

CONTRIBUTION FROM JEREMY LEFROY MP

Thank you for inviting me. I apologise that, due to urgent constituency business, I am unable to be with you.

I welcome this report because it identifies five of the major challenges which the world faces and stresses that the countries of the European Union cannot ignore them. I would add a further three – which it may be argued are, in part, included within those set out, but I believe deserve special mention.

The first is the challenge of creating many more jobs and livelihoods – by one estimate at least a billion in the next decade. Un- or underemployment certainly causes poverty and inequality as well as the economy, has a major impact on peace and security and hence democracy and human rights. It needs to be recognised as a challenge in its own right, rather than a contribution to others.

The second is the increasing rise of nationalist and religious extremism. This may sometimes have its roots in poverty and inequality or a lack of democracy. But equally it can flourish independently of them, or even be given succour through the institutions of democracy which it then perverts to its own uses.

We cannot ignore this extremism. We are a group of nations which have thrived because we have largely turned away from it although it is rising again in certain places. We therefore have a responsibility both to others and to ourselves actively to challenge and confront it at every opportunity.

The third is the changing demographics of the world. Parts of the European Union are ageing fast and have unsustainable social programmes, as currently designed and funded. That applies too in other parts of the world. Yet, other than some tinkering with the pension age – extraordinarily in both directions – I do not see much effort to tackle what is currently the greatest single generational transfer of wealth from young to old we have ever seen. In this context, I would recommend reading my colleague David Willetts MP's book 'The Pinch'.

This report is absolutely right to take the risk of straying beyond what others might perceive as its strict develop remit and to stress the need for all countries and their citizens tackling shared problems. Our unique grouping of nations has an opportunity to work with others across the world in ways which draw upon our strength in acting together while offering the diversity which we as independent nation states with our own distinct traditions can offer.

Let me briefly consider just two areas. The first is energy policy. The EU contains a host of different approaches to a single goal, which is a massive reduction in carbon emissions. We currently have various experiments – in Germany, for instance, an aim to do this without nuclear power; in the UK, the introduction of contracts for difference which is designed to encourage the most efficient and effective sources of low carbon energy. Both encourage increasing uptake of renewables.

We know that lack of electricity generation is identified time and again by our partners in the developing countries as one of the top two or three constraints on their economy and hence reduction in poverty and inequality. By working as a 'European team' with them, we should have a sufficiently broad experience to help develop solutions together. Not only that,

developing countries may well come up with solutions which we would do well to consider in Europe.

The second is the delivery of public services such as health and education. We have many different ways of doing this in Europe. In health, we have experience in both universal and insurance-based systems. This expertise can be combined so that – where we are working with developing countries – the most appropriate solution can be found. Again, we can learn increasingly from developing countries which have developed public health and health education in a way which we have largely forgotten about and need to rediscover.

To be taken seriously, of course, one thing we must do as a European Union and that is live up to the commitments which we make to the rest of the world. I think particularly of Gleneagles and the promise to provide 0.7pc of GNI as official development assistance. That is not happening, but must.

I think too of the recent decision regarding the rescue from the sea of refugees from North Africa and the Middle East. We should not abandon them. That goes against the fundamental principles which we say we hold dear.

Italy and others cannot be left to take the strain alone. But we have apparently decided to scale down humanitarian rescue on the grounds that it is a 'pull factor', before working to solve the problem in cooperation with countries in North Africa. If the EU is serious about constructive engagement with the rest of the world, it must begin by looking again at this recent extraordinary decision and putting the sanctity of human life above all else.

Again I apologise for not being with you and wish you fruitful discussions.