

Stocking up for Christmas: tackling slavery in our supply chains

Written by Lord David Alton of Liverpool

As usual, the approach to Christmas is marked by many challenging and contradictory messages vying for our attention.

There's the oldest message that seeks to remind us of the origins of Christmas, emphasising peace and goodwill.

Then there's the message from retailers who every year move the starting blocks further forward to gain an advantage over their competitors.

Another insists that Christmas should emphasise sharing, through the giving and receiving of presents.

The reality of "Christmas present" is that many of our gifts will have been produced by people in other countries. What is less well known and deeply shocking is that some of these people are victims of modern slavery. This practice that we hoped had been consigned to "Christmas past" is very much alive today.

Anti-trafficking group Walk Free has just released a frightening estimate that there are more than 35 million victims of the slavery worldwide – including those in forced labour.

There are numerous examples illustrating the global nature of the problem. The US Department of State calculates that more than 109,000 children in the Ivory Coast's cocoa industry work under the worst forms of child labour.

Anti-Slavery International's research has uncovered the routine use of forced labour of girls and young women in the spinning mills and garment factories of five Indian clothing manufacturers, previously linked to major Western clothing brands.

Earlier this year, a Guardian investigation revealed how workers in Thailand are subject to appalling violence in the supply chains of seafood products sold by major US, British and other European retailers.

This country is not immune; the Home Office estimates that up to 13,000 people are victims of forced labour in the UK alone.

The Modern Slavery Bill is currently making its way through Parliament. Peers from all parties have been working with civil society, business and investor groups to ensure that the Bill includes effective measures to tackle slavery in the supply chains of large companies in the UK.

At Committee Stage we tabled an amendment to achieve this and to build on the Government's welcome acceptance of the principle. Our amendment includes specific requirements for all big companies operating in the UK to report on what they are doing to tackle slavery within their supply chains.

In the New Year when Parliament resumes we will continue to maintain the pressure on Government to include the right details in the Bill so that when we prepare for "Christmas future", we can make informed decisions about our purchases in the knowledge that we are not contributing to modern slavery and forced labour here and around the world.

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