

Abbott is cutting Australia adrift from what matters in the world of aid and environment

Toni Hassan
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For a practicing Catholic supposedly bound to the teaching of his church, Tony Abbott appears to have little regard for one of its key tenets – the unity of humankind. Intense pragmatism has given him the space to divorce belief from behaviour.

On climate change, he acts as if Australia is cut off from the rest of the planet. It's the same with international aid.

This month, thousands of Australians took part in World Vision's 40 Hour Famine, many going hungry for the first time. It's a profound experience, which often leads to a lifetime of giving.

As we give in a private capacity, we expect our Commonwealth government to give on our behalf and commensurate with this country's wealth. But when surveyed, we overestimate the amount our government gives. We are surprised to learn that our contribution to international aid development has dipped to below 1 per cent of our federal budget and without even a debate or special vote on the subject.

China now gives more than Australia. Its government is increasing the proportion of its income spent on aid while ours is cutting it.

It is doing so in part because it feels somewhat responsible for the fate of the planet. China is capping its emissions by 2030 for the same reason.

Australia's decade-long Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands was expensive but worthwhile. By building the local government's capacity to deliver services, we helped build livelihoods and reduced the likelihood of military disruption.

Marc Purcell, who heads the Australian Council for International Development says Timor is another case in point. He says of our cuts to foreign aid: "We'll pay for it in the future, as we have done in the past, with bouts of instability and security threats because we didn't use all the levers at our disposal."

The expertise within AusAID, the agency now merged with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade under Julie Bishop, appeared to be missing in action, if not ignored, to establish what programs are working and where to cut.

Aid is not charity. It's about supporting good governance, enabling environments and entrepreneurship.

It is possible to understand why we are withdrawing from Vietnam, which is a middle-income country now helping its neighbours. But it's hard to understand why we are

withdrawing aid from Afghanistan after a decade-long military campaign in which we put lives at risk. Military intervention, whether in Iraq or now pending in Syria is not cheap either, especially when there are no clear objectives or an end point.

And we are withdrawing aid from Burma, right in the middle of a transition to civilian rule with elections now due in November.

Abandoning Africa the very year Ebola threatened the entire world defies logic. Africa has the highest number of countries in the world in poverty, but has massive massive assets; among them a burgeoning population of high-energy young people and enviable natural resources. As a resource-rich country ourselves we've so much to offer, including how to deal with resource companies. Yet, we've cut our Africa program by a staggering 70 per cent.

For a prime minister keen to frame his leadership in national security terms, international aid and solid action on climate change are areas Abbott could actually make his own.

It's important to be part of the world, even while we are looking after ourselves. In Britain the Conservative government of David Cameron has boosted foreign aid, lifting it by 28 per cent in the past year. Our own conservative prime minister seems keener on cutting us adrift.

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