

Paddling in Choppy Waters

The Role of Politics: A Response to Paddling on One Side of the Canoe

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By Pat Webster

I was pleased to see the paper by Banks, Murray, Overton and Scheyvens (2011)² with its overview of NZ Development Assistance, its place in the world and its analysis of current problems. I am disappointed, however, that overall the paper takes a rather negative view of political action, arguing instead that we need a bi-partisan approach to development. This flies in the face of all I understand about social and economic development. The implicit view of the paper is that there is a bi-partisan place to be found in New Zealand's development policy. The paper states that "the politicisation of New Zealand's development assistance over time may have undermined the building of a coherent, consistent and committed aid programme" – but consistent, coherent and committed to what? We are always in the midst of a contest about where resources go in social development, a struggle that Jan Pronk, A former Dutch Minister of International Development, in his answer to a question about politicisation of aid encapsulates very well.

"[Interviewer]: Development aid probably has become more politicized. Why do you think it has become more difficult in the Netherlands to mobilize support to use tax payers' money for development?"

***Jan Pronk:** There is a lot of discussion about development and development assistance in the world. Until recently, in the Netherlands there always was strong popular support for it. However, rational analysis would demonstrate that development aid is only of secondary importance (in) explaining economic growth and development. Modesty – or honesty – requires that one should be careful claiming successes. However, this means – at the same time – that you may lose popular support for aid. I see development assistance as a device within the new international legal order established after World War II. You need to deal with international problems: peace and conflict, poverty, environment, instability and violations of human rights. And you have to do that together in an international system with common policies, international finance, a world economy and an international civil society. Presently, we see an emerging global middle class living an increasingly comfortable life. Many people don't care much for the*

¹ NZADDS Commentaries provide commentary from the perspective of the author, contributing to discussion and analysis of NZ aid and development work. NZADDS Commentaries do not necessarily represent an official NZADDS stance on any issue. Other NZADDS papers can be read online at: <http://nzadds.org.nz/publications/>

² This paper can be accessed online at <http://nzadds.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/paddling-on-one-side-of-the-canoe-nzadds-working-paper-may-2011.pdf>

*poor, for the voiceless, because they are afraid that they would have to give up part of their newly won wealth. They have to be educated that caring for less privileged people would be in their own interest. It is a political struggle and it's not easy.*³

Developing the analogy of paddling the canoe I'd suggest that paddling on both sides of the canoe may be important to get to a particular place, but where that place is and the route taken may involve many options which the paddlers may not always agree upon. There are many routes to any one destination – choosing a route is political.

I am mentioned in the paper as one of those who used the political system to change the way international development was run in New Zealand. Achieving the change to a more professional and experience-based aid programme was an enormous struggle. It was achieved through what I have always regarded as a fortuitous conjunction of people and circumstance, a good dose of strategy and political nous, but above all by political action. This struggle brought into being an agency which, as some have pointed out, was not perfect, but which, in its few years of existence, had become well regarded. It was an agency that could well have adapted to the Minister's need for an approach more suited to his political worldview. That he chose to return it to the confines of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) is the real politicisation here.

There is no doubt that the process of bringing New Zealand's Agency for International Development (NZAID) into being could have been better. It would have been wonderful to have gained an agreement between parties, to have managed, through rational discussion, to persuade those with the power in MFAT to loosen the strings and allow a more credible programme to flourish within MFAT's Development Cooperation Division (DEV), but many people had been trying that for some time. The extensive political networks that senior people in MFAT have developed over many years, and the alignment between their view of development and that of many of our more conservative and business oriented politicians was a significant impediment to change, as John Luxton's diatribe against Grossman and Lees (2001)⁴, mentioned by the authors, indicates. Previous cross-Party attempts to change our aid programme such as the 1987 Select Committee Enquiry resulted in the production of a large report and some tinkering around the edges of the programmes. In 2000 senior MFAT officials tried to divert our efforts for change in the same direction.

Development Assistance policies in most countries take their lead from domestic policies which result from an ongoing contestation for resources by different sectors in the community. Politics is the stage on which this struggle takes place. When public money is at stake, political philosophy, of one kind or another, guides the way we operate all day and every day. The taxes we pay (or don't), the social services we have access to, the infrastructure we can use, the working conditions we operate in, the health services we receive and most aspects of our environment are all, to a greater or lesser extent, subject to political opinion and action. There are some things on which a broad consensus can be achieved but as I try to think of them I have difficulty coming up with an uncontested view of all but the most minor matters. Some issues heighten the differences between world views and social development seems to be one. I cannot remember a time (and I've been in New Zealand since 1972) when there were not deeply divided views in this country about issues of poverty, welfare, unemployment and the approach to dealing with it. We can even have a strong consensus on what we want to happen (e.g. a

