

House of Lords

Monday, 12 May 2008.

The House met at half-past two: the LORD SPEAKER on the Woolsack.

Prayers—Read by the Lord Bishop of Liverpool.

Education: Chevening and Commonwealth Scholarships

Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe asked Her Majesty's Government:

Whether they will reconsider the funding cuts for Chevening and Commonwealth scholarships to be made in 2009.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Malloch-Brown): My Lords, we obviously face hard budgetary choices, not least to find resources for new priorities such as climate security. We have consolidated our scholarship programmes and are focusing on the Chevening and Marshall schemes. While the FCO's support to Commonwealth scholarships is ending, the Government's overall contribution is increasing through funding from the Department for International Development.

Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe: My Lords, I thank the Minister for his reply. I also declare an interest as chief executive of Universities UK. How does he reconcile the cuts made by his department with the Prime Minister's initiative, which is intended to enhance higher education globally and not just in certain countries? In taking that decision, did his department make any assessment of the impact of these cuts on the competitiveness and reputation of British higher education?

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, my noble friend speaks to a subject with which I think all in this House are deeply sympathetic. I am sure that many of us benefited from scholarships of these kinds. Certainly I was lucky enough to go to the United States on such a scholarship. There is a growing number of sources of such scholarships both from the British Government but more generally from foundations and others, and we felt it important to consolidate the programme at this point and to focus on countries that are not so well imbued with such opportunities and where the prospect of bringing students from those countries to the UK would contribute to strategic relationships in the long term. I mean countries such as China and Brazil.

Lord Howell of Guildford: My Lords, the Minister is putting up a brave defence. As I understand it, the Chevening scholarships are not affected by the announcement on 13 March that there would be cuts. At any rate, they do not have the Commonwealth as their priority, but the FCO scholarships did, and it

12 May 2008 : Column 794

seems absolutely crazy at a time when we are trying to establish strong links with the fast-growing, high-tech countries, many of which are in the Commonwealth and in rising Asia, that we should be cutting our scholarship arrangements with them. If the United States took that view, the Minister would not have been awarded a scholarship to go there because it would have said, "Oh, Britain's a developed country and it doesn't count any more". Could we please rethink a system that will work very badly against this country's interests?

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, let me reassure the noble Lord that the funding for Commonwealth scholarships will not in fact decrease, but increase slightly because DfID funding is being substituted for FCO funding. It will, however, be targeted more at developing countries. Until now, 90-plus per cent of the funding went to the old Commonwealth countries whereas the DfID funding will be aimed at new ones. Therefore, while there will be losses in countries such as Canada and Australia, we will be targeting those Commonwealth countries where the need is the greatest.

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff: My Lords, will the Minister confirm that funding will be transferred for medical courses? I declare an interest as it costs less than £9,000 to educate a specialist in palliative medicine or in dermatology using distance learning and supervision. In many cases, they have been the only specialist in their country following education from the UK.

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, I may need to get back to the noble Baroness with more detail on that. However, supporting training of that kind is a DfID priority in its public health programme.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire: My Lords, we on these Benches appreciate the Foreign Office's delicacies in a relationship in which DfID's funding is increasing rapidly and the FCO's funding is being held down. We understand that the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer did not like the Foreign Office and that that is part of the shift. However, we have important political relationships with a number of other developed countries in the EU in what we have to call the developed Commonwealth. The small political investment required for those seems to be worth while and in the national interest in building relationships with future political, economic and social elites in those countries. Will the Minister encourage his Secretary of State gently to remind the now Prime Minister that these matters are politically important?

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, I do not know about the former Chancellor but I know that the now Prime Minister strongly supports the Foreign Office. We all recognise that the relations that these programmes have given us with countries such as Canada and Australia are critical and we need to find ways to make sure that scholars go back and forth between them. However, I am not sure that a Foreign

12 May 2008 : Column 795

Office programme, whose strategic purpose is not links in general but targeting countries with which we do not enjoy such historical relationships, is necessarily the vehicle for that.

Lord Judd: My Lords—

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: My Lords—

The Lord President of the Council (Baroness Ashton of Upholland): My Lords, I think that the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, stood up earlier than my noble friend Lord Judd. However, if we are quick, we can get both in.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: My Lords, the noble Lord spoke about Marshall scholarships in his first reply and gave the impression that all was fine as far as they were concerned. However, will he confirm that the FCO funded 40 Marshall scholarships in 2006, is offering to fund only 31 in 2008 and, on present assumptions, that the figure will drop to 28 by 2010? Is it not shameful to repay the single most generous act in this country's diplomatic history by such penny-pinching economies?

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, the noble Lord will be relieved that my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary committed to not reducing the moneys available for Marshall scholarships in this coming budgetary period. However, the increased cost of providing them due to the increase in tuition and other fees in the US means that the same money will buy slightly fewer scholars. However, the numbers are coming down from around 43 to 38 and, therefore, it is not the rapid descent that the noble Lord described.

Lord Judd: My Lords, I must again declare an interest as an honorary officer of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth. Does my noble friend agree that, whatever the Government's intentions, this will enhance scepticism in many quarters about real political commitment to the Commonwealth? Does he further agree that, if the Commonwealth is not to be anything but a hollow and expensive edifice, it is essential that in its declared commitments to human rights, democracy, the rule of law, good governance and to being a world leader in this respect, the interchange of education at the university level is an absolutely essential priority?

Lord Malloch-Brown: My Lords, again, I reassure my noble friend that we are not cutting Commonwealth scholarship funding. DfID moneys mean that the budget will increase, not shrink. I acknowledge that this is leading to a deployment of scholarships away from old Commonwealth to new Commonwealth countries in the hope that other sources of funding will be available to make up the difference. I completely agree that scholarships of this kind are not only a critical part of this country's future in a global world but critical for students everywhere.