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Wonders never cease

Derek Law looked at developing the global society at Celtic Connections, introducing the work being done by 'Making Wonders', an impressive and carefully focused project in Malawi.

At library school one was always taught that classification went from the general to the particular, and that is the structure used here. First of all our politicians and their response to the global information society is briefly considered; then Malawi and its problems are described as an example of one of the poorest countries in the world; and finally, the 'Making Wonders' project is used as a very specific example of how best we can help in developing that global society to the benefit of all. As Malawi shows, not only is the global information society a myth, it is barely relevant as a concept to countries with endemic and virulent disease, low literacy and fragile infrastructure. However, if we in the developed countries choose to use our skills to help those struggling to survive, we can not just make a difference, but help to build that global information society into a reality.

The reputation of our politicians continues to plumb new depths, where even estate agents and used car salesmen are seen to have greater integrity than what the current Deputy Prime Minister, called "the most desperate, despicable, seedy, grubby, hopeless, lying, hideously incompetent bunch of third-rate, double-dealing disasters this great nation has ever seen" (Prescott, 1996). [1] What we can now see as a generic description of the political class demonstrates all too clearly the tiny step from hubris to nemesis.

It may then seem extraordinary to talk of Members of the Scottish Parliament in general and First Minister Jack McConnell in particular, for their selfless actions in the global village. Doubly extraordinary in that foreign policy is quite clearly not a devolved power, but obeying silly rules

was never a great Scottish characteristic. Scots are at least metaphorically brought up on the milk of an international Burnsian, egalitarian socialism encapsulated in Burns verse

*For a' that and a' that,
It's comin' yet for a' that
That man tae man the world ower
Will brothers be for a' that*

Perhaps the most famous graduate of my own university is David Livingstone, who worked in Central Africa and forged links in Nyasaland, now known as Malawi. That link was strengthened through the long presidency of Dr Hastings Banda, probably the only head of state anywhere, ever to have been an elder of the Church of Scotland.

Reciprocal visits between heads of state led to Jack McConnell and several groups of MSPs visiting Malawi and, as with so many of us, falling in love with the place. This in turn led to the government-funded Scotland-Malawi partnership and his acceptance of three crucial principles, which might be said to form the McConnell Doctrine. Firstly, the support which the Scottish government offers is limited – only a few millions – and so it should be targeted to make a difference, not spread thin to make us feel better. Secondly, it should be aimed at sustainable projects and not disaster relief. Thirdly, it should be disbursed through a competitive tender process to Scottish groups already working in country. McConnell suffered all sorts of press criticism for this initiative, but it was a decent humane gesture.

Malawi sits landlocked in south central Africa, calling itself “the warm heart of Africa”. It has a population of 12 million, and what seem intractable problems. It is one of the world's ten poorest countries, with 65% of the population living below the poverty line, set at income of USD 1.00 per day – in fact average national income is about USD 30.00. It has middling levels of corruption, being 97th out of 158 countries, a fact being actively tackled by government, and has 42% illiteracy. There is one qualified teacher for every 118 primary school pupils and 90% unemployment. Even global warming has affected them. The country is bordered by a huge lake, teeming with fish and a source of food for all, sometimes the only source of food when the crops failed. But global warming has raised the temperature of the lake and driven the fish into deeper cooler waters which the general population cannot now reach.

It has huge health issues, which mean that life expectancy is dropping by a year every eighteen months, from 45 to 36 in just over a decade. Maternal mortality is 18 per 1000 births; infant mortality (before 12 months) 115 per 1000 (the UK's is 5.4); child mortality (between age 1 and 5) 189 per 1000. Most of this is due to treatable illness – malaria, pneumonia and diarrhoea. It also has one of the world's worst AIDS infection rates. More than 1 million people are infected. One in four pregnant women are HIV positive and there are 500,000 AIDS orphans. Doctors are few – one for every 120,000 people and one of the most striking sights in the country is roadside coffin

workshops.

