

Will things only get better for UK aid under Labour?

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When Prime Minister Rishi Sunak stood in the pouring rain outside No. 10 Downing Street on 22 May, he announced an election date of 4 July – a mere six weeks away – prompting shock and speculation from the British press and commentators. He did so with the 1993 hit song “Things can only get better” blasting in the background, thanks to a noisy protester who was using the song in support of the UK Labour Party, repurposing their 1997 victory anthem.

This election announcement came after months of government instability, including rotating ministers, changes in leadership, and **surprise appointments**. In the weeks since, political parties have raced to release their manifestos, detailing their policy platforms if elected to office. Both the Labour and Tory manifestos propose restoring Britain’s once formidable international development program, including by increasing humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to Gaza, which has emerged as a British ballot-box issue.

This bipartisan focus on restoring international development is welcome. For those unfamiliar with the shifts in the last few years, it has been a sorry tale. Under Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Britain lost significant credibility on the global stage. Legislated commitments were walked back, such as the commitment to abide by the United Nations target of investing 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) as Official Development Assistance (ODA). The Department for International Development (DFID) was merged into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which became the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The merger’s difficulties were greatly increased by the subsequent reduction in the aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI. This resulted in a cut of 4.6 billion pounds (about \$8.9 billion) — double Australia’s entire annual aid spend. Furthermore, in 2022 significant British ODA was spent on in-country refugee and asylum seeker processing costs, with **over a third of the ODA budget spent domestically**. Experts and representative bodies said that, although this support is urgently needed, it should not come from the ODA budget at the expense of assistance to the millions facing conflict, climate impacts, and poverty globally. It’s fair to say that there was much to restore.

The **2024 Conservative Party manifesto** boasts a surprisingly strong international

development platform, promising a return to the 0.7% ODA/GNI ratio and building on their [2023 White Paper](#). It [has been welcomed](#) by civil society. This represents a dramatic turnaround under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, alongside Foreign Secretary David Cameron and Development Minister Andrew Mitchell. However, the [widely-predicted Labour win](#) means that this long overdue turnaround amounts to nice but largely inconsequential signaling. To quote author, diplomat, and former International Development Secretary Rory Stewart [last week](#), “the Conservative manifesto is almost a historical document now, because they’re not going to win the election ... they’re not going to do any of it.”

So, what can we expect from a Labour Government led by Sir Keir Starmer? Likely a vast improvement on the status quo. First, the Conservatives have raised the baseline so that Labour can feel politically safe in going further — not least with bipartisan support for the 0.7% ODA/GNI spending target again. Second, [Labour’s manifesto](#) proposes much-needed change. They commit to restoring Britain’s development reputation by doubling down on efforts to combat instability and climate change, leading on multilateral action, and revitalising the FCDO’s development expertise. They commit to “bringing in robust measures of development effectiveness, transparency, and scrutiny”, working with the UK’s Independent Commission for Aid Impact, a mechanism which has no equivalent in Australia. It all sounds pretty good.

It’s not all roses though. With the tax burden set to reach its highest level since 1949, Labour’s manifesto promises mightily expensive domestic commitments – cutting NHS wait times, improving health and education systems, and expanding rehabilitative prison programs – all without raising taxes. International development could easily take a (distant) backseat to the domestic agenda when it’s time for costed programming decisions. Furthermore, their manifesto doesn’t address the domestic refugee and asylum spends from ODA. Labour promises to abolish the government’s Rwanda scheme (sending UK asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing) and proposes several border security measures, but is silent on whether ODA will still be used to meet domestic costs in this area. The manifesto also contains serious caveats – restoring 0.7% “as soon as fiscal circumstances allow” being one example. Bond’s Policy Director [Gideon Rabinowitz stated](#) “concrete details and realistic timelines are essential to make this commitment meaningful”, insisting “they should commit to urgently increasing the UK aid budget” while strengthening FCDO’s development expertise. Bond requests a permanent Cabinet-level Development Minister to help translate these promises into implementation. All things that resonate with our views on [Australia’s development program in 2024](#).

At a more granular, programmatic level, FCDO policies currently underway could be

infused with more ambition under a Labour Government. A locally-led development strategy is being developed (as in Australia). The strategy's ambition could now increase, with Labour's manifesto emphasising local development leadership. The FCDO will need to review the state of British humanitarian programs (which have arguably fallen out of step with global need) and reconcile these with Labour's Gaza reconstruction commitments and their pledge to tackle global insecurity. And, as above, Labour is yet to take a position on domestic refugee and asylum seeker processing costs being counted as ODA. Some of these issues (locally-led development and the adequacy of humanitarian funding in particular) are also live in Australia, as we too approach elections within a year.

Irrespective of political standoffs, the UK scene has generated something that has long since disappeared from Australian politics: a materially bipartisan approach to international development. The British conservative political spectrum has embraced the idea that, at the very least, the UK aid program projects soft power in an environment of geopolitical contestation. Australia has seen [some green shoots of bipartisanship](#), including the 2022 Pacific tour undertaken by Senator Simon Birmingham and Shadow Minister Michael McCormack with ministers Penny Wong and Pat Conroy. But the Liberal Party's platform and the parliamentary tactics of the Coalition suggest this is far from being enshrined in policy.

Britain's Development Minister Andrew Mitchell has been unwavering in building explicit cross-party support for aid. In July 2023, Mitchell told media that "the White Paper will be a parliamentary command paper by the government, but it does not work unless you have agreement across the political parties ... After all, international development and British leadership on this is not a Labour or Tory thing. It's a British thing."

An election loss this year could mean a swing to the right for Britain's Conservative Party, which would be disappointing for bipartisanship on aid. But as we approach the 2024 election, that bipartisanship currently holds, and is underpinned by domestic sentiment on the critical importance of humanitarian assistance for Gaza. Australia has a lot to consider as we confront an election season of our own. Most importantly, the Australian conservative political spectrum could embrace the perspective of Minister Andrew Mitchell and Secretary David Cameron: international assistance is more vital, if more difficult, than ever before. If we want to combat malign interests around the world, providing humanitarian and development assistance is a [cost-effective strategy](#). They can borrow from the UK Conservatives' proposed Soft Power Strategy or apply a strict "national interest" test, if they must.

While one wouldn't go quite so far as the song and say that "things can only get better", it's fair to say that in the UK this is now likelier to be true than it was before.

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