Boris Johnson reinforces imperialist agenda of Britain's overseas aid

Jean Shaoul
24 June 2020

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced the closure of the Department for International Development (DfID), which disperses Britain's £15.2 billion aid budget in the name of poverty reduction.

It is to be subsumed under the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to form the new Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The move makes transparent that which was once unstated. "Aid" will only be dispensed if it furthers Britain's geo-strategic, defence and commercial interests.

The new department is expected to be established in the autumn, even before the completion of the government's integrated foreign and defence security review being carried out by Downing Street adviser John Bew.

Sir Simon McDonald, the FCO's most senior civil servant, is to retire earlier than planned after five years in the post to make way for a replacement more in tune with Johnson's agenda. Unpopular with Downing Street because of his perceived opposition to Brexit, he recently recanted on his statement to Members of Parliament that the UK had made a "political decision" not to join a European Union scheme to source ventilators for treating COVID-19 patients on Number 10's orders.

Johnson announced the move in the House of Commons in a statement redolent of his imperialist, arrogant and racist views. After saying that Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab would in future make the final decision about which countries would receive Britain's "help," he added, "For too long, frankly, UK overseas aid has been treated like a giant cashpoint in the sky, that arrives without any reference to UK interests."

While Johnson said that the government would maintain its statutory commitment to spending 0.7 percent of GDP on overseas aid, he noted that "DfID outspends the Foreign Office more than four times over and yet no single decision-maker in either department is able to unite our efforts or take a comprehensive overview" in favour of Britain's broader interests.

He complained, "We give as much aid to Zambia as we do to Ukraine, though the latter is vital for European security. We give 10 times as much aid to Tanzania as we do to the six countries of the western Balkans, who are acutely vulnerable to Russian meddling."

Nearly 60 percent of Zambians live below the international poverty line of $1.90 a day, while nearly 50 percent of Tanzanians live on less than $1.90 a day.

Whatever Johnson's critics in parliament and in the charities and other NGOs might say, aid has always been about Britain's geo-strategic interests whether dressed up as "development economics" or not. But now all niceties and evasions are to be junked. Henceforth, the aid budget will be used explicitly to boost Britain's business and military interests.

DfID was set up in 1997 as a separate department under Tony Blair's New Labour government with cross-party support. This was done in response to various scandals surrounding the FCO's aid disbursement to further its foreign policy and commercial objectives, via the notorious policy of "tied" aid schemes whereby aid to third world countries is used to pay for contracts with British companies. The most infamous was the tying of funding for Malaysia's Pergau dam to a weapons deal under Margaret Thatcher's government in the late 1980s.

DfID's statutory-defined function of poverty reduction was more honoured in the breach than the observance. It did not stop Blair from greenlighting a highly dubious and wasteful air traffic control system for Tanzania that was clearly designed for military purposes—probably for use in the "war on terror" in East Africa. A flagrant breach of the World Bank/ International Monetary Fund's loan conditions to the country, it led to a US court case alleging corruption and a £30 million refund to Tanzania.

DfID's demise had long been trailed within the Tory government and actively championed by Johnson's key

© World Socialist Web Site

advisor, Dominic Cummings. Former DfID Secretary and current Home Secretary Priti Patel had argued that Britain's aid budget should be cut unless it works in the national interest and was tied to trade deals. In 2017, the BBC revealed that Patel, after meeting Israeli officials, had lobbied to divert part of the UK's international aid budget to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operations in the Golan. Israel has been widely reported as aiding the Al Nusra Front and other Al Qaeda linked fighters in Syria.

Like her mentor in the White House, Patel is a vehement opponent of aid to the Palestinians. With DfID providing most of Britain's $85 million a year aid to the Palestinian Authority and Gaza, as well as grants to human rights organisations that criticise Israel, including Amnesty International, it can be expected that this will soon cease.

Patel's successor at DfID, Penny Mordaunt, sought to change the international definition of government aid spending to include profits from DfID's private sector investment arm, the CDC Group, formerly the Commonwealth Development Corporation. This would enable the government to reduce new funding from the Treasury, while still meeting its commitment on paper to spend 0.7 percent of GDP on "aid." She called for the government to work with managers to make it easier for British citizens to invest in poor countries.

The CDC, which accounts for around 40 percent of DfID's aid budget, has been heavily criticised for its investments in commercial development projects such as hotels and shopping centres in Kenya, for channelling its investments through tax havens, and for losing most of its $140 million investment in a Kenyan cement maker.

Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, sliced up the aid budget and handed over bits to other government departments, including the FCO, so that by 2019, the FCO spent £680 million on aid, more than double the amount spent in 2013 and around 40 percent of its £1.7 billion allocation.

The House of Commons Select Committee on international development recently reported that UK aid outside DfID's remit "has a very different geographical profile, with around three quarters going to middle-income countries, including China, India and South Africa, pursuing priorities such as reducing carbon emissions, tackling insecurity, building research partnerships and promoting trade and investment ties with the UK."

A senior Tory said that Johnson took the decision to scrap the DfID without any discussion in cabinet. Only two months ago, the current DfID Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan told the House of Commons international development committee that DfID was safe.

The announcement has sparked outpourings of hypocritical outrage and condemnation from politicians concerned over Britain's declining international position, and the political impact of such a naked exposure of the use of aid as a form of imperialist power.

Three former prime ministers—Labour's Blair and Gordon Brown and Tory David Cameron—have opposed Johnson's move, saying it would undermine Britain's credibility overseas. Their concerns lie with Britain's diminishing influence and reputation—particularly in the wake of Britain's decision to leave the EU—faced with the challenge from its major rivals, including France, Germany, Turkey, the US, and China, in both Africa and Asia.

Blair tweeted, "I am utterly dismayed by the decision to abolish DfID. We created DfID in 1997 to play a strong, important role in projecting British soft power. It has done so to general global acclaim."

Most of DfID's budget goes on projects, whether branded as poverty alleviation or conflict resolution, that promote British interests, including bringing many students to British universities via a plethora of aid programmes. Much aid has already been "securitised" and used to prevent migration from Africa and the Middle East, and to provide security, meaning military, and police operations and training channelled through a handful of corporations.

DfID provides most of the £1 billion plus funding for the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) set up in 2015 to replace the previous Conflict (Prevention) Pool. Overseen by the National Security Council, it includes programmes such as developing human rights training, strengthening local police and judiciaries, and facilitating political reconciliation in war-torn countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia, with 40 countries receiving money.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site