

PRIME MINISTER

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Locusts and other beasties

Can I offer a serious comment about the work of the scientific units funded under the aid programme, before we all start to collapse in mirth every time the word locusts is mentioned?

You have taken an interest in the Directorate of Overseas Surveys and the Centre for Overseas Pest Research (which incorporates the locust work). The cost of running these units is a relatively small part of the aid programme - DOS just under £4 million last financial year, COPR about £1.8 million. They work in fields where British scientists developed unique knowledge, and through which Britain gained an international reputation for helping developing countries overcome technical problems and develop a technical capacity for themselves.

There may well be a case for re-assessing the range of activities of some of these bodies, for checking the genuine future need for their work, and for checking that, individually, they are run as tight ships. But if they are made a particular target of attack, or subjected to random cuts, the result could be to destroy sources of unique expertise. The savings you can make from the programmes are small. If economic necessity makes the aid programme a major target for public expenditure cutbacks, you might look at the much greater sums spent to buy (on grant terms) goods produced by uneconomic UK industries and foisted on developing countries in an attempt to keep those industries operating when a planned run-down would be logical. Obviously, there are cases where such sales can tide over an industry through a bad period, but we are far from having sorted out our priorities in that field.

Some of the exchanges in yesterday's Foreign Affairs Debate touched upon helping the Third World in ways which showed continuity of purpose. Helping countries to develop their maps, over a period of years; providing the scientific basis to control risks of a resurgence of the locust threat over about 40 countries; specialised research into storage techniques in the Third World; and other specialised scientific work like these examples, all provide a continuous link with high quality British expertise for a number of developing countries. The money involved is not a high price to pay for the high quality reputation it can help us to maintain in the countries concerned.

Of course we need to re-assess from time to time the way in which we provide these services, and the reasons for doing so. The reason that I mentioned the locust work to you was because it illustrated the self-preservation instinct often to be found in the public sector. The work was originally done by

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a body called the Anti-Locust Research Centre. This body really did get a grip on a major international problem which was very difficult to control because locust plagues are not regular, although devastating when they come. British work laid the foundations for international monitoring and an international system of control to be called into operation when there were signs of new locust problems. But the Anti-Locust Research Centre then metamorphosed into the Centre for Overseas Pest Research and spread its net wider to deal with other pest control problems. I know that some of that additional work is very highly regarded. In Pakistan, for instance, there have been contacts over a period of three years with the various cotton research institutes, to develop a major project on cotton pest control. The decline of the cotton crop has been about the single most negative factor in Pakistan agriculture over the last dozen years. If British help with research reversed this, the several million pounds which might be spent over 5-8 years would do far more for our reputation than the three unwanted ships we have just agreed to subsidise at something nearer £20 million. Even so, it is fair to ask whether the transition from Anti-Locust Research Centre to Centre for Overseas Pest Research was more about preserving the jobs of a group of scientists than about helping developing countries.

But in questioning work like this, I hope you can start your enquiries without implying that no-one can possibly justify the work that is being done. If you and one or two senior colleagues do dismiss every new example in that fashion, you can very easily destroy the morale of the specialists who do this work. They are not particularly well paid by British standards, and can very easily get employed by the United Nations or the World Bank at exaggerated salaries. As you are only too well aware, Britain is not producing much that the rest of the world wants to buy. In some of these specialised areas we are still providing a service that the rest of the world wants. We choose to give it to many countries, but it is also bought by international agencies, and may increasingly be bought by the oil producers and others. It would help if your enquiries could come across as open-minded even if you are sceptical.

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