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Who wants to follow? British leadership claims hamper international cooperation

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Bonn, 18 March 2013. There is nothing really new about Britain often finding itself in a special position in international relations, and in that position it is deriving added strength from the current anti-Europe debate in the UK. The past few months have provided some vivid new examples of this. Prime Minister Cameron, for example, pre-empted the UN Secretary-General last year, believing that Ban Ki-Moon would nominate him as one of the three co-chairs of the High Level Panel set up to deliberate on a follow-up agreement to the Millennium Development Goals ("post-2015"). He then clearly announced his leadership claims last November in the Wall Street Journal, where, without any undue modesty, he described Britain as playing an outstanding role in the fight against global poverty and in development cooperation and demanded that it continue to be cast in a leadership role in the future: "... our record on aid also gives us the legitimacy to lead a radical new approach to address the causes of poverty."

Britain has unquestionably achieved a great deal with its development policy in recent years. Its development department (DFID) is regarded internationally as one of the "best structured" and most energetic organisations of its kind. Its contributions to development cooperation certainly place it among the world leaders. Among the development aid donors, it currently ranks third behind the USA and Germany in volume terms and sixth in terms of aid contribution relative to economic strength. And on occasions in the past it has given the debate on aid effectiveness decisive new impetus. British aid is not altruistic, however: it is used, for example, to preserve British spheres of influence. And where it might make a major contribution to greater effectiveness – namely by helping to overcome fragmented donor structures through the increased Europeanisation of devel-

opment cooperation – British aid sticks to the general Euro-sceptical course charted by British policy and so stands in the way of more effective joint aid.

Nonetheless, Britain is rightly considered to be one of the leaders in the debates on greater "aid effectiveness". These positive notes are, however, in danger of being overwhelmed by vociferous claims to leadership, two processes currently being linked to a British leadership role: 1. the post-2015 process already referred to and 2. the Global Partnership for Development Effectiveness.

Priority of traditional approaches

Cameron advocates a global post-2015 framework along very familiar lines: growth has priority, and poverty alleviation is supported in developing countries with aid from the donors. Economic growth is undeniably one of the main requirements for the further eradication of poverty, and in various countries development cooperation will continue to play its part. A question that arises in international debates, however, is this: what point does a global agenda of this kind still have for emerging economies, for example? They are unlikely to greet a patronising traditional poverty policy with open arms. And what about problems in the wealthy OECD countries themselves? Or are there no signs of poverty, no challenges posed by economic and social inequality in Europe? What is the situation as regards ecological sustainability and the responsibility of traditional industrialised countries? And can the OECD countries not make contributions other than development aid – contributions that may be even more important? It would be very interesting to know what the European financial centres London and Frankfurt can do to prevent developing countries from coming to any harm if the stability of financial markets is

improved and illegal financial transfers are stopped. So far the British claim to leadership has barely extended to these forward-looking issues.

Global donorship

The Global Partnership for Development Effectiveness, though still in its infancy, is now the main international mechanism for norms and standards in development cooperation. The Paris Declaration, which has developed considerable authority, has been unable to overcome one blemish: it has been seen as “donor-heavy”, because responsibility for the initiative was assumed by an OECD working group set up for the purpose. Formed in mid-2012, the Global Partnership was meant to overcome this disadvantage by installing new structures. In this case, too, Britain succeeded in procuring the role of co-chair of the partnership on behalf of the donor group.

But here again, the signs are that Britain’s claim to leadership is helping to weaken joint objectives: the new partnership has not (yet?) rid itself of the suspicion of wanting to perpetuate the old dominating donor behaviour. The British claim to lead-

ership in particular provides plenty of material for exposing the supposed old donorship system. The progress cautiously made in recent years towards a dialogue with the emerging economies as “new donors” is consequently in danger of being reversed by dominance posturing. An “eye-level dialogue” would be the more tried and tested approach here. With an inherited policy of domination, Britain is damaging international efforts to forge a genuine partnership, rather than translating an inherited claim to leadership into a more up-to-date global governance concept.

In March 2013 the Global Partnership’s Steering Committee will be meeting for the second time, and the Panel for the Millennium Development Goals has just a few weeks to submit its report. Both processes could do with some innovation. While obsolete claims to leadership may go down well in domestic British politics, they contribute little to global progress in the dynamic world of 2013. The European partners should stress this when Britain is engaged in joint endeavours.



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