³ Pronk, J., 'A European Perspective: Interview with Jan Pronk' in *Impact*, magazine of Public Services International, No. 6, May 2011, p. 30, Accessed on 2 June 2011 at: <http://www.psi.org/impact6>

⁴ Grossman, J. and Lees, A. 2001, *Towards Excellence in Aid Delivery: A Review of New Zealand's Official Development Assistance Programme*, Report of the Ministerial Review Team, Wellington.

poverty free world) but totally incompatible views on how we get there. While these differences in our society are played out through politics, not only do we as a society do a pretty bad job of ensuring people know how to engage with our political system, but we also tend to excoriate the practice of politics and the people who do involve themselves in the process. I believe the paper has contributed that.

Each political party brings a worldview which underpins its actions in government. Development policy has, however, not been a high priority for any government and so, for a long time here in New Zealand, the differences in worldview between one government and the next have been mitigated by a powerful bureaucracy which managed the aid programme to meet its own overarching goals. The latter may have provided more stability for those fortunate enough to receive funding be they consultants, NGOs or some people in developing countries but that did not mean that the programme was achieving as much as it should have in development terms and it provided a much more politicised programme on the ground than NZAID did.

It is not necessary to raise yet again the problems that existed in The Development Cooperation Division of MFAT (DEV). The paper reviewed the key points but it is worth also mentioning that the “Wellington Consensus” the authors alluded to was wider than they suggest, as it included many of the people who had dealt with DEV over the years from journalists to contractors, both community and business focussed, to NGOs, officials in other government departments and even people within DEV itself. The situation was not one which many wanted to see continue. There was recognition that changes were required and CID’s Davenport and Low (1999)⁵ report, launched in 1998 by Don McKinnon, then National’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, was widely circulated within MFAT and throughout its posts. However, MFAT management was adept at making sufficient change to divert real action. There can be no denying that the vision of development assistance that drove change - tackling poverty through developing internationally recognised good practice, addressing internationally agreed development goals, increasing cooperation with other donors and the UN, and nurturing experienced and knowledgeable programme staff, proved at the time to be a partisan one. There was not much middle ground to be won in 2001, nor, I believe, is there now.

The only way to make change happen where government departments are involved is through the political process. This has been particularly so since the onset of New Government Management which places such strong emphasis on accountability to key performance indicators for departmental managers. The best campaigns, to be successful, need to persuade elected politicians to sanction change. While I agree that individual political actors can play a powerful role in leading change in policy, it is wrong, in my view to place too much emphasis on the individual because it detracts from where the real responsibility lies. Most decisions in Parliament are only made with the support, tacit or otherwise, of the Cabinet and Caucus of the Party on the Treasury Benches. The current Minister has achieved that. He may have been the source of the ideas but he had to have support. Murray McCully is, in fact, a reasonably rare type of Minister in the development field, in that he has very strong views on his portfolio. His views are, however, perfectly in accord with his Party’s world views on social development. That the Minister has pushed through changes without respect for the knowledge and expertise within his department is also in accord with his Party’s view of public servants. National Party politicians have spent a considerable amount of time criticising their bureaucracy since they took office and development assistance is not the only department that is dealing with obliteration by absorption.

⁵ Davenport, E. & Low, W., 1999, *Partners in a Common Future: Development for Poverty Eradication*, Council for International Development (CID): Wellington.

The problem for those of us who are concerned about core development issues such as poverty, social justice, human rights and community development is that, because of our approach to development we are seen as having a centre to left perspective. There may be some points of agreement across the increasingly blurred centre which could be built upon but I believe we must make our differences explicit if we want to effect real change. The Minister reflects a traditional right wing agenda where progress is about economic growth built on profit focussed individuals and efficient businesses, minimal government, increased competition and exports. At best, his vision is one where economic growth will trickle down to improve the general well-being and any problems are mopped up by minimal state intervention preferably contracted out to the charitable sector. Many of us have experienced this political approach enough to understand its failings. Personally, I am more interested in supporting the development of socially healthy, cohesive and thriving communities where people can have fair access to their country's resources, the opportunity to meet their potential and to live fruitful and fulfilled lives. Business is but one tool to achieve that and economic vibrancy is but one measure of success. I don't think I want the canoe paddled in the same direction as this government.

