

**Transcript: Legitimate self-interest and the campaign for aid: an interview with Rev Joel Edwards**  
**3 August 2015**

CB: My name is Camilla Burkot, I am a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre, and it is my great pleasure to be sitting down with the Reverend Dr Joel Edwards, who is here visiting us from the UK. He is the former International Director of [Micah Challenge](#). Reverend Edwards, welcome.

JE: Thank you very much, Camilla.

CB: Perhaps you could just start and tell us a little bit about yourself and what brings you to Australia?

JE: I am here on invitation from [TEAR Australia](#), and they are sort of wheeling me around the place, I spent a few days in Queens, I am here in Canberra for a day and then I get despatched to Sydney for another few days, and I will leave eventually on the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> of August. And the reason I am here really is to just join TEAR in a conversation with their members and supporters about what just leadership looks like; how, as a faith community, TEAR tries to up the game in Christian involvement in issues of justice and transformation. It's a huge pleasure to be back in Australia.

CB: And I am sure it will be a great pleasure for the many people that you will have a chance to meet to really engage with these questions, because you are someone who has a long history and has a lot of experience dealing with these in the UK.

JE: Yes, I feel like a guy who's got a long history of learning about these things. So it's very exciting, every day, you know, is a new adventure in trying to work out where this is all going and what our responsibility is on that journey.

CB: Fantastic. One of the things I am really interested to talk to you about is what's been happening in the UK in relation to foreign aid and development. We know about two years ago the UK became the [first G8 country](#) to reach the 0.7% of GNI target for giving aid, and that commitment [became a law](#) earlier this year. So my first question I wanted to ask you is: what difference will this make having this legislated, having this in law? What difference will it make both for those who care about giving aid, who are involved in the aid and development sector in the UK, but also for the world's poor? What difference will this legislation make?

JE: I think the legislation is first of all an expression of a very long journey. Maybe that is the context to put it in. I don't think it is any accident that when we had a Coalition government come in five years ago, the previous administration, they ringfenced the National Health Service and aid – overseas aid – as two things they would prioritise and then, as you say, that has now been put into law. I think that's a part of a journey, which has been going on in the UK for the last 30 years, of massive public campaigns. AfricaAid, LiveAid, Jubilee 2000, Make Poverty History – all these have led to where we are now.

What difference will it make? I think it tells the British people that there is good leadership on this issue. Some of us are still a little bit mesmerised as to 'exactly why have you done this?' But I think all credit to the British government, they have said, 'Look, we are coming to recognise that what is happening in other parts of the world – especially previous British colonies, India, Africa – is a part of our concern.' And I think the British government is beginning to see that there is a joined-up policy to be pursued between insecurities in other parts of the world and security for the British people, between more sustainable economic development in other parts of the world and Britain's ability to trade with, for example, India. And so I think there is a kind of political common sense prevailing.

Now whether we can hold this 0.7 will be a part of the challenge for all of us, I think, in the years to come.

CB: Yes, so that's very interesting, because when I was preparing for this interview I was looking at some things that David Cameron has said, that various politicians have said, and there was a great quote from a [speech he gave](#) in 2013 just before the G8 Summit. He said: 'Fortune favours Britain when we're ambitious, when we count, when we play our part in the world. And we have been playing our part. We made the decision to protect the aid budget because I believe this commitment is in Britain's long-term interests'. It was very clear about this idea of globalisation and economic interconnectedness, and these sort of security linked arguments. But I wonder – clearly this is the kind of argument that politicians are very responsive to and that the public seems to be quite responsive to – but I wonder if you see any problems or risks with leaning so heavily on that economic and security angle. Is there something – where does the moral argument for aid come in, or do we even need it?

RJE: I think we do need it. I think two things are tucked away in David Cameron's statement there. One is an aspiration to be a global leader, and Britain has been very serious about kind of recovering their global consciousness and leadership role. That was there under Blair and Brown, who definitely positioned themselves as global leaders and who are passionate about these issues. If you stood in a room with either of those individuals and indeed Clare Short, who was International Development Secretary at one point, they were passionate about the global scene, and I think that's transmitted itself and carried through into the present administration.

The second is what I call legitimate self-interest, and I don't think that there is any barrier between morality and legitimate self-interest. As a Christian leader I would say 'Love your neighbour but as yourself', as Jesus said, is great for policy, it's great for neighbourliness, and so there is a morality in recognising that people are interested in their own future and security, and the future and security and education of their children, and then by extension too, the future reciprocation in other parts of the world. So a safer world is a better world for me and that's legitimate. And I think that's very different from a selfishness which says, 'we're going to protect our borders, we're going to play amongst ourselves and we are going to seek what's good for us and we couldn't care less about anybody else'. Now whether that's internal politics or international politics, that's bad politics.

CB: That's interesting, that these things are not mutually exclusive but it can be very much this idea of self-interest can be a moral argument. It's a useful concept, but it's perhaps a tricky one to translate. I guess what I am interested in talking a little bit about is, to go back to this passage of legislation, to talk a little bit about advocacy, particularly among NGOs and communities. Particularly you may be able to comment more on the side of faith communities. Can you give us a flavour of the kind of advocacy and interactions that civil society had leading up to this, whether it was putting pressure on politicians, or responding to what politicians were saying?

RJE: In the UK context?

CB: In the UK context.

