

Questions, anybody? How to cut aid without unduly arousing parliamentary curiosity

By Robin Davies

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On commencing to read the transcripts of Senate Estimates hearings on foreign affairs, trade and development matters, I always allow myself the hope that I might find some odd nugget of information or at least something funny enough to offset partially the investment of time. For example, last time around, we had this from Senator Brandis:

The question, 'What is truth?', is of course a deep philosophical issue. I thought when you asked the question you might have had in mind the story in the gospels of Pontius Pilate as he entered the temple and he asked the same question himself. I am not necessarily comparing you with Pontius Pilate, Senator Rhiannon. I have in the course of a long life, some of which I might say was spent teaching philosophy, often reflected upon the meaning of truth, but I have not arrived at a concluded view.

However, the [most recent hearing](#), on 3 June, yielded not even such tangential returns.

Senator Wong pursued her concerns about loss of transparency in the DFAT Portfolio Budget Statement and in Budget Paper No. 1 with respect to the aid budget. Her concerns are in this case misplaced. Those documents were never even slightly useful as sources of information on Official Development Assistance (ODA) aggregates or detailed ODA allocations. Wong made less of the absence of the Blue Book, the annual ministerial statement on the aid program which has been released with the budget documents forever. In response to DFAT's point that the information she seeks, i.e. what used to be in the Blue Book, is available on the department's [web site](#), Wong objected that this information is only made available at the discretion of the bureaucracy. (The same was in fact true of the Blue Book itself. It was only a 'budget-related' paper, not a budget paper, and was not made available compulsorily.)

There seems little value in pursuing more detailed ODA accounting in mainstream budget documents, which are necessarily concise and employ accounting methodologies that tend not to be consistent with the commonsense way in which the ODA budget is normally presented. What's more important is that (a) there should be transparency, somewhere, about allocations, which we do have via the DFAT web site, and (b) there should be

transparency, somewhere, about actual expenditures against allocations, which we do not really have.

The latter purpose was slightly served in the past by the ‘estimated outcomes’ information on financial year x-1 provided in the Blue Book for financial year x. That’s now gone, a fact that Wong noted and questioned. DFAT responded that this information will be provided in its Annual Reports. That should be an adequate response, except that last year’s [Annual Report](#) — the first post-integration report — was still rather vague, mostly providing ‘estimated’ outcomes even though it was published several months after the end of the financial year. In addition, it did not provide information on spending outcomes in a consolidated way under the headings from the high-level allocation table ([Table 1](#)) always used at budget time — Appendix 4, p. 263, did this only partially. Getting better accountability on this score would seem to be a priority.

As for other aid-related topics — the cost of the now-closed Ebola clinic in Sierra Leone (\$18 million), net cuts in aid to Myanmar, cuts in aid for avoidable blindness, staffing reductions, the Vanuatu emergency response, cuts in allocations to Africa and the Middle East, IT integration costs (\$21 million), the priorities of the innovationXchange project, Bjorn Lomborg’s appearance on the scene, and so on — the questions and the answers were both of very limited interest. It should be noted that the shadow foreign minister, Tanya Plibersek, apparently thinks otherwise in relation to the Ebola clinic: on the basis of cost information provided during the 3 June hearing she has [called](#) for an inquiry into the timeliness and cost-effectiveness of Australia’s response, comparing it unfavourably to that of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF). Certainly the costs should be looked at, particularly in view of the fact that Aspen Medical was selected via limited procurement under pressure of time, but it should be recalled that MSF Australia [rejected](#) government funding with a flourish, calling for a standalone response, which was never going to come cheap.

More generally, it verges on staggering that no senator asked either of the two obvious questions that spring to mind in the aftermath of aid cuts on such an [unprecedented](#) scale. First, what representations has the government received from partner governments and organisations regarding cuts in funding to Asia, Africa, the Middle East and multilateral organisations? Second, when will the government be in a position to provide comprehensive information to the committee and the public on the allocation of the cuts at activity level, and will it provide as much information as it has on that point before the commencement of the next round of Senate Estimates hearings in October 2015? There was a question of the first kind about the Pacific, but of course the response was that there were no complaints from countries that received no cuts. Questions of the second kind were asked about one or

two specific allocations but senators were fairly easily bamboozled with responses that related to 2014-15 expenditure, rather to the the year in which the cuts will be applied, 2015-16.

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