

Right Turn!

by Terence Wood

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Over at the Guardian's Poverty Matters blog Oxfam International's deputy advocacy director Stephen Hale [explains why development NGOs should engage with centre-right political parties](#):

"The centre-right dominates the global governing class in the north. Europe has right-wing presidents or prime ministers in 21 of the EU's 27 member states. Canada is led by the right, [though now preparing for a general election](#). Barack Obama's election in the US bucked the trend, but the Republicans and indeed the Tea Party now [exert very strong influence over US policy](#) following recent elections."

This makes sense: with the right in power or wielding considerable influence in most OECD countries, NGOs need to engage if they want to shape aid and development policy.

Having made the case for engagement, Hale then offers advice for engaging effectively (liaise with the centre-right's own NGOs and think tanks, think carefully about framing, and work hard to shape and create common policy terrain). Which is fine as far as it goes, but it avoids an important question: what should NGOs do when a new government (of any political persuasion) isn't actually interested in engagement?

That's the question being asked in the New Zealand development community at

present. As I wrote [last year](#), Murray McCully, New Zealand's Foreign Minister since late 2008 (from the centre right National Party), is harming the government aid programme. He is derisive of those who work for him and prone to cutting aid activities for no good reason. At the same time he appears to have awarded some aid contracts on the basis of political connections and seems to be flirting with Boomerang Aid (links to examples are provided in my original post).

Importantly, these are problems that have occurred *in spite of* engagement from the New Zealand development community. In 2008 NGOs met with the new Minister and while there was disagreement there was also a willingness from NGOs to work within a new policy space.

Yet the Minister rapidly proved impossible to engage with. He dramatically [cut funding to the Council for International Development \(CID\)](#) an umbrella NGO that had previously been a valuable mechanism for dialogue between government and civil society. He then [dismantled a well-regarded NGO fund \(Koha\)](#), and replaced it with a fund that was [described by one NGO as a “fiasco”](#) and which was unable to dispense the money allocated to it. In light of this, the Minister reconfigured the fund again in a way that will see it overseen by [a National Party MP, a National Party Lawyer and one other board member](#). Something that looks a lot like the politicisation of NGO funding.

Which brings me back to my original question: what should development NGOs and Civil Society do when the government of the day doesn't want to engage?

In a democracy the obvious answer is to act: to use the public sphere to hold the government to account. Even if you don't change the government, at the very least, you act in the hope that such action will serve as a countervailing force, stymieing the worst actions of those in power.

In the case of New Zealand aid, public opinion seems to suggest that this could be effective. Whenever they're surveyed [\[pdf\]](#) New Zealanders are both in favour of having a government aid programme and also strongly in favour of aid being given for ethical reasons. So if the public's on board then all that needs to be done is alert them, right?

Unfortunately it's not that simple. The first problem is that while the public's heart is in the right place on aid, the average New Zealander doesn't know much about aid giving, nor do they devote much thought to aid effectiveness. This isn't their fault: like people everywhere, most New Zealanders have sufficient concerns in the here-and-now to prevent them from thinking too much about problems in far away places. And aid is different from social policy at home: its impacts aren't obvious to the

average voter, they take place overseas.

That news which voters do get on aid tends to come through TV, radio and newspapers, which means it's often brief and balanced in a "he said"/"she said" way. Brief is understandable, and balance is admirable, even if it shouldn't be confused with objectivity. But such a format makes it very hard to foster informed thinking about complex issues. It's harder still when the politician you're up against has a background in public relations and is adept at working the media. He's good at dismissing opponents with ad hominem (witness the "desk jockey" quote [here](#)) and he's a capable user of the misleading justification. (For example, [claiming his changes](#) to the Koha fund were partially motivated by the fact that there were "rather too many... [funded] programmes focussed on trade union rights in obscure parts of the world" when at the time fewer than 2 percent of Koha funded projects had anything to do with unions.)

Another problem is that most New Zealand development NGOs get some funding from the government aid budget. Which means that, at a time when the Minister in charge of that budget appears to be comfortable with politicised funding, speaking out raises the risk of reduced funds. Some NGOs have spoken out in spite of this, but it's hard not to think that others have — perfectly reasonably — been more reticent in their commentary than they might otherwise have been.

In an attempt to adapt to the new aid environment, along with my wife and a group of academics, for the last few months I've been involved in running a new development think tank called [NZADDs](#). Our aim is to increase informed comment and debate in New Zealand on international development issues. Something that seems absolutely critical right now. Even this hasn't been simple though. Everyone involved has day jobs, and obviously we can't get government funding which means, in a small country like New Zealand, we're entirely voluntary. We're also learning as we go along. All of which means the story of NZADDs, as well as the fate of our government aid programme, is one of those ones that will have "to be continued at a later date".

In the meantime I have a piece of advice for Mr Hale and anyone else contemplating a changing political environment. Try to engage, but don't make the mistake of assuming that engagement will always be possible. Inevitably there will be times when you will be stuck outside the tent. And, when this occurs, you'll need to have a plan for making those on the inside listen.

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