RJE: Yes, I think, no doubt about that. I was there, kind of mesmerised in Cologne in the height of the Jubilee Campaign. So to have taken what is essentially what is a biblical concept of freedom, and applying that to the 43 highly indebted countries who would never be able to pay their debts, and going on the rampage across Europe to say, 'please cancel these debts'. Now that was a touch of idealism, but it was also economic pragmatism. And when you have people like Ann Pettifor heading up a campaign like that, and gaining massive public traction, drawing in governments – I remember

being a part of quarterly breakfast meetings between Gordon Brown and Clare Short, the Treasurer and the International Development Secretary, meeting with NGOs to talk about these issues. Now that was unprecedented.

If you underlay that with the development of the MDGs and this new language about dealing with extreme poverty, that I think has been a very powerful concoction. Educating public opinion, campaigning and trying to mobilise individuals to hassle their politicians, I think, has been a very important part of the British government's decision to actually protect overseas aid. And so this is a kind of pincer movement, you know, you go for your politicians but you also try and advocate at the grassroots level. And Christian communities and faith communities have been right at the heart of that in the UK context, and it is something we can be encouraged by and proud of – although still a long way to go, a long way to go.

CB: Yeah, it's interesting because it seems like you're saying that in a lot of ways it's a quite unique sort of confluence of events between the MDGs, between who is particularly in power at the time and the place. But it is encouraging that it sounds like there is hope for us in Australia that NGOs can get involved, can really make their voices heard. There is hope.

RJE: I think there is hope, there is hope. I think if we can get the narrative right about the positive impact of aid, if we can dispel some of the myths which exist in the UK and in America and in Australia and other parts of the world, certainly across parts of Europe, that these 'dishonest African nations' are getting, you know, trillions of dollars in aid and are so corrupt. And actually put that in perspective, to say, 'no, most of these places are losing money through corruption, it's not just from bad governance, but from multinational dishonesty', which comes back to rich nations, and that the amount of aid they get is not 7.0 but 0.7! If we can really sort out those kind of narratives, I think there is hope that we can perhaps begin to see a real sea change. I think too to challenge our leaders – and I think in the Australian context this is quite important – to challenge leadership to be global in its perspective and its politics, not protective of its borders in terms of the principal political drive. And I think as an outsider that is what I see is missing in Australian politics.

CB: Speaking of narratives, we've seen actually quite similar trends between the UK and Australia in terms of levels of public support for aid. And one of the arguments you often hear people say is that, 'that's fine, there's people overseas who need help, but there are also people in our own country, there are people in our own backyard who need help, and we shouldn't be spending money overseas when there is poverty in our own communities'. And I am curious to know how you would respond to that sort of argument.

RJE: It's not either-or. There is a real sense that charity begins at home before it can spread abroad, and so one always has to ensure that your policies have domestic justice applied to it. But it must do in democracy, if it doesn't in a democracy you don't survive, and governments know that. So I think nobody is pretending that there are not two million children in the UK who are technically described as living in poverty; that's bad. Food banks have proliferated, in the United Kingdom that is. Agencies – largely charities – giving food to people in the UK, that's crazy, that's bad. And we have got to raise our voices against those things.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that there is no comparison between someone in the UK who is described as poor, and somebody in Africa or Asia living on less than \$1.25 per day in extreme poverty, or individuals in other parts of the world whose lives are at risk, literally. And that there are 60 million displaced peoples around the world and that we must have some kind of responsibility towards them. And so to use the domestic, relative poverty at home as an excuse for doing very little or nothing abroad is unreal politics, and it's immoral.

CV: OK. My last question, I guess it's a two-part question. And you alluded to this a bit earlier on. This 0.7 per cent commitment in the UK: do you think it will stick? And do you think this is something that should be seen as an exception, that the UK has managed to get there, to join this very small group of countries that are at that level, or do you think, as somebody who is looking at wider trends, is this something that we may be seeing more, more countries reaching this level of generosity?

RJE: I hope we see more countries reaching that level of generosity. I think it will stick in the UK to the extent that we really can get the narrative right. That we can have honest debates and understand proportionally what poverty is for us in the UK in the time of austerity, and what it means for someone in sub-Saharan Africa. I hope it will stick as the legitimate self-interest becomes clearer, that poverty and insecurity elsewhere affects us. As you will know, at the moment we are experiencing real difficulties in terms of immigrants coming in through the Channel Tunnel, disrupting traffic and all the rest of it. That can go in one of two ways; it could either lead to higher levels of intolerance and therefore put aid under pressure inadvertently, or it could open the eyes of the British people to say, 'you know what? We really are a part of a hurting world and therefore what we are proposing in 11.8 billion pounds per annum for overseas development and overseas aid really is not disproportionate to the pain being felt there and to the effects it is having on us back here in the UK'. If we can really begin to make those arguments, really begin to ramp up the Secretary's mantra about the '[beyond aid](#)' dialogue and show that yes, the aid we have given has made a difference in treatment of diseases, in increased education, and increased security, and more of that leads to a better world which leads to more security for us, I think then it will stick. It all depends on how well we do the narrative, I think.

CB: It's always about telling the narrative. Telling the story. Framing the debate.

RJE: It's how you tell 'em. As a comedian would say, it's how you tell 'em. It's also true for politicians.

CB: Reverend Edwards, I want to thank you again very much for taking a few minutes to sit down and chat with me. And I wish you all the best on the rest of your visit in Australia. And I hope that we will have a chance to speak again in the future.

RJE: Thank you very much, I hope so too, it's been a pleasure.