



Shallow, heartless aid cut

The great thing about using a proportion as a guideline for spending is that it reflects your own circumstances. So if the country gets richer, using the 0.7% guideline, the Overseas Aid budget is increased; if the country gets poorer, the Overseas Aid budget is decreased.

So in the light of Covid 19, the country is poorer, and so it was natural that the government would be spending less on foreign aid. If that was all that happened, fair enough. The church is not protesting about a proportional decrease in aid spending. But this government didn't just choose to do that; it chose to cut the budget beyond the norm.

Now, yes, you may say, but there's a welfare crisis in the UK; there is difficulty with funding schools and nurses already. We can't afford to give so much to those abroad; we need to look after our own. And if it was all about cuts, you might be right, but last Friday, the government announced a £16.5 billion increase in defence spending, including on a rocket launcher facility in Scotland.

So at a time of global pandemic, the government isn't battering down the hatches. Rather, it's increasing its spend on weapons and cutting its spend on the world's poorest. This is a choice; it has not been forced into this.

Too often, there's a dichotomy presented between looking after the vulnerable in UK society and the vulnerable in the world. The thing is, when it comes to it,

it isn't like that at all.

Of course, 0.7% isn't a number that is set in stone; it's a figure the UN came up with decades ago, as a guideline for aid budgets from richer countries to poorer ones. No one achieved it, until Britain got there around about 2005. The way I see it, it's not something to be proud of; it's the least we can do. After all, the British empire pillaged its way around the rest of the world for two centuries, harvesting the world's resources from Jamaica to Jaipur, from Kampala to Karachi. We should be giving back.

And of course, there can be problems with aid; some is misspent, other stuff is misplaced. But then, it's not like the Ministry of Defence is a model of frugality and care.

Now the ultimate goal has to be a world in which national governments and local companies are autonomous, where aid is not needed. But when civil wars break out, or genocides happen, right now it is only reasonable that we (a richer country) can offer some of that money towards the relief of those who have fled, or who have been crippled by natural disasters. Or not.

For the thing about the world's poorest people is that they don't kick up a fuss, and they don't have a vote either, so it's not like there's an electoral problem. So let's just cut spending money on them, but let's make sure we can fire a rocket from Scotland. As long as we've got our priorities straight.

Nov 2020 Thought. for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.