries from which we could buy these shirts bought from us far more than we bought from them.

If we really wanted to help these countries we could buy their shirts. This would be far more effective than making speeches or giving aid.

Strangely enough, it would help us too. We would be able to save \$45 million a year when buying shirts. With this money we could do all kinds of useful things.

And if we were worried about the people who lose their jobs because we stopped making shirts, think of all the employment that would be created by spending \$45 million a year wisely, say, on schools or hospitals or something!

So if these dedicated and competent activists in Action for World Development want to get something useful done about closing the gap between the rich and the poor countries, I suggest they ask their members of Parliament when the government is going to reduce the tariff on shirts.

This would be a useful start!