

Irreconcilable Differences

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IN his speech to the National Press Club on the prospect of war with Iraq and the case for disarmament, Prime Minister Howard stated that Australia will play a significant humanitarian role in Iraq.

If so, the Howard Government needs to evaluate carefully the foreign-aid non-government organizations (FANGOs) which it funds to carry-out this humanitarian programme. Many FANGOs have made it clear that they do not share the Australian Government's objectives and values in Iraq. Moreover, some do not agree with the Government's overall aid policies in general.

THE COALITION OF THE UNWILLING

In the lead-up to latest Gulf War, some 30 Australian aid agencies put their names to an Open Letter to the Prime Minister organized by the Australian Council of Foreign and Overseas Aid (ACFOA). The aim of the letter was to 'speak out against war in Iraq' and it expressed grave concerns about the humanitarian consequences of the war and the effects of the existing sanctions.¹ The FANGOs that signed the letter were: Oxfam Community Aid Abroad; World Vision Australia; TEAR Australia; Union Aid Australia - APHEDA; Caritas Australia; National Council of Churches; Australian Council for Foreign and Overseas Aid; Save the Children Australia; CARE Australia; Oz Green; United Nations Association of Australia; Family Planning Australia; Mercy Works; Marist Mission Centre Australia; Every Home for Christ; Baptist World Aid for Christ; CCF Australia; Quaker Service Australia; Australian Lutheran World Service; Australian Relief and Mercy Services; Anglican Board of Mission; AUSTCARE; Community Development and Health

Group; Amnesty International Australia; AngliCORD; Australian Aid for Cambodia Fund; Burnet Institute; RedR; Friends of the Earth; PLAN Australia; and Australian Volunteers International.²

This open letter highlighted a number of problems with the FANGOs sector. First, it highlighted the weak logic that passes for advocacy in the sector. The letter argued against military action, was critical of sanctions and suggested that nations should settle issues only by diplomatic means. It is a viewpoint which totally ignores the fact that the Government had to deal with Saddam Hussein.

The shallowness of their logic was best exposed by the Prime Minister in his response to the open letter, in which he stated that the humanitarian situation in Iraq is best addressed by Saddam Hussein's removal and, perhaps more pointedly, that Saddam's manipulation of foreign aid had allowed him to maintain and pursue his weapons of mass destruction capability and human rights abuses.³

Second, it also highlighted the fact that the so-called 'human rights-based approach' to development (embraced by several of the signatories) is not so much about realizing human rights (as its proponents argue) but is more about providing them with an excuse to 'play politics'. According to the theory, the human rights-based approach to development allows FANGOs to tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice.

Yet the root cause of the Iraqi people's suffering can be summed up in two simple words—Saddam Hussein. The fact that the FANGOs who subscribe to this particular approach have been obsessed with imaginary human rights abuses committed by Shell, Nike, Rio Tinto, BHP-Billiton, and Aurora Gold, while the activities of Saddam

Hussein have been virtually ignored, is a searing indictment of the warped ideology, feeble analysis, and moral blindness of the sector. For them now to re-discover the plight of the Iraqi people and to invoke their name in the media is beyond contempt.

THE OXFAM COMMUNITY AID ABROAD POSITION

Of the 30 FANGO signatories to the open letter, Oxfam Community Aid Abroad (OCAA) has been perhaps the most outspoken. It opposed military action—even with UN Security Council approval.⁴ In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, OCAA was comfortable with Saddam Hussein's assurances that he did not have weapons of mass destruction.⁵ Adopting the common policy agreed to by the other Oxfam affiliates, OCAA stated that it will not take any money from the 'belligerents'—a quaint term used to describe democratic nations planning to disarm a dictator guilty of countless human rights abuses.

OCAA's outrage against the so-called 'belligerents' appears to be geographically confined to Iraq. OCAA appears happy to take government money from the belligerents elsewhere around the world.

