

A letter to Penny Wong: DFAT needs an international cooperation stream

by Peter Callan

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Senator Penny Wong giving the UQ 2019 Annual Lecture in Political Science and International Studies (Credit: UQ/Twitter)

Dear Senator Wong,

I am writing to you as a former, long-standing public servant who worked mainly for AusAID and retired in 2011.

Assuming that Labour wins the next election and that you become Minister for Foreign Affairs, you will face the daunting task of restoring Australia's international reputation and credibility across your portfolio, including in development assistance and broader international cooperation.

Successive Coalition governments have damaged Australia's strong record in aid and cooperation through successive budget cuts and the disastrous integration of AusAID into the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2013.

The integration was badly handled, leading to the departure of many skilled professionals and, I suspect, to a significant decline in aid program quality and effectiveness.

I do not suggest that a Labour government re-establish AusAID as a statutory authority or move back precipitately to the pre-2013 level and pattern of aid – the world has moved on, as has Australia. But I do suggest that you give serious consideration to creating an international cooperation stream within DFAT (akin to the trade and consular streams) and that you set up an expert team to identify the most effective ways of achieving this.

International cooperation is a deliberately broad concept encompassing all cooperative and partnering activities that the Australian government enters into with the aim of assisting international development, or responding to humanitarian emergencies and disasters, or promoting regional cooperation, or solving global

problems. It is an essential component of good international citizenship. It is deliberately broader than the world of Official Development Assistance, encompassing new and emerging forms of cooperation.

Australia needs a dynamic suite of cooperative activities to add much-needed substance to its relationships with countries and organisations. Foreign affairs and trade are established aspects of these relationships, and Australia has been well-served in these areas over many decades. Inevitably, issues arise in our relationships with countries and organisations which call for a cooperative approach and some action – on our part, or on both sides. This is where international cooperation comes in. To put it mildly, our current international cooperation efforts fall well short of what would be in our best national interest.

Building up Australia's international cooperation would help to restore our reputation and credibility in domains such as development and humanitarian assistance, transboundary and global challenges, and regional economic cooperation (to name but a few). The creation of an international cooperation stream would also free up DFAT staff, many of whom work under enormous pressure, to focus on representation, policy advising and longer-term relationship management. And it would provide direction to international efforts and activities across government.

Sincerely,

Peter Callan

Author/s:

Peter Callan

Peter Callan was Assistant Director General, Asia Regional Branch, at AusAID and retired in 2011.

Link:

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