Added to this complexity there is also the issue of politics in developing countries. The paper concludes by suggesting that changes in the aid programme have placed New Zealand's interests above those of the recipients. But who are these recipients? The Minister recently referred to the support he has received for his approach from leaders in the Pacific. Many of those same leaders, or their predecessors, were vocal in opposition to the establishment of NZAID, and as far as I could see this was because the new agency loosened the diplomatic threads which tied the ruling elites to the benefits of the development which so often eluded their citizens. This is where the real politicisation of aid lies and we are not alone in facing this type of move. According to Simon Stocker, Director of Eurostep, a network of autonomous European non-governmental development organisations working towards peace, justice and equality in a world free of poverty:

"These calls to bring development aid together with Europe's foreign policy will inevitably lead to development becoming part of the EU's foreign policy... When aid is politicised in this way, which was the approach of the Bush

*administration, development fails... Development policy must remain sufficiently independent of the EU's diplomatic service for it to be able to achieve its principal objective – the eradication of poverty. The management of the EU's development policy must remain with the Commission, outside the new diplomatic service"*⁶.

Our development programme has, over the many years prior to NZAID, tacitly colluded with country leaders to spend money in ways which have denied some people access to decent education, health and other services. It is clear that many people throughout the Pacific want these things and it is clear that for some of their leaders those needs have not been much of a priority. Can a programme that is once again tightly linked to a diplomatic agenda aimed at our own benefit, provide real development benefits for those who really need it? Our current government has taken a highly partisan stance with regard to sections of the Pacific community. They have withdrawn funding from many organisations which were working to build local capacity for development, to speak out about human rights, and to help people

⁶ Stocker, S., 2009, *Politicising Development Aid is a Recipe for Disaster*, Eurostep Press Release, 14 October 2009, Accessed on 2 June from: http://www.eurostep.org/wcm/dmdocuments/091014_IDN-indepthnews-service.pdf

participate actively in their own country. We need to be clear about who our partners are and how to work with the political systems both here and overseas to ensure our taxes go to those we want to help.

Over the years we have had very few Members of Parliament, never mind Ministers, with any practical understanding of development issues, or experience in the development community. While some of us in development have spent time nurturing understanding we don't spend nearly enough time encouraging people within our ranks to take an active interest in the political process, to champion the kind of change we believe in. We need to be able to argue about our issues without getting sidetracked by personality issues. If Mr McCully disappeared from the Minister's portfolio tomorrow would much change? There might not be the same level of drive from another Minister, or disdain for other points of view, but I doubt if the policies would change. Given the general views in the development community about effective development I don't see much room for bipartisanship at present. In the meantime there is a lot to do.

As people with knowledge, understanding, background and experience in development, and as people with good contacts on the ground in partner countries, we can credibly critique the development approach, the transparency of the programmes we, as taxpayers, pay for. As time goes on, we can critique the outcomes. We also need to start thinking about the kind of approach we'd like to see in the future. We now have some people with real expertise in Parliament in the field of development assistance, people who have had intimate experience of the last process of change, and who are our best bet for establishing a programme that looks the way many people here, and many people in our partner countries, would like to see delivered. We can choose to use our collective knowledge, understanding and experience to develop something that can be better embedded and more sustainable in the future. The authors of the paper argue for a "coherent consistent and committed" aid programme. If the canoe is to be paddled on both sides, where is it to go?

Finally I believe this paper misses the real point about politicisation of aid. By totally embedding the aid programme within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where diplomatic imperatives and a generally conservative approach (e.g. minimisation of risk) to development activity dominate the agenda, aid, of necessity, takes on a more partisan political role in developing countries. This is our real challenge for the future. Do we, as was suggested to me recently, accept that the aid programme be left where it is within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs simply because constant change is disruptive. Or do we argue that, to focus more effectively on the goals of development, we need to provide some distance between our aid programme and our Foreign Policy? There are a couple of useful lessons to be learned from the drastic action taken by this government on NZAID. One is that there is obviously great benefit to MFAT and the Minister in having the programme on a tighter rein and as the paper outlines, that benefit is not about aid effectiveness and international legitimacy of the programme, as many of us understand it. The second lesson is that the only way we will get a bipartisan approach is by accepting that aid is simply a tool of our Foreign Affairs policy with all the self-interest that that implies. The paper places greater emphasis on the need for international action based on good development practice, in particular the prioritising of the needs of recipients. To do nothing is to accept the status quo which leaves us where some of us were in the late 1990s. I agree with the authors that the canoe needs paddling on both sides but it has to be paddled through some very choppy waters to get somewhere worthwhile. It started out on that journey once before. I'd like to see it try again.

About the Author

Pat Webster has been Executive Director of the Council for International Development, and Chair of the Advisory Committee on External Aid and Development (ACEAD) and of its successor, the International Development Advisory Committee (IDAC). She has a Postgraduate Diploma in Development Studies from Massey University and is currently a candidate for PhD in the Institute of Development Studies at Massey. Pat has been actively involved in party politics for over 30 years and has served as Senior Vice President of the Labour Party twice.

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