According to OCAA's Executive Director Andrew Hewitt, refusing to take money from the belligerents was done to 'protect its impartiality'.⁶ This is a very curious position from Australia's arguably most political FANGO. OCAA has a long track-record of being anything but impartial or reluctant to take sides in military action. It wasn't impartial in East Timor, where it sided with Fretlin in its quest for independence. According to its own testimony to a Senate committee, OCAA was given the choice by the Indonesian Government between 'playing politics' or delivering aid projects in Indonesia.⁷

It chose the former, thus making it *persona non grata* in Indonesia for almost a decade.⁸ It wasn't impartial in Mozambique when it sided with Frelimo in the country's civil war.⁹ It wasn't impartial in Ethiopia when it developed links to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front during its war against the then government.¹⁰ It was not impartial or anti-war when it sided with the Tigray People's Liberation Front in the neighbouring province to Eritrea, when that group was waging a guerrilla war against the government.¹¹ And recently, there have been claims that in the Middle East it was little more than an 'eager propagandist' for the Palestinians.¹²

In East Timor, Ethiopia, and Mozambique, OCAA was linked with organizations which supported direct military action that led to the deaths of thousands of civilians. In none of these locations were the enemies of their friend any worse than Saddam Hussein. Indeed, in many cases OCAA's friends were arguably no better than their enemies in terms of human rights.

OCAA's decision not to accept Australian Government funding is the correct one in the sense that it clearly does not share the Government's values on the question of Iraq and therefore shouldn't receive any government money.

Hewitt went on to state in a press release that: 'We will not take funds that might allow a government to use humanitarian efforts as an instrument of foreign policy...'¹³

This is fine—except the Australian Government's foreign aid is an instrument of foreign policy. And it always has been. This is spelt out quite clearly in the Australian Government's latest foreign and trade policy White Paper *Advancing the National Interest*.¹⁴

FANGOs that cannot accept this rather basic proposition should not be getting taxpayers' money. They are clearly unsuitable for the task at hand.

The consequences of Australian taxpayers' money falling into the wrong hands were brought home to Prime Minister Howard when he met Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri to discuss the war against terrorism and

Australia's involvement against Iraq. At the top of the Indonesian agenda was the issue of Australian funding to FANGOs being used to support separatist movements in Indonesia.¹⁵

Post-war Iraq will be a better place without Saddam Hussein and his thugs. This does not mean that it will be a safe place or necessarily a stable place. After all, one of the reasons for Western toleration of Saddam Hussein for many years was his ability to hold the various

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ethnic minorities in Iraq together, albeit rather brutally, thereby maintaining a balance of power in the Middle East. His departure would see strains on Iraq from the various ethnic minorities that make up Iraq. There is a strong chance that Iraq will fragment.

The last thing the Australian Government or any of the so-called belligerents needs in a post-war Iraq is western NGOs running around and becoming self-styled advocates for national self-determination for Iraq's ethnic minorities and injecting themselves into Iraq's internal politics. This is a real risk. The behaviour of Australian foreign aid NGOs in Indonesia should make Australian decision-makers extremely wary of funding any NGOs with Australian taxpayers' money so that they can operate in Iraq.

As things stand now, FANGOs face very few restrictions on their actions from government. If they undertake activity that is inconsistent with being an agent of government, they may lose funding for specific projects or, in more dramatic circumstances, lose funding in a country. Nonetheless, they are gener-

ally able to access Australian Government funding for other projects and countries. In other words, the penalties for becoming caught up in political activities are very light for NGOs and pose them no serious problems.

Foreign aid NGOs that 'play politics' are unsuitable contractors for the delivery of aid. That these overtly political organizations have been allowed to gain government accreditation and receive government funding points to some serious problems at AusAID, Australia's official aid agency. The time has come for this to change.

NOTES

- 1 http://www.acfoa.asn.au/media_releases/2003_releases/26_3_03.PDF
- 2 <http://www.acfoa.asn.au/emergencies/openletter.PDF>
- 3 http://www.acfoa.asn.au/emergencies/iraq_response.htm
- 4 *Oxfam Horizons*, Vol. 3 No. 1, (February, 2003) page 2.
- 5 Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, 'Iraq Overview', February 2003.
- 6 Hewitt, quoted in Liz Gooch, 'Oxfam: we'll say no cash', *The Age*, 16 March 2003
- 7 Community Aid Abroad, Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee Inquiry into East Timor. Downloaded at <http://www.caa.org.au/campaigns/submissions/timor.html>
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Susan Blackburn, *Practical Visionaries: A Study of Community Aid Abroad* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993), page 313.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pages 325-333 passim.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Gerald Steinberg, 'Propaganda vs. Humanitarianism', *Australian Financial Review*, 7 June 2002. Downloaded at: <http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~steing/conflict/oped/propvshumanitarianism.htm>
- 13 <http://www.caa.org.au/pr/2003/iraqfunds.html>
- 14 <http://www.dfat.gov.au/ani/>
- 15 Dennis Shanahan, 'Jakarta fears aid funds for rebellion', *The Australian*, 17 February 2003 page 2.

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