Even for the fit, life is no joyride. In the villages which cover most of the country there is no running water and no sewerage system. There is no electricity (4% nationally) and by extension no television (1% nationally) and telephones are rare (85,000 nationally). But fear not, the global information society has arrived. Thanks to the generosity of western publishers, higher education has almost unlimited access to e-journals. Shame about the 18-hour power cuts.

Where can one begin in a country which is so manifestly failing at all levels? One of the reasons we have our links is because of shared values and one of those shared values is education. Malawi has introduced compulsory primary education. It has a high quality technical and university system, although students pay. There is little postgraduate teaching – it is almost impossible to keep the well qualified in country.

As a result, when we are involved we much prefer training in country. We can train 100 teachers or engineers for the cost of sending one abroad, and they are more inclined to stay once qualified. In Strathclyde, working with Bell College we offer bursaries for engineering students and nurses. We have also sent numbers of our own postgraduate students to do fieldwork in Malawi where they do research in country on topics as varied as water treatment; sustainable energy; designing the \$10 House. The Making Wonders project grew out of a British Council-funded project to survey needs and availability of IT skills instruction.

The importance of information in education is almost self evident, but even here there are problems. There is no indigenous library school – although the redoubtable Joe Uta has set up diploma courses based on the personal library of the equally doughty Joe Hendry, past president of the Library Association. Many donated books lie uncatalogued and shelves lie empty, through lack of cat and class skills. One of the commonest donor problems is to send books we don't want, rather than books the libraries need. Parinthenetically I'd like to put in a plug for Harcourt Educational who has donated 300,000 (sic) primary school level books to help attack literacy. We have sent over 50,000 books and journal volumes requested by libraries, all with catalogue records enclosed, so that they are immediately useful.

Internet access is poor and limited in many ways so we also send PCs which are not just refurbished but are also upgraded at very low cost and we have negotiated very cheap licensing arrangements with software suppliers, so that the PCs are valuable rather than just usable. As part of our first study of IT skills training needs we discovered a large issue to do with blind and visually impaired children. Although there are one or two special schools, most children are taught within general classes, this being a country with a significantly higher than average rate of eye disease. Montfort College specialises in training teachers to teach the disabled. A major issue is the general unavailability of relevant training materials. Unrepairable braille machines are a common sight. It quickly became

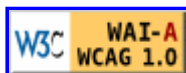
obvious that if we could provide access to appropriate training materials through computers and the internet, the children would not only have a better education, but would have IT skills which gave them an important role in a society which can only grow again if it can develop a basic industrial capacity based on an information society which lets it do such prosaic things as sell tropical fish over the internet.

And so with huge local enthusiasm we were encouraged to develop the Making Wonders project. Its mission is straightforward: To enhance the education of the blind and visually impaired in Malawi through the use of appropriate assistive technology. The project does some fairly obvious things which allow staff from Strathclyde to share their skills locally. The initial focus was on Montfort College, where we wanted to Train the Trainers, test the delivery model, determine the suitability and most importantly sustainability of equipment and establish resource rooms. Working with the College we prepared things at Montfort, selected dates for training and planned arrangements for teachers covering travel, accommodation and catering as well as training schedules.

The results were piloted in a handful of schools. Each had to be visited to collect a range of information, to clarify the use of equipment, to identify staff for training, to explain what will be provided, to assess that the room proposed to site the equipment was water-tight, suitably furnished and safe. Phase two is extending the programme to all schools teaching blind and visually impaired children. Phase three will pass control of the project to sustainability partners.

So, is it worth it? Worth those millions of taxpayers money? Our concern is sustainability not charity, but we believe we CAN make a difference, with literally hundreds of reading books in every primary school to tackle literacy issues and every visually impaired student turned into an important resource for society. Some of the answer lies in the other half of the equation. Competitions in Scottish schools focused on Malawi as part of a plan to raise awareness of global issues; a modern maternity hospital paid for by the Lord Provost's Burns Supper in Glasgow and built by off-duty Scottish firemen; Malawians addressing the General Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. All of those involved humbled by the way in which the smallest of actions really does make a difference to the poorest of our fellow men.

1 Prescott, John. Closing Speech at the 1996 Labour Party Conference.



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